

The parable of the wedding feast

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 07 May 2023

Preacher: John Winter

[0:00] Okay, we're going to read together Matthew 22 and verses 1 to 14. It'll come up on the screen. This is the parable of the wedding feast.

You would think it was almost planned. It wasn't planned. At least I didn't have it in mind when I was putting the sermon scheme together, but it's appropriate.

You'll hopefully be able to see it there. I'll read it to you if you can't. 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 had 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 fatted cattle have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet. But they paid no attention and went off one to the field, another to his business.

[1:06] 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. Then he said to his servants, The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come.

Go to the streets, 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 the 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.

Amen, and the Lord will bless to us the reading of his word. So the parable of the wedding feast. Sometimes people ask me, Why is it that some people accept the gospel and others don't?

[2:21] Why is it that some people seem to have a propensity or tendency to faith, to believe, whereas others don't?

Why are some people skeptical and doubting, while others will quite naturally, it seems, accept what they're told, however supernatural and however implausible those beliefs may seem?

Is it because some people are just made that way? Well, to believe in God is natural.

According to the scripture, it is the fool that says in his heart, There is no God. Just a basic observation. I have never been an atheist, though I didn't become a Christian, until I was 18.

There were things that I could not accept, even as a child, though I wasn't particularly well educated. One thing I couldn't accept was that something came into being from nothing.

[3:26] So when I was told that the world just naturally evolved over time without any guiding force or power, I just couldn't believe that. How would that be possible?

There must be something or someone that starts the whole process off. To deny that seems to me to be the height of foolishness. There is nothing else like it.

This pulpit, your clothing, your car, everything you possess has been designed by a designer, and a designer has an intelligent mind.

So that was something. I, when I prayed, which I did occasionally, especially when I faced the prospect of dying, but it was other people's death, I was too young to be worried so much about my own, because you're always kind of bulletproof when you're that age.

But in the event that I might die in a thousand years' time, I would pray that God would somehow keep me alive. So I've always had that natural propensity, that bent or disposition.

[4:38] But is it because I'm cleverer than others or better than others? Of course not. But some people claim that they have no belief at all. They can't believe that they were always that way, although how you would ever know you were always that way, I really don't know, just as I don't know if I was always that way.

It's just been my tendency. But the reality is that there are those kinds of people in the world, the people who believe and the people who don't believe, the people who accept the truth of the gospel and those who don't or won't, whatever is the case in their particular cases.

And God recognizes that and accepts that. The beauty of being created in the image of God is that God gives us responsibility to make our own decisions.

But we have to live or die by our decisions. There are always consequences to decisions. And God will respect people's decision to reject him, to turn away from him, and not to believe what he has commanded us to believe.

It is a free choice. And God will respect that free choice. I've always sort of smiled inwardly, at least, to the question, why does a good God allow people to go to hell?

[6:06] The answer is because a good God allows people to make their own decisions. If you want to go to hell, it's your choice. It's not God's will for you.

It's not what God wants. But he will respect your freedom to choose. So we can't blame God for what happens to us when we die.

That is a choice for us to make. And this stark reality is part of this story of the wedding feast.

Everybody, of course, loves a wedding.

But if you think about the number of weddings that you've been through, there are things that go wrong at weddings. Some people don't turn up. Other people turn up inappropriately dressed. Who would have thought it?

Whatever the word inappropriate means, it's always cultural, of course. And some people get a bit gnawed at a wedding. Some people get offended at a wedding. All of that happens in this wedding.

[7:05] It's great, isn't it? Just like many of the weddings I've been to. And this is a parable. So next slide, Josh, please. And if it's a parable, you've got to listen carefully.

You've got to pay attention. We've already seen parables in Matthew's Gospel. Parables are lovely earth stories. They're a teaching device that were deployed by Jesus. Not only by Jesus, they were deployed in the Old Testament by the prophets as well.

And the Greek word parable means to lay something side by side. And so the thing that's been laid side by side is you have a recognizable everyday story that people in Israel would instantly understand.

And then you have a spiritual dimension or meaning to the story. Sometimes it might be a single thing that is being drawn out, or there may be more than one thing that needs to be drawn out.

And so they read more like allegories, as we've mentioned the last two sermons at least. The point is that Jesus' attempt to make the truth accessible to the ordinary mind, to make it concrete, to take spiritual realities, to apply it to everyday life, and say, you know what this is like?

[8:29] You know what it's like when a farmer goes out to sow? You know what it's like when a fisherman goes out to fish? You know what it's like when, you know, somebody lights a lamp and so on. You know what it's like to go to a wedding.

I want you to understand that there's something more significant beneath the surface that will highlight a spiritual reality that you need to know something about.

But not everybody grasped parables. They were kind of designed that way. They were appeals to spiritual understanding and spiritual enlightenment.

They revealed whether you had it or didn't have it. And that's how they were to be applied. So they served as comparisons.

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who give a wedding feast for his son. The kingdom of heaven is like two things being laid side by side.

[9:27] And the purpose that Christ, of these parables, was described by Jesus in Mark chapter 4, verses 10 to 12. So Jesus gave the parable of the sower, the very first parable, and the disciples said, why are you speaking in parables?

You preachers make things difficult to understand at times. Why don't you make it easy? Well, let me tell you why. It's not always easy. You know, read the book of Revelation. It's not easy.

The book of Jeremiah or Ezekiel. They're not easy to understand. They require us to dig deep. They require us to seek truth.

To understand revelation is a God-given thing. Remember when Jesus asked his disciples, who do men say that I am? And the disciples said various things.

And then Jesus said, well, who do you say that I am? And Peter says, you are the Christ, the son of the living God. And Jesus said, Peter, you're a really clever man. Well done for studying on the Alpha course.

[10:30] No, he didn't, did he? He said, blessed are you, Simon, son of John, for flesh and blood have not revealed this to you. In other words, no rabbi taught you this, but my Father who is from heaven.

You were instructed by the Holy Spirit. Your mind was enlightened to that truth. You see who I am because God has revealed it to you. And that's where spiritual understanding comes from.

But not everybody has it. So the disciples said, why do you speak in parables? Jesus says, when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, to you has been given, hear that word, to you has been given.

It's a gift. It's a revelation. To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God. But for those outside, everything is in parables, so that they may indeed see, but not perceive, and may indeed hear, but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.

The same truth that reveals God to some hides truth from others. Parables act as a filter to show the difference between, and to discriminate between those who believe and those who do not.

[11:51] And so if you read the scriptures and you say, this is all double Dutch to me, I can't understand it. The answer to that is not found in a Bible commentary. The answer to that is to pray for God to enlighten your heart and mind in his truth.

People say, I read the Bible, well, I don't, it just does nothing for me. Well, it wouldn't. It wouldn't. Not if you don't seek it as food. Not if you don't drink it in like milk.

Not if you don't long for it. Not if you don't meditate upon it day and night. Not if you don't see to believe and read to believe. Lots of people read the Bible to cast questions and aspersions and to challenge its authority, but that won't do them any good at all.

They are the words of life to those who have hearts and have eyes that are open to see its truth. And that is why Jesus taught in parables.

And he said in the parable of the Suah that when people hear the word, well, they respond in different ways. Four different kinds of responses. The stony ground hearer who refuses to listen.

[13:02] He's got his fingers in his ears. I'm not going to listen to this rubbish. It's all nonsense. You meet many of those people, don't you? Or you read of them on social media. Then the shallow listeners who hear and think, well, this is interesting.

I'm quite moved by this. This is pretty good. I went along at 10.30. I may consider this again one day. But then never come back. Never listen again.

I'll pick it up again when I've got time. But they've no intention to let it in. Their hearts are full of weeds. And the pressure of life and the different responsibilities and busyness of life, as we shall see in this parable, distract them from the word and keep them from believing.

And then there's the preoccupied hearers who take it on board and perhaps follow it for a while. But then life just gets the better of them.

Things are just too busy. There are other commitments that we have to see to, legitimate commitments too. Or there may be, it may be hard to be a Christian because of inward sin and sinful desire.

[14:21] Or it might be down to the fact that it's just too hard. Too many people take the mickey out of you. It's too hard. People laugh at you. You get persecuted. And that terrible worry drives you away from Jesus.

And then there are the fruitful listeners. Those who hear the word, receive it, accept it, run through the persecution and difficulties too and still believe on the other side of it.

After many, many months, after many, many years, they're still found drinking in the word, hearing the word, reading the word, being transformed by the word and their life grows and flourishes and produces fruit thirty, sixty and a hundredfold.

And such are some of you. Now that introduction is important because it provides an explanation for this parable. It also shows us what parables are about.

It also tells us that we need to take seriously the fact that in the Christian life we are on a journey. We are following the way of Jesus.

[15 : 32] We don't get it all at once. We might get a good dose of it at the start and we might be filled, thrilled, and full of Jesus.

But the challenge comes when the feelings disappear, when struggles hit, and when our faith is tested as it will be.

And when we're tried through fire, will we then still hold on and still then believe? And this is what this parable is about. So these parables are the words of Jesus, the master teacher.

He wants to reveal the true condition of our heart. And He says in Mark chapter 4, verses 21 to 25, Do you bring a lamp to put it under a ball or a bed?

Instead, don't you put it on a stand. For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open.

[16 : 31] If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear. Consider carefully what you hear. With the measure you use it, it will be measured to you, and even more.

Whoever has will be given more. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. Do you get that? Jesus warns against the danger of complacency here.

Be grateful that you have been given truth. Be astonished that it has been revealed to your heart.

Be thankful that you have His Holy Word in your hands, and that it has influenced your life.

But never be content to sit on what you know. Always seek to learn more. Always seek to know more. Always seek to move on with Jesus. Let Him never become second, and let His Word never become a kind of irrelevance, a thing to be put aside in your life.

Jesus gives to give more. He wants us to know and enjoy Him more. How are we hearing?

[17 : 45] Be careful how you hear. if you have ears to hear, let Him hear. God is the judge of the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts.

So we have to be careful, don't we, about what we think and what we say. It becomes a needed corrective, doesn't it, when we sin and we do wrong because there are none that do not sin.

what then evaluates how we should respond? Isn't it the inner voice of the Holy Spirit? Isn't it the Word of God that says, John, you should not have said that.

John, you should not be thinking that way. Well, I feel I can. And the Holy Spirit says, you can't. I think I should.

I think it's entirely justified. And the Holy Spirit says, that is not Christ-like. And I agree.

[18 : 50] I agree. And I'm brought to repentance. The Scripture says in Hebrews chapter 2, verses 1 to 3, we must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard so that we, listen, we do not drift away.

Let me ask you, are you drifting in your Christian life? Are you floating around in the sea of uncertainty? Is it because you have stopped paying attention to what you hear?

Stopped being influenced by what you read? For if the message spoken by angels was binding and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape, listen, if we neglect such a great salvation?

There will be many a person who read the Bible who ends up in hell. There will be many a person who studied theology who ends up in hell.

There will be people who have claimed to believe in Jesus who end up in hell. It is much more serious a thing than intellectual dissent is.

[20 : 12] It's the commitment of the heart and the mind to eternally pursue Jesus and to love Jesus and to love his truth. Be careful how you listen.

Next slide, please. It's a parable. Listen carefully. Secondly, it's a parable about a wedding. So let's get into the details a bit.

As I say, everybody likes a wedding. Weddings are fun. We can all have a good look around and comment on the food, comment on how wonderful the bride and bridegroom look, what a lavish feast the Father has put on, the fact that people have come in and they've dressed wonderfully, except for that particular individual there who didn't have the wedding garment on and then see what happens when he doesn't follow the rules.

And a wedding feast is a really appropriate symbol of the salvation that we receive in Jesus. The Bible often likened salvation to a wedding banquet, which is really good, isn't it?

That means when we're in heaven, we're not going to be hungry, which is really nice. And I love the fact that even though I don't need to eat to survive in heaven, and that must be true, mustn't it, because I have eternal life, so I could be on a keto equivalent diet for the rest of my life and always be, you know, at optimum condition.

[21:41] The reality is heaven is going to be filled with fine food and wine. That's good too. A bit disappointing for those who are teetotalers, but never mind. I'm sure there will be orange juice and other things, even Newcastle brown ale.

So, the wedding banquet is a really exciting view of heaven. I've heard people say, well, I don't want to go to heaven, it'd be really boring. I'd rather go and be with my mates and have a good time in hell.

Well, you won't have a good time in hell because you won't even see your mates. You'll be in darkness where there is weeping and mourning and gnashing of teeth. But heaven, wow, that'll be a party.

It'll be fantastic. The music will be great. There'll be loads of food. There'll be great opportunities for fellowship. We'll be able to sit and talk to Paul about what he meant in certain passages of the Bible and so on.

We'll be able to get all of those answers. It'll be fantastic or else we won't care about the answers. So, it's going to be great. Everybody loves a wedding.

[22:50] Aren't you looking forward to heaven? There's going to be a great party. But unfortunately, not everybody loves a wedding because in this story, there were people who didn't want to go.

In fact, we read that the king sent his servants to call all who were invited. So, that means they had a prior invitation just like the royal wedding. It would have been, the invitation would have been sent out a long time ago.

But the people who came on the day didn't turn up and so the king said, I'm going to send out my servants just to remind them just in case they're on the way or they're running a bit late like apparently William was yesterday and I'll remind them and, well, I don't know if he was late but the paper's asked that question.

He got there on time as far as I was concerned. It was George actually. It wasn't George the page boy. Never mind. Anyway, sorry, forget that. so he sent his servants out and some, I'm not coming. I'm going to, I'm going to visit my fields or, you know, I'm not coming and not only am I not coming, I'm really offended that you've come to tell me that I'm not coming so I'm going to beat you up.

[24:10] I'm not only going to beat you up, I'm going to kill you. That's what they do. It's quite an extreme reaction to not wanting to go to a wedding. You could have just said, sorry, I can't come, couldn't you?

But that reveals, of course, something about the hearts of these people. There was a, either an indifference to the king or an outright rejection of the king.

It was a gross act of rebellion. Not against the servants, but against the king. These people were making it clear that they didn't like the king, they didn't want to be at the feast, they weren't interested in anything he had to say or do.

This was an act of rebellion. And this was an act of rebellion in the first century AD. Right? When, you know, you couldn't just turn up with yellow placards and say, not my king, and get arrested. You would get killed for rebellion against the king, which is exactly what happens. The king sends out his servants and he says, well, his troops, and he says, right, those people who behave like that, you're going to kill.

[25:17] And they did. So he took out instant retribution. Now, again, you've got to remember, parables have limited application. We're not to find a spiritual truth in that.

It's just a filler in the story. This is what kings commonly did in those days and commonly did for a long, long time in history too. Henry VIII would have done something similar, I'm sure. This was normal behavior because the king was clear that this was an act of civil disobedience and rebellion against his throne.

But then the king thought, ah, it's not going to be a very good party because there's not going to be many people here. So let's fill it up. I tell you what, I'll send my servants out. They'll go to the kind of poorer areas, places like South Shields or Belfast or somewhere and we'll go to the really rough areas and we'll invite people in.

You can't do that. Well, what will they wear? Well, we'll give them some wedding garments. So they bring in all the waists and strays, the equivalent of the tax collectors and prostitutes of last week. And they bring them in. The parable says, good and bad. That's great. That's like, what, him? You're letting him in? Really? And in they come.

[26 : 35] And they all eat at the party and they have a fantastic time until somebody looks around and says, hey, there's one person in here. He doesn't have another wedding garment. What happened? They were at the door.

He could have picked one up. Why is he not wearing a wedding garment? He doesn't want to. He wants to assert his independence from the king. He doesn't want to live by the king's expectations about appropriate dress.

And so he gets kicked out. Not only kicked out, but he's not going to live. He's not going to live and cast into outer darkness where they will be weeping and ash and empty. That's a pretty severe punishment.

But you see what happened. It was as much a rejection of the king's authority as was the rejection of those who would not come.

In fact, it was worse in some sense because it was the height of arrogance to say, I'm going to come, but I'm not going to live under your rule.

[27 : 33] And you can see the spiritual application coming through, can't you? If you've got eyes to see. People are rejecting God. People are saying, I will not stay.

I will not submit to your rule. I will not respond to your invitation. And you offer me a cloak. I'm not going to wear that either. I refuse to come by your conditions.

If I am going to enter the kingdom of heaven, I will enter on my own terms. Thank you very much. I will not accept this idea that I am a sinner and I need to be saved.

I will not accept the idea that only the blood of Jesus will save me. I will not accept the idea that there is only one way to God, that there is no other name given under heaven by which we should be saved.

I will come on my terms or not at all. And in every case, every act of rebellion, including that one, results in them being sent away and punished.

[28 : 36] don't be misled by those who take the name Christian but reject its truth. Challenge its tenants and refuse to live by its rule.

God will no more be merciful to those than he will to those who outrightly refuse to believe. And that's what this parable is about. It's about a wedding but really it's about a rejection of God and his gospel.

And so the next slide, please. It's a parable that contains a warning. The parable distinguishes between the religious insiders, the religious establishment, the Pharisees, the chief priests, etc., who are first invited to the wedding but refuse to come or are too busy to come.

And the religious outsiders, the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the despised of society, who wouldn't expect to get an invite but do get an invite but even then one of them refuses to come on the terms that God has required.

Good or bad, it doesn't really matter who you are, what your social status is in life, God will invite everyone regardless of their status into his kingdom.

[29 : 57] The kingdom is wide open, the invitation is made, the king, King Jesus, is ready to offer his salvation to anyone who will accept it but you have to accept it or take the consequence.

And that's the warning. And you have to accept it on his terms or not at all. And that's the warning. It's a lovely, simple, but powerful parable.

The sting in the tail is interesting. The man without the wedding garment, the man who rebels, that draws from Jesus this statement, many are called but few are chosen.

Now you have to be careful here. I believe in the doctrine of predestination. I believe that God chooses his people before the foundation of the world. I have no problem with that.

I don't think this text is saying that the people who got rejected got rejected because they were not chosen for salvation. That's not what it's saying. It's saying because the word *eclecto* means selected or approved.

[31 : 09] Many are invited but some are not approved. The ones who turn their back and refuse are not approved. The ones who are too busy are not approved.

The ones who refuse to come in on the terms provided by the king to wear the garment are not approved. If you come by the king's way, if you accept the king's invitation, you will be chosen. You will be approved. That's what it means in that context. And that's the challenge. It's always the challenge.

We are asked to humbly bow the knee to Jesus and to submit. My favorite moment of the coronation was when Prince William bowed the knee before his father and suddenly his father became king.

And he pledged his liege and he kissed his father. And it reminded me of Psalm 2. Do you know Psalm 2? One of my favorite psalms. Where the psalmist asks, why do the nations rage?

[32 : 19] The people imagine a vain thing. And they rebel against the king. They rebel against God and his anointed. And then the psalmist says, but God laughs.

Imagine these puny people rebelling against the king. You know, it's like me trying to fight Tyson Fury. All he would need to do is just keep his arm out.

His arms are probably bigger than I am. So you can imagine his arm on my forehead and I'm kind of doing this and punching the air. What a waste of time. He couldn't knock me out in a moment.

Imagine trying to fight God. Imagine trying to rebel against God. Imagine trying to think that your ways of working things out and your ways of scheming will eventually be able to get one over on God.

You are never going to be able to do it. You can run from God but you can't hide from him. And so the answer is this. Kiss the son lest you be angry and you perish in the way.

[33 : 24] For his favor lasts for a moment. It's available to you. You can have it or you can reject it.

You can bow the knee and kiss him and kiss his son and come into intimate relationship with him or you can continue to reject him and accept the consequences. That is your choice.

It's the only choice. And so the last slide. We need to pay attention. It is not our profession of faith that determines the true reality of our conversion to Christ.

It is our discipleship and our faithfulness to God's word. It is our pursuit and continuance of our relationship with Jesus.

Our willingness to accept the invitation and live by the requirements that God lays down not to pick and mix but to accept his authority and accept his rule.

[34 : 32] And it is to live in a permanent commitment to Jesus that says I want to be with Jesus. I want to become like Jesus and I want to do what Jesus does.

And the last slide. A wonderful quote from C.S. Lewis. There are only two kinds of people in the end. Those who say to God thy will be done.

And those to whom God says in the end thy will be done. All that are in hell choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no hell.

No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find those who knock the door will be opened.

My friend you don't need to go to hell unless you want to. Jesus is always available to you. He invites you into his wedding feast.

[35 : 38] Come and have a party. Come and bow the knee to King Jesus. Let's thank him for his precious blood shed on the cross for our forgiveness and let us accept without condition his terms to be said.

Let us pray. Let us pray.