

## **YOU PRIORITIZE GOD CORRECTLY**

**MATTHEW 22:1-14**

June is supposed to be the big wedding month of the year. A few years ago, *TV Guide* ranked the "20 Greatest TV Weddings." Prince Charles and Lady Diana's wedding in July 1981 came in tenth. Tiny Tim's wedding to Miss Vicki on the "Tonight Show" back in December 1969 was third. Luke and Laura's wedding on "General Hospital" back in November 1981 was second. What was the greatest TV wedding? The wedding of Grace Kelly and Prince Rainer way back in April 1956 came in first.

A wedding is the background to one story Jesus told. Jesus was Jewish and His favorite subject was the Kingdom of God. The vast majority of Jewish religious leaders assumed they already knew everything about the Kingdom of God. They had God all figured out. The longer Jesus went about His ministry, the more evident it became to Him that the Jewish religious leaders as well as the majority of the Jewish people weren't going to accept Him or what God was going to do through Him at the cross and the empty tomb. God wanted to use the Jewish people as the channel to reach all the people in the world with His love and grace. But instead of being humbled by and grateful for this opportunity to be used by God, the Jewish people became, by and large, elitist and exclusive - thinking that God's favor somehow made them better than others. But God's heart for the world was not going to be defeated by the spiritual blindness of the Jewish people. Jesus addressed that issue here.

It's easy to see the analogies in Jesus' story. The king is God. His son is Jesus. The wedding banquet is symbolic of the ultimate triumph of the Kingdom of God one day. The king's servants are the Old Testament prophets as well as John the Baptist who pointed to Jesus. The first group of guests - the ones who didn't come - are the Jewish people. The second group of guests - the ones who got invited when the first group had better things to do - are people all over the world who've entered into God's way of salvation through Jesus. This story reminds me of what the Bible says about Jesus, "He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God." (John 1:10-12 NLT)

So, first and foremost, this parable is about the Jewish rejection of Jesus, but it has plenty of relevance to you and me. As I think about the meaning of this parable for me personally, I realize that:

### **GOD'S INVITATION DEMANDS MY RESPONSE.**

God's been inviting people into a relationship with Himself for a very long time. The Bible is full of that truth. Long before Jesus was born, God spoke through the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, "Let all the world look to me for salvation! For I am God; there is no other." (Is 45:22 NLT) In the book of Revelation, Jesus

says, “Look at me. I stand at the door. I knock. If you hear me call and open the door, I'll come right in and sit down to supper with you.” (Rev 3:20 MSG). Now, when I hear God's invitation, something happens. First, my response reveals my heart condition. And my heart responds back to God in one of two ways. Here's the first and the right way: I want God and the joy He gives. Don't miss something very important in Jesus' story. What's maybe the most joyful human occasion? Weddings would make the top five, don't you think? That's how Jesus describes the Kingdom of God in this story: a wedding banquet. That's what a relationship with God is supposed to be like. Full of joy! Don't make a relationship with God some kind of drudgery! Jesus describes it in terms of joy. I'm reminded of what King David wrote in the Old Testament, “You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever.” (Ps 16:11 NLT)

The sense of joy and celebration was even greater than normal at the banquet Jesus describes. Why's that? Because the guests hadn't expected to be invited! They were there because the first group was too preoccupied to show up. The second group had been rounded up on short notice and now they were enjoying all this unbelievable stuff. Imagine none of your invited guests turning up for your wedding. What can you do? You can go out and round up some poor, homeless folk to enjoy the food you've prepared. Can you imagine their reaction? Instead of stale bread and water they'd be enjoying filet mignon and ice cream - just two food items that bring me joy – with you! Chances are your new guests would be even more joyful than your lousy friends who were too busy to show up.

Something like that happened to Katie Hosking. She decided to break up with her fiancé just twelve days before the wedding. Katie had reserved a country club for the reception. With 150 invited guests, the cost was \$6,200. Club policy required 60 days notice for any cancellation, meaning that Katie's parents were required to pay the full amount. So the family decided to have a party anyway. In place of wedding guests, Katie and her parents invited the residents of the Interfaith Family Shelter to a country club banquet. More than 50 close family friends joined 40 homeless people, and together they danced and feasted on baron of beef, salmon, shrimp cocktail, fettuccine, and fruit. Strawberry shortcake replaced wedding cake. Afterwards they packed up the leftover food and sent it back to the shelter. It was enough to feed the homeless for several more days. When it was over, Katie said, “We had so much fun!” Jesus is saying that His Kingdom – a relationship with Him in all of its dimensions – is this incredible celebration. Everyone there is full of gratitude, full of joy and full of utter amazement at being invited to God's forever party. Are you? Are you full of amazed joy every day of your life at God's unexpected goodness to you?

God's invitation demands my response. My response reveals my heart condition. And I can respond back to God in one of two ways. I want God and the joy He gives or, secondly, I want what the world offers. The Jewish people aren't the only folk who reject Jesus. The fact is most people reject Jesus.

That's the sad reality behind Jesus' story. Why is that? Jesus' story just brushes on a few of the reasons. "But the guests he had invited ignored them and went their own way, one to his farm, another to his business." (Mt 22:5 NLT)

Sure, indulging a desire to commit some terrible sin – adultery, murder, theft - will keep you away from God's party, true enough. But simply getting voluntarily preoccupied with the routine things of life will keep you away from God's party just as effectively. That's Jesus' point here. That's what happens to this group that got invited to the party first. They get so busy with so many good things in life – their jobs, their careers, their kids' extracurricular activities, their retirement – that they no longer had any desire to pursue the best thing in life – a relationship with the King. And it's their choice. Nobody forces them to minimize what matters most. They just get too busy for spiritual stuff. Has that ever happened to anyone you know? Too busy, too preoccupied—for God and His joy?

Jesus' parable says something else about my response to God's invitation. My response invites God's action. If I want God and the joy He gives, I enter into His salvation. That's what the wedding banquet symbolizes. Who gets to go to this banquet? Well, the story suggests it's folk who know they don't deserve to be there. There's no sense of being entitled. In fact, the ones who thought they were entitled to come to the banquet thought so little of it that they didn't even bother to show up! I love the "whoever" verses in the Bible. What are "whoever" verses? Jesus said, "I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God." (Lk 12:8 NIV) The Bible also says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.... Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him." (John 3:16, 36 NIV) No sense of entitlement. No suggestion that some deserve to be there and others don't. No secret way to God that only a few know about. Just "whoever"! I hope you are a "whoever."

My response invites God's action. If I want God and the joy He gives, I enter into His salvation. But if I want what the world offers, I experience His judgment. Isn't that clearly what Jesus teaches here? "The king was furious, and he sent out his army to destroy the murderers and burn their town." (Mt 22:7 NLT) Some scholars see in that statement Jesus' prediction of the awful destruction of Jerusalem. That occurred some 40 years later in 70 A.D. when the Roman armies leveled the city and killed some 1.5 million Jewish people. Don't miss the larger message that applies to everyone. There's a high price to pay for ignoring God. There's a high price to pay for indifference to Him and hostility towards His messengers. Yes, God is forgiving and unbelievably patient, but He will bring judgment at a time and a place of His choosing. Jesus' story teaches that God's invitation demands my response. My response reveals my heart. My response invites God's action. But there's an additional truth that Jesus suggests in His parable that I don't want you to miss:

## **MY RESPONSE DEMANDS MY PREPARATION.**

Look with me again at v. 11-14 (NLT): “But when the king came in to meet the guests, he noticed a man who wasn’t wearing the proper clothes for a wedding. “Friend,” he asked, “how is it that you are here without wedding clothes?” But the man had no reply. Then the king said to his aides, “Bind his hands and feet and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” For many are called, but few are chosen.” What is all that about?

First of all, let me say something about the background here. If you were invited to the wedding of a king’s son in Jesus’ day, you didn’t turn up in a torn T-shirt and dirty jeans. Apparently, the issue here isn’t so much that you had to have a special outfit for the wedding as it is that you needed to have a clean, freshly washed outfit to wear. To come to a wedding in the same soiled, stained and smelly garment you’d been working out in the fields in or conducting business in all day long was a pretty serious insult to the wedding party. It revealed the fact that you really weren’t prepared for the wedding; therefore, you didn’t really value the people being married very highly or the event to which you’d been invited.

I believe this part of Jesus’ story is addressing a potential misunderstanding about grace in the Kingdom of God. Let me state, first of all, what I believe is a correct understanding of grace and then explain how grace can be misunderstood. Jesus is implying here in v. 11-14 that grace is a gift that becomes my responsibility. You can misunderstand grace in at least two different ways. For instance, you can fail to appreciate that grace is, by definition, a gift. Most people have a hard time understanding that they can’t do anything to deserve, earn or merit a relationship with God through good behavior. Once you get something in return for your own efforts, it ceases to be a gift. It becomes, instead, a wage, a reward or a payoff of some kind. But a genuine gift is unearned, undeserved and unmerited. God’s grace is a gift.

But there’s another way you can misunderstand grace. You can go to the other extreme. You can fail to appreciate the responsibility that comes with accepting grace. You can say, “Well, if grace is free and I can’t do anything to deserve a relationship with God, then it doesn’t matter how I live anyway. I can live my life just any old way I choose, because my behavior, my words and my lifestyle don’t matter.” It’s that misunderstanding of grace that this part of Jesus’ story addresses. This guest shows up to the wedding in unwashed clothes. He’s completely unprepared for the event. His actions reveal his heart. He doesn’t respect the king or his son. He doesn’t value the enormous privilege he’s been given by being invited to the wedding. It’s not wise to presume on grace.

It’s a similar issue that the apostle Paul had to address in another part of the New Testament. “Well then, should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more and more of his wonderful grace? Of course not! Since we have died to sin, how can we continue to live in it?” (Rom 6:1-2 NLT) In the Kingdom of God,

grace is a gift that becomes my responsibility. I'm now expected to act differently, speak differently, set my priorities in life differently, value everything in life differently as a direct result of what God has given me. Am I prepared to enter into all of what God's grace provides? My actions reveal my heart. Am I truly thankful for what King Jesus has done for me? Do I value being invited into the Kingdom of God? My behavior, my words and my lifestyle will tell the story.

Augustine, who lived way back in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., is considered one of the greatest Christians who ever lived. But before he became a follower of Jesus, he led an immoral, godless life. Before his conversion he had a mistress named Claudia. Shortly after he found Christ, Claudia saw him on the street in the city. "Augustine! Augustine!" she cried after her old lover. Augustine paid no heed. "Augustine! Augustine!" she cried out again. "It's Claudia!" "But it's no longer Augustine," he replied and continued on his way. He understood even then that grace is a gift that becomes a responsibility.

There's a second truth about my response and my preparation that Jesus implies here through this part of the parable. Repentance is an act that becomes my way of life. Now, remember, the issue is dirty, inappropriate clothes being worn to the wedding. Jesus' Jewish listeners understood that image quicker than we do. Dirty, unwashed clothes are symbolic of a dirty life before God. Clean, washed clothes are symbolic of repentance before God. Isaiah, the prophet, says, "I am overwhelmed with joy in the LORD my God! For he has dressed me with the clothing of salvation and draped me in a robe of righteousness. I am like a bridegroom in his wedding suit or a bride with her jewels." (Is 61:10 NLT)

Paul writes this to Christians – people who already knew Jesus in a personal way. "This is all the more urgent, for you know how late it is; time is running out. Wake up, for our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is almost gone; the day of salvation will soon be here. So remove your dark deeds like dirty clothes, and put on the shining armor of right living. Because we belong to the day, we must live decent lives for all to see. Don't participate in the darkness of wild parties and drunkenness, or in sexual promiscuity and immoral living, or in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, clothe yourself with the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. And don't let yourself think about ways to indulge your evil desires." (Rom 13:11-14 NLT)

You don't just repent of your sinful life once when you first receive Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Genuine repentance is a way of life. You're constantly taking off your "dirty clothes", so to speak, and putting on the spotlessness of Jesus. Repentance is a commitment to change and to keep on changing as God reveals to you what needs to change. Your lifestyle choices will change. Your attitudes will change. Your words will change. How you do relationships will change. How you handle money will change. How you express anger will change. How you express yourself sexually will change. What you value will change.

Living in the Kingdom involves this lifelong responsibility to step up to everything grace provides and makes possible. Your willingness to make repentance a way of life marks you as a true citizen of the Kingdom of God. Not perfection. That's not what God expects. What He does demand is authentic repentance. Don't just blow this off as unimportant. Don't you dare take God's grace for granted or presume upon it. This is the evidence you belong in His Kingdom - not praying a prayer to receive Jesus 20 years ago, not getting baptized, not church membership. Your life – your everyday, walk around life and how you reveal Jesus in it! How did Jesus put it at the end of His story? “That's what I mean when I say, “Many get invited; only a few make it.”” (Mt. 22:14 MSG) It's one thing to be invited into the Kingdom; it's another to be in it.

Christian speaker and author Ravi Zacharias tells a story about an evangelist by the name of Jakov who arrived in a certain village in what used to be the country of Yugoslavia. He met and ministered to an elderly man there named Cimmerman. He heard about all the tragedies he had experienced in his life and Jakov talked to him about Jesus. Cimmerman abruptly interrupted Jakov and told him that he wished to have nothing to do with Christianity. He reminded Jakov of the dreadful history of the church in his town. So-called Christians had proved to be thieves and even murderers. "My own nephew was killed by them," he said. He angrily rejected any effort on Jakov's part to talk to him about Jesus. "They wear those elaborate coats and crosses," he said, "signifying some kind of heavenly mission, but I cannot ignore their evil lives."

Jakov, looking for an occasion to get Cimmerman to change his thinking, said, "Cimmerman, can I ask you a question? Suppose I stole your coat, put it on, and broke into a bank. Suppose further that the police saw me running away in the distance but couldn't catch up with me. But they had one clue: they recognized your coat. What would you say to them if they came to your house and accused you of breaking into the bank?" "I would deny it," said Cimmerman. "'Ah, but we saw your coat,' they would say," answered Jakov. Cimmerman understood the analogy only too well, got annoyed and ordered Jakov to leave his home. Jakov continued to return to the village periodically just to visit Cimmerman, encourage him, and share the love of Jesus with him. Finally one day Cimmerman asked, "How does one become a Christian?" Jakov taught him the simple steps of repentance for sin and of trust in the work of Jesus Christ. Cimmerman bent his knee on the ground, bowed his head and surrendered his life then and there to King Jesus. As he rose to his feet, wiping his tears, he embraced Jakov and said, "Thank you for being in my life." And then he pointed to the heavens and whispered, "You wear His coat very well."

Do you? Do you wear His coat very well? You will when you prioritize God and His Kingdom correctly. That's what happens when Jesus is King.