**THE PARABLE OF THE WEDDING BANQUET**

Matthew 22:1-22
Key Verse 22:2 – *“The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son.”*

In today’s passage, Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven to a wedding banquet and openly invites us to attend. Out of his love and mercy, we are all invited to share in this incredible joy yet few will accept this invite. Many are invited but few are prepared to fully enjoy it. I pray we may fully accept this gracious invitation to be united with Christ

Look at verse 1, **“Jesus spoke to them again in parables…”** Last week we saw how Jesus responded to the religious leaders who questioned His authority through the use of the parables of the two sons and of the tenants (Matthew 21:23-46). Jesus gave a stinging rebuke to the religious leaders and Israel as a nation by pointing out how they turned away from God and His commands in favour of their own way. Because of this, they completely missed the very One whom all the Scripture and all the prophets pointed to. The Truth was right there standing in front of them, yet they refused to believe in Him. When we see our own ways and our own thinking as being greater than God’s, it is easy to fall into this same trap and as we shall see in the rest of the parable, this recurring tendency can have effects that can last throughout eternity.

Verse 2 starts us off on a new parable, **“The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son.”** Few things in life can ever match the joy that weddings bring. The union of two lives bound together by their vows before God. Beautiful smiles as everyone is dressed to impress. The dinner, the dancing and the memories that will last a lifetime. This year alone we have been invited to more weddings than we could possibly attend, making 2019 feel like it has been one continuous, joyous celebration. God created weddings (and marriage) to give us a little taste of what we will experience in the kingdom of heaven; the eternal joy that comes from being united with our Divine Lover for all eternity. Many fear that heaven will be a boring place filled with boring people who never did anything interesting or had much fun in life but here, Jesus gives us the complete opposite image; of a royal wedding unlike any other and a king who prepares an exquisite banquet not just for his son but also for all those invited.

But to our surprise, no one accepts his invitation (3). What’s going on here? Remember, this is a king we are dealing with. Any wise person will understand that a king’s invite is also a king’s summon. It is both an honour and a duty. While it is an incredible privilege to receive the grace of being personally invited by the king, it is also their duty to respect the king’s wishes for them to attend the wedding… yet all the invitees refused to come.

However, the king was not discouraged by this. In those days, it was customary to send out the invitations twice; once to announce the wedding and another to tell the invited quests all the preparations were finished. The king could have thought to himself, “*They probably didn’t get the first message. Must’ve gotten lost in the mail. No worries. I will send out even more messengers!*” So, in verse 4, **“… he sent some more servants and said, ‘Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.’”** Surely the people received their invites this time, right?

Sadly, verses 5 and 6 go, **“But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them.”** To our horror, their response to the king’s invite ranged from total indifference to annoyance to hatred and even murder. How could such a terrible thing happen? Here are two important reasons why.

First; they neither loved nor revered their king. From the patience that he exhibited after the first round of rejections, he must have been a kind and merciful king fully deserving of love from his subjects. Even the fact that he invited them for his son’s wedding proved he genuinely thought highly of them for one only invites those that mean the most to them for their wedding. The other side of that coin would be showing the appropriate amount of reverence towards their king. Imagine how you would feel if Queen Elizabeth personally invited you to one of her functions. Whether you love her or not, you would do your very best to be there in attendance. Thus, their rejection was also a reflection of how little they felt about their king in return.

Second; they saw their own desires as being more important than the king’s and what they possessed as being worth more than what the king wanted to give them. This is the most damning reason of them all. You possibly can find ways to excuse the first reason. However, there is no way to escape from this one. They placed other things in life as being of far more importance than their king. All these points are illustrative of how the religious leaders and people of Israel as a whole viewed God. While they received an abundance of grace and blessings from God, they broke their covenant with Him. By ignoring His commands and mistreating His prophets, they showed how little they cared about God. Their worship was in name only. And God, much like the king in the parable, could only bear with their willful sinfulness for so long. Look at verse 7, **“The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.”** Just like the evil tenants, those that rejected the king’s invite were justly punished for their crimes and in the same way, the nation of Israel would later receive a similar judgment for rejecting Jesus Christ.

Yet what one group despised, another accepted. The king’s open invite to every other member of his kingdom is a clear parallel to Jesus’ open invite to all peoples of this world to believe in Him (8-10). What was once a privilege for the very few is now a gift to all. God’s salvation is available to everyone. To our knowledge, none of us here are Jewish or have Jewish ancestry yet through Jesus, we share in the same promise given to Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 12:2). Furthermore, through the Spirit we are no longer separated from God due to the burden of sin but are called into His family by His divine love (Ephesians 2:1-3, Romans 8:15-17). We have done nothing to deserve this grace and there is nothing we can ever do in life to earn it yet God offers it to us because of what Christ accomplished on the cross. It matters not whether you are “good” or “bad” in the eyes of the world for all that matters is how our King sees us… and He sees us as people worth bringing into His kingdom. What marvelous grace this is. Thanks be to God for loving us in such a way.

Amazingly, there is still one thing that is out of place at the wedding. Look at verses 11-12a, **“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. He asked, ‘How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?’”** Another practice in ancient Middle Eastern times was that the king would provide clothing for his guests when invited to such an occasion. These days, we give chocolate or little knick-knacks as gifts for the guests. However, royals are able to give so much more! The king must have spared no expense to ensure everyone there had the finest clothes imaginable. Beggars on the street now looked like millionaires. Farmworkers looked like posh celebrities dressed in all the trendiest labels. Whatever the equivalents of Versace, Louis Vuitton and Calvin Klein were, they were wearing them. Yet here was a man, likely dressed in the same things he wore before entering the king’s court, standing right before the king. Why had he refused the king’s clothing?

We have to delve deeper into the meaning of wearing the new clothes. The prophet Isaiah in describing the “Year of the Lord’s Favour” put it this way: “*I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels*” (Isaiah 61:10). In the same way we wear our best to a wedding, God clothes us in His very best with His salvation and His righteousness. Likewise, we are encouraged to “put on the new self” (Colossians 3:9-17) and clothe ourselves in Christ Jesus (Romans 13:14, Galatians 3:27). To put on new clothes is to take on a new identity, thus we are being invited to try on and wear Jesus’ clothes in order that we become like Him. We are called to cast aside the dirty rags of our old self and take on our new identity in Christ Jesus (Zechariah 3:3-7). As Pastor Henry explained before, it is not easy. Often the clothes feel like the wrong fit but our life’s great hope is that, with time, we will eventually grow into them.

How did the man respond to the king’s question? He couldn’t (12b)! He literally had no excuse. He was invited to a wedding he didn’t deserve to go… but went… and was given the very best clothing for the occasion but chose not to wear it. He is symbolic of all those who come to Christ for the benefits but they themselves do not want to be transformed by Christ. They simply want to carry on living exactly the way they always have been. They want to receive all the blessings Christ offers but refuse to surrender themselves to Christ so He can truly change their entire being. They believe that as they are, they are “good people,” acceptable to God and deserve to enter His kingdom (i.e. heaven) even though they may fail from time to time. However, they confuse “acceptance” with “licence.” Just because God accepts us as we are, it doesn’t mean He will want us to remain as we are. A real relationship with Christ can only happen if we let Him truly transform our hearts, our minds and our souls. Regrettably, the destiny of those like the man is that they never truly experience the kingdom of heaven in all its fullness and end up in a place no different from those who rejected God’s invite from the beginning (13, Matthew 7:21-23). Many people go to church but are never transformed by the Gospel. Sadly, they often leave the faith entirely because it did not “fit” their expectations.

Ultimately, this parable serves as reminder to take our salvation seriously. The Apostle Paul summed it up in this way; “*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure*” (Philippians 2:12-13). And this fear is not one of terror but of an awesome reverence for how precious a gift our salvation is to us.

If the first section of this passage could be described as “what have we been given by God?” then the second can be described as “what do we give back to God?” An entire sermon can be written just on this event alone. Here, Jesus was challenged by the Pharisees and the Herodians, two groups who were bitter enemies. The Pharisees staunchly supported Israel and the preservation of all things Jewish while the Herodians supported Herod and, by extension, Roman rule and policies. Yet both conspired against Jesus by bringing up the issue of the poll tax, a tax that was paid solely by those who were colonized by Rome (no Roman citizen paid it). It was so punitive it completely impoverished the nation and the taxes paid literally went towards keeping the Israelites colonized by Rome. To make matters worse, the coin was engraved with Caesar’s and the Roman high priest’s images and inscribed with words that described how Caesar was seen as a god. Thus, so many Israelites saw even using this coin as violation of the first two commandments (Exodus 20:1-6). All this made for the perfect trap. By flattery and posing this impossible question, they hoped to ensnare Jesus as either a political criminal or a religious one. However look at how Jesus diffused their question in verses 19 to 21, **“[Jesus said] show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?” “Caesar’s,” they replied. Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.””**

What did Jesus mean by this? It goes back to our “dual citizenship” in this world and the kingdom of heaven. In answering this way, Jesus acknowledges the need for us to respect our earthy authorities but always remembering our true allegiance belongs to God (Romans 13:1-7). To give to God what belongs to God is to fully give our service, worship and devote all our acts of righteousness to Him above all and not for the sake of a socio-political institution. Additionally, we should never twist God’s word to justify whatever socio-political agenda we have but to let God’s truth speak for itself. What matters most to God is how much we obey the greatest commandment to love Him with everything we have and love others just as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:37-40). In the vein of this passage, accepting the invitation and wearing the clothes our King offers us is one of the many ways we give God the love, honour and adoration that belongs solely to Him. Finally, much like how Jesus transcended the politics of His time, we too as Christians should not let our personal politics get in the way of what is most important; our shared bond in Christ Jesus and our desire to always honour Him first and foremost in everything we do.

In conclusion, Jesus invites us into His kingdom. It is a place of joy, love and life that is open to all who believe in Him. To have His kingdom in our hearts enables us to navigate through the many challenges of life and helps us view things from Christ’s perspective. Lord, help us to eagerly wear the new clothing of the new self that Jesus gives us. Transform us into people who live for You and Your kingdom above all things in the world. Let whatever we do be rooted in You and that others will see You in the lives we live, so they too may accept you invitation to have life everlasting in You.