

The Parable of the Wedding Feast

📖 Matthew 22:1-14

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We are studying the three parables that are given after Jesus' confrontation with the religious leaders in the Temple in 21:23-27. All three of these parables are directed at them even though they are in the midst of a crowd. They understood that He was talking about them and all three messages relate primarily to them and to that generation that completely blew it. In 21:28-32, the parable of the two sons contrasts the leaders with the tax collectors and prostitutes. In a stark contrast between the most religious Jews and the most irreligious Jews, it was the irreligious Jews who had actually repented and come to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. They had done what the religious leaders should have done but failed to do, in fact they would not do. The only thing they wanted to do was destroy the Messiah. In 21:33-45, the parable of the landowner presents the patience of God in dealing with generations of Israel's leaders who continually rejected Him generation after generation to the point that this generation crucified His own Son. In 21:33 the landowner is God. He planted a vineyard, which is the kingdom in history begun at Mt Sinai, and He put a wall around it, which is the Law, and He dug a wine press in it and built a tower in the midst of it, the purpose of which is to say that He provided all that was necessary for the kingdom to come to fruition. At the end of v 33 He rented it out to the vine-growers, which means He gave stewardship of the kingdom to the leaders of Israel, while He Himself went on a journey, meaning He stood at a distance to evaluate their stewardship. In 21:34 when the harvest time approached He sent His slaves, which represent His prophets, to the leaders of the kingdom to receive His produce. The prophets were sent to restore the leaders to God so they would lead the kingdom to fruitfulness. But 21:35 says the leaders of Israel took His prophets and beat one, and killed another and stoned a third. God's attempt to reach out to the leaders by the prophets was rejected. In 21:36, again He sent another group of prophets larger than the first, and the leaders did the same thing to them. There is a pattern of rejection among the leaders of Israel. In 21:37 after all of this God sent His Son, who is Jesus, to them saying, "They will respect my son." But in 21:38 when the leaders of Israel saw the Son they said among themselves, "This is the heir of the kingdom; let us kill Him and seize His inheritance." What they decided to do was crucify Him and seize His inheritance which means to press against the kingdom in the sense of opposition. In 21:39 they took God's Son and crucified Him. In 21:40 Jesus posed a question to the crowds, "Therefore, when the owner, God comes to deal with the vine-growers, the leaders He set over the kingdom, what will He do to them? In 21:41 "They said to Him, "He will bring those wretches to a

wretched end, and will rent out the kingdom to other vine-growers, other leaders of Israel who will pay the proceeds at the proper seasons." This was correct. God would judge those leaders and give stewardship to the kingdom out to other leaders who would lead the nation to accept Jesus as the King. Verse 41 really solves the whole problem of verse 43 and the identity of the nation or people to whom stewardship of the kingdom would be given since it looks to other leaders using a Greek word that means "others of the same kind that differ" and not "others of a different kind." It's looking to a leadership of a generation of Israel that differs from that generation's leadership. So the stewardship of the kingdom is not being taken away from the nation Israel but it is being taken away from that generation of Israel's leaders and transferred to a generation of Israel's leaders that will produce the fruit of the kingdom, unlike all previous generations. In 21:42 Jesus said to them, "Did you never read in the Scriptures, 'The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner stone.'" Jesus applied this passage to Himself. He is the stone that the leaders of that generation of Israel rejected. So obviously the kingdom belongs to Him and their rejection of Him evidences a failure of their stewardship of His kingdom. Therefore, 21:43, as a consequence, the kingdom of God will be taken away from that generation of Israel's leaders and given to a nation or people who produce the fruit of it. It's the nation or people, Greek *εθνη* that has stirred up so much controversy. It is clearly used of Gentile nations and the nation Israel but it is never clearly used of the Church. The only two passages used to claim it does refer to the Church are Rom 10:19 and 1 Pet 2:9, both of which are quotes of the OT and do not appear to refer to the Church. The Rom 10:19 passage refers to Gentile nations and the 1 Pet 2:9 passage refers to the Jewish remnant within the Church. So there really is no textual support for claiming that the Church is the nation to whom the kingdom is being transferred. Further, practically speaking, the Church is not a nation but composed of believers from every nation. So it is not textual to claim this is the Church and to do so can lead to replacement theology, the idea that Israel failed in its stewardship and so God has rejected Israel forever and given stewardship to His Church. But this has nothing to do with what is being said here. The statement is a judgment on that generation of Israel's leaders that stewardship would be taken from them and given to a future generation of Israel's leaders, one that produces the fruit of the kingdom. What is the fruit of the kingdom? It is the fruit of repentance. John called the nation of Israel to repent. They needed to repent because they were violating the Law of Moses. This caused spiritual blindness. In order to prepare for the King's arrival John was saying they needed to repent, have a change of mind. If they did, they would be prepared to meet and enthrone the King of God's own choosing. Therefore, the fruit that would be produced would be enthrone the King of God's own choosing. This too proves beyond all reasonable doubt that the people or nation to whom stewardship of the kingdom was being transferred was a future generation of Israel since one generation of Israel will produce this fruit by enthrone Jesus as King, the King of God's own choosing, just as Deut 17:15 says they must do for the kingdom to come. The Church can do no such thing, we do not enthrone Jesus as King. He is presently sitting at the right hand of the Father on the Father's throne awaiting the generation of Israel to receive Him so that the Father will give Him the throne of David and install Him as King on Mt Zion! Further, in 21:44 Jesus said that he who stumbles over this stone, referring to Himself, will be broken to pieces, this occurred in the AD70 destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple

when 1.1 million Jews were killed by the Romans. He then continues, "but on whomever the stone falls, it will scatter him like dust," a reference to the future smiting stone of Jesus in Dan 2 coming in the future Tribulation to pulverize all who have not believed and are not clothed with His righteousness and therefore will not enter His kingdom. In 21:45, "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them." They at least understood that He was saying they had rejected Him and would go to judgment. In 21:46, "when they sought to seize Him, they feared the crowds, because they considered Him to be a prophet."

Why is this parable included? To show that God had been very patient with Israel's leaders for many generations. He even sent them prophets to help restore the kingdom to fruitfulness, but they rejected them. After many attempts God sent His own Son and the leaders of Israel not only rejected Him but they went so far as to crucify Him. Because of this God was taking away the stewardship of His kingdom from that generation and giving it to a generation of Israel's leaders who will lead the people in enthroning the King of God's own choosing, Jesus, the Messiah. That generation is still to come...

Today we come to the third parable in the series; 22:1-14, the wedding banquet. This parable is difficult mainly because people have assigned meaning to too many details of the parable. With a parable always keep in mind that you should remain general and identify the main idea. Obviously, one of the main ideas is to present God's gracious dealings with the leaders of Israel generation after generation and how that grace came to an end and resulted in judgment on that generation. Paul explained in Rom 10:21 how God said to Israel, "All the day long I have stretched out My hands to a disobedient and obstinate people." God cannot be blamed for Israel's unbelief. God was remarkably gracious to Israel generation after generation, and yet, as we will see today, they spurned His grace and that grace ran out and hence judgment was coming on that generation and on their city. God's grace would then extend beyond the nation Israel to the Gentiles and those who respond by faith will partake of the kingdom.

In Matt 22:1 **Jesus spoke to them again in parables...** Constable said, "The antecedent of "them" was the Jewish leaders, but there were many other Jews in the temple courtyard listening to the dialogue."¹ So many heard but the main audience are the Jewish leaders. J. Vernon McGee said, "Take note of the word *again*. This little word indicates that Jesus is still addressing the chief priests and elders mentioned in Matthew 21:23."² Toussaint said, "The third of a trilogy of parables spoken with the religious leaders in view is now recorded. All these are a result of the encounter of Matthew 21:23-27."³ I make a big point of this because many people want to sneak the Church and the judgment seat of Christ into this parable at the end when it speaks of the man without wedding clothes. They highlight the fact that the man is in the kingdom and therefore must be a genuine Christian, but his lack of wedding clothes indicates that he was an unfaithful Christian. The consequences he will face are being cast into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Since they interpret him as a genuine Christian in the kingdom then they say that being cast into outer darkness

must refer to being excluded from enjoying the banquet within the kingdom and to be in weeping and gnashing of teeth must refer to extreme sorrow and regret over not living a more faithful Christian life. I find this interpretation problematic for many reasons. First, in the progress of revelation there had been very little revealed about the Church and even less understood. It would be out of place to introduce the judgment seat of Christ. The issues here are that generation and the kingdom offer. Second, in the context it would be strange to introduce a major warning about living an unfaithful Christian life when the immediate audience is the religious leaders of Israel amidst a crowd of Jews. Third, the expressions cast into outer darkness and weeping and gnashing of teeth have two other references in Matthew and both refer to unbelievers despite the fact that attempts have been made to say that they could refer to believers. Fourth, if these expressions refer to consequences at the judgment seat of Christ then Christians can face penal consequences at the judgment seat of Christ. I find this difficult to reconcile with the fact that we will be in resurrection bodies and as perfect as Christ Himself.⁴ Fifth, if some Christians will be cast into outer darkness so that they do not get to enjoy the wedding supper in Christ's presence then that means the body of Christ will be divided for at least part of the kingdom. I find that difficult to imagine from what the Bible has to say about the Church. Sixth, to say a Christian may be cast into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth introduces fear and anxiety into the Christian's expectation of meeting His Savior. How can one turn what is pictured in Scripture as a joyous occasion to a fearful one? I think these are dangerous interpretations that have no support from the progress of revelation, the context, the usage of the expressions, the unity of the body of Christ and the fear and anxiety it induces. It is much better to interpret the parable in general terms that relate to that generation of Israel's leaders' extreme rejection of their King and the consequences of that rejection.

Let's read the parable, then we'll make some identifications. **"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. ³"And he sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come. ⁴"Again he sent out other slaves saying, 'Tell those who have been invited, "Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are *all* butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast." ' ⁵"But they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, ⁶and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them. ⁷"But the king was enraged, and he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and set their city on fire. ⁸"Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. ⁹"Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find *there*, invite to the wedding feast.' ¹⁰"Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered together all they found, both evil and good; and the wedding hall was filled with dinner guests. ¹¹"But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw a man there who was not dressed in wedding clothes, ¹²and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?' And the man was speechless. ¹³"Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' ¹⁴"For many are called, but few *are* chosen.'" In 22:2 the**

kingdom of heaven is a reference to the Messianic kingdom and is an equivalent of the expression kingdom of God. Recall that Matthew is the only gospel writer who uses **kingdom of heaven**. All the parallel passages in the Mark and Luke use kingdom of God. The reason Matthew usually chose **kingdom of heaven** was to avoid offending Jews by overusing the name of God. So the **kingdom of heaven** is the same as the kingdom of God and refers to the Messianic kingdom. This kingdom is being **compared** in some way to **a king who gave a wedding feast for his son**. The **wedding feast** therefore, is equivalent to the Messianic kingdom and not merely a part of it. So it has to do with those who are invited to the kingdom. Since a parable is always drawn from a story that is true to life, though not necessarily true, it should not surprise us that Jesus' audience was familiar with the customs of wedding feasts that are described here. First, an invitation would be sent in considerable advance to the guest list so that they would have plenty of time to prepare for attending the wedding feast. Second, slaves would be sent a week before the wedding feast to remind those who had been invited so that their calendar was clear. Third, slaves would be sent the day of the wedding feast to relay to those who had been invited that all the preparations for the feast were completed and it was time for them to come and enjoy the feast. When they did not come the parable departs from the customs of wedding feasts well-known to the audience and introduces another invitation, this time to any and all who would attend.

There are a number of identifications to make here. First, the **king**. In verse 2 the **king** gave a wedding feast for his son. In verse 3 it is implied that He sent out the invitations well in advance. When the time drew near the king sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited but they were unwilling. In verse 4 the king sent out other slaves when all the preparations were made but they paid no attention and killed some of his slaves. In verse 7 the king was enraged with those murderers and sent his armies to destroy them and their city. In verse 9 the king sent out his slaves to the main highways to invite any who would come and the wedding hall was filled. In verse 11, when the king came to look over the guests he noticed one man had not been issued wedding clothes. In verse 12 the king asked how the man came in without wedding clothes and the man could not give an account. In verse 13 the king had his servants bind this man and cast him into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Who then is the **king**? The **king** is God the Father. Second, the king's **son**. In verse 2 the wedding feast was given for the king's **son**. No more information is given about the king's **son**. Who is the king's **son**? God the Son. Third, the **wedding feast**. The **wedding feast** was the main event. In verse 2 it was what the Father was giving for His Son. It was what certain people were invited to. In verse 3 the time drew near and those invited were called, but they were unwilling to come. In verse 4 it was ready but those invited either paid no attention and went on their own way or attacked and killed some of the king's slaves. In verse 9 another invitation went out to the wedding feast and many were gathered in the wedding hall. At that time an individual was improperly clothed and cast out of the wedding banquet. What then is the **wedding feast**? It is the messianic kingdom. Fourth, the **slaves**. In verse 3 some slaves were sent out when the feast was near to call those who had been invited but they would not come. In verse 4 other slaves were sent the day the preparations were made to call those who had been invited to come but some ignored them and others mistreated and killed

them. In vv 8-9 slaves were then sent out to invite people that were not on the original guest list. Who then are the **slaves**? There are disagreements here but it seems to me that the first set of slaves in verse 3 are the OT prophets. The second set of slaves in verse 4 are John the Baptist and the apostles in the Gospels. The third set of slaves in vv 8-9 are the apostles in the Book of Acts going to Jews and Gentiles in the time preceding the kingdom. All who respond by faith are given wedding clothes. The man in verse 11 who does not have wedding clothes is a man who does not respond by faith. This is an individual decision and no one can enter the kingdom who does not have on wedding clothes. Fifth, the king's armies. In verse 7 the king sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and set their city on fire. Who are the king's armies? The Roman armies under Titus in AD70. They destroyed the city of Jerusalem by fire. Sixth, the **servants**. In verse 13 **the servants** are distinct from the slaves, which is a different Greek word. The servants are the ones the king tells to bind the man hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Who are **the servants**? They may be angels. If so they execute the judgment prior to the kingdom so that no unbelievers are able to enter the kingdom.

Understand there are a lot of questions and difficulties here but let's try to put together the parable. In the OT God invited the nation Israel to enjoy a kingdom that centered on His Son. He sent out prophets to the nation Israel to call them to remind them of the kingdom but they were unwilling to come. When the kingdom was near God sent John the Baptist and the twelve apostles to call Israel to come to the kingdom but some paid no attention while the leaders allowed John the Baptist to be killed and mistreated the apostles. God was enraged at how the leaders treated them and so He sent the Roman armies to destroy that generation of murderers and set the city of Jerusalem on fire. The kingdom stood in a state of readiness and so God sent apostles and prophets to go out into the world and invite as many as they could find. Many responded and the wedding hall was filled with people. But one lone man stood there not dressed in wedding clothes. When asked how he came in without wedding clothes the man had no valid excuse. God sent his angels to bind him and cast him into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. The explanation is that many are called, but few are chosen, a most controversial and enigmatic explanation...

We want to deal with this man in particular. This is the man that people often say is a genuine Christian because he is pictured within the kingdom. I think it is dangerous to press this detail into that kind of scenario. Parables are not intended to be pressed at every detail. Any detail that is pressed must fit in the overall context and argument of what Matthew is doing. What Matthew is doing is pronouncing judgment on that generation of Israel for their rejection and the consequent destruction of Jerusalem and the going out of the invitation to the whole world to attend the kingdom through faith in the death and resurrection of Christ. The way into the kingdom is always through the cross of Christ. So if you're going to press this man into any scenario it needs to be a picture of the contrast between those who have been given wedding clothes by faith and those who have not been given wedding clothes because they have no faith. The religious leaders did not have faith. They would not be in the kingdom. Nor will anyone who does not have faith. Instead they will be cast into outer darkness.

Turn to Matthew 8:12 for the first usage of "cast into the outer darkness." This is Jesus' interaction with the Gentile centurion at Capernaum. In this situation the Gentile centurion said that Jesus did not have to come in order for his servant to be healed, only say the word and it would be done. In verse 10 Jesus marveled at the Gentile centurion and said, "Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel." He then says in verse 11, "I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." Obviously He meant that many Gentiles like the centurion would have faith. Because they would have faith they would qualify to enter the kingdom with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who also had faith. But note who will be excluded in verse 12, "But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness, in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." The sons of the kingdom are the Jews in contrast to Gentiles. The reason they are called sons of the kingdom is because they were the natural recipients of the kingdom. God covenanted the kingdom to them. But they neglected the truth that one must have a faith like Abraham to participate in the kingdom. Because they did not have faith they would not be in the kingdom at all. Instead they would be cast out into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. This interaction is a contrast between Gentiles who respond by faith and Jews who do not have faith. Matthew was as surprised by this difference in response as most of us. As such he frequently cites Gentiles like the wise men, the centurion and the Syrophenician woman who responded by faith in contrast to the multitude of Jews who did not. This is not a contrast between faithful believers and unfaithful believers with unfaithful believers facing outer darkness and weeping and gnashing of teeth. It is a contrast of believing Gentiles and unbelieving Jews. The expression cast into outer darkness and the experience of weeping and gnashing of teeth applies to unbelievers only.

Turn to Matthew 25:30 for the third usage of "cast into the outer darkness." This is the parable of the talents. In this parable a man goes on a journey and before he leaves he entrusts his possessions to them with expectation of return. To one he gave five, to another two and to another one. The one with five doubled it and had ten. The one who had two doubled it and had four. The one who had one buried it in the ground. When the man returned to settle accounts he allowed the first to enter the kingdom with reward. He also allowed the second to enter the kingdom with reward. When he came to the third in verse 30 he said throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness, in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. He neither enters the kingdom nor is rewarded. It should be clear that the third slave is an unbeliever. The problem people point out is that he is a slave. However, for whatever reason people do not see that that feature is only included so that the parable can remain true to life. If he was not a slave then the man would have never entrusted anything to him to begin with and no contrast between faith and lack of faith could be made. Further, this relates to the judgment of Jews and the following section in verse 31 deals with the Gentile nations and the sheep/goats judgment. There is no reference here to Christians whether faithful or unfaithful. The issue is believing Israel and unbelieving Israel. Believing Israel will enter the kingdom with proper reward. Unbelieving Israel will be cast into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The same is true in our parable in Matt 22:11-14, anyone who does not have faith will be cast into the outer darkness. The main truth we pick up here is that this is an individual decision not a national issue. The Jews thought that because they were God's nation they had automatic entrance into the kingdom. They were mistaken. Each individual Jew has to have faith like Abraham. That is how one receives wedding clothes, whether they are Jew or Gentile. The man never entered the kingdom. That is not the picture. The picture is that when the King comes to establish the kingdom He will cast all unbelievers out. They have no place in the kingdom because they do not have faith so as to be clothed in proper garments.

Verse 14 explains, **For many are called, but few are chosen.** The verb **called** is from the same Greek root that is translated "invite" in vv 4, 8 and 9. We might translate **For many are invited.** The invitation to enter the kingdom through the cross is given to **many**. In other words, the gospel goes out as an open invitation. The final expression is a contrast, **but few are** εκλεκτοι, which is **choice. Few are choice.** The ones who are **choice** are those who are wearing wedding clothes. The word is an adjective giving a qualitative description of one who is of the highest quality, exquisite, premier. It does not have anything to do with God choosing a few before time to believe. That idea leaves more questions than answers. It wouldn't even make sense as an explanation in the context. The issue in verse 3 is the invitation went out and "you were unwilling." It did not have to do with inability but with unwillingness. That is what made that generation, and all who refuse to believe, in verse 8, characterized as "unworthy," another adjective giving a qualitative description of those who reject. It is the antonym of those who are **choice**. Those who are unworthy are those who had every reason to believe and refused to believe. That is why the man without wedding clothes stood speechless when asked about his wedding clothes. No one has any argument for not believing. Everyone should believe and many are invited but only **few are choice.** The **choice** are those who believe and are clothed with wedding clothes. It is important to understand that the **choice** do not put these wedding clothes on themselves but are clothed with them. That's how they become **choice**. It is a passive voice. The real issue then is what are believers clothed with? The answer is Christ's righteousness. The wedding clothes are Christ's righteousness imputed through faith. Any and all who are clothed in Christ's righteousness are of **choice** quality, not because of anything they have done, not even because of faith, but because through non-meritorious faith they have been clothed with the perfect righteousness of Christ. Other usages of the Greek word in this same sense are Matt 24:22, "Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the choice those days will be cut short." Another passage is Rev 17:14, "These will wage war against the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, because He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those who are with Him are invited and choice and faithful." If you are a believer you are choice in His sight because you are clothed with the perfect righteousness of Christ. This solves our problem of nakedness in Adam and makes us fit to enter into the joy of His kingdom. All who do not have the perfect righteousness of Christ, though they may have been invited, will not enter the kingdom, but will be cast into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In the end the meaning of the parable is simple: God graciously invited and called Israel to enter the kingdom when it arrived. That generation spurned grace and went to destruction in AD70. The gracious invitation to enter the kingdom through the cross is now available to all but only those individuals who respond by faith are clothed with Christ's righteousness such that they are choice and will enter into the joy of their master. All who do not have faith remain naked in Adam and are cast out into outer darkness, in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

¹ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 22:1.

² J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary: The Gospels (Matthew 14-28)*, electronic ed., vol. 35 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 104.

³ Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, p 252.ujh

⁴ See exposition of 22:14.