

Let's keep our Bibles open right there at Matthew chapter 22. We're looking at another of Jesus's parables today. And this one is about a wedding. I'll never forget my wedding day. May 31, 2014, Kristen and I got married right here in this room, I watched her come through that door and down the aisle. The ceremony was truly special. Standing here, marrying Kristen, surrounded by so many of our closest family and friends. And the celebration afterwards was a blast. We had a great party that night with good food—including some brown sugar bacon which I did not get to try—and lots of joy and laughter.

It's hard to beat a good wedding. They're wonderful occasions, some of the best experiences of our lives. And in this parable, Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a wedding. Think about that. Throughout Matthew, we've noted that when Jesus refers to the kingdom of heaven, he isn't talking about a place as much as he's talking about a power. The kingdom of heaven is the rule and reign of God, which was breaking into the world through the presence and power of Jesus. And Jesus invites anyone into the kingdom who will trust and follow him. So, in a very real sense, the kingdom of heaven is here now for all who follow Christ.

At the same time, there is a day when the kingdom will come in full. When God's people will say, "We're in heaven!" This parable is pointing forward to that day. Sometimes people hear about heaven, and they think of something very ethereal, other-worldly, and odd. They picture a sort of cloud city, with little angelic babies flying around playing harps, and they are understandably unsure if they want to go there. But that's not the way the Bible speaks about heaven. When Christ returns, when the kingdom comes in full, heaven will come to earth. God's redeemed people will enjoy an eternal embodied life in the perfections of a new creation and God's immediate presence. And our experience of the kingdom will not be strange. It will certainly not be boring. It will be like the greatest wedding you can imagine.

Look at verses 1-2: *And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son..."* (Matthew 22:1-2). This is not just any wedding. This is a wedding hosted by a king for his own son, with lavish decorations, rich food, and distinguished guests. Who wouldn't want to be there? Well, here's the first surprise in this parable: Many people don't want to go. Look at verse 3: *And [the king] sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come* (Matthew 22:3). The question is: why? Why would these invited guests not come? Why would they miss out? Here's what we'll see: Some don't come because they're apathetic—they've got better things to do. Others don't come because they're hostile toward the king. Then, we get a glimpse of those who do come, but even one of them gets booted out, because he came in a presumptuous manner. And remember, in all of this, Jesus is revealing something about the kingdom of heaven. He's showing us what keeps people out, and what brings people in.

Friend, when heaven comes to earth, you don't want to be outside of the kingdom. So, listen carefully to what Jesus says here. And honestly ask yourself: which of the people in this story best describes me? There are four kinds of people in this parable:

- The apathetic
- The hostile
- The presumptuous, and
- The chosen

Let's take them one at a time.

1. The Apathetic

In verses 2-3, the king sent out his servants to tell the invited guests that the wedding feast was ready. But they would not come. Think of how disrespectful this is! Can you imagine if you planned a wedding for one of your kids, invested all the time and money to make it happen, and when the day came no one showed up? This king had every right to be absolutely furious. But this king is astonishingly gracious. And instead of immediately punishing his disloyal subjects, he tries to persuade them to come.

Look at verses 4: *Again he sent other servants, saying, ‘Tell those who are invited, “See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast”’* (Matthew 22:4). This is our God. Every one of us is made by him to know and enjoy him. But every one of us has rebelled against him. And what does he do in response? Does he wipe us out in wrath? No. He sends his servants, stewards of his Word, throughout all the earth to persuade people to come to him. To enjoy the riches of his grace and the goodness of his presence, blessings we could compare to a steak dinner! “Everything is ready!” his servants say, “Come to the feast!” But what happens? Many are totally apathetic. That’s what we see in verse 5: *But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business...* (Matthew 22:5). They paid no attention. They don’t care. Why? Because they’d rather stay on the farm. They’d rather keep working. They are consumed with the stuff of everyday life.

This happens all the time. People hear the invitation to trust in Jesus, to come into his kingdom, and it just doesn’t seem compelling. Because they’re so consumed with the stuff of everyday life. There’s work to do, kids to raise, mortgages to pay, vacations to plan, friends to see, entertainment to enjoy, and so on. The list is endless. And it’s all happening right here and right now, which can make the kingdom of heaven sound remote and frankly, unimportant. But Jesus is saying that’s like skipping a feast with the king for another day on the farm! The only reason someone would do that is they don’t really understand what they’re missing.

C.S. Lewis famously put it like this: “We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with [everyday stuff] when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”¹ Is it possible that describes you? If so, you need to know there is something available to you in Christ that is infinitely greater than all this world offers. And if you could see it, your apathy would disappear, and it would be replaced with affection for him. But you might say, “That’s my problem. I can’t see it!” Well, what should the kid do whose parents offer her a holiday at the sea, though she’s never been, and she doesn’t understand what it means? She should go. And when she does, she will see how wonderful it is.

In John chapter 1, there’s a man named Nathaniel who hears about Jesus, and he’s unsure. He doesn’t know if it’s a good idea to follow this new teacher. But his friend Phillip says to him, “Come and see.” Friend, that’s my encouragement to you today... come and see. Come to Jesus, trust him, follow where he leads. And you will see. The feast is real. The kingdom is wonderful. Don’t let apathy keep you out. That’s one response we see in this parable. The second is hostility.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*

2. The Hostile

Look at verse 6: the king's invitation goes out, and some pay no attention ...*while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them* (Matthew 22:6). This is a picture of the persecution of God's people, which happened in the Old Testament as many prophets were treated shamefully and killed. And it's about to happen to Jesus as he is despised, rejected, and crucified. And as we know, persecution of God's people continues today. The question is, what will God do about it? Well, watch the response of the king in this parable. *The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city* (Matthew 22:7).

The king was angry. Furious. Full of wrath. And this is our God. Now, remember what we said just a moment ago: Every one of us rebels against him. And what does he do in response? Does he wipe us out? No. He sends his servants, stewards of his Word, throughout all the earth to persuade people to come to him. This is his grace. God is slow to anger. In Ezekiel 18:23 he says, *Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?* (Ezekiel 18:23). And yet, at the same time, God will punish those who refuse to repent, as he says in Ezekiel 18:24: *But... for the treachery of which he is guilty and the sin he has committed, for them he shall die* (Ezekiel 18:24). And certainly, this would include the treachery of persecuting God's own people. Could a just God overlook such an awful thing?

Recently, Kristen and I watched a movie about the Nuremberg Trial, which took place after World War 2, when the remaining Nazi leadership was brought before a global tribunal. And there was a scene in the movie, a very painful scene to watch, where the courtroom is shown images and videos from the concentration camps. And as the camera moves around the room, you can see the horror in people's faces, and though no one says a word, you can also see in their eyes a burning desire for justice. A desire that is not satisfied until the men are sentenced. Again, some people may bristle at the idea of God's wrath, but when we are confronted with evil, we all long for justice.

What the king did in this parable is just, and what God does in his wrath is just. But here's the good news. Because of his grace, even persecutors have a way to escape his wrath. Think of the Apostle Paul, who was an insolent opponent of Christ and the church, arresting Christians and approving of their deaths. But then he met Jesus. And what happened? Listen to Paul's own words in 1 Timothy 1:14: *The grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus* (1 Timothy 1:14). How could there be grace and love for someone as wicked as Paul? Because... Verse 15: *The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners* (1 Timothy 1:15). Even persecutors. Even those who are hostile toward God, his Son, and his church.

And maybe you recognize yourself here. You may not have persecuted God's people, but you are hostile. You have raged against Christ, despised his word, and mocked his followers. Receive the warning of this passage: God's wrath is real. But also receive this good news: God's grace is abundant. And if you will turn to him, and repent of your rebellion, his grace will overflow for you. We're seeing different kinds of people who tragically remain outside of Christ's kingdom. Some are apathetic. Others are hostile. We see this throughout our world today. But there's a third category: the presumptuous. And as people who come to church, this may be the most important warning for us to hear.

3. The Presumptuous

Look at verses 8-9: *Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find’* (Matthew 22:8-9). The king invited guests to his son’s wedding. The initial invitations were all rejected. But there’s a feast on the table and the king wants people to enjoy it! So, he tells his servants, “You know what, go out there and invite everyone!” It reminds me of my friend Nathan’s wedding in college. It was a great wedding. It was also the most casual wedding I’ve ever attended. So casual that Nathan and his fiancé decided to extend invitations to anyone and everyone. And one night a few of us went around campus with flyers, inviting as many people as we could find.

Well, the wedding in this parable isn’t casual, but the invitation is open to anyone and everyone. It’s a preview of the great commission. The king says, “Go therefore... and invite... as many as you find.” And after he is risen from the dead, Jesus will tell his disciples, “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.*” Everyone is invited into the kingdom. And, verse 10 says, *those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests* (Matthew 22:10). I love the description of the people—bad and good—this is a motley crew (like the church!). And they fill up the wedding hall, and everyone lived happily ever after. No, Jesus isn’t finished.

He says in verses 11-12: *But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. And he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless* (Matthew 22:11-12). Picture this. The wedding hall is full. The king steps into the room, and he notices a man with no wedding garment. In the 1st century, you didn’t need to wear a fancy suit or dress to a wedding. It was customary to simply put on a clean garment. Anyone could do this. But this guy didn’t change before he came. Perhaps he showed up in his dirty, everyday clothes. His sweatpants, his t-shirt, and flip flops. He heard there was a free meal, so he went, but he’s not showing any respect to the king. And he knows he’s in the wrong, which is why he doesn’t say anything. He has no defense. No justification for his actions.

Then, in verse 13, the parable takes a very serious turn... *the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’* (Matthew 22:13). The wedding feast is a picture of heaven. This is a picture of hell. And here’s his point: The invitation into the kingdom is open to all, because God is that gracious and that generous. But if you presume upon his grace and generosity, and show him no respect, you will have no lasting place in his kingdom. You might come to the gathering of his people, you might even belong to a church, but you’re not heading to heaven. In fact, you’ll be cast out in the outer darkness. That’s terrifying! How do you avoid it? How can you ensure you belong to the fourth and final group of people in this parable, those who resist apathy and hostility, those who are not presumptuous, but those whom Jesus calls the “chosen”?

4. The Chosen

With our remaining time, let’s answer that question. In verse 14 Jesus says: *For many are called, but few are chosen* (Matthew 22:14). I don’t know about you, but when I read that I’m not surprised to hear the word “called.” After all, throughout this parable the king is calling people to come to the feast. But I am surprised by the word “chosen.” Why does Jesus use that word? Didn’t these people decide to come to the wedding feast? Yes, they did. But throughout the

Bible we see two realities regarding God's people. First, they respond to his invitation, repenting of sin and trusting in him, because they love him. Second, he loved them first. Therefore, they are often referred to as his chosen ones.

This is how God speaks about his people in the Old Testament. For example, Deuteronomy 7:6 says, *You are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession...* (Deuteronomy 7:6).

And this is how God speaks about his people in the New Testament. For example, Peter tells the church, *You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession...* (1 Peter 2:9). The question is: how might you know if you belong to that group? Well, have you responded to the invitation? Jesus's invitation goes out into all the earth. It's come to you. What's your reply? Don't delay in apathy. Don't refuse in hostility. Receive the invitation and come to the feast! He came into the world to save you. He died to cleanse your sins. He rose to give you life. Receive his overflowing grace and rest in his love. That's foundational. But here's a second essential question: Are you wearing the wedding garments? "Well," you might ask, "what are they?" We don't have to guess.

In Revelation 19 we get another picture of a wedding feast. God's people are finally gathered in his presence and they declare... *Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure*"— (Revelation 19:6-8). The bride is the church. And she has made herself ready to see her Savior, the Lamb, Jesus Christ. How? She clothed herself with fine linen, bright and pure. And verse 8 concludes... *the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints* (Revelation 19:8).

Church, let's be clear: Our righteous deeds could never pardon us from sin. But our righteous deeds do prepare us for heaven. And they glorify God now. So, our call is to pursue righteousness. None of us will do this perfectly, not in this life. But in the Spirit's power, we can do this truly. And we must. Otherwise, we are presuming upon his grace. These are the defining marks of God's chosen people: They receive his grace, and they respond to his grace by resisting sin and running after righteousness. Does that describe you?

Conclusion

One more wedding story and then we're done. A few months before our wedding, Kristen and I went to the venue that was going to host our reception, and we got to sample some of the food. It was at this meeting we decided to have the brown sugar bacon as an appetizer, though there we didn't get to sample that, one more reason I never got to try it. But the samples we did have were delicious. And as we sat in the room where the reception would be and had a taste of the food that we would enjoy on that day, it only heightened our anticipation of the wedding to come.

Brothers and sisters, that's what the Christian life is like now. No, the kingdom has not come in full. The wedding day is not yet here. But even now, as we receive his grace and walk in his ways, we can enjoy samples of the kingdom. Like the joy of worshipping with his people, and the peace of his Spirit's presence with us, or the treasure of his truth as we open his Word, along with a thousand other blessings. We can enjoy these appetizers now, knowing that the feast is still to come. Don't let apathy or hostility or presumption keep you from enjoying that day. Come to Christ and live as his chosen people.