

**Matthew 22:1–14**

<sup>1</sup> Jesus again in reply spoke to them in parables, saying, <sup>2</sup> “The kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. <sup>3</sup> He dispatched his servants to summon the invited guests to the feast, but they refused to come. <sup>4</sup> A second time he sent other servants, saying, ‘Tell those invited: “Behold, I have prepared my banquet, my calves and fattened cattle are killed, and everything is ready; come to the feast.”’ <sup>5</sup> Some ignored the invitation and went away, one to his farm, another to his business. <sup>6</sup> The rest laid hold of his servants, mistreated them, and killed them. <sup>7</sup> The king was enraged and sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. <sup>8</sup> Then he said to his servants, ‘The feast is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy to come. <sup>9</sup> Go out, therefore, into the main roads and invite to the feast whomever you find.’ <sup>10</sup> The servants went out into the streets and gathered all they found, bad and good alike, and the hall was filled with guests. <sup>11</sup> But when the king came in to meet the guests he saw a man there not dressed in a wedding garment. <sup>12</sup> He said to him, ‘My friend, how is it that you came in here without a wedding garment?’ But he was reduced to silence. <sup>13</sup> Then the king said to his attendants, ‘Bind his hands and feet, and cast him into the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.’ <sup>14</sup> Many are invited, but few are chosen.”

**Context**

Our text is the third of three parables: (the two sons 21:28-32; the tenants in the vineyard 21:33-46; and the wedding banquet 22:1-14). All three have images of father and son(s). The first two also have the image of a vineyard. The last two have the sending of servants, the murder of servants, and the punishment of the murderers. In each case, there is a distinction between those who do the will of the father/landlord/king and those who don't. To put it all in context, Eugene Boring has offered an outline of this series of parables which marks the conflict between Jesus and the leaders of Jerusalem:

A Jesus' response: a question (21:24-27)

B Three parables

The Two Sons (21:28-32)

The Lord's Vineyard (21:33-46)

The Great Supper (22:1-14)

B' Three controversy stories

Taxes to the Emperor (22:15-22)

The Resurrection (22:23-33)

The Great Commandment (22:34-40)

A' Jesus' question (22:41-46)

Scott (*Hear Then the Parable*) talks about all three parables starting with the first one:

The parable is the first of three that challenge the legitimacy of the Jewish leadership. They all expose Matthew's ideology of the true Israel demonstrating the claims of the Pharisees to be false and those of the church true. The parables of the two sons, the wicked tenants, and the king who gave a marriage feast exhibit a progression from John the Baptist to the rejection of Jesus and punishment of those who rejected him through the final judgment, when those without a wedding garment will be cast out. [p. 81]

The parable of the “Great Supper” (described as a wedding feast in Matthew) appears in canonical gospels – as well as non-canonical texts such as the “Gospel of Thomas,” the latter of which is the simplest rendering of the parable. The “Gospel of Thomas” is not a unified narrative as much as it is a collection of saying and parables of Jesus that seems to have been assembled in Egypt among the Copts [not discovered until the 20<sup>th</sup> century]. Greek fragments of the text were unearthed at

Oxyrhynchus, Egypt, ca. 1900 C.E. and the complete gospel written in Coptic was discovered at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945.

In Thomas' version, the parable is comprised of a series of refusals to a dinner. Each of the guests who declined did so for reasons of business or commerce. Consequently the host sent servants into the streets to bring back whomever they could find. The closing line of the parable proclaims: "Buyers and merchants will not enter the places of my Father" (Thomas 64:12).

Luke's version of the parable (Luke 14:16-24), also preserves the reversal motif and bears evidence of the evangelist's conviction, that the poor, outcasts, those otherwise marginalized from society will find a welcome in the kingdom. However, when Matthew's rendering of this parable is compared to these other sources, there are, several obvious differences. The main portion (vv. 1-10) of the parable is offered as an allegorical presentation of salvation history. The host has become a king (God) who was preparing a wedding banquet (symbol of kingdom) for his son (Jesus). The two groups of servants were probably representative of the Hebrew prophets and the Christian apostles, whereas the invited guests who repeatedly refused the king's invitation and brutalized the servants were intended to portray Israel. People from the byroads represented the gentiles to whom the gospel was also to be extended.

The contribution of the Matthean church can also be detected in the incident regarding the guest who was ejected from the feast (vv. 11-13). Aware that God's invitation to salvation was extended to all of humankind, good and bad alike, the early Christians were also aware that not everyone who received an invitation would remain as a guest. The improperly dressed guest represented those who had not cooperated with or appropriated the invitations that God had offered. As a result of his/her unresponsiveness, the improperly dressed guest forfeited a place at the banquet. It was then a reminder to the Matthean church that the divine invitations to love are a daily invitation. Thus one must possess a willingness to be daily transformed by God's grace and according to God's will. To do otherwise is to refuse the invite to the "wedding feast" or to appear improperly attired. Either open the road to an eternity of insatiable hunger and unquenchable thirst.

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## Commentary

***In the Various Traditions.*** Among the various sources of Christian tradition, this parable of the wedding banquet has been preserved in three distinct versions. The simplest, and some say most authentic, rendering of the parable can be found in the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas. In Thomas' version, the parable is comprised of a series of refusals to a dinner. Each of the guests who begged off did so for reasons of business or commerce. Consequently the host sent servants into the streets to bring back whomever they could find. The tag line of the parable proclaims: "Buyers and merchants will not enter the places of my Father" (Thomas 64:12). Luke's version of the parable (Luke 14:16-24), also preserves the reversal motif and bears evidence of the evangelist's conviction, that the poor, outcasts, those otherwise marginalized from society will find a welcome in the kingdom.

***Matthean Differences.*** However, when Matthew's rendering of this parable is compared to these other sources, there are, several obvious differences. The main portion (vv. 1-10) of the parable is offered as an allegorical presentation of salvation history. The host has become a king (God) who was preparing a wedding banquet (symbol of kingdom) for his son (Jesus). The two groups of servants were probably representative of the Hebrew prophets and the Christian apostles, whereas the invited guests who repeatedly refused the king's invitation and brutalized the servants were intended to portray Israel. People from the byroads represented the gentiles to whom the gospel was also to be extended.

In verse seven, the parable takes a strange twist; the city of the guests is destroyed. Starting a war while the meal is prepared and on the table strains even the wide range of flexibility allowed to parables. Add to that the mention of the burning of the murderers' city – especially in the light of the

Lucan tradition of the story and we begin to suspect something added from Matthew's community – or something Luke thought to omit. Most scholars believe that the Matthean community and evangelist were referencing the destruction of Jerusalem which occurred in 70 C.E. at the hands of Titus and the Roman army. Matthew projected this event back into this parable of Jesus. By so doing he was simply updating the history of salvation as it had unfolded by the time his gospel reached its final form in the mid-80s C.E.

**Matthew's Trajectory.** Matthew makes this story the climax of the progression of this three-parable set: The first of the triad, the parable of the two sons (21:28–32), focuses on the (more than a) prophet John; the second, the parable of the lord's vineyard given to others (21:33–46), pictures the whole prophetic line climaxing in Jesus, the Son who is killed. This third parable is understood from Matthew's own post-Easter perspective, facing the *parousia* and final judgment. This final parable thus follows the perspective in picturing the history of salvation from the original calling of Israel to the last judgment, and places Jesus and the church in the succession of Israel's prophets, persecuted and rejected by Israel.

The parable has the same addressees as the preceding one except that now he specifically includes the Pharisees. Matthew's insertion of "again" (*palin*, or "once more") connects the parable to the preceding one as well, as do all the points we noted above. This means that the Matthean meaning cannot be derived from the parable alone, but only from the narrative structure of which it is now an integral part.

**The Invitation.** Rabbinic and Hellenistic sources indicate that a two-stage invitation was quiet normal – an ancient "Save the Date" coupled to the actual invitation itself. But in the 1<sup>st</sup> century modality, the invitation sent well in advance of the banquet. The invitation was acknowledged and accepted by those invited, who then received a courtesy reminder on the day of the banquet itself.

The problems begin "on the day" when those who had committed themselves to attend the banquet simply declare their unwillingness/refusal to come (*ouk ēthelon elthein*). What are we to make of this reaction? There are two avenues often pursued: one personal, one political (of a sorts). One could take the approach that the invitation to come was a threat to the invitees' own pursuits. They want to do what they want to do when they want to do it. One goes to his field and another to his business. These aren't excuses (as in Luke 14:18-20), but personal concerns that they think are more important than the king's invitation to this most important celebration for his son.

On a political scale, refusal of a king's invitation, especially by so many and so suddenly suggests something is afoot. There are two likely things: a general snubbing and disrespect toward the king, or perhaps more sinisterly, a conspiracy and that would be tantamount to rebellion (2 Sam 10:4). But then the king is a patient and accommodating person (again, cf. the preceding parable).

Either way, the unwillingness/refusal to come share the festive occasion with the King is to send the signal that loyalty and commitment are waning. In religious terms, people are wandering from the Covenant. Yet, the king does not strike out or retaliate, but sends a second group of slaves. This element of the story is peculiar to Matthew. Not only do those invited continue to refuse, but some go so far as to abuse and kill the messengers as well. If "a second time" (v.4) is considered the day of the feast – and there is good reason to do so since "everything is ready" – then it may be that Matthew is not talking about early and later prophets, but the Christian evangelists of Matthew's own time. Certainly, many of the late-1<sup>st</sup> century evangelists were ignored; some were martyred.

**The King Responds.** Patience goes so far. Upon hearing that the servants have been, in some cases, murdered, the king responds. While the feast continues to wait, the king wages war (v.7). Those who had dishonored and rebelled against him were put to the sword while their cities burned. The vocabulary reflects Matthew's theology: "destroyed" (*apollymi*) is the same verb used in 21:41;

“murderers” reflects the same view as 23:31, 35. Matthew is thinking in terms of his view of salvation history, not of an actual king who waged war while dinner waited. Most scholars see this as Matthew’s retrospective view of the destruction of Jerusalem, understood as a judgment on rebellious Israel, who had rejected the Messiah. The rebellious first group has been judged as unworthy (v.8), but the feast is still a celebration awaiting guests.

**The Main Road.** “Go out, therefore....” and so a third group of servants is sent onto the “*main road*” (*diexodos hodos*) – a reasonable translation, but then again, something is lost. The term *diexodos* describes the road that leaves the city crossing over into the countryside. In the allegorical setting, this would mean to leave Jerusalem and the center of Judaism, going out to the land of the Gentiles as well as Jews considering not worthy of the Covenant. The language used here shares vocabulary with the Great Commission of 28:12-20. The invitation is no longer restricted to those who had accepted the previous invitation, but is extended to all. Those who are “gathered in” are both bad and good, corresponding to Matthew’s realistic picture of the church known to him (see 13:24–30 and 13:47–50).

**The Community Gathered.** This parable further clarifies not only the failure of the leaders and its consequence, but also the nature of the new “nation.” They are symbolized now by an indiscriminate collection of people from the streets, people of no special standing, just as in 21:31 it is the lowest social groups who will get first into the kingdom of God. This feature of the story speaks of the universal proclamation of the good news of the kingdom of heaven.

The concept of a mixed community, within which not all will make it through to ultimate salvation, has been a recurrent feature of this gospel. Consider Matthew 7:13–27, especially the “impostors” of 7:21–23 who apparently thought they were all right, and later in Matthew’s gospel (25:1–13) where both wise and foolish bridesmaids are invited but only the wise get into the feast. Remember also Mt 13:36–43, where weeds and wheat are allowed to grow together and are separated only at the final judgment; also 13:47–50, in which good and worthless fish are gathered in the same net.

**What to Wear.** Scholars are of mixed opinion about the urgency of the “*feast is ready*” in v.8 as it applied to those invited when the servants scour the main road. One line of thought offers that these royal wedding feasts were several days in the making and even more in the execution. Not all guests came at the beginning nor stayed until the end. There was a great deal of coming-and-going during it all. There is no reason to suppose that, once invited, these people have no time to go home, to change their clothes, and to borrow clothes from their neighbors, if necessary.

For any such occasion guests would be expected to wear clothes that were both longer than those worn by ordinary people on working days and also newly washed. Those who could afford it would wear white, but it was sufficient for ordinary people to wear as near to white as washing their poorer quality clothes could achieve. Poor people, who might own only one patched tunic and cloak each, would often borrow clothes for occasions such as weddings or religious festivals.

How could those unexpectedly herded into the wedding hall from the main roads wear the expected clothing, which all but one of them seem to do? Again, realism is sacrificed to meaning. However, the issue has troubled some readers, and is normally addressed by the traditional speculation (deriving from Augustine) that the host was himself responsible for providing a wedding robe, so that this man’s fault was in his refusal to accept what was freely offered. While it is a nice thought, it lacks any convincing evidence in terms of contemporary wedding customs (see the Note on 22:11). The clothing expected at a wedding was not a special garment but simply decent, clean white clothes such as anyone should have had available. In that case the man’s fault is that, even though invited to a royal wedding, he had not gone home to change into his best; to turn up in ordinary, dirty clothes was an insult to the host. The symbolism is of someone who presumes on the free offer of salvation by assuming that therefore there are no obligations attached.

In early Christianity, the new identity of conversion was often pictured as donning a new set of clothes; the language of changing clothes was utilized to express the giving up of the old way of life and putting on the new Christian identity (see Rom 13:12–14; Gal 3:27; Eph 6:11; Col 3:12; cf. Luke 15:22; Rev 3:4; 6:11; 19:8). At the allegorical level, the man was expected to have the faith and deeds of an authentic Christian life, corresponding to the “fruits” in the imagery of the preceding parable. When confronted with his lack, the man has no response, for he is without excuse.

**The Elect of God.** *Then the king said to his attendants, ‘Bind his hands and feet, and cast him into the darkness outside, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth.’*<sup>14</sup> *Many are invited, but few are chosen.*” The judgment seems harsh, but Matthew is thinking not of an actual wedding party, but of the last judgment. The language “weeping and gnashing of teeth” corresponds to 8:12; 13:42, 50; 24:51; 25:30, an apocalyptic expression (cf. Luke 13:28) that became a favorite of Matthew’s to picture the terror of condemnation at the last judgment.

Matthew does not use “call” (*kaleō*) in the sense of “effective call,” as does Paul, but in the sense of initial invitation to become a disciple. Whether one is actually “chosen” (*eklektos*, “elected,” i.e., accepted in the last judgment) depends on manifesting authentic Christian faith in deeds of love and justice. For the first time Matthew explicitly appropriates the term rendered “elect,” referring it not to a specific group (Jews, Christians), but to those who will finally be accepted in the last judgment (see also 24:22, 24, 31). The focus of an elect people of God has shifted from the OT understanding of the people of Israel as a whole to that of the righteous “remnant,” a shift already made in some streams of Judaism.

**Reflections.** From Eugene Borning:

The theological point of 22:11–14 is that those who find themselves unexpectedly included may not presume on grace, but are warned of the dire consequences of accepting the invitation and doing nothing except showing up. By concluding in this manner, Matthew makes it clear that such pictures in which unfaithful Israel is condemned are not an encouragement to smugness on the part of his Christian readers. The “elect” are not the church as a replacement for Israel, but those finally accepted in the last judgment. The whole section, in fact, is directed to the Matthean reader. It is instruction and warning to insiders, not a description of the fate of outsiders, confessional language rather than objectifying report. At this point, Matthew does join his voice with his fellow Jewish convert, who laments the present rejection of Israel: “*Therefore, whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall*” (1 Cor 10:12; cf. Romans 9-11)

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## Notes

**Matthew 22:2 may be likened:** an unusual form of the verb which can rightly be translated as “the kingdom of heaven has become like.” The kingdom has thus already dawned in the ministry of Jesus and has become like “a king who gave a wedding feast.”

**wedding feast:** the Old Testament’s portrayal of final salvation under the image of a banquet (Is 25:6) is taken up also in Mt 8:11; cf. Lk 13:15.

**Matthew 22:3–4 servants...other servants:** probably Christian missionaries in both instances; cf. Mt 23:34.

**Matthew 22:9 main roads:** the term *diexodos* is sometimes taken to mean cross-roads or street crossing. In many cases it describes where the main road crosses the city boundaries into the open countryside.

**Matthew 22:10 bad and good alike:** cf. Mt 13:47 – nets cast catching fish good and bad.

**Matthew 22:11 a wedding garment:** the repentance, change of heart and mind, that is the condition for entrance into the kingdom (Mt 3:2; 4:17) must be continued in a life of good deeds (Mt 7:21–23). With respect to the idea that the king provided the garments, some commentaries point to *Midrash* 416 which mentions Judges 14:12–13 and 2 Kings 10:22, but the former refers to wedding gifts and the latter to vestments for worship. When looks at all the OT and NT verses to support this speculation, only one of them is close to being relevant, Rev 19:8, at least it refers to a wedding, but it speaks of the clothing of the bride, not of the guests.

Jeremias, *Parables* 187–188, quotes a parable of Johanan Ben Zakkai from b. Šabb. 153a., where it is the wearing of dirty working clothes which excludes the unprepared guests. A later version of the story identifies the clean clothes of the accepted guests as “fulfilment of the commandments, good works, and the study of the Torah.”

**Matthew 22:13 wailing and grinding of teeth:** the Christian who lacks the wedding garment of good deeds will suffer the same fate as those Jews who have rejected Jesus. A phrase used frequently in this gospel to describe final condemnation (Mt 8:11, 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30). It is found elsewhere in the New Testament only in Lk 13:28.

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