

Matthew 22:1-14

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[0 : 0 0] I do love a wedding. It's all that happiness and joy. It's refreshing and invigorating, and usually the food is pretty good as well. Well, this evening we've read about a wedding banquet, the parable of the wedding banquet. And I want to spend a little time this evening considering, enjoying, and being challenged by what Jesus has to say by means of this parable.

Now, before we launch into the parable, we need to get to grips with the words of introduction. There at the very beginning of chapter 22 of Matthew's gospel, Jesus spoke to them again in parable saying, the kingdom of heaven is like, and then it continues. But just the very beginning there, what is Jesus saying there? The kingdom of heaven is like, and then He gives the comparison.

Well, Jesus is using a parable to teach us truths about the kingdom of heaven. But what is the kingdom of heaven? There's little merit in discovering what it's like if we don't actually know what it is. This expression, the kingdom of heaven, is one that we find often in Matthew's gospel. Matthew is especially keen on quoting Jesus using this expression. Clearly, it's an expression that Jesus used. But Matthew particularly quotes Jesus' use of this expression extensively. In the other gospels, you have a similar expression that tends to predominate, which is simply the kingdom of God. You find it more commonly.

And, you know, there's extensive literature comparing and contrasting the expressions. But for our purposes, I think it's fair to view them as practically synonymous. The kingdom of heaven, what is it? Well, it's the kingdom of God. But the question remains, what is the kingdom of heaven?

What is the kingdom of God? Rather than think of the kingdom of God or of heaven as a realm, I think it's best to understand it or conceive of it as the rule of God. The expression is dynamic.

[2 : 2 8] It points us to God doing something. It's actively ruling. So, rather than to a realm or a kingdom with identified borders, we're talking about, Jesus is talking about the rule of God.

But we need to kind of develop that a little bit more. We recognize, of course, we recognize that God rules over all and everything. And yet, the kingdom of heaven is not everything. The kingdom of heaven, as the parable will make clear, is composed of those who gladly acknowledge and submit to His rule.

So, God rules over all. He is sovereign over all. But not all acknowledge His rule. And the kingdom of heaven, very particularly, is made up of those who do acknowledge His rule and submit to His rule.

And so, you know, that's a question that we can begin with and reflect on even as we enter into thinking about the parable. Do you submit to the rule of the king? Would you like to know what is involved in submitting to His rule? This morning, as we were thinking about James chapter 4, we were challenged by James to submit ourselves then to God. Well, is that something that you are willing to do?

And what does that look like or involve? Now, we thought a little bit about that this morning, but this parable can also shed light or provide some answers to some of these questions. The kingdom of heaven, submission to the rule of God, is like, and then we have the parable. Now, the parable is actually quite complex in its content, more so than most parables. But I want to draw out three big truths about the kingdom of heaven that the parable highlights or draws out for us. So, let me just state what these three big truths are, and then we can give a little bit more thought to each of them in turn. First of all, the kingdom of heaven, our submission to the king, if we want to think of it in other terms, the kingdom of heaven is a great place to be or a great kingdom to belong to, if you wish. The kingdom of heaven is a great place to be. It is a great kingdom to belong to. We want to just reflect on that just for a moment.

[5 : 00] The second big truth that I think the parable highlights for us is that the kingdom of heaven is open to all. All are invited to be part of this kingdom. And then the third big truth that appears right at the end of the parable is this, that the kingdom of heaven has a dress code.

And we'll think about what we mean by that in a moment. I'm not saying these are the only big truths that we could draw out from the parable, but these are the three that I want to just spend a little bit of time thinking about this evening. So, the first one, the kingdom of heaven is a great place to be or a great kingdom to belong to. I think it's important to just pause and reflect on this truth, because when we turn to this parable, I think the temptation is to rush to the significance of the invitations and how people respond to the invitations. And of course, that is at the heart of the parable. But if we rush too quickly there, we could miss out on this really very encouraging truth that the kingdom of heaven is a great place to be. I love imagining Jesus thinking about how best to describe what submitting to His rule and living out His values is like. He wants to teach His disciples.

He wants them to grasp what it means to be a member of His kingdom, of His family, of what it means to submit to His rule. And he's thinking, well, what's the best way of getting this across in a way that they can understand? And so, he's thinking about these parables. He must have, you know, composed them in his mind. What will secure this truth most vividly and most effectively? And as he thinks about maybe the different comparisons he could have made, the kingdom of heaven is like this or it's like that.

And of course, he does on different occasions. On this occasion, he comes up with this, that the kingdom of heaven is like a wedding banquet, an occasion of fun and feasting. The kingdom of heaven is like a ceilidh. It's a place of joy and celebration. That's what it's like. This morning, when we were looking at James and what he was urging us to do in the context of our sin, to grieve and wail and to mourn. And of course, that is right. There is a place for that. But perhaps thinking about this parable provides a helpful balance to that in seeing the big picture that the kingdom of heaven is a great place to be. It's a great kingdom to belong to. It is being compared by Jesus to a wedding banquet, to a feast, to a celebration. How different to the conception that we often have or the impression we often give of what it's like to be a citizen of God's kingdom. And maybe that's something that we need to reflect on. What is our conception of what it's like to be, to belong to

God's kingdom? What impression do we give to others? The kingdom of heaven is a great place to be. It is a great kingdom to belong to. It's not a fast, but a feast. We're not invited to a wake, but to a wedding.

[8 : 27] Well, using the imagery of the wedding banquet, let me give some reasons why being part of God's kingdom and being subject to his rule is so great. Well, as I say, just drawing from the parable itself, let me just suggest one or two reasons. First of all, it is to be part of God's inner circle of friends and confidants. You see, in the parable, the king invites his friends to a family occasion. It is the wedding of his son. It's not just any royal ceremony or garden party. You know, maybe some folk here have been invited to a garden party, you know, in Edinburgh at Holyrood Palace. I know some folk here have been invited to such an occasion. And of course, that's a great honor to be invited to a garden party.

But this is way more than a garden party. This is the wedding of the king's son. And that speaks volumes of the place of privilege of those who are being invited. What a wonderful thing that God would invite the likes of us to be part of such a family occasion. So that we can identify as one reason why we can come to this conclusion that to be part of the kingdom of heaven, to belong to the kingdom of heaven is a great place to be or a great kingdom to belong to. And again, just drawing more on the parable, it is also to be served by God Himself. You know, listen to the language of the king in the mouths of his servant or his servants. You know, they're going to once again urge those invited to come.

And in verse 4 we read, tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner. I have prepared my dinner. Now, no doubt, servants were involved in helping. But nonetheless, the king speaks of this as something that he has done for his guests. I have prepared my dinner and I'm going to share that dinner with them. Tell them to come. You're invited. You know, God does not invite us to be citizens of His kingdom because of what we can do for Him, but because of what He has done for us.

He doesn't need you to prepare the dinner. He has prepared it for you. And what a striking contrast with the kings and the emperors and the empires and the political powers and world powers of our day and indeed of every age, where the whole purpose of expansion and conquest was to bring peoples to subjection, where the peoples could render tribute and pay taxes to the conquering emperor.

But here God presents Himself as a king who serves His people. He's the one who prepares the dinner. He's the one who invites others to come and enjoy of what He has prepared. The kingdom of heaven is a great place to be, a great kingdom to belong to. It is to be part of God's family circle. It is to be served by God Himself. It is to enjoy a dinner or banquet that meets our every need. The banquet, of course, here in the parable symbolizes the blessings of God's salvation. All the blessings that have been secured for us in and through the work of Jesus, the work of Jesus, the work of Jesus, the work of Jesus, the work of Jesus. It reminds us of the language of Jesus, recorded for us in Matthew chapter 8 and in verse 11, where He speaks,

[12 : 36] In these terms, I say to you that many will come from the east and the west and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. This feast that represents all the gospel blessings that have been secured for us and provided for us in and through what Jesus has done on our behalf. In the words of Bishop Ryle, in the gospel that is complete provision for all the wants of man's soul, there is a supply of everything that can be required to relieve spiritual hunger and thirst.

But I think we can go further in terms of God's generous provision in the gospel or in the kingdom of heaven, if you wish. There is provision for our every need, not only our spiritual needs, our emotional needs, our emotional needs, and our physical needs, and our material needs. Indeed, through eternity, all of these needs generously provided for in the kingdom of heaven.

What do you long for? What do those we live or work or study alongside long for? Love, joy, peace, community, security, belonging. It's all there on the banqueting table of God's grace in Christ.

In the words of the hymn of John Newton, solid joys and lasting treasures none but Zion's children know.

The world offers fleeting joys and passing treasures, but God in his kingdom provides his people with solid joys and lasting treasures. The parable, limited as a parable is, says little of the cost incurred by the king in providing this banquet. It speaks of the animals that have been slaughtered, but there isn't a focus on the cost to the king of providing this banquet. And we all know how expensive weddings can be.

[14 : 47] It just, beyond conception, how much a wedding of this nature would have cost. But we know the price that the Father paid to provide us with a spiritual banquet that is ready for us.

The cost, the cost, the price of the death of his own son. All is ready. It is ready now, and it is ready here. It's worth noting that while enjoyment of kingdom privileges begins in the here and now, the picture of a wedding banquet also anticipates the great feast to come that John speaks of in his vision recorded for us in Revelation chapter 19, the wedding banquet of the Lamb. So, this is the first great truth I just want to stress that we can draw from this parable that the kingdom of heaven is a great place to be or a great kingdom to belong to. And so, what I would urge you is to enjoy it.

Enjoy being part of this kingdom. Treasure belonging to the kingdom of heaven. But don't only enjoy it, not only count it a privilege, but invite others to be part of it. Which leads us into the second big truth that I want us to notice, and that is that the kingdom of heaven is open to all. In the parable, all eventually are invited. And let's just see what it said about what we could call the two waves of invitations that are outlined in the parable. And I think it is legitimate to understand the identity of those invited in each of these two waves as representing two groups of people in each wave.

That may sound a bit of a tongue twister, but hopefully it will become clear as we make our way through it. So, first of all, the first wave of invitations recorded for us or described for us in verses 3 and 4, where you have the king sending his servants really to remind those who clearly had already been invited. It's implicit that they'd already been invited. Presumably, they'd already given some indication or certainly had received the invitation, and now they're being invited.

You know, everything's ready. You can come now. See that banquet you were invited to? It's ready. Please come now. So, that's the first group of people who are invited. Who do they represent?

[17 : 17] Well, I think we could suggest two possibilities that are not mutually exclusive. First of all, I think it's clear that they represent the people of Israel, and especially the religious elites, who, of course, throughout Jesus' ministry were always opposing Him and seeking to make life difficult for Him. So, they represent those who enjoy and have enjoyed great privileges, and yet who are unwilling to become part of this kingdom. They imagine that they are part of it, but their lives show otherwise. They show no real, no genuine interest in God's invitation to His banquet. What is the response of these guests or these folk who are invited? Well, we read in the parable that some are simply indifferent. In verse 5, we read, they paid no attention and went off, one to his field, another to his business. They give greater importance to their material prosperity, their farm, their business. They're busy making money and being successful and prospering. They have no time to go to this banquet. They're indifferent.

Others are actively hostile to those who are sent. We read of the servants being seized, ill-treated, and indeed some of them even killed. And I think it is reasonable to draw from this a reminder of how the prophets had been treated, those who had been sent by God throughout Israel's history, how many of them had been ill-treated and seized and some even killed by the religious people by the nation of Israel. What is the fate of those who are invited and who are indifferent to the invitation? Well, it's a very solemn one. And the language that we have in the parable is the language of judgment. You know, the king is enraged. He sends his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. As people try and draw historical parallels from the parable, some have suggested that there's perhaps here a reference to the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem. Some decades after, Jesus would have told this parable. Now, that is possible. But perhaps we're on safer ground to simply see the language here as echoing language that we find in the Old Testament where God warns

His people of the judgment that awaits them if they, like these guests represented, reject and do not value the privileges that they have and that they enjoy. Let's, to just illustrate that reality or that background, we can maybe just notice what is said by God through the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah chapter 5 and verses 24 and 25. Very solemn language that is directed to God's own people in the face of their unbelief, in the face of their rejecting their privileges as God's people. And what do we read? Therefore, as tongues of fire lick up straw, and as dry grass sinks down in the flames, so their roots will decay and their flowers bow away like dust. For they have rejected the law of the Lord Almighty and spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel. Therefore, the Lord's anger burns against His people.

His hand is raised and He strikes them down. The mountains shake and the dead bodies are like refuse in the streets. And it's a very sobering and dark picture that is painted of God's judgment against those who are because of those who enjoy great privilege. So, these folk invited represent the people of Israel. But I think we can also draw from this, and I don't think this is to impose in the parable in a way that wouldn't be legitimate. I think these folk also represent people in every age, in our age, who enjoy gospel privileges but who are careless with those privileges and refuse to submit to the king. They won't attend the banquet. They are guilty of a similar response to that described in the parable. They're indifferent, some perhaps even hostile, and they are subject to a similar solemn fate. And so, the word here would be one of solemn warning.

And we are all, all of us here, certainly in comparison to most in this city, enjoy great gospel privileges. Let's be very careful that we don't prove indifferent to our privileges and fail to respond to the invitation to trust in Jesus and to follow Him and be His disciple.

[22 : 21] But then you have in the parable a second wave of people who are invited, and we know the story in the light of the first group refusing to come. The king says to his servants, well, just go out and invite anyone. And that's literally what he says, invite anyone, basically anyone who is willing to come. And who are represented by these guests who are being invited? Well, if we think of the history of redemption, then I think these guests do represent the Gentiles. They represent us.

When Israel rejected the Messiah, well, that served as the opportunity for the invitation to be extended to all nations. All were always welcome, but an explicit invitation is one that became so much more prominent historically in the light of the rejection by Israel of the Messiah and that opening the door to the nations of the world. And that's something that a theme and a truth that we're familiar with.

So these guests represent the Gentiles. But I think also kind of paddling what we just said a moment ago about the first wave, I think these guests also represent people in every age who know little or nothing of the gospel, who appear the most unlikely to be invited to be part of the kingdom of heaven.

A very different and unexpected people of God. To such the servants are now sent to invite them in. The king opens up the invitation to anyone, to everyone, and to anyone. The only condition is a willingness to turn up. Also, I think implicit in the parable is the implication that these guests are more likely to accept the invitation. It's an astonishing thing that the original guests didn't accept. It was such a wonderful invitation. Why would you not accept? So it's really preposterous their refusal to attend. But it does seem implicit that the ones who are now being invited are even more likely to accept. It's such an astonishing thing that they would be invited at all to such an occasion. And sure enough, that is what they do. They're delighted with the invitation. And in their droves, they respond and accept. And we're told the wedding hall is full of guests. The king's purposes are not ultimately frustrated by the folly and the foolishness of those who refuse. The wedding hall is full of guests. Where do you stand in all of this? Who do you identify with in these guests and in the responses that there are to the invitation? Are you one who has known and continues to know great gospel privilege, perhaps brought up in the church and knowledgeable of the Scriptures, who has heard the gospel preached and explained on numerous occasions, and yet you remain reticent, you remain reluctant to throw in your lot with God's people, to embrace Jesus as your Savior? Be very careful, because the fate of such is very vividly and solemnly described in this parable.

But let me just finish by noting one-third what I'm calling big truth that we can draw out from the parable, and that is that the kingdom of heaven has a dress code. Now, the parable could easily end at verse 10, where you would have had described what people are being invited to, the banquet, and all that suggests to us about the kingdom of heaven. Those who were invited and refused, and their solemn fate, and then those who are invited and accept. And that would provide us with a very helpful parable, and it could end there. But it doesn't end there. There's this final twist, if you wish, in the parable that we discover from verse 11. When the king came in to see the guests, so these are those who had been invited from the highways and byways, from the most unlikely places, the most unlikely guests.

[26 : 47] They've arrived in their droves, and the king comes to see those who have appeared. And what were we told? That the king noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. Friend, he asks, how did you get in here without wedding clothes? And the man was speechless. What does this tell us, or what can we draw from this final twist in the parable? Well, the manner in which I'm describing it is that the kingdom of heaven has a dress code. This is a man who was invited during the second wave, who had turned up. But there's a problem. He's not wearing wedding clothes. And clearly the king is not happy about this.

Indeed, his ultimate fate is as solemn as that of those who had refused to come at all. So, how are we to understand this guest who's not wearing the wedding garment? It's been differently or variously understood by those who have come to some kind of conclusion. Some, maybe most famously Augustine, have identified the wedding clothes, the wedding garment that this man wasn't wearing as representing Christ's imputed righteousness. Indeed, the suggestion is sometimes made that the guests would have been provided with a garment, and this man refused to wear it. So, when they arrived at the palace, garments would have been provided for them. And most of them, or just about everybody, said, great, I'll wear that. But this man didn't.

He said, oh, I'm not going to wear this garment. That's sometimes suggested. Now, let me be clear. It is, of course, true that as believers, we are wonderfully clothed in Christ's righteousness. That is a glorious truth.

The question is, is that what the parable is suggesting? I would suggest that that, or my conclusion, tentative conclusion, is that isn't what Jesus has principally in mind when he speaks of this man who is not wearing the wedding garment. I think the wedding garment here is really simply the requirement that the guests come appropriately dressed, maybe even simply in clean clothes. It's not about the expense that the guests have gone to to dress up for the occasion, but simply that their clothing be appropriate to the occasion. A suitable wedding garment.

And I think that suitable, appropriate wedding garment represents a lifestyle that is appropriate for those who are citizens of God's kingdom. We can't just turn up as we see fit. We need to submit to the king. We need to obey his commands. Indeed, we could maybe see an echo here of what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, in chapter 5 of Matthew's Gospel, and in verse 20, where he expresses himself in this way, challenging his disciples, challenging those who would be part of his kingdom. And what does he say there? For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. We know we're a little bit uncomfortable with this. What does that mean? Does that mean that our good works somehow get us into the kingdom of heaven? No, of course it doesn't mean that.

[30 : 10] What it means is that if we are to be members of that kingdom, we are to live lives that are consistent with that citizenship. Lives worthy of our calling, of who we are. This is not a requirement for getting in, but it is evidence that we are genuine in our commitment and loyalty to the king.

We wear the wedding garment. We live a life imperfectly, but we seek to live a life that is consistent with our profession of being members of God's kingdom. We could maybe see that same truth being expressed by Paul when he urges the Christians in Philippi in the first chapter of his letter to the Philippians in chapter 1 and in verse 27. Listen to what Paul says to the believers who are receiving this letter.

He says, whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. You are Christians. You belong to Christ by grace and grace alone.

Well, now that you belong, now that you're part of his kingdom, conduct yourself in a manner worthy of that. Or to use the picture of the parable, wear the wedding garment. Wear clean clothes. Be suitably dressed, given who you are.

Don't be careless about how you live. Don't take your privileges lightly or take them for granted and think that you can live as you please and do as you please.

[31 : 51] No, wear suitable, appropriate, clean clothes. I think this is what Jesus is getting at in this final twist in the parable.

The kingdom of heaven is a dress code. Conduct yourself in a manner worthy of Christ. You're a king. What is the fate of this guest devoid of the wedding garment?

Well, it's the same fate that awaits those who rejected the invitation. And the language here very solemnly and explicitly is the language of judgment.

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. And Jesus closes the parable with his final concluding statement, for many are invited but few are chosen.

The parable is not principally about election or the doctrine of election, but the conclusion does affirm this truth. But there's no sense, and here we do need to be careful, there's no sense that the elect are few in number.

[33 : 01] Simply, the truth is that not all those who are invited accept the invitation. There's that contrast. Everybody's invited but not all accept. In that sense, they are few. Not in some absolute sense.

We believe that those who are members of the kingdom are a multitude that no man can number. So let's just pull the threads together and draw things to a close. Your call to submit to the king.

Is this a burdensome duty? No. The kingdom of heaven is a great place to be. It's a great kingdom to belong to. All are invited. You are invited.

Everyone and anyone is invited. The key matter is to accept the invitation. To turn up. But to turn up and to participate in a manner that is worthy of one invited to such an occasion.

As a guest of the king. As a citizen of God's kingdom. To conduct yourself in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Your king. Well may God help us so to conduct ourselves.

[34 : 10] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for the kingdom of heaven. We thank you for the great and wonderful privilege to belong to the kingdom of heaven.

To be subjects of a king Jesus. We thank you for the wonderful gospel privileges that come with belonging to your kingdom.

And we pray that our conception of our privileges would indeed reflect the language that Jesus employs here.

Of what a tremendous and wonderful thing it is to be invited by you. And to be brought in to your family and to your circle of close friends and associates.

Heavenly Father, we do thank you that this invitation is extended to all. We thank you that we have been objects of this invitation. And that you have enabled many of us to respond to that invitation.

[35 : 13] Indeed, we pray that all of us would be able to declare that we have accepted the invitation. And we have thrown in our lot with yourself.

Trusting in your son, Jesus. We pray that we would know what it is to having received so much. Having and enjoying such privileges.

To go out and invite others. To invite the unlikely. To invite the marginalized. To invite those who have had little opportunity to know or to hear this good news.

And as we do, that we would know the joy and the satisfaction of many responding to that invitation. And we pray also, finally, that you would help us to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, our King.

And we pray in his name. Amen. Amen. We're going to send you to the scholar. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[36 : 18] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.