

## Earthly Stories, Heavenly Meanings: The Wedding Garment

February 15, 2009; 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

Today as we continue in our series, Heavenly Stories, Earthly Meanings, we are looking at another parable about a wedding. A few weeks ago we talked about the parable where the Bridegroom returned to his home and the people there needed to be ready to open the doors and let him in. This week we're looking at another custom of weddings back then, and how it pertains to us today.

Will you please turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew 22:1-14? We've talked a lot about Matthew the past few weeks, so we won't review all of that information, only to say that I'm willing to bet that Matthew probably had the best understanding of the grace and mercy of God from the first than most of the disciples, given Matthew's job as a tax collector. While you're turning in your Bibles to Matthew, let's review again, though, the title of this series, "Earthly Stories, Heavenly Meanings."

At its core, that's really what a parable is: a story that people will hear or read that they can relate to on an earthly level. The earthly story part of the parable would resonate with the hearers so they would say things like, "I've been there!" or "I know what that's like", or "Wow! I never saw that twist coming at the end! That story is going to stay with me for awhile!" The Heavenly Meaning part of the parable is the part that reveals an insight into the heart of God and the working of the Kingdom of God. When you hear a parable, it resonates with you and teaches you a lesson about God at the same time.

So today, we're looking at a parable about a spurned wedding banquet invitation, and then someone getting thrown out of the banquet when they *did* come. Once again we are going to Matthew 22, verses 1 through 14:

*Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. "Then 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.' "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. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. "Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.' So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing*

wedding clothes. *'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless. "Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'* *"For many are invited, but few are chosen."*

First, let's look at the earthly story part of the parable. What would the original hearers, as well as we today, have connected with?

First, this was an expensive meal! *My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready.* This was not a platter of cold cuts and such, this was a feast! You only butchered oxen and fattened cattle for big celebrations. This was no little get-together, this was a major to-do! The people would have understood this, and so do we.

Second, the word that gets translated as 'dinner', (*I have prepared my dinner*) is "ariston", and it is not the big meal of the day, but rather a late breakfast/early lunch kind of meal – a Brunch. Ok, that's not actually all that significant, but I thought I'd just throw that out. The people were invited to a major Brunch.

Third, the twist that would stick with the people? The invitees said no! This was the king, not Joe Shmoe inviting them. They said no to the king who personally prepared a feast for the honor of his son, and they not only rejected the king and his son, they killed the king's messengers.

And then Jesus throws in another twist – the king destroys the people and their city! Doesn't that seem like overkill (pun *so* intended!)? This would be the first twist that would make the hearers gasp in surprise, and may make us do the same.

That's the first part of the earthly story. The second comes when the king goes out and brings into the wedding banquet people who were not originally on his invitation list. So far, so good, we might say. At least the food didn't go to waste, and there was a celebration. But then comes the next twist – the king throws someone out of the party who wasn't dressed right! *"...when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. 'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless. "Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'*

Once again you can almost hear the gasp of the shock in the crowd when Jesus told this story. Doesn't that seem like a little much? The first people didn't come, and when someone finally *did*, the king goes and throws him out because he wasn't wearing the right clothes? Seems a little finicky, doesn't it?

That's all the earthly story part. What's the Heavenly Meaning and the application for us?

First, I need to tell you something that may shock, dismay, and even offend some here today. It's not my intention to do any of these things, but it is necessary for us to understand something

to fully ‘get’ this parable, and to appreciate even more God’s grace. Ready? Here it goes: you and I were not on the original guest list to Heaven. Put another way, salvation through Christ Jesus, was not originally intended for you and me.

In the margins of your Bible next to these verses you can write Romans 11:1-24. We’re not going to look at all of those verses, but just a couple. To quickly give the context of these Romans verses, the Holy Spirit is explaining that salvation through Jesus was offered to the Jews, and after they rejected Him, it was then offered to the Gentiles – to those who were not Jewish. Again, you’ll want to read all these verses on your own at home today to get it all, but we are told in these verses in Romans that because of the sin of the Jewish people in rejecting Jesus, salvation was then offered to us, to the Gentiles (verse 11). We are told that we are like branches that have been grafted in to the root (verse 19). What this means is when the original people to whom salvation through Jesus was offered rejected Him, we were offered the salvation only *after* that happened. In other words, to use the language of our parable, when the original invitees to the wedding banquet of the King’s Son refused Him, then we were invited, but we weren’t on the original guest list.

You can write in your Bibles that the king is God the Father, and the son of the king is Jesus. The original guests are the Jews, and the second group of guests that were invited are you and me. The wedding clothes given is the grace offered through Jesus, and we’re going to get to that in just a moment.

Does this shock you? Does it make you feel like second-class citizens of heaven, or a people who are not loved? Don’t let it! Here’s where grace and mercy come in a fantastic way! Grace is getting what we don’t deserve: in the language of this parable, an undeserved invitation to the banquet in Heaven. Mercy is not getting what we do deserve: a barring from the banquet because we were not on the original guest list. Right next to the Romans reference, write 2 Timothy 2:4-7 “ {God the Father} *wants all men* {people} *to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men* {people}...*Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all men* {people}... *And for this purpose I was appointed a herald and an apostle...and a teacher of the true faith to the Gentiles.*

God the Father loves you dearly. He loves you so much that when His own chosen people rejected Him, He didn’t walk away but instead came to you and me and invited us in to His family. We are not second-class by any means! We are first class citizens of Heaven. Colossians 3:11 tells us in Christ there is no distinction between Jew or Gentile, but rather we are all dearly loved children of God.

So if we’re all dearly loved children, then why did I just tell you that we were not on the original guest list? Because it shows us how much God pours His grace out on us – the least deserving of His love and His acceptance. And yet that is exactly what all who believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior have – the love and acceptance of God the Father. 1 John 3:1 says it all, “*How great*

*is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!”*

Let's continue on the theme of grace for a moment as we look at another Heavenly meaning. After the original guests refused to come, the king invited others, and the banquet hall was filled. When he saw someone who wasn't dressed right, the king threw him out. What does that have to do with grace?

The grace it has to do with is in relation to the other guests at the banquet. The person who was thrown out tried to get in to the banquet on his own accord, or even more, tried to take the credit himself for being at the banquet. How do we know this? In those times kings would often provide clothing to guests who come to their banquets. Richly ornamented robes, expensive special clothing were given to people as a gift. This would have been especially true in this parable when the guests had just come off the streets!

This person was not wearing the robe the king offered him. In the original Greek, the question the king asked the person, *“how did you get in here without wedding clothes?”* carries with it an understanding that the person was conscious of what he was doing. In other words, he purposely did not accept the clothes offered him. Another way of asking this question when you look at the Greek would be *“What were you thinking, thinking that you could be in here without the robe I provided you? What is going on in your head?”* And when he was caught, he was speechless, because he knew he had no excuse or no hope. Throw the bum out!

So where does grace come in? Let's go back to our analogy we've used before: Do you have to get cleaned up to take a bath? No, the bath *is* what cleans us up. It is the sacrifice of Jesus that cleans us up and gets us into the Heavenly banquet, and it is the *only* thing that does it. The other guests at the party had accepted the gracious gift of the king in allowing him to put on the robes that covered them – the gift they didn't deserve and they couldn't provide for themselves. This other person rejected the robe, and in rejecting it, rejected the gift, the grace that was offered, and relied instead on his own self or own self-worth to be at the banquet. In response, he was thrown out of the banquet, and would not be allowed back in.

It's the difference between “cheap grace” and “costly grace.” “Cheap grace” is the grace we give ourselves; it's the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance; it's grace without discipleship; grace without the cross; grace without Jesus Christ. Costly grace is the grace that comes only through the spilled blood of Jesus on the cross. It's costly because it 'cost' God the Father His own Son – His own self. It's costly to us because it means we have to pick up our cross and follow Jesus. It is costly because it means we live in a way that is very much in contrast to the rest of the world that practices 'cheap grace.' It's costly to us because it may even

cost a person their life when push comes to shove, rather than to deny the violent grace of Calvary in lue of the cheap grace of the world. It's grace because it gives true life.<sup>1</sup>

What are the clothes we're wearing today? I don't mean that literally! I mean simply, what is the grace that we have? God's grace offered through Jesus that brings us into the Heavenly banquet our King of Kings has prepared for us, or our own cheap grace that's just going to get those who where that thrown out into utter darkness?

This parable is an earthly story about a spurned invitation, a great banquet and a uppity guest who was thrown out of a party. It's a parable with a Heavenly Meaning about rejection and acceptance; cheap and costly grace; eternity with the King and His Son, or eternity all alone with regrets and wails and sorrow.

Are you ready for the banquet? In the old 1941 Communion liturgy, we used to sing "Grace our table with Your presence, and give us a foretaste of the feast to come." We have a foretaste of that Heavenly banquet here with us today. Are we ready to come, admit we have no right to be here, and simply accept the grace, the forgiveness, offered here in Jesus' body and blood? Are we ready to take a bath? Are we ready to get our new robes put on us? Are we ready to live in the costly grace of Jesus, rather than return to the cheap grace of the world? I don't know about you all, but I am. I need it, I need this foretaste, and I can't wait to have Jesus come to me again and clean me up and re-pledge my life to Him.

No wonder they call this grace, amazing.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Dieterich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran Pastor during World War II who participated in the resistance movement against Hitler's Nazi Germany, wrote a great deal about cheap and costly grace. The above is taken from some of his writings