

## ***The Obligation of Grace***

Matthew 22:1-14

Romans 13:8-14

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The part of the story about the man who showed up to the wedding ill-attired reminds me of an opposite sort of situation. There was a family that moved into a community, and the nearby church decided to reach out and welcome the family and invite them to services. When the welcome committee arrived at the doorstep of the new family's house, they were surprised to find that the family had 12 children and were, for the most part, poor. The welcome committee invited the family to services and said goodbye.

Later that week the church decided to help the family. They delivered a package to the family and said, "We want you to know that you and your entire family are welcome at our church anytime. We have bought you these gifts and we want you to feel comfortable and at ease in our congregation. We hope you can use these," and they left. The family opened the package to find 14 suits of clothing, beautiful clothes for every member of the family.

Sunday came and the welcome committee waited for the family. And they waited. The family never showed. Wondering what could have possibly happened, after church they returned to the family's house and found the family just getting home, all dressed in their new clothes.

The person in charge of the welcome committee spoke up, "We don't mean to be nosey but we would like to know what happened. We had hoped to see you this morning in church."

The father spoke up. He said, "Well, we got up this morning intending to come. And we sure do appreciate your invitation. But after we showered, shaved, and dressed, why we looked so proper we went to the Presbyterian Church."

Maybe if the man in the parable had a benevolent neighborhood church to help him dress properly, the story would've had a different outcome...

But, alas, we only have the story as Jesus told it.

It is a troubling story, isn't it? For all our talk about loving one another like Jesus loves us, this parable doesn't sound very loving, does it? It disturbs our sensibilities and leaves us troubled in spirit. We rather prefer the stories that end with "and they all lived happily ever after," over the stories that end with "Tie him hand and foot and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."<sup>1</sup>

The truth is, actually, there is more grace in this parable than we know what to do with. Grace overflows in this story. The negative things in the story have more to do with how people decide to respond to grace. If we feel bad and uneasy, it should be for us a warning not to take God's grace lightly, or to take God's grace for granted.

The parable describes the kingdom of heaven. In the immediate context of the audience to whom Jesus was speaking, the king in the story represents God. The first

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 22:13

invitees represent the Old Testament people of Israel, who were promised a messiah who would usher in the kingdom of God. Now, though, the kingdom is about to be fulfilled in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and the religious officials will have nothing of him as their Messiah. The second wave of invitees represents the Gentiles – including you and me.

In ancient times when a king would issue an invitation to a feast or banquet, the invitation would come in two stages. The first was simply an announcement sent to the invitees, notifying them that there would be a feast, and they were invited; the date and time were yet to be determined. Then after the king had made all the necessary preparations, he would send out the second invitation to the invitees: all is ready; now, come to the banquet.

The invitation is all about the grace of God. God invites people into the kingdom. God started with Abraham, but God's vision and plan for the kingdom wouldn't simply comprise of the nation that would arise out of Abraham's genealogy; indeed, God foreswore that the whole world would be blessed through the project he began in Abraham.

Nobody in the parable has done anything to merit the invitation. The king simply issued the invitation. That is the grace of election. God calls you and me – invites us to partake of his kingdom – purely out of grace. Nothing that you or I have done compelled God to choose us as his children.

The invitation is God's grace.

And notice that there is a wideness in his grace. After the first series of refusals to come to the banquet, the king sent his servants a second time, this time with a description of the elaborate feast that had been prepared. Perhaps the king hopes that when the invitees hear how great the feast is going to be, they might have a change of heart, and come.

God's grace is patient, and wide, and won't be put off easily. There's a prayer that we sometimes offer during communion. Part of the prayer includes these words: "When we rebelled against you, O God, refusing to trust and obey you, you did not reject us, but still claimed us as your own. You sent prophets to call us back to your way..."<sup>2</sup> God's grace is patient, and wide, and won't be put off easily. God calls to us – God invites us into his kingdom – time and again.

It's only after a persistent refusal to accept the invitation that some people are excluded from the feast. But it is not the king who excludes them; it is the invitees who have chosen to reject the invitation.

Why would anybody refuse an invitation from the king? Why would anybody refuse God's personal invitation to feast at the table of his kingdom glory? It baffles me. But people are good at making excuses. People are adept at getting out of things they don't want to do.

Sometimes people say the darnedest things just to get out of an obligation. A school district in New Mexico posted some excuses that they had received from parents so their children could be excused from school. Let me share a few of the excuses with you:

"Dear School: Please excuse John from being absent on Jan. 29, 30, 31, 32, and also 33."

"Please excuse Brian for being. It was his father's fault."

"Please excuse Jennifer for missing school yesterday. We forgot to get the Sunday paper off the porch, and when we found it Monday, we thought it was Sunday."

Makes me wonder if it was the parents who wrote the excuses, or if the students wrote the excuses themselves... In the parable, the people who turned down the invitation of the king weren't quite so creative in their excuses. They were simply too busy. Or just plain hostile to the king.

<sup>2</sup> Book of Common Worship, PC(USA), (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1993), p. 69.

The message implied in the refusals to come to the feast is, "I've got other fish to fry. I have things that are more important to me." Underneath the surface, the refusals to attend the feast have to do with a fundamental conflict of priorities in the lives of those who were invited. The king's invitation just didn't mean enough to them.

It makes me wonder what kinds of excuses we might hear today, for people who don't want to accept God's gracious invitation to his kingdom? It happens. People find all kinds of excuses not to join the feast of the kingdom of heaven:

"I'm not very religious, so faith isn't something for me."

"Most Christians are hypocrites anyway, so why should I join in with them?"

"I find enough satisfaction in my job and with my family; I really don't need anything else."

"Sunday is the only day our family can be together." (And apparently we shouldn't be together in church)

"Sunday's the only day I can sleep late."

Listen, I'm preaching to the choir here. You're here today. You resisted the excuses. You have come to the feast.

But still, it baffles me that people resist the invitation to the feast. It's an invitation to experience the love, and the joy, and the peace, and all the other fruits of the Spirit that we experience when we enter the life to which the Lord invites us. Why would anybody not want to come to the feast?

I suspect that a primary reason why people refuse the invitation to the kingdom of God is because they don't want to change their lives. They may want the grace that comes to them freely, but they don't want to live the life that they must live once they embrace the grace with all its implications. We are told in the New Testament that whoever is in Christ is a new creation, the old has gone, and the new has come. For many people, it is the "letting go of the old" that they are unwilling to do. To accept the invitation means that things will be different. You cannot embrace the grace of God and remain unchanged.

And that thought scares people. Or turns them off.

Grace is free. But it does not come without obligation. If there's anything that we take away from the parable, it is an understanding that there is a relationship between the grace of election and invitation, and the obligation of obedience and repentance.

Obedience, repentance – a changed life – that is the most common interpretation of the part of the parable that concerns the person who does not dress for the occasion. It's not because the man was too poor to buy a wedding garment; he wasn't the only poor person invited to the banquet. It's because he chose not to clothe himself appropriately. When he was asked by the king why he didn't dress appropriately, the man had nothing to say. He had no excuses.

The wedding garment that the man failed to wear – the wedding garment represents the evidence that God's grace is operative in one's life. We put on the wedding garment when we respond to God's grace by embracing the way of the kingdom – when we actively seek to do God's will.

There's always a tension between grace and works. Grace here is not conditioned on specific behaviors or moral qualities. The invitation – grace – is extended independently of our moral standing. But when we receive the grace, it means that we also accept the consequences of grace. And those consequences – the obligations of grace – include godly living, repentance, a desire to conform our lives to Jesus Christ. Works do not save us, but they do point to the grace of God at work in our hearts.

You see, I'm not trying to be a good Christian as a basis for my standing before God. No, I want to be a good Christian out of love for the One who has loved me with an everlasting love. To embrace the grace of God means that we will naturally "want to be righteous personally – not as a basis for standing before God, but as an evidence of wanting to please the Father who was gracious enough to invite [even] me."<sup>3</sup>

Referring to the wedding garment in the parable – and the relationship between faith and good works – John Calvin has this to say:

"There is no point in arguing about the marriage garment, whether it is faith or a holy and godly life; for faith cannot be separated from good works and good works proceed only from faith. All Christ wants to say here is that we are called by the Lord under the condition that we be renewed in our spirits into His image, and therefore, if we are to remain in His house, the old [person] with all his [or her] blemishes is to be cast off and we are to practice the new life so that our appearance may correspond to our honorable calling."<sup>4</sup>

The apostle Paul puts it like this: Clothe yourselves with Christ. In Romans, Paul tells us to "put on the Lord Jesus."<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere he reminds us that whoever is baptized into Christ have clothed ourselves with Christ.<sup>6</sup> In one of the most beautiful exhortations in all his writings, Paul tells the Colossians, "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with each other... forgive each other... Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect unity."<sup>7</sup>

Maybe it's because of this parable, or maybe it's because of the pervasiveness of Paul's urgings in the New Testament, but early Christians often described conversion as a change of clothing<sup>8</sup>.

Take off the old, and put on the new. Put on the Lord Jesus.

Friends, this has virtually nothing to do with a dress code, at least not a literal one. It has everything to do with how you receive and embrace the grace of God. As one pastor has noted, "God's gracious invitation comes to us as we are, but we need to come not as we were."<sup>9</sup>

If you accept the invitation, you are a new creation.

We just need to dress the part.

Or better yet, live it.

Amen.

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3 F. Dale Bruner, Matthew: A Commentary, Volume 2 – The Churchbook (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 391.

4 John Calvin, cited in Bruner, op. cit., p. 390.

5 Romans 13:14

6 Galatians 3:27

7 Colossians 3:12-14

8 Bruner, p. 391.

9 Rev. Dr. Elton Richards, "Sorry, I'm Busy", [www.day1.org](http://www.day1.org)