

## The One About the Wedding Reception Gone Bad

I received an invitation a couple of July's ago for a good friend's wedding that was going to happen at the end of October of that year. It had a little card inside, and it asked me to RSVP and let the bride know if I was coming. And so, excitedly, I sent it back. But there is a long time between July and October. And as the date drew closer and closer I found myself thinking – wow – the wedding is late on a Saturday afternoon. It's at Tilley, AR. I'm not even sure I can find Tilley, Ar. It's going to take a long time to get there. I'm wondering who the Razorbacks play that day. I'm thinking it's probably going to be cold, and it's outside. I'm wondering: what does one wear to an outdoor wedding at the end of October? I'll probably get home late and I definitely have to get up early on Sunday morning to preach. I was thinking of all kinds of reasons not to go to this wedding.

Just like the guests in the parable, I was thinking of all kinds of excuses even though it was the wedding of a person who was very special in my life.

And just like we sometimes do with God's invitation to each of us – we think of all kinds of other things to commit to that seem way more important at the time.

Today, I invite you to think about the deeper meaning of this story. I invite you to consider the invitation God offers to each of us to come to this grand celebration -- a life lived with God both on earth and in heaven!

If you've been with us for other parts of this sermon series, we've heard enough of the parables to know that when Jesus tells stories there is a deeper meaning. Jesus is not just talking about going to a party. And he's not talking about how we should dress, either. And for Matthew, who wrote this parable down, it had a very specific and local meaning. To Matthew, the invited guests who refused to come when the time came represented the Jews. Ages ago the Israelites had been invited by God to be his chosen people. But when God's son, came into the world, and they were invited to follow him, many of them refused. And so the result was that the invitation of God went out by prophets and missionaries to the roads inviting all kinds of other people. – representing the non-Jewish people, the Gentiles – those who never expected an invitation into the Kingdom of God. And as Matthew saw it, the refusal of the invitation was terrible.

But does this parable mean something to us today?

This parable of the wedding party is actually two parables in one. One parable is about guests who are invited and don't come – they find other things that are more important.

The second parable is about a guest who accepts the invitation but who comes dressed inappropriately. As we think about the deeper meaning of these two parables, you will probably be able to find yourself in one of them.

So, Jesus describes a grand party thrown by the king. And it was the custom of Jesus' day that an invitation to a big party like this would be sent well in advance, but the date wasn't stated. So the initial invitations were sent, and then all the preparations would be made. The servants would then be sent out to summon the guests to come. And so, it was quite insulting when the guests refused to come – just like it would be pretty insulting if I didn't go to the wedding at Tilley when I said I would. After all, think of all the preparations that go into such a thing. Think of all the money and time that has gone into the party.

But the scripture says the guests “paid no attention and went away – some to their fields, others to their businesses.” They had other things to do – they thought other things were more interesting or more important. This is the first group – those who don't accept the invitation.

But then we have the second parable. The king then sends his servants out to the roads to gather everyone in. The good people, the bad people – everyone was invited. And the party was bursting to the brim – full of guests. But the king notices that one of the guests is not dressed in a way that is fitting for a wedding party thrown by a king – I imagine he has his old dirty overalls on – he’s really dressed inappropriately – as if he doesn’t even respect the King, as if he didn’t even take the time to wash up after coming in out of the fields. And the king becomes very angry.

Two parables – two different responses to the invitation.

These two parables are tales of God’s grace.

It is God’s grace, God’s unconditional love, behind the invitation. Because God loves you so much, God invites you to his party. It is God’s grace that even tracks you down, pursues you on the roads and highways – each of you – and God begs you to come to the party. You see God wants you at his party. And God will stop at nothing to get you there. So some of us here today, may have never accepted the invitation. Some of us may have never really said “yes” to living a life with God. And so you may need to hear that today. And it may be time for you to respond to the invitation. All you have to do is say yes to be a part of the most joy-filled party you could ever imagine. Maybe it is time you stopped running from God.

You may see yourself in this first parable. And if so, won’t you come and see what God might do in your life?

But the twist in the story comes with the second parable where one who comes to the celebration is not dressed appropriately. Now, of course, this is not really about what kind of clothes we wear. To me this parable is about those who have accepted the invitation – they have said yes to God but they have really gone no further. They have not even taken the time to notice that they stink in those overalls. And more is expected of them when they come into the presence of the king. Maybe they have no idea how grand and glorious the party is going to be, and so they just come as they are – not even realizing the mighty power of the king!

The message of this second story is that God’s grace is not a one time event in our lives – God continues to pour out grace on us from the moment we are conceived to the moment we die – God continues to draw us closer and closer. And this party goer who comes dressed in his overalls, has accepted the invitation, but he has not grown closer to Christ – he has not become clothed in Christ, he is not seeking to walk with Christ and to become more like Christ. My favorite commentator William Barclay said it this way:” It is true that the door is open to all people, but when they come they must bring a life which seeks to fit the love which has been given to them. **Grace is not only a gift, it is a grave responsibility.** A man cannot go on living the life he lived before he met Jesus Christ. He must be clothed in a new purity and a new holiness and a new goodness. **The door is open, but the door is not open for the sinner to come and remain a sinner, but for the sinner to come and become a saint.**”

And so if you have accepted the invitation to the banquet and you can’t recognize yourself in the first parable, you can probably place yourself in this second one. We can all become more like Christ – every single day, we can practice – we can grow more filled with God’s spirit and more like Christ as we spend time in spiritual disciplines – through prayer and scripture reading and through serving others. Surely we can become clothed in our very best as we come into the presence of the King.

John Wesley, the father of Methodism, shared some profound thoughts about this topic in a sermon called “Spiritual Christianity.” He was preaching to ordained clergy and many young

people who were seeking to become clergy. And his words are so blunt that he probably stirred his listeners up a bit – that was always happening with Wesley. In fact, Wesley writes in his diary more than once that he made people so mad with his preaching that they asked him not to return. In this particular sermon, Wesley said that he hoped their generation would not be “triflers with God, with one another, and with their own soul.” Triflers with God, not taking their faith seriously. He asked his listeners how many spent even a single hour a week in prayer. He asked them who among them was acquainted with the work of the Holy Spirit. He asked them how many of them had thought of God in the general tenor of their conversation.

Wesley continuously challenged his listeners to a deeper level of commitment and to a serious pursuit of a holy life. Wesley said that many who thought they were Christians seemed to be so in name only; he called them “almost Christians.”

Maybe an “almost Christian” is what the king saw dressed in his smelly overalls at the amazing party he had so carefully prepared.

Wesley said there is more to being a Christian than just saying “yes” to God. There is a power, and a love and an unexplainable joy that comes from being clothed in Christ – from walking with Christ. And the king expects us to be truly changed by being in his presence.

I want to share a story about five brothers with you. As you listen, notice how each brother reacts to the King’s invitation.

Five brothers were walking along a road when they saw a sign: “party tonight!” It announced. “Free food, drink, music, dance.” And best of all, at the bottom it said, “hosted in person by The King.”

The first brother read the poster and said, “I’m not interested.” I’m going to stay home and eat leftovers and go to bed early. This is as close to the King as I ever want to be.”

The other four were excited to go, and spent the rest of the day talking about what it was going to be like. The appointed time came and they set out together.

As they neared the hall they could already hear the music pouring out of the windows, and they could see the smiles on people’s faces as they walked in. It was a glorious sight, and they could feel the excitement. The second brother stopped and sat down on the curb. “This is close enough,” he said. “I can sort of hear the music and I can see the people going in. This is pretty good, I don’t want to go any further because I’m not sure what I’ll find. And maybe I’ll get a glimpse of the King going in.”

The three remaining walked into the hall together, and the sight was amazing. The smells were incredible, the food unbelievable, the music was supreme. They sat and feasted and enjoyed the party, and could see the King at the head table feasting and laughing and radiating joy. As they finished the meal, the tables were cleared away to make room for the dance floor. The third brother got up and said, “I’ve had enough. My belly is full, I enjoyed the meal, I’m leaving before I have to really join in the party. I got to see the King, this is close enough for me.”

As the last two sat there, they saw a beautiful woman walking across the dance floor straight towards them. As she got closer they recognized her as the daughter of the King, who had been seated beside Him at the head table throughout the meal. She approached the two and reached out her hands to them both and said, “Come and dance! My Father saw you and wants you to come and join us and the others in dancing for joy!!”

One brother looked down at his feet. “No, thanks. This is close enough. Besides, I don’t know how to dance.” “Just let go, I’ll teach you!” said the Daughter of the King. “No,” he replied, I might get embarrassed. This is close enough.” And he got up and left.

The last brother also bowed his head. “I’m not worthy. I’m not good enough to dance with the King, and besides, I don’t know how to dance either. I’m afraid He will send me away, or I’ll get it wrong and look silly.” He paused, and looked up into the eyes of the daughter of the King. She repeated the invitation, “Just let go, I’ll teach you!” She reached her hand a little closer, and though his was shaking, he reached up and took her hand. Her face came alive with a smile, he saw joy in her face, he felt life and boldness and love and exuberance come flooding into him and with joy he followed her across the dance floor to the King, who embraced him like a long lost son and then took both of them by the hand. And then they all danced.

Many people are invited, but few dance in the presence of the King. Only one of the brothers was able to dance in the joy of the Lord.

Each of us is being called today to come closer. No matter where we may be on our journey with God – God wants more of us. May we overcome our fear and desire for control. May we just let go and allow the king to teach us. Isn’t it time to join the dance?