

Part 39: Grace: The Kingdom Invitation

Tyler Velin | Matthew 22:1-14

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We've all been invited to a party of some kind. But I also know that even the most party happy people in this room hasn't gone to all the parties they have been invited to.

Some parties we don't go to because, if we are honest, we don't want to go to them. Some parties, we would attend if we lived in a perfect world, but with the amount of tasks we need to get done this weekend we just don't think we can make it.

Then there are other parties, parties which you would love to go to, but we don't have the resources to do it. Who wouldn't want to drop everything in December and attend your destination wedding in the Caribbean?

In our mind we have a highly complex matrix which guides our decisions and weighs our invites to any given event: price, purpose, guest list, accessibility, time, duration, location, and if they put pineapples on their pizza.

As we heard in the passage which was just read for us, today Jesus is going to teach us using a parable, a short story, about weddings, feasts, invitations and guest lists.

This is because in the book of Matthew we see Jesus in dialogue with a group of religious officials who claim to follow the Bible, but at the present are opposing, and even planning to arrest Jesus.

They are assessing Jesus with their own matrix of data, but what Jesus is going to do in this parable is assess their hearts. The beautiful thing about parables though is that we don't have to work hard to find ourselves in this story Jesus shares.

We always encounter an invitation to a party from the mindset and worldview of a guest. But here in this story Jesus gives us the privilege of seeing it from the posture of the host. In our experience we can assess and weigh the gospel of Jesus, but in this story Jesus is helping us understand truths that are beyond our experience. By the end of this passage today we will not only see the invitation that each of us encounter, but also the obligation and options of that invite.

As Jesus uses this illustration of a wedding feast in our text today, our big idea is going to be simple: **The wedding feast is ready. Are you?** There is an invitation, where do you stand?

To help us understand this invitation and our responsibility to it we are going to look at three truths in this text: The delusion of self-righteousness, The reality of free grace, and A fitting response.

So let's together read the first part of this parable as we look at our first point today: **The Delusion of Self-Righteousness.**

Matthew 22:1-7. At a cursory reading we might be confused as to who the delusional party is in this text, is it the King who seems to overreact? Or the guests who turn him down. As we look at this parable we will actually see it is the King who is the most reasonable of the whole bunch.

We spend the whole of our lives looking for that one perfect situation, person, job, whatever which brings us total satisfaction. In fact in 2016 the Oxford Dictionary presented their words of the year, and one of those words was a Danish word pronounced "hygge."

They explained that this word is picking up popularity in America because there is no equivalent to it in the English language. If you've watched football lately you might have seen a home security company commercial which promises to keep the "hygge" in your home.

The dictionary defines hygge as, "A quality of cosiness and comfortable conviviality that engenders a feeling of contentment or well-being." In other words, it's hard to define hygge, but when you have it, you know it. It is comfort, cosiness, relaxation, peace, belonging, and all the words that we decorate our home with during the Christmas season. What shalom might be to the religious community, hygge is to the secular one.

And here we see God as the King has prepared for us a full buffet of hygge. This idea of a wedding feast is something that God has used throughout his scripture to represent the wonderful union between God and man. Where we come together not as unknowns, but as friends and family at the table of God, eating to our delight, laughing safely with not a single care in the world.

The prophet Isaiah describes it this way: **Isaiah 25:6.** We also see this table again in Revelation 19, but at that table we are not invited as guests to the wedding, but the bride herself: the church. But here in Matthew is God's table. A table laid out with all the fixings of total satisfaction.

Now what's interesting, and what I want you to look at in this text is what Jesus says in verse three: "and he sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast."

The King didn't invite anyone, he invited those who he already knew and extended an invite to. There were people who has been given a save the date, they had replied "yes," and now he was sending out his servants to remind them that today is the day. But people said no.

The people who knew the King, who had received the RSVP, heard this reminder and the Greek says they literally did not want to go. It wasn't that they weren't inconvenienced by it, they were unmoved by it. So much so that some men chose to go to work instead of the party, and other men became so enraged that they killed the messengers.

Why would they do this? And what is Jesus trying to teach us here? On a surface level Jesus is speaking to the Jews who are resisting him. In the same way last week we saw tenants kicked out of the vineyard for killing the master's son, here we see men who are already invited scoring the request of a king.

If we look at the two groups of people we can see two delusional reasons for their responses. The first group of people didn't think that the King's feast was any better than what they could do on their own.

Look back at **Matthew 22:4-5.**

What is lost in our English grammar is the tense of many of the words Jesus is using here. There is a tense in Greek which stresses the full completeness of an action, it is called the perfect tense.

We see this show up everywhere in this text. Not only were these guests already perfectly invited [they had everything they needed to know], but the dinner was perfectly prepared, the BBQ was perfectly slaughtered. So much so that there was this wonderful summary sentence: everything is ready. Ready in the fullest, waiting only to be enjoyed. The work was done, the table was set, the food was hot, the host was waiting...but they paid no attention to it.

They went to work. Why? I think it would have to be because they didn't understand the feast which was prepared for them and in their delusion they thought they could labor on their own and find the reward which would satisfy them.

I remember when I was in high school there was a new student who came to our school. He found out that a friend and I were big NFL fans, and he told us that his parents had just purchased NFL Sunday ticket and that we could come and watch it at his house.

Now, as the story goes, which I have no recollection of, we apparently told him that we would come over. But we didn't. We weighed the situation, and apparently we decided that we could do better on our own. The call to go with someone new was too costly, too strange, too good perhaps to be true.

What we did was stay at our respective houses, ate whatever we could scrounge up, and watched whatever meaningless game our local coverage demanded us to watch. All the while he was at his house waiting for us: an HD TV with DVR and the full slate of games including our favorite teams were available to us, his mother had prepared for us a full scale feast with a table next to the TV filled with all the snacks we could eat, and despite our initial rejection, this man would also go on to become one of my closest friends.

When we didn't show up that day, we had no idea what we were rejecting, but I can tell you this, there was no way we had any chance to beat what was offered to us.

Friends the table of God is set for you, and you can't come close on your own. You can try to earn perfection on your own through your own self-righteousness: by trying hard enough or putting in those extra hours just to afford a little more security or expense, but here perfection, peace, companionship, salvation is already offered to us if we would just come on God's terms.

Jesus is speaking to us and to these Pharisees when he says, the invitation has gone out to you, and you can spend and labor all you want, but you will find none better than what I have prepared for you in the gospel. Jesus is better than what we hope to find in our own effort. You can try to find it on your own, or you can choose to see the beauty of what the God of creation is calling you to participate in.

But also do not be deceived into thinking that a rejection of this invitation is a small and insignificant thing. Look again at **Matthew 22:6-7**. Where the first group of men didn't think this king was good enough, the second group of men didn't think this king powerful enough. They thought that they could reject his message and scorn his messengers and fear no punishment.

For the most part all of us have turned down an invitation and none of us have been killed for it. But this invitation, the invitation of a King brings with it an obligation and to refuse it is not to simply say no, but

it is to commit violence against this king. Just as we spoke of last week, to reject this message of God is not only to reject something that is better. It is to reject the only thing which is right. When a king calls on you to come, you have a responsibility to obey.

These Pharisees may reject the invitation of God, and even kill the messengers, but all who reject God's invitation to come to him will not only miss out on what is good, but you will face the punishment of your rejection. You will suffer for the way in which you have wronged this king.

You are not stronger than God, you do not know better than this God, you can find no one greater than this God. So perhaps consider where in your life you might be acting as such. Where do you feel entitled due to your knowledge of God, but in many ways you pay no attention to him? Are you one who has your RSVP hanging on your fridge, but chose instead to keep your own schedule and set your own priorities.

We cannot come to God while keeping our own autonomy and self-righteousness. That's because something better is offered. And this is where Jesus goes next: **Matthew 22:8-10**.

Remember what we saw last week? Look back at **Matthew 21:43**. Last week we saw Jesus taking the kingdom and giving it to those who produced the fruit of faith. This week we see Jesus taking his exclusive invitation, and giving it to those who would respond with obedience.

The Pharisees knew how to look obedient. They were part of the Jewish people, God's holy, chosen pre-invited people. But they didn't listen to the call of the king. They were not worthy of the invitation because they didn't respond to the invitation.

So what is this king going to do instead? Invite anyone. This is our second point today: **The Reality of Free Grace**.

You can imagine how offensive this parable was to the pious and pure priests who were listening. They were the pre-invited. They were the pure, the good. They were the ones who should have first dibs on God's perfect feast. But here they are rejecting it. And here Jesus is calling anyone to it.

At least in my own efforts of evangelism I've noticed that one of the hang-ups for people when it comes to understanding their conversion is the idea that while they might know Jesus died for their sins, they feel like they can't take the next step in faith until they know the Bible better, or understand theology more deeper, or be able to refute culture more adequately.

And if that is you, let this parable relieve you of that burden. What makes you worthy of God's perfect table? What makes you worthy of ultimate and divine hygge? Responding to God's gracious invitation. What did you do to earn a spot at the wedding feast of Jesus Christ? Nothing. You simply responded the call which God gave.

During the Christmas season we all look at where we can be more charitable. In fact it is advantageous to us to look charitable. But what is less advantageous is to be seen as one in need of charity. In fact we have a phrase to express our fear of it: "I don't need your charity."

Especially in Montana, we have this last frontier, self-sufficient reality which pervades even our worship with God: we don't need God's help. We can and need to figure it out on our own. But you need God's

charity. You need him to pity you. You need him to offer to you what you could never get on your own. To not see your need for God's grace is to commit one of the errors above. It is to think that you can do better than God, or that you are more powerful than he is.

But here is the message to you who are Christians: You do not come to God because you are worthy. You respond to his message because he is worthy. Strangers wandering highways are not worthy to sit at the head table of your son's wedding. But when the King calls us to sit in the honorable feast, and we respond, we inherit the worth of his whole rule. We are not innately worthy, but the moment we sit down at that table we become worthy not because of who we were or where we once were, but by nature of where you now are.

This is the free grace of God which we believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are not worthy to be saved from our sin and invited to sit at God's perfect feast because we are white, middle class conservatives. We are not worthy to partake of divine mercy because we are educated and successful business men. We are not worthy to gorge ourselves on God's forever goodness because we were more spiritual or moral than our neighbor.

We are made worthy to sit with God because of his gracious offer to us in his gospel. It is by grace you have been saved. To not believe this grace, to not accept his grace, is to find yourselves outside of God's feast. But to accept it is to join the bad and the good who have been made whole by the blood of Jesus Christ. The grace of God has gone out into the world through the gospel of Jesus Christ, and it will take those who see themselves as good, and those who seem themselves as bad, and it will robe all of them who respond in the transformation of grace.

That's because if you really respond to this grace, it is wonderfully effective to change you. While Jesus' exclusive party was made into a universal offer, people do not universally gain access. Responding to grace requires us to change. This might sound a little confusing, but let us consider our last point today: **Matthew 22:11-14.**

Here we see our last point: **A fitting response.**

This might seem confusing to us still. Here we have Jesus rebuking people for not coming, freely offering an invite to those wandering around with no place to go, but then we see the King throwing out someone who responded to the offer and came to the feast.

Well first, it's important to realize that Jesus is using a parable here. So there are allegorical aspects of Jesus' story which correspond to reality, but the parable is a picture of reality not reality itself.

What I mean is this: Is there anyone who will be granted access to God by grace through faith who will one day be thrown out of the wedding feast. No. Jesus himself says in **John 6:37.**

So the point Jesus is making here is not that one can come with true salvation and lose it. The point he is making here is that we cannot find God through self-righteousness, but neither can we find him with mere entitlement, by showing up and saying, "I've heard you're gracious, here's my invite, where's my seat?"

Here we have the king coming to examine his guests. And he finds one man who doesn't have on any wedding clothes. And when confronted, the man is speechless. Why? Because he has no defense of himself. He knows he doesn't have on the right clothes.

Now remember, all of these people who are now filling the hall were called from the same places. None of them were prepared for a wedding, but all of them seemingly understood the weight of the invitation and prepared themselves by going home, or finding a store, and getting more fitting clothes.

But this guy saw the invitation, thought it would be fun, saw the crowds all moving in their proper attire and thought to himself...I'm fine as I am. And when he was found out, he had no excuse and was therefore cast out into eternal punishment.

The gospel is not: work hard and find salvation. But neither is the gospel: change nothing and find salvation. The gospel is the good news that Jesus did everything required to save sinners and restore us to God.

While the offer of grace has gone out into the world universally, people who respond to grace must come to God on God's terms. In other words accepting God's invitation of grace changes you. It forces you to realize that things are no longer the same. This feast is a beautiful and exclusive feast still. The gospel of Jesus' doesn't lower the value of the wedding feast, but it does change the status of those who come to it.

This is summarized when at the end Jesus says this: **Matthew 22:14.**

There is a free, open, and ever increasing invitation in the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is not reserved for a specific people group or class. And we pray that through the work of missions it goes further and deeper into the lands of the unreached. In fact It's only when we understand free grace that we feel the urge to evangelize. Often times our lack of evangelism is crippled because we subtly believe in a conditional grace: "they won't respond." But this grace doesn't care about conditions and you're living proof of that.

We ought to evangelize. But hearing the offer of salvation universally proclaimed is not the same as universal salvation.

There is a difference between those to whom the invitation is given and those who are chosen to be allowed into the feast. Now we can begin to fret and say: "How do I know if I'm chosen?"

But I can't see a more unreasonable paranoia than that in this text. Isn't it obvious in this story? There is a man at a wedding wearing a sweatsuit. If you really believe you are going to a wedding, wouldn't you change your clothes? Last year a zoo in Egypt got in trouble because one tourist realized that the animals on display in the zebra exhibit were actually donkeys with painted stripes.

To think you can respond to a grace which Jesus died to give you and remain unchanged by that grace means you might be a donkey in a room of zebras. To think that grace means that you can live however you like and still sit at God's table, means that you might be in a sweatsuit. To think that we can receive grace and get access to God's kingdom without worshipping, honoring, or obeying the King who saved you means that you might be the one who is out of place, and it should be obvious to you.

But friends, this is where the parable meets its limit. We are not at the wedding feast right now. We are here. We are about to have a potluck, and it will not be nearly as ultimate or as satisfying as what God has offered you in his son.

How can you know that you are chosen by God to sit at his table? You accept his grace and you begin to manifest fruitful obedience. Look at what Jesus says in **John 14:21**. If we love Jesus we will keep his commands. We will change our clothes. Obedience and changing our clothes are not what qualify us for salvation. The offer of grace has gone out to those who have no clothes! We do not obey and then believe, that's self-righteousness. We believe that the feast God offers is infinitely better, and in light of that belief we begin to adorn our hearts with obedience.

Friends, we are not at the table yet. But the table is prepared. The wedding feast is set. Everything is ready. Are you? Do you see him as better, do you hear his invitation even today, and will you respond with humble obedience and eat your fill?