

Right Picture – Wrong Focus

It's been said that a picture is worth a thousand words. Well... the few words that make up this parable paint quite a *vivid* picture, don't they? In fact, it's very easy to miss all that our Lord is teaching us today because we tend to focus *only on one part of the picture*: the terrifyingly vivid image of the angry king (who is clearly God); the angry king who slays the wicked ones who reject Him and His feast; the angry king who burns cities to the ground in fiery wrath; the angry king who has a poor sap bound up hand and foot and cast out of the heavenly feast into the hellish darkness, where there is only weeping and gnashing of teeth, simply because of a dress code violation. Horrifying!

How many times does the king extend his gracious invitation to the feast? (Do you see what I mean when I say we miss the big picture? Consider how many times we hear our Lord invite His people to His great feast in the Old Testament lesson. This is nothing new!) And *why* are they invited to the feast? Well... we know why they're **NOT** invited to the feast. All these people in the parable are invited by the king, not because they're somehow "worthy" or "better" or "more deserving" than anyone else. No. This king invites all these people to the feast *purely out of undeserved grace*. He chooses them. He invites them to His feast simply because He loves them. He cares for them. He wants to celebrate the marriage of His Son, and He wants everyone to share in His joy. You don't have to bring anything. You don't have to do a thing! *Just show up and receive!* That's it!

But there's the problem. Those who get the first invitations (i.e., the Jews) ignore and reject Him. The king sends his servants to tell them that it's now time. The groom is here. Let the wedding feast begin! And they simply blow him off. They refuse. "*They would not come.*" So... the king tries **again**. He extends the gracious invitation **again**. He sends more servants, instructing them to tell the people about the overflowing magnificence of his free feast. "*Look! The oxen and the fattened calves have been butchered. Ribeyes and prime rib for everyone! Come on! I've already reserved your spot. All you gotta do is show up and receive!*" But they pay no attention... **again**. They refuse... **again**.

And pay attention here to the *two different responses*. Some blow off the invitation by either going to their farm or to their business, and the others reject it with violent, shameful, even murderous behavior. Simply put, some are *indifferent* to the invite. They're too busy for the feast. They've got better, more important things to do. The others are *flat-out hostile* to the invite. They persecute the messengers in their pride and hatred. They even put them to death. They make martyrs out of the messengers; guys sent to simply invite them to a feast! *It makes zero sense, doesn't it?*

Now... you need to think on this. All too often we hear this and quickly dismiss it as not pertaining to us. After all, Jesus is talking about those wicked Jews, who were the first to get the Christ-centered wedding feast invite. We might even apply the parable to all those in this current day and age who reject and despise the King's invitation, either out of selfish indifference or prideful arrogance and hostility. Admit it: We can all think of more than a few people who aren't in church, and who need to hear how angry the king is when His invitation is rejected. ***But... what about you?*** We don't preach sermons about people who aren't here to hear them. That does nobody any good. Sermons are for us and our ears. ***Can you see yourself in this picture?*** How often have you been too busy for God and His feast? How often have you been indifferent to His grace? How often have your "personal decisions and preferences" taken precedence over the King and His feast? How often have you been hostile to the message or murderous and shameful to the messengers? (Remember how Jesus defines the 5th Commandment!) How often has your temper, your pride, or your anger kept you from the King and His feast? ***Yeah... that doesn't turn out well, does it? The King clearly isn't okay with such contemptible behavior.***

Back to the parable. The feast will still go on. Those wicked fools want to reject and despise such a gracious invitation? That's their problem, and there will be consequences for their wicked rejection. ***But the feast still goes on!*** "Go and invite everyone!" And the messengers do just that. We're told that the feast hall was filled with both ***good and evil*** people who responded to the gracious invitation. (There's another invitation!) ***What does this mean? Are there "evil" people in heaven?!*** That doesn't make sense! Sure it does. Jesus is explaining things here from ***our worldly perspective***; the way we so often see them. In this life there are "good" people and there are "bad/evil" people. There are some who are "salt of the earth," and there are some people who do some pretty evil things. The thief on the cross? Was he "salt of the earth," or was he a pretty bad guy? What about all those tax collectors and prostitutes and Roman soldiers who would come to faith and be baptized? What about murderous Saul (*before* he became St. Paul)? From our perspective and by our standards—***here and now***—we would look to heaven and see some really good people—salt of the earth—and we would also see some pretty shady and evil people at the feast table; people like the thief on the cross or anyone else who came to faith after living the life of an evil reprobate. You see, God desires the death of no man, and He means it. His grace in Christ is for ***all*** people. The invitation to Christ's wedding feast was for the bad/evil people too. Heaven is filled with people that you would dare to call "evil." Heaven is filled with people that you would say "don't deserve to be there." Purely by God's good grace, Heaven is filled with people ***just like you***, and praise God that it is!

God sees us children of Adam differently than we see each other. He looks at us—all of us borne of Adam—and sees only evil. *All* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. *All* are dead in the evil of their sin. *All* are in need of a Savior, which is why Jesus died for *everyone*. God so loved the *whole world* that He sent His only-begotten Son to die for it—each and every person borne from Adam. Now...do some reject this gift of grace? Yes. It's what I often refer to as "the tragedy of justification." Christ died for all people. His death and resurrection has paid the wage of sin for everyone. All have been set free in Him...*and yet so many still reject it.* "*The many are called, but few are chosen.*"

Okay... so what about the poor soul who gets bounced from the heavenly feast and cast into hell because he's not wearing the proper attire? Folks: It's actually pretty simple. This guy wasn't some "poor soul" who was a victim of an angry King. This guy brought it all on himself. He was cast into hell because *he wanted God on his terms; not God's terms.* Here, again, is where we need to pay attention. Our Lord teaches this parable for us and our ears! *What do these robes signify?* Are they baptismal robes? To be sure, you ain't getting into heaven if you're not covered over in the all-availing robes of Christ's perfect righteousness. Well... that's not us, is it? That's not our loved ones. After all, they've been baptized... even confirmed. We're all good, right? Bear in mind: We live in a "Christian Nation." Is everyone who simply "identifies" as "Christian" getting into heaven? Not according to Jesus. "*Not all who say 'Lord, Lord' will be saved.*"

Perhaps there's more to this. You are saved purely by grace; faith alone in God's grace alone because of Christ alone, right? Your works do not save you. However... your works/fruits can certainly *condemn* you. You are known by your fruits, and good fruit trees bear good fruit. One of our early Church fathers—a 4th century fellow by the name of John Chrysostom—stated that the garment is "*the Christian life and practice.*" He acknowledges that the invitation to the heavenly feast is purely given out of grace to all people, but the possibility of saying "*Great! I'll take your gracious forgiveness gladly, but—NO!—I have no intention of actually changing my life and fighting sin and abstaining from sin. I like doing what I'm doing, and I'm not going to change! I'm gonna do what I wanna do*" is simply not possible. Such behavior is nothing more than *wicked contempt* for the King, no different than what any of those other fools did to earn the King's fiery wrath. "*Come as you are*" **NEVER** means "*Stay as you are.*" God is God, and you are not. The Christian life is on His terms, not yours. If you're living on your terms, then you've got a different god. *Yeah... that doesn't turn out well, does it? The King clearly isn't okay with such contemptible behavior.*

You know what? Fear is a great motivator, but it never lasts. Besides, this isn't the point of the parable. Jesus doesn't teach this so as to *terrify us into fearful submission.* That would make Him nothing more than a tyrant. This isn't

a warning; i.e., “*you better do this or else!*” Nope. ***This is simply a statement of fact; i.e., “here’s how it all ends.”*** The focus here isn’t on the King’s wrath, but rather on His grace; His joy and love for us, in Christ and because of Christ. The focus here is on the feast of God’s grace and joy and peace, ***which has already begun in the death and resurrection of Jesus.*** We’re taking part in this feast today! This is why we’re gonna end by putting all the focus where it needs to be: On God’s grace for you, in Christ and because of Christ.

Look to this cross! Look to your baptism! Look to this altar/rail. Here is the King, and here is His feast of unmerited and overflowing grace for you. Here is the King, and here is His feast for you; a foretaste of the heavenly feast to come. ***Understood through repentant faith, who would be so stupid or stubborn or foolish so as to reject this?!*** Who could possibly be indifferent to this?! Who could be too busy for this or hostile to this?! You see? Understood through the lens of the cross; understood in saving faith, you don’t need to be brow-beaten and coerced into “showing up” or acting like a Christian. When faith understands the Truth of sin and salvation, ***faith wants all the Jesus it can get!*** True saving faith **NEVER** says, “*I’m good. I love Jesus, but I’m gonna do what I want.*” Those words might speak of a love for Jesus, but the fruits prove otherwise. The picture tells a different story.

Here is God’s grace for you in the flesh. Here is Christ. Covered over in His perfect righteousness, repentant baptismal faith wants nothing more than to serve Him and make Him known. This is what the Christian life is all about. The Christian life; that is, the life lived out in repentant faith produces good fruits of faith, which are really nothing more than ***one big response of thanks and praise*** for all that God has done for us in Christ, and all that God continues to do for us in Christ. To bear good and God-pleasing fruits of repentant faith; to be clad in grace; to be covered over in Christ’s righteousness isn’t a chore; it’s a joyous privilege!

My fellow baptized: May this Good News of God’s grace for you in Christ, through Christ, and because of Christ, ever and always bear good and God-pleasing fruits ***in all that you say and do.*** Basically, may your entire life be one big picture of repentant faith and thanksgiving; a picture that puts all the focus on the masterpiece that is God’s love and grace for you in Christ.

To Him be all the focus; all the glory, all the praise, and all the honor...

AMEN