

# A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 22:1-14

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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 slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet,  
but they would not come.

Again he sent other slaves, 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 slaves, mistreated them, and killed them.

The king was enraged and sent his troops,  
destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.

Then he said to his slaves, ‘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 slaves 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.”

This parable of Jesus is a Matthean version of the parable of the great feast. Its structure consists of seven episodes:

1. First invitation
2. Second invitation
3. Rejection and rage of the king, which could also be called the war episode
4. Third invitation to all
5. Full hall
6. Guest without a wedding garment
7. Cast into the outer darkness

In the Gospel of Matthew, the parable of the wedding feast is a complex parable that appears to end with the invitation to all, but continues with the story of the man without a wedding garment. Everything leads up to the story of the inappropriately attired guest. This provides a kind of double shock, a reversal of expectations—twice! The first is the shock of the invitations, the rage of the king who is throwing the wedding banquet, and the destruction of the people who reject him. The second is the shock of the guest without the wedding garment and his being thrown into the outer darkness. The two shocks form two parts to the parable.

The underlying assumption of the parable is that everyone wants to be invited to the wedding banquet. That was true of wedding banquets in Palestinian towns as well as in the kingdom of heaven. So for people to turn down the invitation is a reversal of expectation. Nobody in Jesus' day turned down invitations to wedding banquets and especially not to the eschatological banquet in the kingdom of heaven. It would be like turning down an invitation to the inaugural banquet in the White House after your presidential candidate has been elected.

The second reversal of expectation is that the guest without a wedding garment receives such extreme condemnation. One would suppose that he was poor and didn't have enough money to afford a festive garment to wear. Especially for a wedding banquet in the kingdom of heaven you would expect he would be welcomed, even without proper clothing. The unexpectedly harsh treatment he receives from his lord is a similar dynamic to the parable of the talents in which the one-talent servant also gets "thrown in to the outer darkness" (Matthew 25:30). The punishment seems excessive to the offense. Therefore, a parable, a story that requires reflection.

As is the case with many of the stories in Matthew, the Jewish-Roman War of 66-70 CE, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and the formation of the church as a Jewish set within the community of Israel, are associations of the story for Matthew's audience. It is virtually an allegory of recent history for them. The rejection of the invitation to come to the wedding banquet is connected with the rejection of Jesus and his way of peace. The conclusion of the first part of the parable is about the invitation to all people, Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, to enter the kingdom of God.

A norm of the first century Jewish community was that everyone wear a festive garment to a wedding. For someone to come to a wedding without a wedding garment would have been an insult. It would have been a sign of indifference to tradition and to custom. Our best guess with regard to understanding the second part of this parable is that the guest's indifference to proper clothing is associated with disregard for the law. For Matthew's listeners, this indifference would have been associated with indifference to the Torah and the law. The parable is connected with the motif established in the Sermon on the Mount: "not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matthew 5:18).

The first part of the parable ends with an implicit invitation to the listeners to rejoice that they have been invited to the wedding banquet. The invitation is now open and free to everyone to come to the banquet. The trials and tribulations of the past are over, and we're all invited to join the celebration of the elect at the great banquet in the kingdom of heaven. In other words, "I've been saved! Hallelujah, I'm in!"

The second part of the parable addresses the implicit arrogance of any who assume that they are in and nothing can change that, that there are no requirements for feasting at the banquet. The guest without a wedding garment assumes that there are no requirements for his election. The lord's response to him is merciless. So the end of the parable is a wake-up call for anyone who is arrogant enough to think there are no requirements for continued membership. The expectation is that those who have been called to the banquet must also pay attention to "doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with God" as the prophet Micah exhorts.

In telling this parable it is important to make the last words of the lord to the man without a wedding garment tough. These are hard words. The shock of the parable is directly related to the hardness and mercilessness of the lord's judgment.