

**Date:** April 27-28, 2024

**Title:** The Stories Jesus Told: The Wedding Clothes

**Scripture:** Matthew 22:1-14

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A couple of weeks ago we began a new series that we called *The Stories Jesus Told*, and we're looking at some of the parables that are found in the New Testament from Jesus. Today we're looking at one in Matthew 22 verses 1 through 13 that tells the story of a wedding feast where a king invites people to a wedding feast and some don't come. And then some come and aren't dressed appropriately.

And this got me to thinking about weddings. I don't know how many weddings you've been to, but it was 30 years ago this year that I was first ordained into ministry. And so, as I was thinking back, I think I have probably officiated nearly 300 weddings over the last 30 years. That's about ten a year. I was just kind of reliving that as I had read this parable. And, you know, I might be off by a little bit, but it's close to that. And so that means that if you do a wedding rehearsal, wedding, and wedding reception, I've done over a year of my life at weddings is basically what that means.

I've been to weddings that have been in beautiful places like this room, in our Chapel, and some of our campuses. I've been at weddings that have been in barns, living rooms, country clubs, lakefront, and oceanfront. I've been at weddings in roller rinks. That's a true story. There was a couple that met as roller derby partners and wanted me to marry them on roller skates. I was a younger man, and we did the wedding at a roller rink in which then they had the roller party right there.

And one of the questions when you go to a wedding is always, how do you dress? You know this question, if you go to a wedding, you're always wanting to pick just the right amount. Now there are some people who just don't care. They're like, I go to a wedding, how I go to a wedding. But most people say I want to dress at the appropriate level. And certainly, when you're officiating, that's even more of a question because you don't want to be dressed inappropriately. So, when you get the invitation to a roller rink wedding, the question is, what is it that I should wear? By the way, it was a full suit because that's what they wanted.

But here's really the issue in this story that Jesus tells. At first, the story is pretty clear. The king says go and invite people, and some of the people who are invited don't come. In fact, in verse five, we see one of the reasons people don't come. It says this. "But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business." Translation... the reason some people don't respond to Jesus Christ is because they're just simply preoccupied with their own lives. They have too many things going on, too many commitments in their mind. They'll get to it someday, maybe, if they need to. But right now, there's just too many other things.

Then in verse six, we see another reason. It says, "The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them." Here you have some people who are hostile to the message, and hostile to the king. And so, that's the simple part of the story. In verse seven, it says this. "The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city." Now, you may say, okay, that seems extreme. And it does. If somebody doesn't come to the

wedding that you throw, you don't dispense an army and have them burn their house down. And so, you say, what's up this? And what does this have to do with me? This is probably, by the way, a historical allusion to the sacking of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and to the Jewish people having rejected Jesus as their Messiah and what he did.

But there's certainly an application that goes beyond. And the reason I say this is because what comes next is the twist in the story. And this is the being dressed for a wedding because he says, listen, go out to the servants and invite in everybody, historically the Gentiles, but by extension, everybody. And at one point, he says, the good and the evil, making it very clear that the kingdom is not about your behavior. It's an invitation by the gracious extension of the king.

And so, people came in, but then when the party happened, somebody came in who wasn't dressed for the wedding and was thrown out again. Not something you would probably do. Somebody comes undressed for the wedding, you say whatever, their deal. But here he says, he throws him out where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth. This is verse 13 which is a phrase that's used for torment or to express something dire.

Here's what's at issue, at least in this passage. So, what theologians have long called the general call and the effectual call of God's work in people's lives. So, the general call is that there's an invitation that's brought the good and the evil. Everyone's invited. But then there's an effectual call where not everybody responds. This is verse 14 where it says, ""For many are invited, but few are chosen." And so, there is a distinction between the general call and the call that people actually respond to.

Now, again, on the surface, this is an easy story. There's an invitation, some reject, but the twist here is that some appear to come and yet don't dine in the feast. So, what does this mean for you and me? Well, let me just give you three objections because these are some of the places where faith is challenging for some people. And the first one is this. It's an objection about the fact that God has displeasure and is rejecting those who are unwilling. And we see this again in verse eight where it says this. "Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come.'"

And the reason I say this is an objection is some people will basically say this about their idea of God, and that is the kind of God I worship. Have you ever heard somebody say this? Maybe you've said it. Usually what comes after this is an idea that says, I have a version of God. I don't like the Biblical or Christian version of God. So, I have a version of God. And the version of God that I have would never turn anybody away. My God accepts everybody.

Now, God, by this very story, accepts everybody, but he has displeasure with those who don't come. And it's his right to say, I will not turn a blind eye to those who have rejected me throughout their lives. And, you know, in some ways that this matters because if God simply has a universal salvation, meaning there is no justice for those who run afoul of God, not that everyone doesn't come because of His grace, then there's no need for repentance. There's no need to ever acknowledge God's grace in our lives.

Philip Yancey tells a story in his classic book *What's So Amazing About Grace?* It's about a feast that's called "Babette's Feast." It was a story turned into a movie about a woman who

was an immigrant to another country. She worked for two sisters who ran a mission. The mission was to try to extend the kingdom of God in a desperate town, and the mission was failing. And at one point, Babette came into a lot of money. And the sisters assume that what she would do is just simply leave town and use her money on herself. But what she did instead was throw a feast for the people of the town and spared no expense. And what happened was that when people encountered the grace of Babette to the people of the town, it renewed the sense of mission because people had a moment of saying the mission is not about rejection, but it's about a feast.

And here's my point. Yancey says at another point, "I have come to know a God who has a soft spot for rebels. A God whose son made prodigals the heroes of his stories, and the trophies of his ministry." You see, this story is not about rejection necessarily. It has that element, but it's about the feast and invitation to everybody. And yes, there are some who will say, whether it's my preoccupation with my life or my hostility to the things of God, to God's right to rule, that will keep me from coming, there is still this invitation that is broad, and it is to a feast. So that's one objection.

Here's the second objection. Some people will object because in verse 13, there is this notion, this idea of the existence of eternal torment. This is the phrase that I alluded to. Here's what it says in verse 13. "Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie his hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'" Now, the reason that I bring this up, is a lot of times churches will just avoid this subject because they'll say, just come, God loves you, and we won't talk about that. But any honest person who reads the Bible has to actually deal with this reality that there is this idea of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

There is this picture in the Bible of something that is referred to as how, in fact, Jesus uses this phrase. This is in Mark chapter 9, and it's probably one of the better descriptions of this from Jesus directly. Mark chapter 9, verse 47, he says, "And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell..." And the word that's used here is a word that was actually for a literal place right outside of Jerusalem. It was a garbage dump where people who were on the margins sometimes would scrounge for food, and it was miserable. And this is the picture that Jesus invokes to talk about what happens to those who reject him.

And then he says this. He quotes Isaiah 66 here, verse 48 of Mark 9. He says, "...the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched." And the NASB and ESV, they both say their worm and their fire, meaning it's a personal, possessive pronoun. That's probably a better rendition of the language. Here, the NIV picks it up by saying the worm that eats them.

So, Jesus invokes these two images of fire and a worm to talk about hell or torment. And again, this bothers some people because they say, the God that I worship would never. But what you have here is Jesus' description of this torment. And I mentioned that it comes from Isaiah 66. In Isaiah 66, these were future predictions. Here, it's a present. And this fits with what we've learned about the Kingdom of God in recent weeks, that the reality of hell is both present and future. And here's what I mean. I don't mean that it's not future, but sometimes the picture that people get of hell is this eternal fire pit with Satan, pitchforks, and stuff running around.

But Jesus' picture in some ways is even more unsettling because he says the fire is not quenched. What does fire stand for in scripture? Certainly judgment, but it can also stand for the presence of the spirit of God. And sometimes you'll hear people talk about the Christless eternity that awaits for people. But I sometimes think that's almost too sanitized of a version where it's like, you know what, I'm going to have a Christless eternity. I'm going to go have a frat party with my buddies, and that's going to be my existence. But in Scripture, the fire not quenched can certainly refer to the presence of God, the judgment of God at a minimum. And if you read Psalm 139, it talks about if you go to the depths, the presence of God is there. If you go to the heights, the presence of God is there. In other words, there's nowhere you can go that's outside of the presence of God.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in writing about this years ago, said it this way. He said, "The last thing that the sinner wants is to be the object of the unremitting gaze of a holy God." Think about it. I mean, if you were a kid, you have kids, do you know what kids don't want when they do something wrong? What's the one thing you say to them? Look at me. And what do kids do? I'm not going to look at you. You can punish me all you want, but don't make me look at you. And what's the idea here? The gaze of God.

But the worm that doesn't die refers probably to conscience, to something gnawing at us from the inside. Jonathan Edwards put it this way a couple of hundred years ago now. He said, "Not only will the unbeliever be in hell, but hell will be in the unbeliever." Because the conscience will continue to say, the way that I'm doing this isn't the right way.

I don't know if you saw it, but Kanye just came out with a new business this last week. I won't go into the details, but let's just say his new business rhymes with easy. I thought that would land better, but maybe it's too serious a moment. The reason this was interesting to me is he had released an album years ago called *Jesus is King*. And supposedly when he released this, everybody who had to work on the set had to commit to not fornicating because he wanted the album to be pure. This is a guy who's had some spiritual awakenings at different points in his life, and now he's going into the pornography business. And when he goes into the pornography business, there's an album in here. And I saw an interview where he had talked about this idea of his bitterness toward God because he had prayed for certain things that God didn't do.

Now, here's why I bring this up. I don't know Kanye's state or where he'll be. That's up to God, not me. But here's what I do know. When somebody embraces something that is counter to the very good things and good way that God has intended it to be, what happens is your conscience starts to prick you over and over and over again. And you degenerate into a place that's further and further from the goodness of God.

And here's what I know about pornography from talking to men over years and years, and women, but mostly men. And that is, it never satisfies. It always destroys what is good and right. In a sense, hell is in the person at that moment. I don't mean that there isn't a future, but what I mean is that the conscience and the destruction of all that's good and right is part of the experience that happens.

The reason that this is important when we look at this text is sometimes, we want to say, well, I can't believe in a God who would. But it's the experience that many of us have either given witness to in others or experienced ourselves. That has a full culmination in the future.

There's one other objection that sometimes is given, and this is the objection that there's in this passage the selection of some and the exclusion of others. Verse 14 says it this way. "For many are invited, but few are chosen." And so for some people, this is challenging because they hear this and they say, well, wait a second, if God calls some and then some come to the wedding and they're told they can't stay because they don't have the right wedding clothes, they're not chosen, then how do I know I'm chosen and how is that fair? Here's what is true throughout the pages of the Bible. God takes credit for salvation, but he holds us responsible. Now it might feel like it's an oxymoron. But the idea here is God says I'm the one who draws you, keeps you, preserves you, and chooses you, but you are responsible when you go your own way.

R.C. Sproul, in talking about this years and years ago, talked about a professor in a class who had due dates and had let them slide for a while. Then finally, after some time had passed, he said, okay, now anybody who doesn't turn in their work by this day, you're going to get an "F." And what happened was some of the people objected. He said, the idea is everybody has passed the due date, even if you turned it in before some others. In other words, the way to see this is not necessarily to focus on who's chosen or who isn't, but to say everybody deserves this. But I will worship as one who is able to say God has done His work in me, and yet I will take responsibility for myself.

Stephen Colbert, years ago, was interviewing Jimmy Cliff, who is a reggae artist on his late-night show. And Jimmy Cliff and Stephen Colbert were talking about religion. And Stephen Colbert asked him what was his place? Jimmy Cliff said he had graduated from religion. And so, Stephen Colbert basically said, well, tell me, like when you die, do you want to be on the Jewish scorecard, the Muslim scorecard, or the Christian scorecard? And Jimmy Cliff said, well, I prefer to be judged on truth and facts. I don't often say I agree with Stephen Colbert, but what he said next was right. He said, I'd prefer to be judged on faith and grace. Because he understood that it's not us.

You see, the wedding clothes here are probably the clothing of Jesus Christ, the righteousness of Jesus Christ that you and I bring to the feast. It's not that we improve ourselves. It's that we have the righteousness of Jesus Christ given to us. So, when somebody comes and doesn't have it, they're probably the kind of person that John 10:1 talks about who are robbers and thieves who try to sneak into the kingdom. And ultimately, what I would say is you don't need to worry if you're one of the chosen if you've responded to the feast.

You see, the point of Jesus is there's this feast, there's an invitation, you can come, and it is to anybody who wants to come. Yes, there's an effectual call. Yes, there is a sense in which God chooses and we will worship like this. But I think ultimately his point is, don't let your preoccupation, objections, or hostility keep you from coming.

Paul David Tripp talks about how we like to use our inner lawyer and what he says is we need to fire our inner lawyer because our inner lawyer says, I don't deserve that. I'm a pretty good person. I'm better than others. I don't worship the kind of God who's like that. Rather than

simply saying He's the King, and he has the right to the feast any way he wants to, and I'm invited. Why wouldn't I come and acknowledge my need?

In fact, in verse 12, the man who was in the wedding without the clothes, without being dressed, it says he was speechless. Meaning there was no defense. There was no inner lawyer. When we worship as a community, those who say, I don't come because of my goodness, but because of Jesus Christ's goodness, it creates the kind of a community in which life change happens. Because this is the recognition not that I'm worthy or you're worthy, but Jesus Christ is worthy, and we worship him for what He's done on our behalf. I don't know how you come here today. My guess is a great number of you say I've believed in Jesus for a long time, and my hope today is really simple that you would walk away maybe understanding the objections better, but more than that, with a sense of saying God has invited me to a feast and I didn't deserve it, but I get to go.

And for some of us maybe who've come and have always had objections or reasons not to believe, we've used our inner lawyer to keep us away from faith. Maybe today is just your day to say, God, I understand that you're right to reject me, in the sense if you want to use that word, because I haven't trusted Jesus Christ, because I have sinned. But you've invited me to a feast, and I want to be a part of that. You can do that today by acknowledging that Jesus has done for you what you can't do. And that religion is not about our attempts to make ourselves better, but ultimately a relationship with Jesus Christ is because of what Jesus has done for us. And by doing that you can say, I'm part of the feast, I'm part of the Kingdom of God.

We thank you today for just the stories of life change in our midst and God that you invite each of us to a feast, whether good or bad, and that it's about what you've done. I pray that truth would so inspire each one of us that our lives would be marked and changed because of it. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.