

# The Joyful God

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, you'll find Matthew 22 on page 827 in the New Testament part of the Bible. And as you do, the children's spots this morning reminded me, some years ago in a children's spot, the person who was leading said, boys and girls, what's the little animal that comes across our gardens in the fall time with the leaves and runs with acorns up and down the trees and hides the acorns?

Dead silence. And she asked again and one little boy put his hand up and he said, I know the answer should be Jesus, but it sounds like a squirrel. Matthew 22.

This is a simple, searching and quite shocking parable. Verse 2. So the most important thing you need to know about the God of the Bible is that he's a king and that he has a son and that he is preparing a magnificent wedding feast for the son and he wants you to be there and he wants me to be there and he wants a lot of people to be there.

Because Christianity is essentially an invitation. It's a call. It's a summons from God into this great joyful wedding feast where we experience God's own joy, entering into the joy of the Lord.

And that comes as a surprise for many because we're so used to thinking about God's under the topic of thou shalt not. You know, if I become a Christian, surely that's going to confine and constrain my appetites.

[ 1 : 5 1 ] Isn't Christianity about what I should not do? It's a famine for my desires. And through this gospel, Jesus keeps putting the kingdom of heaven before us and saying, what do you really want?

I mean, what is really important to you? Because anything and everything that's most important to you cannot fulfill and cannot satisfy anything close to the love of God and to the feast that he's preparing.

But as it was read so peacefully by Martin, it's also a little bit shocking, don't you think? I mean, parables are meant to shock. It seems like a melodrama.

And you keep thinking, oh, that's a really good place for the story to end. And then it takes off again. And then it comes to another point. And then it takes off again. So there are three acts in it. And the first act, the invitations have been sent out.

The king calls the people who said yes to the invites to come. And no one comes. They say, we don't want to. And then he sends out the invites again, a little bit clearer the second time.

[ 2 : 5 4 ] And unbelievably, this time, not only do they say we've got more important things to do, but they take the servants and they murder them. And even more unbelievably, the king says, right, that's it.

He sends his troop. He kills all those people and burns their city. And you think that's a good place for the story to stop. I could preach on that. And then there's a second act.

And again, the king sends out his servants. He seems so deadly committed to this joyful feast. He says, go out and find the bad and the good people. And at the end of verse 10, the wedding hall is filled with guests.

Now that's a good place for a parable to finish. You could preach that. But there's a third act. King comes in in verse 11. He looks at the guests. He finds one person there without a wedding garment.

He binds the person hand and foot with rope, throws them into the outer darkness. And then Jesus says, many are called, but few are chosen. Why so shocking?

[ 3 : 55 ] Why so melodramatic? Well, Jesus is speaking to his own murderers in the temple in Jerusalem. Back in chapter 21, he's finally got to Jerusalem where he knows he's going to be executed.

And the first thing he does in verse 12 is he goes into the temple, straight to the heart of corruption and the seat of power. And he drives out the sleazy sellers.

And interesting, in the very next verse, verse 14, he turns around and he heals all the blind and the lame in the temple. It's almost as though there's this beautiful picture of salvation, a picture of cleansing as well as healing, dealing with sin and giving life.

And the chief priests and the elders just hate what Jesus is doing. And in verse 23, they confront him and they say, we didn't give you a permit to do this. On what authority are you doing this?

We're the ones in charge here. And in answer, Jesus tells three parables. And this is the last one. And I think the reason it's so strong, part of the reason it's so strong, is because even with these men who are about to kill him, Jesus woos and warns.

[ 5 : 12 ] He holds the door of the kingdom open to them. He wants them to see the great danger that they're in in the starkest possible terms and the opportunity that they have to still come in, if only that they would listen to God through him.

If only they would come in. Jesus still wants them to come to him. He still wants these men who hate him, hate him bitterly to be there at the wedding feast.

And so he woos them with this picture of the feast, the picture of happiness and joy and pleasure and fulfillment and true home. And he warns them that all turns on their response.

And the reason we're looking at this is because that's exactly what Jesus wants for all of us as well. That's why you're here. That's why I'm here. God wants to invite us again and to call us again and to remind us of all the good that he has in store.

So we're going to go back and look at the three acts together. And in each act, there is a subtle play between the king's kindness and the complicated responses of people to his call and his offer.

[ 6 : 22 ] And I've called the first act, which is verses three to seven, refusing the kindness of the king. So we pick up the story at verse three, when the final call for the big wedding goes out.

Now, in those days, the invites to a wedding was a three-stage process. A person of means, and this is the king, would send out an invitation to the very select people to come to a wedding.

The people would say, yes, we're going to come. It's going to be around this sort of time. And then the king says, then gets on with the preparations, very complicated preparations, killing animals, etc.

And when things are almost ready to get on the table, then a call goes out. The call is come. So when we pick it up at verse three, the invitations have already gone out.

People have said yes. And now is the call to the lucky ones to come. The royal banquet. Time has come. And if you're familiar with the Bible, you know that a royal wedding feast is one of the primary pictures in the whole Bible of the kingdom of God, of life with God.

- [ 7 : 31 ] It's a feast for our bodies. It's a feast for our souls. It's a feast for our senses where God will provide perfectly what we most deeply need.
- I don't think we need to be shy about this as Christians. It's sweets. It's treats that perfectly satisfy us and will also create in us and satisfy needs we never knew we had.
- And the whole thing is God's idea. He gave the wedding feast for his son. He provides everything. The work is complete. Nothing has been spared from the table because the gospel is food for the hungry.
- It's home to the lonely. It's joy to the grieving. It's love to the unloved. And this is the experience for everyone who belongs to the kingdom of God.
- This is what it means. You sense God calling. You hear God calling you, drawing you. You're attracted by this offer from God. By name.
- [ 8 : 35 ] Old Martin Luther said this. Christ calls it a marriage feast. Not a time of toil or sorrow. But a time of holiday and joy. In which we make ourselves fine.
- We dress up. We sing. Play. Dance. Eat. Drink and be glad. We have a good time. Or otherwise it wouldn't be a wedding feast. He said Christ calls his Christianity in the gospel.
- By the name of the highest joy on earth. Namely by the name of the marriage feast. Or as old Bishop J.C. Riles said. The father is ready to love and receive.
- The son is ready to cleanse and pardon guilt away. The spirit is ready to sanctify and to renew. The angels are ready to rejoice over the returning sinner.
- Grace is ready to assist him. The Bible is ready to instruct him. Heaven is ready as his everlasting home. Only one thing is needed. But the response of the lucky ones to this invite.
- [ 9 : 37 ] Who've already said yes. Is completely unnatural. At the end of verse 3. They do not want to come. It's just so rude. They ignore the call. Remember.
- Jesus is talking to the seriously religious insiders. And Jesus sees the refusal to come. As unnatural. They had said yes.
- I mean they believed in this wedding feast of God. They were absolutely confident that their names were on the list. And they had received invitation after invitation from Jesus. They just refused to enter.
- Because salvation is more than feeling a call from God. And getting an invitation. It's entering in. It's acting on it. But such is the kindness of God the Father in this parable.
- That he's willing to forgive that insult. And for the sake of the joy of his son. In verse 4. He sends out another group of servants to the same people. He gives the ingrates the benefit of the doubt.
- [ 10 : 35 ] Maybe my first servants weren't quite as explicit. So he says look the meat has been marinated. The cooks are in the kitchen. The wine is in the cooler. Come. And if their first response was unnatural.
- Their last response is completely bizarre. And inexcusable. As some of them say look I've got better things to do with my time frankly. I've got a vineyard going.
- In the south of France. I've got a business I'm building. These are things I've prayed about. I can't come. And the others are so irritated by the reminder of the king's claim on them.
- They resort to violence. And they murder the servants. Could you think of a better way of communicating your complete disregard and dishonour to the king? What's interesting is that these two responses.
- Indifference and violence. They look different on the surface. But they have the same root. And the root is pride. Though their highest value is themselves and their own things.

[ 11 : 38 ] This is the sin of the religious insider. We become accustomed to hearing the invite. And we treat it lightly. We gradually have other things that we find we enjoy.

And they give us more joy. And become more important to us than the king's son. And in verse 7. Their reaction is not just selfish and foolish. It's suicidal.

The king's had enough. So he sends his troops to the city where the murderers live. And he kills them. And he burns the city. And again, we expect the story to end there. It's a savage warning for anyone who trifles with the grace and kindness of God.

But it does not. So we move from refusing the kindness of the king. Act 2, verses 8 to 10. Receiving the kindness of the king. And you might think that the king, after all this nastiness, might call the wedding off.

But he's so committed to the joy of the son. And he is so committed to the joy of the son even today. That when people refuse and reject his kindness, you know what happens, don't you?

[ 12 : 42 ] That the mercy and kindness of God just flows around those people and goes to others. And that's what's happening here. In a massive understatement in verse 8.

The king calls the first people, the first invitees, unworthy. They thought they were very worthy. But now the king says, go out to the places that are off the beaten track.

Go and invite people who would never expect to be invited to a royal wedding. The most recent royal wedding we had was Prince Harry and Margaret, sorry, Megan Markle.

Did I get that right? Anyone here receive an invite? I'm quite disappointed to see that. It was dubbed the biggest wedding of the decade.

Do you know how many guests they were unable to invite? 800. 800 only. Very carefully selected and vetted. And 530 of the 800 were royal relatives.

[ 13 : 47 ] The rest were celebrities. The Beckhams, Oprah, Serena Williams, Elton John. And then there was a special selection across the land of 2,000 others who were carefully selected by the regional lord lieutenants.

That's a thing. And they were invited and they had the privilege of standing outside and watching the royal procession go in and out. Point is, you cannot, you could not buy a ticket to this wedding.

And now the king of heaven sends his messengers, but he sends them off the beaten track. And he says, I want you to go to people who are both bad and good.

And he says bad first because he wants to emphasize that the way God looks at people is not the way we look at people. He looks straight past all the things that we think make us worthy.

You know, our moral record or our physical beauty or our intelligence or our personality or charm or influence or whatever. And his fundamental desire is to share the joy of the wedding feast to all who come to him.

[ 14 : 54 ] Now this has all sorts of implications for us. Let me mention just two. Number one is, it means that as a church, the church is always full of people who are both bad and good.

It's always mixed. It's always messy. And if you are frustrated with other people in this church, that's okay. They're probably frustrated with you too.

What unites us is we're heading for the same feast. Our desire is to honor the same king. We've responded to the same invite as best we can. We're all holding on to that promise of the great feast when death will be swallowed up and all frustration.

But the fact is that Jesus saves sinners, not based on moral success. And he does it for the joy of his feast. And he wants you there. Here's another thought.

Today is Trinity Sunday. And last week, on Thursday, we celebrated. It was the last week. We celebrated. Sorry. Pentecost. Where am I? What day is it?

[ 15 : 58 ] It's Pentecost. How long ago has we celebrated Ascension? Was that Thursday or a week ago Thursday? I've got the details straight. Don't worry. We had an Ascension Day service here on Thursday.

And I'm really sorry you weren't here. It was terrific. And we learned a little bit. That Jesus now, even in his heavenly glory.

He doesn't just live a life of majesty and splendor. But of love and care. But of love and care and desire for us. From heaven, Jesus continually shares the Holy Spirit and all his supplies of grace.

And he now intercedes for us. He thinks about each of us. He meditates on his people. And he desires not just to know us, but to be with us and for us to be with him.

You ever thought about that? So that means, let me quote you from Mark Jones, who's an author here in Vancouver. He's speaking about Christians who die.

[ 17 : 10 ] He says, We must always remember that when Christ calls one of his loved ones home to himself, he has gained more than we have lost in the death of our loved one.

He desires to be with us because he knows us. And that demands that one day he will call us home to be with him. Ultimately, this happens not because of something such as disease or fatal accident, but rather because the father has answered the prayer of the son.

I think that's a wonderful perspective. So in verse 10, the wedding hall is full. There's been a massive yes. People have responded to the call.

We want to be there too. And again, another lovely place to finish this parable. Surely Jesus is finished. But there is a sting in the tail. And act three, we see someone presuming on the kindness of the king.

Verses 11 to 14. This is the searching, the very searching act. Because the kingdom of heaven is more than just our hearing. And it's more than just our responding and saying, yes, there's something else.

[ 18 : 27 ] So in verse 11, the king comes in. The feast has not started. And the king examines his guests. He looks at them carefully. People who are there who never thought they would be there.

They can smell the food and they're enjoying the presence of the king. But there is a man who stands out from everyone else who is there. And the king immediately identifies him by this difference.

And the difference is he has no wedding garment. He has not changed. And since the people who are there are both poor and rich, this has nothing to do with the person's capacity to buy a wedding garment.

And most commentators since Augustine take the line that the king provided everyone who came with a garment. But this man either doesn't care or he doesn't understand what this whole feast is about.

And in verse 12, the king confronts him. Friend, he says, it's sort of a friendly word. He says, how did you get in here without a wedding garment? And the man is muzzled. It means he's speechless.

[ 19 : 31 ] He's aware of his own guilt in this. He's nothing to say. And the king says, bind him hand and foot and cast him into outer darkness, in the place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, for many are called, but few are chosen.

Now, for the largest part of this week, I was really frustrated that Jesus didn't tell us exactly what the garment is. But now I'm glad. Because it stands for a change of life that you can't reduce down to just one thing.

You know, if it was one thing, we'd tick that off and continue unchanged. What marks this man out is his presumption. He presumes on the kindness and graciousness of the king.

He presumes that since the offer is free, he doesn't need to do anything more than just show up. He doesn't need to go on respecting the king.

He doesn't need to make any attempt to identify with the joy of the king and the son. And I think that's why this is so searching. This man has not been changed by the kindness and grace of God.

[ 20 : 44 ] He assumes that all he needs is the invite. But that great sense of privilege and joy has not permeated his heart. And so he does not value the kindness of God.

He treats the riches and kindness of God's grace with contempt. He won't allow it to change him. This is the other side of accepting the invitation to enter.

The way in which we take hold of the invitation by God and the call by God to enter is by repentance. The Apostle Paul, later writing in Romans, also speaking to religious insiders, he said this.

He said, See, I think we're quite familiar and we use this picture of faith as empty hands, of receiving the invite of God with empty hands.

That's what faith is and it's a pretty good picture. But the thing about empty hands is you have to empty your hands first of other things so that you'll be able to receive your gift.

[ 21 : 59 ] If your hand is full of something, I'm not going to be able to hold on to anything else. So you see, repentance, it's not beating myself up and making myself miserable. It's not being sorry for the bad results of what I've done.

It's not keeping God happy so that he'll give me good stuff. Repentance is acknowledging God as God, that I haven't treated him in that way. It's hearing his call and understanding the feast of the sun and it's emptying my hands so that I can then take hold of the invitation.

And I think that is how repentance changes us. The order is important. It comes from hearing and believing and accepting that God has accepted me absolutely completely into his meal.

And it starts to sink in and this becomes more important. And I'm okay to let go of this electronic organ and anything in my hands.

Because you can't repent. It's not possible to repent until you really trust in God's kindness. Until you really understand his acceptance. Only if you believe that he's called you to the feast and provided the way to enter.

[ 23 : 13 ] And provided the place that he's done it all completely. That he completely accepts you. Then I can look at what I'm grasping in my hands so tightly. And I can let go of anything for the joy of accepting the feast.

I can let go of my entitlement. And my presumption. My arrogance. And my superiority. And my busyness. And my all those things. And I think as Christians. This is how change happens on a daily basis.

So you can't change your behavior. Let's say your behavior that you're trying to change. Is being too sensitive to criticism. And you try and you know. Try not to be too sensitive to criticism day by day by day.

You go into the mirror. You say I will not be sensitive to criticism. And then your mirror is dirty. And someone criticizes it. It just is not going to work. And it's not going to work. So long as you hold on to your sense of superiority.

Or your sense of entitlement. Or if you are someone who struggles with behaviors of anger or resentment. You're not going to change those by just trying to change them.

[ 24 : 18 ] But so long as you hold on to the desire for power. You won't be able to change them. But if you open your hand and let go of the desire for power. Or the desire for a sense of entitlement.

Then you can receive from God. And it's only that full acceptance of God. Makes it possible to face the reality. Of the infinite inferiority of the thing that I'm holding on to.

And to face my weakness. And to face my darkness. And my false thinking. It's only the kindness of God. That enables me to open my hands. To receive his joy.

And when I open my hand and receive his invitation. It does enable us to let go gradually over time. Of all the idols that crowd our hearts. And as you know.

Repentance is not something just for the beginning of the Christian life. It goes on for the whole of the Christian. All our lives. Our lives of believing and repenting. And repenting and believing. From beginning to end.

[ 25 : 18 ] Christianity. Is an invitation to enter into something joyful. And complete. Something God has done through Jesus. It's a kingdom. It's a wedding feast.

And he calls each one of us to come in. And to enter in. And to open up our hands. To put away the things that hold us back. And to receive that invitation with joy. And to live as though.

We're part of that feast. Let's kneel and pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.