

## The Worst Parable (and Party) Ever!

*Matthew 22: 1-14*

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other servants, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’ But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ Those servants went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad, so the wedding hall was filled with guests. “But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.”

A few years ago, when the Golden State Warriors won the NBA championship they were invited to the White House. Except, one player, Stephan Curry, said he wasn't sure if he was going due to some remarks made from the president at the time about the NFL and some players who took a knee during the national anthem. When the president got word, he Tweeted, “Going to the White House is considered a great honor for the championship team. Stephan Curry is hesitating, therefore, invitation withdrawn!” It reminds me of the parable Jesus tells, where a bunch of people who refuse the host's party invitation end up being “uninvited”—and by uninvited, I mean destroyed. Then only to have the king invite anyone willing to come, except that one person who showed up without the proper clothing. So the bouncers toss him out into outer darkness where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” What a mess of a parable and party it is! So what exactly does any of this have to do with the kingdom of God?

Begin by remembering the larger sequence. This is final of three parables to the chief priests in the temple about who the true heir of God's kingdom is and what the kingdom is going to look like. All three parables belong together. There is the parable of the two sons: one son says, “yes” to their papa and does nothing, while the other says, “no” and does something. When asked which one fulfilled their father's desire they said the second son, of course. Jesus is trying to get them to work out for themselves what they have seen yet still refused to say “yes” to. Then for parable #2 we get the vineyard with the tenants who keep killing the owner's servants and eventually his own son. Jesus asks, “What does the owner do to the tenants as a result?” Again, the question is *how do you interpret what God's authority look like?* They answer that the owner will destroy the tenants, which is how they understand God's justice to operate. So Jesus makes a comment about the rejected being the cornerstone and the one who stumbles on this will be scandalized. The chief priests think he is speaking about them, so they get a bit crabby. That's the

larger sequence. But it all circles around how we discern what is of the kingdom of God and how we interpret what the true messiah looks like.

It's a fair question. How do we know what is of the kingdom? What is the litmus test or how do we gauge what is of God? We watch the rerun of conflict between Israel and Palestine. Violence out of control. Over what? Over what they interpret God's promise to be. It's a holy war. Terrorists hold hostages and send bombs into coffee shops over what they believe God has given them. Or turn it around. We say God includes everyone and we work really hard at embodying that value—I love it! But we could ask, “how do we know it is what God really wants?” It's a fair question. And how we answer it determines who we believe God is and what God's authority looks like.

Enter parable number three—which is the worst parable and party....ever. A tyrant king throws a huge feast for his son's wedding by inviting a bunch of guests who make excuses why they cannot be there. Now, there is a bit of word play here based on a couple of Hebrew words. Basically, the word for “battle” and the word for “feast” can be interchangeable and interpreted either way. So when the first round of invites goes out how do they interpret it?

Well, in Deuteronomy did you know that there are legitimate excuses when a king summons the people into battle. One is if the field isn't fully planted. Another is if there is unfinished business. The last is if you're engaged and need to get married. Two of these excuses are used in the parable, the third is a play-off of the previous parable where the servants get beaten up—if you kill the messenger than you can conveniently pretend you never got the message. So what we have is a group who believes they are being invited into a battle and misinterpret what they are actually being invited into. And so the king sends the battle to them as his armies wipe them out and set fire to the entire town. It's a bit harsh, but their misinterpretation leads to theirs and everyone else's destruction. Which preaches, doesn't it?

So, a second round of invitations go out. The king is not so picky about who shows up this time. After all, he cares about optics. Scared of what could happen if they didn't show up, everyone who is invited shows their loyalty to the king by wearing the appropriate robe—a sign of loyalty back then. Except that one person who apparently doesn't get the memo. So the king says, “Friend”—which could both mean a military comrade or a dinner companion—“why aren't you dressed up and showing your loyalty to me?” And what does this person say? Nothing. They are silent. So the guy is hogtied and cast out into darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. “Many are called but few are chosen,” Jesus says. The end.

So to recap: the kingdom of heaven is compared to a tyrant king who has dreadfully thin skin—as most tyrants do—who invites a first group who misheard the invitation into a holy war rather than a feast and so are destroyed. We have a second invitation where the tyrant king who only cares about numbers, fills the hall with all types who probably came to the party out of fear for their own lives. And then we have someone out of nowhere who is either protesting silently by showing up to the party, but not dressing appropriately for it; or didn't get the memo about the dress code. Am I missing anything? *So what does this have to do with the kingdom of heaven?*

You see, Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is *compared* to a tyrant king. He is not saying the parable *is* how the kingdom operates. No, he is comparing how the violent system operates to how God's kingdom operates.

- Compare God's kingdom to a tyrant king whose people hear him summoning them into battle and when they refuse, they are destroyed.
- Compare God's kingdom to those who are so afraid and insecure that they go along with the invitation and are subjects of false loyalty.
- Compare God's kingdom with a system who scapegoats those who don't go along with the game plan.

And the irony is that as the chief priests are listening to the parable, they are interpreting a God whose Messiah is inviting them into holy war. They are following a version of god who makes them show up out of insecurity and demands loyalty. They are about to put Jesus on trial who, when asked a question about his kingdom *will remain silent*. And it all goes down just before he is crucified and thrown out into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. The parable is in stark contrast to the kingdom of heaven.

Is God's kingdom realized through victorious holy war, or through a feast? Has the Messiah come to be served by the loyalists, or to serve those who the system has rejected. You see, the kingdom of God looks like Jesus; and Jesus looks like the one whose presence exposes the sham of oppression for what it truly is—"many are called but few actually do it."

It is Jesus whose authority makes so much expansive room that the truth is: *we don't need an invitation for God's kingdom*. Why? Because we already belong on the inside of the party. No invitation required.

You see, Jesus draws up a circle so wide that even those who say "no" are already inside of the project and so find themselves saying "yes" eventually (like the prostitutes and tax collectors who will enter the kingdom before the religious people)—which is the point of parable number one. The circle is so wide that the rejected one becomes the cornerstone which holds the expansive reality together through forgiveness and not violence—which is parable number two. The circle is so wide that we discover ourselves already on the inside of the party. No alter call necessary at the end of the service. No showing up out of insecure fear. No invitation required.

I hope this crazy parable is beginning to sound like good news. Because when it comes to God's kingdom, if it isn't good news for everyone *then it isn't really good news*. There is no party greater than the one that we are already inside of. And the invitation? The invitation is to see that, actually, there is no invitation required.