

God's Invitation

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Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 00] But we're going to be in Matthew chapter 22. Before we read, I just want to speak to the boys and girls for a couple of minutes just so we're all set for reading and knowing what this story is about.

Jesus is going to tell one of his many stories called parables and it's about an amazing invitation. So quick show of hands, boys and girls, if you've ever been invited to a friend's house for a play date, put up your hands.

Okay, so that's lots of boys and girls. Excellent. Okay, who's ever been invited to a birthday party? Put up your hands. Okay, lots of you. Okay, this one might mean less hands.

Who's ever been invited to a special kind of party, a fancy dress party? Anyone been invited to one of those? Oh, a bit less. Oh, sun's been. So less people to a fancy dress party.

Who's ever been invited to a very special occasion like a wedding? Hands up if you've been to a wedding before. Ah, so more weddings than fancy dress parties and weddings. Well, kind of different fancy dress, isn't it?

[1 : 09] Now, okay, so you know what invitations are. You've enjoyed lots of them. Let me ask, boys and girls, have any of you ever been invited to the Queen's house for tea?

No. Were any of you at either of the fairly recent royal weddings? No, any of the adults managed to hook themselves one of those invitations? No.

No. This is what our story is about. Jesus is going to say, you and I are given an invitation by God to something amazing.

Actually, to something even more amazing than a king's or a queen's wedding feast. God gives us an invitation to know him and to enjoy him by trusting in Jesus.

And Jesus says, the kingdom of heaven, life with God is like the most amazing feast, the most amazing party ever. Really, because God is there.

[2 : 11] That's the best thing. Heaven is going to be wonderful because Jesus will be there. But like every invitation we get, we have two answers that we can possibly get.

So for all of you who've been to parties, you obviously at some point said, yes, I'd like to go.

Sometimes we have to say no because we're not able to go.

Maybe you're so popular you get two party invitations for the same day and you have to choose.

Sometimes we say no because we don't want to go. So the Bible invites us, God invites us, Jesus invites us to the most important thing that you could ever imagine.

And all of us, however young or however old we are, we need to decide how we are going to respond to his invitation. So in our story, we're going to find some people who say no to Jesus.

And we're going to find some people who say yes to Jesus. And those people who say yes, they end up receiving all the joy. They're part of the feast. So boys and girls, our prayer for you is that you'd be those who would say yes to Jesus.

[3 : 22] That you would understand the joy that he offers. And so we'll read this story and you can think about the invitations you've had. Think about the invitation that this king offers.

And most of all, think about how you want to respond to Jesus. So let's read together from Matthew chapter 22. Jesus spoke to them again in parables saying, The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son.

He sent his servants to those who'd been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. Then he sent some more servants and said, Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner.

My oxen and fattened cattle have been slaughtered and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet. But they paid no attention and went off. One to his field, another to his business.

The rest seized his servants, ill-treated them and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

[4 : 33] Then he said to his servants, The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.

So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad. And the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes.

Friend, he asked, How did you get in here without wedding clothes? The man was speechless.

Then the king told the attendants, Tie him hand and foot and throw him outside into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

For many are invited, but few are chosen. We're going to continue to discover more amazing grace in Matthew's gospel.

Grace, God's free and undeserved kindness to broken, sinful people such as ourselves. Last week, the God of grace was inviting us to rest.

[5 : 47] This week, the God of grace invites us to the feast. So today's story, as we talked with the children, in some ways has sort of normal elements that we recognize, but also has an out of this world kind of aside to it as well, because we've all received invitations.

Some of those have been expected. Some have perhaps taken us by surprise. We are familiar with the idea now of sending a save the date for a big event.

We know what it is when we receive an RSVP and we need to respond by a certain time. We also know too that sometimes we receive invitations where there is an expected dress code, perhaps a black tie event or something similar.

So we know what it is to find ourselves invited and to be part of a guest list. But here, Jesus is reminding us of the wonderful thing about God's invitation when He pictures an invitation from a king to the feast, to the wedding feast that He is throwing for His Son.

As Jesus is telling the story and the people are thinking, well, to be on that guest list would truly to be have made it. We have arrived. We have access to the highest honor and privilege if our king invites us to a feast.

[7 : 20] So that's our setting for today, the invitation to the wedding feast of a king for His Son. And we want to think in this story, how do we see the grace of God through the story?

And how do we respond to the grace of God as we see different responses in the story? Before we get into it, some important background questions to cover really quickly.

When does Jesus tell this story? It's important to remember parables are not just free-floating stories. They have a setting and a context. In chapter 21, at the beginning, we're told of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, riding on the donkey as God's promised servant king.

And this ushers in the week before the cross. So triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Seven days later, He will have been killed. And so this week in between where this parable takes place is when the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders who oppose Him reaches its climax.

And that's important background. Because who does Jesus tell this story to? Verse 1 of chapter 22, it says, Jesus spoke to them.

[8 : 44] He's already been speaking to a particular group of people. If you turn back to chapter 21 and verse 45, when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew He was talking about them.

So there is a particular audience in mind, this group who presumed that they were insiders. Well, if anyone's in the kingdom of God, it's bound to be us. And so Jesus tells stories that explode their spiritual religious pride.

They are the group who are resisting and rejecting Jesus. And because of that, and we'll see this in the story, they are not those who are part of God's kingdom.

Again, tied up with that, how does Jesus tell this story? There are some extreme elements in the story. Did you notice some of the more surprising language?

The king that sends an army to destroy murderers. The attendants who bind someone hand and foot and throw them out into the darkness. How does Jesus tell this story?

[9 : 53] He tells this story as God's true prophet. Just like in the Old Testament, here is Jesus the prophet announcing judgment on those who are robbing God of His glory, those who are dishonoring God as they dishonor His son Jesus.

And so this parable, like the Old Testament prophets, is inviting the people to see the consequences of rejecting God and His rule. So why does Jesus tell this story?

Two reasons. One, to show how wide God's invitation of grace goes out. And we've seen this in the mission of Jesus, how quick He is to welcome outsiders, to welcome those who are rejected by others, who are on the margins of society.

But in Jesus' mission, those outsiders who recognize their spiritual need, they are brought in. Here, they're brought into the feast. And so it's a reminder to us, again, of just how wide God's invitation of grace is.

But He's also telling the stories we've already said to make clear the consequences that come from our response to God's King and the invitation that He offers.

[11:18] There's two consequences. Either deadly destruction or joyful life. There is no middle ground as the invitation to life with God goes out.

Now, let's think about this. What is this story? Let's look at the details together to see what we can learn. Verse 2, Jesus said, The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son.

So this is the king's feast. And this feast represents the kingdom of heaven, this kingdom that is dawned at the coming of Jesus. And as we've seen in the life of Jesus, invitations to be part of the kingdom, to repent and believe, are going out.

And they're still going out. We're still being invited to this feast today. And as we see in the story, as we see in the life of Jesus, there are still two types of response.

One that says yes, one that says no. Now, in the time of Jesus, it was typical when somebody was arranging a special event like a feast, there would be a double invitation.

[12:31] So this king would have to send out servants to say, this wedding is going to take place so that he would get initial acceptance from those who were to be invited.

Kind of like the equivalent of our save the day. It's coming in the future. Are you going to come?

And then as the time for the wedding drew near, as the food was ready, another message would go out through, I guess, through the kingdom perhaps, saying, okay, now is the time.

That feast that you said you were going to come to, now is the time to arrive. And remember, this is the king's feast that we are being invited to, or these folks in the story are being invited to.

So let's look at the king's invitations, because there's two. First of all, in verse 3, he sent his servants to those who'd been invited to the banquet to tell them to come.

So that's standard practice. Everything's ready. Now's the time to come. And that makes what happens next so outrageous. They refused to come.

[13:40] That's a shocking refusal. They've been invited into joy, honor, privilege, and they simply turn their back. But the king is not done.

There's a second invitation that goes out to this group. He sent more servants, and he said, tell those who've been invited that I've prepared my dinner.

My oxen and fattened calf have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet. Here is insight into the incredible patience and mercy and grace of God.

And grace of God is pictured in this king. He doesn't simply do away with these people who have treated him so badly. Rather, he highlights the greatness of what's in store.

He's saying, there's nothing but the best. I have done everything to get this wonderful feast ready. Please come. He's giving them every opportunity, every invitation.

[14:39] But despite that, the king is rejected. Verse 5, they paid no attention and went off one to his field, another to his business.

The rest seized his servants, ill-treated them, and killed them. Again, if we put ourselves in the crowd, as Jesus tells this story, this would have created a sense of high scandal.

In an honor and shame culture, you just do not do this to anybody, never mind the king. Here is the glory of the king and his feast being trampled upon and being regarded as nothing.

As one group says, do you know what? We've got more important things to do. So they ignore the invitation. And then you have the other group who begin violent attacks on the king's servants and in doing so, are engaged in a violent attack on the king and his honor.

Here is open rebellion. Here is down with the king. Here is let's find ways to dishonor this king who has invited us to receive his grace and kindness.

[15 : 54] And then in verses 7 and 10, we see the king's responses, and there are two. Verse 7, the king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

destruction is one response. The king has been rejected, abused, attacked. And remember the context.

This is during the time when the religious leaders are plotting to kill Jesus. But that very graphic language stands out to us and is a clue for us that Jesus is speaking as a prophet, that this is about the kingdom of heaven.

This isn't simply a nice story about a wedding feast. And this is all about how the people are responding to Jesus. So there's that first response of destruction, but then there's the second response from verse 8 to verse 10.

He said to his servants, the wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.

[17 : 02] So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. So here is incredible grace and kindness.

He throws wide open the invitation to the feast, to honor, to joy, and to glory. It's open to anyone who will come. Both good and bad are here. That would have been a great ending if we were looking for a happily ever after, wouldn't it?

Here is the feast beginning and the crowds have filled up the space. But as Jesus sometimes does with his parables, he has a sting in the tail.

There is this end-of-story stress, and we see it in verse 11 onwards with the king's demand. When the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. Friend, he asked, how did you get in here without wedding clothes? The man was speechless. Whether good or bad, everyone knows there is a dress code.

[18 : 15] The people at the feast must do two things. They must receive the invitation, and they must follow the demands of the invitation, so they must dress appropriately.

So this man here, he is confronted. He has chosen not to wear the appropriate clothing, and he knows he is guilty. He knows he has done wrong.

I have a recurring dream, which is something of a nightmare, in which I'm invited to speak in a church, and I turn up in my pajamas. Do you know, I'm very grateful I can wake up at that point and realize this is just a horrible dream.

The outcome of wearing the wrong clothes in this story is no laughing matter, though, is it? The outcome is to be thrown out to experience the king's judgment for failing to meet the king's demands, and Jesus concludes in verse 14, for many are invited, but few are chosen.

The invitation to the kingdom of heaven goes far and wide, but many refuse to accept, and many refuse to follow its demands. So that's the story.

[19 : 31] And what I want to do now is to think briefly about what lessons can we learn from the main characters. I want us to think about this king and to see that God invites us to enjoy his grace through Jesus.

Even the setting of this story, the fact that it's a wedding feast and it's the king's wedding feast, reminds us of the privilege and the honor to which we are called.

Invited to know God is the greatest privilege imaginable. And then we think about who's telling the story. Here's Jesus, and Jesus in his life was constantly eating with people, and those were meals with a mission.

As he invited the poor, as he invited the despised, as he invited the physically and spiritually needy to feast with him, they were feasting with God's king.

It's a great picture of that invitation of grace that's open to us all. Jesus is still inviting us to enjoy a full life, a joyful life, with God by faith in him.

[20 : 49] In this parable, the king speaks about the great cost that he has gone to to prepare the feast. Now, we know for us God's grace, God's kindness comes to us as a free gift.

It's free for us to receive. But there was a cost to Jesus, which Jesus was well aware of. Here he is in this last week before the cross.

And God had chosen for his son to walk that path of suffering and death so that we might be forgiven, so that we might be clothed in the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ, so that we might, by faith, receive the hospitality of the king, so that we might feast and have real joy.

We have a remarkable God pictured here as this king, a king who is willing to overlook the shame that we bring on him, a king who is willing to overlook the rejection and the disobedience shown to him.

Day by day, he is willing and patient to forgive us and to show us grace. So there is hope for any of us here today, whatever our past sin and our past shame.

[22 : 13] However, in the past, we may have ignored the call of Jesus. He is willing to forgive and to save and to bring you to the feast. There's a great picture in verse 9 of the servants being sent to the street corners.

This king who is willing to invite any, to show honor and to extend joy to any, whoever we might be. We might be used to missing out when invitations are handed out.

We might be used to not earning the approval of others, of having people think not much of us and perhaps we don't think much of ourselves. But the good news of God's grace is that in Christ we don't have to fight to earn God's approval.

God approves of us when we are in Christ and He gives us honor and He welcomes us. And so we find in this king a picture of God and a God who invites us to enjoy His grace through Jesus.

But we also have attention drawn to those first guests who are invited who refuse to come to the feast. And that reminds us that rejecting the invitation of God's grace leads to deadly destruction.

[23 : 39] We've already said it. Jesus as God's prophet is announcing judgment. Jesus as God's king has the authority to judge. And here He is speaking a solemn word to those who persistently and deliberately, violently were opposing and rejecting Him and we'd conspire together to have Him murdered.

So Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees but there are lessons for each one of us. So as we think about the response of these guests, examine yourself, examine your heart.

Do I recognize any of these attitudes in my own heart and life? If you're here today and you're not a Christian, do you see the danger through the story of that position?

Let's look at the different ways people reject the king's invitation which is a picture ultimately of rejecting Jesus. First, there is the group that ignore Him.

Verse 5, they pay no attention. One goes off to his field, another to his business. Too busy for their king. I wonder today if any of us find ourselves so busy with life, so busy with work and responsibilities that we've never really taken the time to think carefully for ourselves about who is Jesus and what has Jesus done?

[25 : 14] Because the claims that He makes and the actions that He takes are so profound that they demand our response. Neil Postman a number of years ago wrote a book called Amusing Ourselves Today.

It's entirely possible spiritually to be so busy with pleasure or so busy working ourselves to death that we never take time to think about the realities of eternity.

There are serious implications for putting other things ahead of this invitation.

As Jesus said another time, what good is it to gain the whole world but lose your eternal soul? What good is it for these men to go off to their fields to work but then to find the king who comes to destroy them for their resistance of him?

So we can reject Jesus simply by ignoring him and his claims. There's another way to reject Jesus and that's to deliberately rebel against the king and that's what we see in verse 6 when they seize the king's servants ill-treat them and kill them.

[26 : 34] R.C. Sproul talks about the sin of cosmic treason. God is the king we owe our allegiance and honour to but in our own hearts we can be so quick to try and remove God from the throne of our lives so that we can occupy that place.

God has made us so that we would know and enjoy and give him glory in our lives but we can deliberately rob God of glory because we want life to be about us.

We like Adam and like Eve in the garden can believe the lie that true freedom, true happiness is found in leaving God and his word behind in living and setting our own rules and setting our own direction salvation.

So that we can in our own mind just like the people in this story we can find ourselves at war with God hostile to him not wanting to hear his claims or demands because we are a rival king to God. But that's not the only way to reject God's grace in the sending of Jesus. There's one last way and that's represented by the man who wasn't wearing the wedding clothes.

[28 : 02] We can resist the king's demands. Clearly there was the expectation that the guests would wear appropriate clothing.

Everybody else in the feast good and bad they were doing that except for this one representative man who in his pride has said I will make my own path.

I will set my own standard of goodness. And we can do that in our own lives when we get it into our heads that our goodness or our religion are our way to pay our way into the kingdom of God.

Where we fail to believe that it's by grace we're saved through faith and instead we are persuaded that we have to earn it and that we can by ourselves earn it.

In which case we of necessity find ourselves saying I don't need Jesus or I need Jesus but I also need to contribute to my salvation and it's pride.

[29 : 07] And it's resisting the demands of a king who simply says come and receive what I have provided. Receive the wedding clothes which when we think about how it's pictured in the New Testament is to put on the righteousness of Christ.

To receive what he has done for us on the cross and to humbly accept that as a gift. This story makes it very clear for us that with any invitation there is an accepted or a rejected choice.

We either say yes to Jesus or no to Jesus. Jesus himself said he who is not for me is against me.

There is no neutral ground, there is no sitting on the fence when it comes to Jesus. And so the shocking elements of this story Jesus gives to us in order to wake us up.

Just like the prophets of the Old Testament, they brought news of impending judgment to shock the people into repentance and faith. Jesus wants us to see the horror of ignoring and rebelling against and resisting our good and gracious King.

[30 : 25] And he wants to show us the urgency of our need to respond positively to Jesus. One of the things that this story reminds us of is that grace is only grace if the outcome should be different.

By rights, because of our rebellion against God, we should all experience judgment. But only in Jesus is there grace and salvation.

And so we need to receive that invitation. And that takes us to our last group. The group that find themselves in the feast. And they remind us that receiving the invitation of God's grace leads to joyful life.

The story reminds us that God's guest list is full of surprises. Jesus' life on earth and his mission shows us that God's guest list is full of surprises.

Now we're told anyone, verse 10, both good and bad, in the world's eyes or indeed in our own eyes, if we believe in Jesus, we will be in the feast.

[31 : 35] Because it's about grace and it's not about merit. It's not about rank or status. It's about, do I see my need? Do I trust the goodness of God, my King, and the sending of Jesus, his Saviour, to forgive my sin and to give me new life?

How do we enter the feast? We be thinking about God's grace, but what's our part? There's faith involved, isn't there?

We need in the first place to say yes to the invitation. We need to say yes that we want to come to Jesus, that we want to have him as our Lord, that we trust that what he did on the cross, he did for me to deal with my sin, to give me new life with God.

And we also, as the story shows us, we need to obey the dress code. We need to come dressed in the right way. And that's not coming dressed in our own goodness.

We don't come saying, well, look at my good deeds, I should be in the kingdom of heaven. And we come clothed in the righteousness of Christ. It takes us back to that great exchange that happens at the cross.

[32 : 46] Jesus takes our sin and he gifts us his perfect record of righteousness. God sees us in Christ, perfectly righteous in him so that we are able to enjoy life with God.

We can be welcomed and accepted when we are in Christ. And because of that, we get to enjoy life in the feast. It's a great picture of the kingdom of heaven, isn't it?

It reminds us of the joy that we have as Christians. I read an article by a guy called Randy Alcorn this week and he said, Christianity is not a frowning context.

Sometimes, perhaps that's the image or the message that we portray to the world. Rather, Jesus is saying, by faith in him we enter this feast.

We are brought into this good news of great joy. We have this prospect of happiness now and eternal happiness to follow. So that actually the joy that we have as Christians should be a crucial

part of our mission.

[33 : 53] As we're inviting others to come to Jesus, people should be saying, what's the basis for your hope? What's the basis for your joy? This is different from the kind of happiness that I'm pursuing which comes and goes.

Yours seems lasting and solid. So joy is part of our mission because joy is our ultimate destination. And joy is what we have now when our faith is in Jesus.

God in Jesus, his son, invites us to the feast. The guests here were surprised by the invitation of the king.

And it's sometimes, isn't it, it's the surprising invitations that bring us surprising and wonderful joy. We still remember and talk about that time years ago when we were on holiday in Corsica, one of the French islands and we'd gone for a day trip to a fairly remote beach and we'd missed the bus and so we were stranded and hitchhiking in this really remote part of Corsica when somebody drove along who'd just been back from a fishing trip.

And it turned out he was the ex-chief of police in Corsica, a man who was very both familiar and fond of Glasgow. And so there was a great chat and then we got invited back to his mansion.

[35 : 14] And we had a wonderful dinner with his family and we stayed in touch for a number of years and it was a wonderful and surprising invitation. God in his mercy and his grace invites us to so much more than that, doesn't he?

To a feast that we don't deserve, a feast that we don't need to earn the invitation for. He has sent his son Jesus, he has paid the great cost to invite us to the feast, to provide that clothing of his righteousness so we can come in and know our God.

To have that joy that begins now, to have that joy that lasts for all eternity. So today, will you come?

Will you come to this feast?

Will you enjoy life with God through faith in Jesus? And if that's where you're at, if you're already feasting on that joy, will you share that invitation with others, continuing that mission to bring others to know the joy there is in Jesus?

Thanks. Trans suspected