

Matthew 22:1-14
Lent Midweek 1
"The Cross is..."

March 4, 2020—Shepherd of the Mountains, Pinetop, AZ

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We see this scene in several movies. A young man (perhaps a novice spy) walks in to a high-end restaurant wearing a polo shirt or something similarly "business casual." Everyone else is in fine business attire. And the maître d' says something to the man like, "sir, we require all of our guests to have a coat and tie. If you don't have them, we can provide them for you." The young man sheepishly accepts and awkwardly dons a sport coat and necktie that don't match the apparel underneath. He remains in the restaurant and the plot continues.

From the number of times I saw this trope employed in movies as a kid, I expected it to be much more of a reality in my adult life. But I've never had this happen to me. And I've never even been invited to party where I opened the envelope and the invitation said, "dress code strictly enforced." But apparently that's a thing also. Sure, there have been costume parties near the end of October over the years where all attendees were "expected to wear a costume." But usually you could just dig up something from your regular attire in the closet and come up with a witty excuse about how what you were wearing was actually an ironic costume of some sort. The host would be annoyed, but would accept the excuse and begrudgingly honor your wit, and you would be allowed to join in the revelry.

The parable Jesus gives has a similar theme. A king has called guests to his son's wedding. The fact that it was a king calling meant more than our modern idea of the word "invitation." This really was a summons from the man in charge. When the first invitation had gone out, the intended guests would have RSVP'd. Then, when the feast was ready, the guests would be called again. "The king joyfully requests your presence. The feast is prepared. Come." No disclaimer of "dress code strictly enforced" would be required. You knew what was expected when you stood before the king.

From the context, we can see that Jesus is speaking a parable of judgment and warning as well as one of grace. Some of the characters are obvious. Jesus was in Jerusalem. This was Holy Week. The kingdom of heaven had come through the Son of God, and this is what it was like. Jesus is proclaiming judgment against the Pharisees who represent Old Covenant Israel because the invitation had been sent out and time and time again, and they had RSVP'd time and time again, "all that the Lord has commanded, we will do." But when the Son came, they didn't honor Him or the Father who sent Him. Instead they rejected Him. They despised Him.

In the parable, the first guests rejected the king and his son. They dishonored them by ignoring the summons. And so, the king became angry and destroyed them. This parable itself is another invitation, another call to repentance so they also can join the feast. It is also a warning. God the Father had sent His own Son to invite them. If they continue to reject the King by rejecting His Son, if they continue to despise them, then woe to those who reject the invitation. From what we know of the events of Holy Week, many did not get the parable. Most did not heed Jesus' warning and repent and believe.

But the king in the parable still wanted a party. He wanted a celebration for his son, so he called out to people who were not originally called. The first guests showed they were unworthy by their rejection of the king and his son. But the king would find new guests. He sends out his servants again, this time calling everyone else, both good and bad. These are the people of the New Covenant. All who hear the invitation and accept the invitation go in and feast with the king and his son. This is good news for us, the latter invitees.

But there is another part of the parable that gives us trouble. After the warning against those who reject the son, there is gracious invitation to people who weren't the original invitees. But then as the guests are gathered, the king notices something. One of these things does not look like the others. A man is there without wedding clothes. The man is speechless when confronted. No witty remark about his attire will excuse him. He doesn't belong in the King's court. So, who is he?

This man is a wedding crasher. He wants in, but on his own terms. He wants to wear his regular old clothes from his closet. But no witty response will be acceptable. The King is strict. And His dress code is strictly enforced. The man could have been wearing the finest silks and the most ornate jewels. But the King is the judge of what is right and worthy. And if the King says they are not clothes fit for His Son's wedding feast, they are not.

This corresponds with those who attend church, but are not the Church. It means the Pharisees of old, as well as modern day nominal Christians. You may have seen these people before. Outwardly they *look* like Christians. They come to the potlucks. They love the social aspect of Bible study and worship. They love that they *look* holy and worthy and righteous. But inwardly they despise God and His Son. They despise God's Word. They put on their Sunday best each week, but then they go home and decide which parts of God's Word to take seriously. They come up with smooth excuses for their sins, as smooth as the finest silks. They adorn themselves with good works in the community as shiny gems. But these don't fit the dress code.

The last part of the parable serves as a warning to people like this. But it also serves as a warning to us. It is not because we are worthy that we are invited, but because we are invited that we are given worth. But this only happens when we acknowledge our original unworthiness. When we acknowledge that we were originally wearing filthy garments not fit for the King and His Son, only then we can see the need for new ones.

At this point in the sermon, usually the pastor will say something about how it was tradition for the king to provide clothing to the guests attending the feast. We like this illustration. After all, in this parable they were called at the last minute and, if the king expected them to adhere to a dress code, he would have to provide the means for them to do so with such short notice. This illustration or explanation has stuck around since the Reformation era. But there is little to no evidence that this was the custom in the region in those days. There is some evidence that this happened at times in the ancient far east, but not here, not among the people to whom Jesus is speaking.

Regardless of the practice, or lack thereof, for a king in biblical Jerusalem, this *is* the practice of *our King*. Jesus still is sending out His servants with an invitation. Regardless of your blood relation to father Abraham, regardless of who you are or what you have done, whether you have been good or evil in the eyes of the world...even if you have been evil in the eyes of God, you are invited. This invitation, this calling, *does* say "dress code strictly enforced." And fortunately for you *our King's servants*, ministers of the Gospel, are like the maître d's for the feast. "You don't have the proper clothes? Well then, receive the sign of the cross, upon your forehead and upon your heart, marking you as one redeemed by Christ." And that is our third look at the cross this Lenten season. The cross is your invitation to the wedding feast.

The King's invitation bears His seal—the Cross of Jesus Christ. The invitation has been sent out through the cross of Jesus Christ and the proclamation that our sins were crucified on it. Paul says in Romans 6 that our baptism unites us with Christ's death on the cross. And in Galatians 3:²⁷ Paul says, "**as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.**" In your baptism, as the Word of God combined with water and was poured over you, you were invited. You have been given the robes of righteousness, the robes that are required to be part of the wedding feast. Through your baptismal faith you are already wearing the appropriate attire.

The invitation sent out from the cross still stands. And the invitation comes with the required attire. During this season of Lent, this season of repentance, as we ponder the cross, we also remember that it is ultimately an invitation from the Father. It is an invitation to lay down our filthy rags and take up the robe of Christ's righteousness. And when the Son returns, we will find that we are not merely honored guests at the wedding feast; we are His very Bride whom He will never cast out.

So, rejoice in the Lord, my brothers and sisters in Christ, all you who have been invited by His cross and made worthy for His feast, "**for He has clothed [you] with garments of salvation; He has covered [you] with the robe of righteousness.**" ^{Isaiah 61:10} Amen.