

## Chapter 90: Many Called; Few Chosen

*Matthew 22:1–14*

In the previous parable of the tenants, Jesus described a relationship between the landowner and the tenants that seemed antagonistic. To be sure, the landowner had done nothing wrong by seeking his share of the fruit as the landowner and as the one who invested in the property to prepare it for productive use, so that the fault of the antagonism was entirely on the side of the tenants. Nevertheless, the landowner sent his servants to take something from those tenants. In this next parable, a king takes the role of the landowner from the previous parable, but this king does not seek to take anything, but only to give something lavish: a great wedding feast. In this parable, the wickedness of unbelief is exposed as opposition for the sake of opposition, based on nothing more than the most spiteful kind of pride. Nevertheless, we see here the lavish generosity of God displayed as his invitation remains for us until this day: *Come to the wedding feast!*

### A Great Calling (Matt. 22:1–7)

In v. 1, the ESV leaves untranslated the Greek word for “answering”: “And *answering*, Jesus again spoke in parables to them, saying...” (my translation). Although the word for “answer” commonly appears in the Book of Matthew as a part of introducing speech, here it seems to connect this parable with the preceding dialogue in which Jesus has been engaged with the chief priests and elders since Matthew 21:23.<sup>1</sup> As Jesus continues to answer the “chief priests and...Pharisees” (Matt. 21:45: ), he has shifted from a defensive responses (Matt. 21:23–27) to criticize the failures of the the religious leaders in their lack of faith. He continues his critique in this parable; however, he also widens the scope of his critique to encompass a broader group of people.

From the outset, Jesus is clear that he is telling a parable to illustrate some aspect about the kingdom of heaven: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to...” (v. 2). In the parable, the “king” clearly represents God, and “his son” is an obvious reference to Jesus himself. While some parallels are illustrative only, Revelation 19:9 informs us that we are indeed awaiting the wedding feast of the Lamb. As in the previous parallel, the authority figure sends his servants—this time, not to collect rent, but to invite them to a wedding feast (v. 3). The word for “invite” is a form of the verb “to call,” so that the king has (more literally) “sent his servants to call the called ones.” Theologians distinguish between a general call that goes out by the preaching of the gospel to all who hear it, and the effectual call by which the Holy Spirit brings people to saving faith.<sup>2</sup> This distinction will

---

<sup>1</sup> Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 885. See Carson, though, who acknowledges this as a possibility, but ultimately determines that this “is probably merely formulaic.” (Carson, “Matthew,” 514.)

<sup>2</sup> “All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, he is pleased, in his appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by his Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by

become important at the conclusion of this section (v. 14). The phrase translated “they would not come” by the ESV might also be translated, “they did not *want* to come,” where *want* uses the same verb that the first son had used in his initial refusal to serve his father: “I *will* not [i.e., ‘I refuse’]” (Matt. 21:29).

Undeterred, the king again sends his servants to invite (lit., “call”) them again, in words that are identical to the previous parable in Matthew 21:36: “Again he sent other servants.”<sup>3</sup> This time, the king emphasizes the richness and sumptuousness of the feast: “See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast” (v. 4). There is an echo here in this call to Old Testament passages that anticipate the messianic banquet, such as Isaiah 25:6 (“On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of wine well refined”) or of Lady Wisdom’s feast in Proverbs 9:2: “She has slaughtered her beasts; she has mixed her wine; she has also set her table.”<sup>4</sup> This was no rubber chicken dinner!

The lavishness of this feast, then, makes the ambivalence of the people jarring:<sup>5</sup> “But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business” (v. 5). In other words, they were distracted by attending to their worldly business. As Lenski writes, “This class is found among the Jews as well as among men of all ages. They prefer the earthly to the heavenly, the transient to the eternal. They always treat the divine call with indifference; they always ‘go away.’”<sup>6</sup> Even worse is the responses of the others who had been invited: “the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them” (v. 6). As Morris understatedly observes, “In no society is it considered good manners to lay hands on people who come bearing a warm invitation, even if one does not intend to accept it.”<sup>7</sup> Although the responses of the tenants to the landowner’s servants were wicked, they were at least understandable, since the tenants believed that they had something to gain by refusing to pay their rent for the land. In this case, the honored guests treat their gracious host—the king!—with contempt by the shameful way that they treat his servants.

Unsurprisingly, the king responds similarly to the way that the landowner had responded to the wicked tenants (Matt. 21:41): “The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city” (v. 7). This time, the king can take his wrath even a step further, both because of the completely unprovoked nature of the attack from the invitees, and because the landowner would not have wanted to burn down the vineyard in which he had invested so many resources. Many commentators hear an ominous foreshadowing of Jerusalem’s destruction in 70 AD.

---

nature, to grace and salvation, by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and, by his almighty power, determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace.” (WCF 10.1)

<sup>3</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 629.

<sup>4</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, 799.

<sup>5</sup> “We should not miss the point that Jesus regards the actions of the high-priestly party as completely unnatural.” (Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 548.)

<sup>6</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 851.

<sup>7</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 549.

## A Great Commission (Matt. 22:8–10)

Even so, the king remains undeterred that his son’s wedding feast must proceed, even if not with those who had originally been invited: “Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy’ (v. 8). Blomberg calls important attention to the phrase “not worthy” in this context:

Interestingly, Jesus declares that the originally invited guests are *unworthy* (“did not deserve”), tying in with Matthew’s favorite theme of worthiness (cf. 3:8; 10:10–11,13,37–38). One might imagine that the second group of invited guests is equally if not even more unworthy. But the worthiness or unworthiness in view here has to do with one’s response to the proclamation of the gospel. These last approached do respond properly, and the kingdom now issues forth in a plentiful community.<sup>8</sup>

Those who had received the first invitation may have been initially favored, but they demonstrated themselves unworthy of that favor by rejecting the call of the king.

The king continues, giving surprising orders: “Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find” (v. 9). The resonance of “Go therefore” with the words of the Great Commission from Matthew 28:19 are deliberate in the Greek: “πορεύεσθε/πορευθέντες οὖν [*poreuesthe/poreuthentes oun*]...” Additionally, the next verse tells us that “those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad [i.e., evil/wicked] and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests.” (v. 10). We have here, then, a vivid picture of the universal proclamation of the gospel to “all nations,” reaching both “the bad and the good.” Of course, no one is good in an absolute sense; however, in this context, Lenski is right that the *good* “are such as had not practiced open sin such as the publicans and harlots were guilty of. Take the malefactor as a sample of ‘the wicked,’ and Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea as samples of ‘the good.’ Before God all men are equally guilty, and the gospel call finds them in this condition.”<sup>9</sup>

## A Great Complacency (Matt. 22:11–14)

We might have expected a “happily ever after” at the end of v. 10. Jesus, however, has another wrinkle to this story: “But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment” (v. 11). There is significant debate about the wedding garment and about the reason that the king is surprised to find a man without the wedding garment. Several scholars argue that the parable suggests that the king had provided the wedding garment as a part of the invitation. Hendriksen lays out the arguments for this position well:

Do not verses 8–10 create the distinct impression that these guests had been rushed from streets and street corners to the wedding hall, where the food was standing *ready*? Is not the

---

<sup>8</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 328.

<sup>9</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 854.

“solution” proposed by some interpreters, namely, that before coming to the wedding all except one of the newly invited individuals had first gone home to change clothes, a kind of subterfuge? It must be born in mind that most of these people were probably drawn from the underprivileged ranks. Cf. Luke 14:21–23. It is a question whether they even owned what today would be called “Sunday clothes,” or that they had the money to buy them. Besides, even if they did, there had been no time either to make or to purchase such costly robes.

There is only one solution, as far as I can see, that will help us out of this difficulty. It is an old one. Until someone offers something better it must stand. It is that, by the command of the king and from his bountiful supplies, at the very entrance of the wedding hall a wedding robe had been offered to each guest. All except this one person had accepted the robe. This one man, however, had looked at his own robe, had perhaps lightly brushed it off with his hand, and had then told the attendant, “My own robe is good enough. I don’t need the one you’re offering me.” Then, in an attitude of self-satisfaction and defiance, he had marched to the table, where he was presently reclining; or from which, when the king entered, he, along with the other guests, had just now arisen.<sup>10</sup>

Even in the modern world, there are restaurants with dress codes, such as those that require men to wear a jacket to dinner. In many cases, those restaurant keep a few extra jackets on hand that they provide to those who come unprepared for the meal; however, if someone were to refuse those loaner jackets and march straight into the restaurant to demand service, that individual might be kicked out. Still, this solution is far from certain. Carson argues against this view, writing that, “Whether one is good or bad, there is an appropriate attire for this wedding feast. Evidence that the host in first-century Palestine weddings furnished appropriate attire is inadequate and probably irrelevant to what Matthew is saying.”<sup>11</sup>

The motivation behind this solution arises from the symbolism for the wedding garments. Jesus continues, narrating that the king asks the man how he had come into the wedding without a wedding garment, at which point the man is left speechless (v. 12). With no good excuse, the king orders his attendants to “Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (v. 13). Thus, the wedding garment seems to symbolize the righteousness required to stand in the presence of God in the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, the idea that the king had given garments to the guests corresponds to the theological idea that Christ alone gives the righteousness that we need to stand in God’s presence. Indeed, as many commentators acknowledge, the Scriptures tell us that we must “put on Christ” like clothing (Gal. 3:27).

Still, it does not seem (to me, at least) that the doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness is in view in this parable. Calvin’s interpretation is simpler, and, therefore, better fitting with the general contours of the passage: “It is not, therefore, the declaration of Christ, that the sentence of casting them into outer darkness will be executed on wretched men who did not bring a costly garment taken from their own wardrobe, but on those who shall be found in their pollution, when

---

<sup>10</sup> William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1973), 797.

<sup>11</sup> Carson, “Matthew,” 515.

God shall come to make a scrutiny of his guests.”<sup>12</sup> This does not exclude the fact that the only way by which we can be cleansed of our pollution is through faith in Christ. Instead, it only ventures so far as to acknowledge that we cannot remain as we were if we hope to inherit heaven on the last day.

Jesus concludes, then, with a profound and pithy summary: “For many are called, but few are chosen” (v. 14). The words *called* (κλητοί; *klētoi*) and *chosen* (ἐκλεκτοί; *eklektōi*) sound similar in order to draw a distinction between two categories that are often conflated.<sup>13</sup> Israel had been *called* by God’s lavish grace; however, by failing to respond, they forfeited that calling by failing to respond to Jesus in faith.<sup>14</sup> Importantly, Calvin distinguishes between the “election” that Jesus speaks of here from the doctrine of eternal election, by which God decrees unchangeably that certain people will indeed come to faith, and by which God decrees to uphold the faith of those people so that they persevere to the end: “I enter no farther, at present, into the question about the eternal election of God; for the words of Christ mean nothing more than this, that the external profession of faith is not a sufficient proof that God will acknowledge as his people all who appear to have accepted of his invitation.”<sup>15</sup> This passage does not teach that anyone who truly possesses salvation can lose that salvation, but only that some who profess to be saved are, in fact, hypocrites and liars who do not truly trust in Christ for salvation.

## Discussion Questions

1. To whom does Jesus direct this parable (Matt. 21:23, 45)? What is the nature of the invitations that these servants in the parable extend (v. 3)? What kind of feast is offered (v. 4)? How should we understand those who turn away from the invitation indifferently (v. 5)? How should we understand the violent opposition of others against these invitations (v. 6)? Was the king justified in his response (v. 7)? Why or why not?
2. What does the king do once the first group of invitees refuse his invitation (v. 8–9)? What does the king mean when he says that that first group was “unworthy” (v. 8)? How does v. 9 anticipate the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20)? What does it mean that the servants brought into the feast “both bad and good people” (v. 10a)? Why does the king want his wedding hall to be “filled with guests” (v. 10b)? What does this tell us about God?
3. What do you think that the wedding garment symbolizes (v. 11)? Why was the king surprised to find a man without a wedding garment? What do you think that the speechlessness of the man suggests (v. 12)? Was the king justified in his response (v. 13)? Why or why not? What does Jesus mean by v. 14? What kind of calling is in view here? What does God want and expect from his people?

---

<sup>12</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. William Pringle (1848; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 2:174.

<sup>13</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, 804.

<sup>14</sup> See also Hagner: “Tragically, the people who had long been known by the adjective ‘chosen’ lose their privilege through their unresponsiveness to the invitation. Their chosenness was in the final analysis a calling—a calling to which they were not true.” (Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 632.)

<sup>15</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:175.

4. Have you lost sight of the lavish goodness of God toward you in the gospel? What tempts you to look at God with an eye that sees only demands, and not grace? How does this parable reframe the extraordinary nature of God's mercy toward guilty, undeserving sinners? How does this parable prick your heart away from complacency toward the gospel? How does this parable help to evaluate the condition of your soul in the light of eternity?