

The Kingdom of Grace

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[0 : 0 0] theme in the Gospel of Matthew is the kingdom of God or more properly the kingdom of heaven. The Gospel of Matthew is not merely the biography of King Jesus but the description of the kingdom over which he reigns as king. Now for the Jewish people of Jesus' day the idea of kingdom described what we might call a nation state or an empire or perhaps even a dynasty of kings. So for the Jews to speak of the kingdom of Israel was to speak of the nation of Israel, the Jews, the dynasty of David.

But Matthew tells us that the kingdom of God is not a nation state and it's not an empire nor is it the dynasty as we would understand it. Matthew's message consistently recording Jesus teaching on this matter is that the kingdom of God crosses geographical boundaries and ethnic distinctives. The kingdom of God is a kingdom of grace where people from every nation, tribe and language join as one under the reign of King Jesus. No one is favored over anyone else because not only is the kingdom of God the kingdom of grace but that the only requirement of its citizens be that they are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and not by works.

So to be an ethnic Jew conferred no special advantage in the kingdom of God. What counts is the unmerited, undeserved, unlimited grace of Christ. The citizens of the kingdom of heaven take on their lips the immortal words of Horatius Boner, not what my hands have done can save my guilty soul.

Not what my toiling flesh has borne can make my spirit whole. Thy work alone, O Christ, can ease this weight of sin. Thy blood alone, O Lamb of God, can give me peace within. The citizens of the kingdom of heaven are often taken from the hated and despised and belittled citizens of this world. Small children, vulnerable women, vulnerable women, tax collectors, prostitutes, those on the outside. Because they more than any other recognize that if they are to be citizens of the kingdom of God it shall be entirely of the grace of Christ. Now the religious authorities of Jesus' day considered themselves de facto members of the kingdom of God. After all they had devoted their lives to the traditions and the ceremonies of of their religion. In their mind their ethnic origin as physical descendants of Abraham conferred upon them special privileges. Jesus tells this parable about the king's banquet here in Matthew 22 1 through 14 to shake up their thinking and bring them back to the necessity of undeserved grace of God through faith in Christ as the fundamental condition for entry to and standard of life in the kingdom of God.

You know I still meet people who when I ask them in what their hope of acceptance with God rests reply well I'm a good moral person. I'm from good Christian stock. I'm well respected in society and I come to church. I hope that's enough for God to accept me.

[4 : 1 6] Well to us as to the religious authorities of Jesus' day he tells this parable to shake us from our wrong thinking and shake us into recognizing the beauty and the invitation and the necessity of grace.

Talk of our own good moral works. Our status in society, our religious devotion does not belong in the kingdom of God. All that matters there is Christ and his grace toward us.

Now this parable we understood in two stages. First of all the guests of the kingdom of grace, those who are invited to enjoy his banquet, and secondly the garments of the kingdom of grace.

That which the king himself provides us with, which prepared us or fit us for life in his kingdom. Let me remind you that the concept of an anti-messianic feast was a very prominent thought in Jewish religious minds.

the question for them, the question for us is this, who's going to be there? Who's going to be seated at the great banquet of the kingdom of grace hosted by God's Messiah himself?

[5 : 40] Shall you? First of all then we have the guests of kingdom grace. The guests of kingdom grace. This parable is the third of three parables Jesus told, each of which describe kingdom grace and the consequences of rejecting the grace of Christ in favor of our own moral good works or religious achievements. There's the parable of the two sons in Matthew 21, 28 through 32.

There's the parable of the vineyard owner in Matthew 21, verses 33 through 46. And now this parable of the king's banquet in Matthew 22, 1 through 14.

And each of these is turning the standards of this world's religion upon its head. Because in every other world religion it's what a man does for God which dictates his standing before God.

But according to King Jesus it's what God has done for us which dictates our standing before him. Our security and our standing and our belonging depends entirely upon the grace of God toward us in Christ Jesus.

Well this parable begins with a king who gives a wedding banquet for his son. As I've said here's the biblical imagery of the end time messianic feast God's preparation of a heavenly banquet.

[7 : 06] But it's also an intimate story. Here's a father who is proud of his son. Here's a father who wants to celebrate the achievements of his son. And so he sends out his servants to invite guests to attend.

Bearing in mind the messianic old testament imagery Matthew so often relies upon in this gospel. Imagery which was very familiar to the religious authorities of Jesus' day so much so that they knew exactly what Jesus was talking about here.

We want to consider first of all the enemies of grace. Those the father invited but who refused to come. And secondly the friends of grace. Those the father sent out his servants to find and though they did not deserve it invite to the feast.

There are the enemies of grace in the first instance. The enemies of grace. In the earlier part of this parable you can see Jesus talks of those who willfully reject the king's invitation.

They are the religious authorities of his day. Pharisees. Sadducees. Men who believe that by their own good works and religious duty God owes them a reward.

[8 : 25] In verse 3 we learn they had been invited to the feast. The particular tense of that word invited implies that the invite was issued a long time before but that it remained open.

And we see this in the context really of God's love for the Jewish people through the covenant God made with Abraham. God called them into his kingdom that if they believed in him he would be their God and they would be his people.

God called to them all the way back then in the days of Abraham calling from Genesis to Malachi from Adam to David saying to them I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt you shall have no other gods beside me.

Those called refused the father's invitation but the father insistent that they should celebrate his son sends more servants inviting them to come.

this time he does not merely invite them to come he commands them saying 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 so they are now invited and commanded feasts prepared by kings tended to be very lavish affairs at which the great and good were to be seen think of the privilege of being invited to a state banquet at Buckingham Palace and these people are invited to come to a king's feast invited commanded and invited again by servant after servant God had chosen the people of Israel and called them to be faithful to him God had sent them his servants men like Samuel and Isaiah who called them to return to him and be loyal to him their consistent call was return to the

[10:31] Lord the history of the Old Testament is that of God's invitations to the children of Abraham that when their Messiah should come they should believe in him and follow him but we read at the end of verse 3 they refused to come they refused to come the actual literal meaning of that phrase they did not want to come they did not want to come they did not want to honour the king's son they did not want to celebrate his marriage and his great achievements they were not willing and so when commanded by the king we read in verse 5 they paid no attention so an invitation arrives in your letterbox from Queen Elizabeth to attend a state banquet at Buckingham Palace and you pay and I quote no attention furthermore not only do you pay no attention to the letter you grab the postman give him a good beating and then knife him and in effect what you're saying to the king is this this is how little I think of you this is how little I think of your son you know

I'll pay attention to my fields and to my businesses and to my religious duties but that I should bow before your son these people are the son of Jesus first parable who offered lip service obedience to their father but did not obey the vineyard tenants of Jesus second parable who murdered the owner's son they are the king's guest who refused to come and they pay no attention to the king's command in a recurring theme in Jesus three parables the king becomes angry and he destroys those who are proved to be his enemies they're going to get what they deserve because they refused what they didn't deserve what they deserve now is God's punishment he destroys them end of verse seven in words of prophetic tragedy Jesus says and burn their city what city of that of course in context it's the city of Jerusalem at the heart of the legalism and work based religion of these men the city which in

AD 70 some 40 years after Jesus said these words will be burned to the ground by the Roman legions you know we can look for all kinds of political reasons why the Romans destroyed Jerusalem but here it is in a nutshell in Matthew 22 it's because the religious authorities of Jerusalem over many centuries paid no attention to the invitation of God to bow before his son the Messiah Jesus just like in Matthew 21 verse 41 the wicked tenant farmers are put to a wretched end so those religious authorities who hate Jesus will themselves be destroyed and their city burned and you know we might blanch at their fate but it's the same fate that awaits all those who mistakenly believe against all privilege that their status before

God depends on their own moral goodness their own social respectability or their own religious observance it is so tragic that so many people having sat under the sound of the gospel for so many years still think well I'm a good person I'm respected in society I come to church I hope that's enough tragic because in their self dependence they do not realize that in effect when God is calling upon them to celebrate the achievements of his son they are saying to him no I don't want to I'm paying no attention to you I'd rather celebrate my own achievements you know sometimes the fiercest enemies of grace aren't to be found outside the church sometimes they are prominent people within the church and Jesus reserves the strongest condemnation for them but the challenge for us is plain there is no future in being an enemy of grace because behind the religious facade lies a heart which refuses to believe or bow down to

King Jesus God sees it God knows it but then not only are there the enemies of grace there are the friends of grace the friends of grace if we have at all been reading Matthew 20 through 22 we shouldn't find it altogether surprising that those who end up inheriting salvation those who ultimately find themselves at the end time wedding feast of the son aren't those the religions of this world may have predicted it is not the great and good because they paid no attention to the invitation of the command of God the king commands his servants go out into the city streets go out to those places where the undesirables are to be found and call them to come to my banquet the servants aren't to go to the palaces and to the parliaments and to the temples but to the street corners to the crossroads where those of whom society is ashamed hang out people like tax collectors gentiles and prostitutes these people have no meaningful relationship with the king they are far removed from him in status and dignity they aren't privileged in fact to all intents and purposes they are at the very bottom of this world's pecking order and popularity list we don't know their names we don't want to know their names it would be shameful for us to be seen with them we'll keep our distance and yet it's they

[17:11] God calls to come to the wedding feast of his son it's they he invites to celebrate his son's glorious achievements and join with him in his joy it is they God calls to the end time banqueting feast of his son and you'll notice that the king calls upon his servants to invite indiscriminately to invite and I quote anyone you find verse 9 what have these anyone you find people done to deserve the invite nothing at all nothing as I've said they're as far removed from thrones and palaces as it's possible to be and yet the king calls them with the same sincerity urgency and passion with which he had called the previous group and from verse 10 notice the servants gathered in both good and bad the call is indiscriminate it does not depend upon the character or status of those invited but upon the sincerity urgency and passion of the king because he says

I must have a people who celebrate the glory of my son I must gather them together because that's how important my son's glory is to me you see it is not the status of these people which confers upon them the right to attend the king's feast it is the undeserved invitation of the king and as these servants faithfully fulfill their master's command the banquet hall slowly fills with guests and if you should have asked any one of those guests who were present what qualifies you to be here that have said to you well I don't deserve to be here I've done nothing special in life my warrant is the invitation of the king we're here not on the strength of our status we're here on the basis that the king has invited us to come now I want to be careful not to push this parable further than it should be pushed but I think that given the previous two parables are basically saying the same thing the application is obvious the kingdom of God is a kingdom of grace filled with those who don't deserve to be there who haven't earned their place there they're there because God invited them to come and that's all there is to it their right to be there isn't a function of their moral goodness their social status or their religious observance their ethnic background their cultural history their family ties

God's kingdom is far bigger than we think but there's only one thing that's true of all its subjects there they're purely down to the grace of God and his gracious invitation and command to come the kingdom of God is the kingdom of grace where its peoples are not there because they have because they're worthy but because they're called not because they deserve it but because of the overflowing generosity of God and his burning desire that his son Jesus Christ should be celebrated praised and worshipped the only prerequisite for being guests of the king of grace is that we don't think we are worthy of it and don't deserve it in every other religion in the world it's what a man or woman does for God which dictates his standing before God but according to king

Jesus it is what he has done for us which dictates our standing before God our standing our security and our belonging depends entirely upon the grace of God in Christ so where are you in this story the guests of kingdom grace secondly and very briefly the garments of kingdom grace the garments of kingdom grace this parable is Jesus picture of the grace of the kingdom of God a grace which is not ours by right it is an undeserved gift we could devote another sermon to the second part of this parable that of the garments of the kingdom of grace who is this man Jesus finds undressed in his presence what does Jesus mean by the words many are invited but few are chosen

I would hope that over the next few weeks the answers to these questions might become clearer to us however what we do need to know is that in the world of Jesus day as in our own every wedding guest was expected to dress up for the occasion it's a mark of respect that we should dress appropriately that we should wear the right wedding clothes that we should not wear fancy dress to a wedding if there ever was a wedding in the land where the guests should dress up to show respect it would have been for that of the king's son you didn't see anyone at William and Kate's wedding wearing a morph outfit because the way you dress is a mark of respect for the king for us to wear ordinary clothes would be an insult but when the king walks into this packed arena in which his son is to be married there's a man there who's not dressed in a wedding garment the text doesn't tell us whether he's one of the good guys or the bad guys he just tells us he's not got a wedding garment on he's there dressed in his civvies a sign of disrespect and insult against the king and his son and yet you might say but give the guy a break maybe he's poor maybe he doesn't have enough money to buy suitable clothes why should the king be so judgmental without knowing why this man was dressed the way he was and that argument might work except for a word in verse 11 a man was there who was not wearing wedding clothes or perhaps more literally a man was there who had not been dressed in wedding clothes he had not been dressed in wedding clothes in other words not only was the invitation made at the king's command but that the garments the guests should wear to the king's feast were supplied by the king himself he gave them the garments they needed to wear it wasn't about people buying their own outfits to the marriage supper all the women trawling around the hat shops in Jerusalem it was about them wearing the outfit the king had provided for them i don't think there's any other interpretation of this passage which fits the context other than saying that not only is god's invitation to us into the kingdom of god an invitation of pure grace but that god's provision for our access into the kingdom of god is a provision of pure grace we neither deserve the invitation nor the provision the text is telling us the king has done it all the king has done it all everything required for a person to enter into and belong in his kingdom it's all of him for this man not dressed in a wedding garment oh he's heard and obeyed the invite but he has refused the king's terms i will not wear that wedding garment the king has provided for me he says what i'm wearing is fine what my own money can buy is enough anyway i like the way i look in this fancy suit compared to the clothes the king wants me to wear the man's in for a shock he is bound hand and feet and cast into the darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth and what Jesus is telling us here is that from beginning to

[26 : 15] end the kingdom of god is the kingdom of grace our good works our religious ceremonies our ethnic distinctives our cultural history they neither grant us entry into this kingdom nor secure our belonging there in fact if we think that we can force our way into the kingdom of god owing to our status in society our cultural heritage or our good works we're in for a very rude awakening indeed because the only condition of entry into and belonging in the kingdom of god is the warrant of god inviting us to believe in his son and the provision of the garments of his grace the grace he provides to the cross and resurrection that if we should believe in Jesus Christ all our sins shall be forgiven and we shall receive eternal life so the citizens of the kingdom of Christ take upon their lips the immortal hymn of

Horatius Boner not what these hands have done can save this guilty soul not what my toiling flesh has borne can make my spirit whole thy work alone o christ can ease this weight of sin thy blood alone o lamb of god can give me peace within these are the words we sing the first moment we hear god's invitation to enter his kingdom through faith in his son these are the words we'll sing at the very last moment when we see christ's face in heaven it's all of you lord and none of me surely surely there's not one among us here today who still thinks that what they can do for god is enough surely not when it's what god has done for us which alone is acceptable can anyone hear his voice his invite today come to the wedding feast of my son by faith will you put on the garments of his grace let us pray lord we thank you for the parables of jesus and we thank you for jesus his his his incisive understanding of the human condition that that by nature we are all legalists who believe that we can work our way to you he tells us that his kingdom is a kingdom of grace or not a kingdom at all and father we pray that every one of us here would hear the invitation that indiscriminate invitation though none of us deserve to be saved not one of us deserved deserved to be invited to that feast yet our warrant for faith is that you have invited us to come whoever we are from whatever background whatever our history up to this point has been however many times we have rejected you or have fallen away from you today you invite us to come and you tell us that you will dress us in wedding garments in the righteousness of your son

Jesus Christ so that with our last breath we shall say see we shall not say see what my hands have done but we shall say not what these hands have done we ask all these things in Jesus name amen