

## What Not to Wear to a Wedding

Matthew 22:1-14

This parable is the last of three that Jesus tells in the temple just a couple of days before he is killed. Two weeks ago we looked at the first parable, of the two sons who were asked by their father to go work in the vineyard. Last week we heard the parable of the wicked tenants who killed the servants and even the son of the vineyard owner. Neither of those parables is very difficult to interpret. As parable interpretation goes, both are a walk in the park. But, we have just left the park and entered the jungle.

This parable is a confusing quagmire of low-hanging branches that will knock you in the noggin, roots just waiting for a chance to trip you up, and, for good measure, a few vines that will wrap around you in between. It is one of the most difficult of all Jesus' parables to completely understand and interpret. However, with a sharp theological machete, we can clear our way through this jungle. Whacking away such questions as: 1) how the king could have waged a war in the middle of a banquet without the food so much as getting cold, and, 2) how a poor guy who was whisked off the street, where he was minding his own business, and into the wedding feast, now finds himself thrown into the outer darkness because he was wearing the wrong clothes, we can turn this jungle into a park that consists of a statement and two questions:

God is throwing a party.

Are you coming?

And, if so, what are you going to wear?

First of all, let's look at the statement; then we'll get to the questions.

God is throwing a party.

In both the Old and New Testaments, God's ultimate victory over God's enemies – evil, sin, death, everything that opposes God – that victory has always been visualized as a great banquet; a feast. Some six hundred years earlier, the prophet Isaiah pictured God's final victory as a feast for all nations, a feast of rich food and fine wines. Jesus picks up on that same picture and speaks often of the kingdom of God as a party. In Luke 13, he says that "people will come from east and west, from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God."

We understand the concept. When you struggle and win, you celebrate, and a celebration always includes food. When we finally completed work on our new building addition, we threw a feast and celebrated. When we finally pay off that building in a few more years, we will throw another feast and celebrate again! If you are a Carolina fan or a Wake Forest fan, you celebrated yesterday, and if you are a Yankees fan or a Red Sox fan, or a Braves fan, well, all you're eating right now is sour grapes.

When God's kingdom is complete, God is going to throw the party of all parties. Evil will be driven out; death will no longer exist; heaven and earth will be one forever, joy will be complete, and God's going to foot the bill for a feast you cannot imagine – and it won't even make you fat! So, yes, God is throwing a party.

Question One: Are you coming?

The question sparks a lot of discussion and debate these days, doesn't it? Who gets to go to this party, and who doesn't? The fundamentalists say that, unless you say the sinner's prayer and ask God into your life, the bouncer angels will turn you away at the door. The universalists, those on the opposite extreme, argue that there will be no bouncers; everyone gets in. The rest of us range in between; will other religions be represented? Will those who make death-bed professions of faith get in? This parable says there will be some surprises on the guest list, because, some of the people who first accepted invitations, when the time arrived, they chose not to come.

In those days, when a host planned a feast, he would send out invitations with RSVP's. You returned the RSVP to tell the host you'd be there. But, then, there was a second invitation. When the feast was ready, the host would send out servants to the homes of those who had been invited, letting them know that everything was ready and it was time to come. Kind of like going to a dinner party these days. You RSVP, you go, and you gather in the living room until the host comes and says it's time to eat, then you move to the dining room to eat. Picture going to a dinner party, waiting in the living room, and when the host comes and invites everyone to the dining room, everyone heads for the door and leaves, without so much as a flimsy attempt at an excuse. That's exactly what happens here. The people this king invites have already said they were coming, but, when the servant comes to say that dinner's ready, suddenly, they've changed their minds. No reasons are given, no attempts to explain why they're not coming, they just don't go.

In Jesus' day, this would have been more than rude or disrespectful; it would have been seen as an intentional attempt to humiliate the host. Those who actually seized the servants, and abused or even killed them, have declared themselves to be enemies of the king. No wonder he wages war on them. Jesus' parable doesn't try to explain why people reject the invitation. What is clear is that you just don't do that – not to anyone, much less the king.

And, what is also clear is that you can say yes to God's invitation to the kingdom feast, and still not end up at the table. There are two invitations, if you will; two responses to God's gracious invitation to include you in the party. There is the initial "yes", but there is something more. I wonder if many of us miss this. A lot of people who call themselves Christians because they belong to a church, or, prayed the sinner's prayer, or responded to an altar call, or went through a confirmation class, think that is all there is to it. But, this parable says that's not all there is to it. Something more is involved – more than words. It's easy to say, "Sure, I'll come to the party," when nothing more is being asked of you; but, something more will be asked.

Jesus calls us to be disciples, not fans. We are called to do more than say we "like" Jesus on Facebook. When Jesus calls us to leave the comfort of life as it has been and make our way to the feast, we find that it isn't necessarily an easy journey. Home, life as it has been, is comfortable, if not perfect. Home is having your name on a membership roll in a church somewhere; discipleship is being committed to the regular, weekly gathering of that church's work and worship. Home is saying, "Yep, I was baptized when I was a baby, but, you know, Sundays are my time to relax." Discipleship is living out that baptism every day – understanding that no day, and especially not Sunday, the Lord's Day – is your time, but Jesus' time.

So, God is throwing a party. Are you coming? Jesus makes it clear in this parable that not everyone who initially says yes to God ends up at the table. Saying yes to an invitation is one thing. But, what follows is another invitation to leave the comfort of life as it has been and become a disciple of the King's Son. So, are you coming? If so, what are you going to wear?

The king orders his servants to go out in the streets and invite everyone they see to the feast. The banquet hall is filled with all kinds of people, "both good and bad," as Matthew records the story. But there is one man who is not wearing a wedding robe. We're really in the jungle now, aren't we? This poor guy gets pulled in off the street, and then gets in trouble because he's not wearing the right clothes? It is confusing, but, hacking away all the vines and roots and branches, the question seems to be, what does not wearing a wedding robe mean? I think it means this: you can say yes to the first invitation, where you first become a believer. You can say yes to the second invitation where you put your faith into action and begin to live as a disciple of Jesus. But, still, on the inside, in your heart, nothing has changed.

What comes to my mind is the first part of First Corinthians 13: *"If I speak in the languages of angels and humans, but have no love, I am nothing more than a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. If I have prophetic powers that enable me to understand all mysteries, and if I have faith to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, even give up my life as a martyr, but do not have love, I gain nothing."* You can say yes to the first invitation. Yes, I believe. You can say yes to the second invitation. Yes, I will follow you, Jesus. I will turn my faith into action. But, if your discipleship is not a matter of the heart, if your discipleship is not filled with the love of Jesus Christ, clothed with the love of Jesus Christ, it gains you nothing.

The one thing you do not wear to this wedding feast is an unchanged heart. It is more than words...it is even more than actions...it goes all the way to the heart.

The king is throwing a party.

Are you coming?

What are you going to wear?