

Obviously, we’re going to be talking about weddings today. But before we get there, I want to make a pit-stop at costume parties (bear with me). I love costume and theme parties. My birthday’s close to Halloween, so for a lot of years now, we’ve thrown costume parties somewhere in that week leading up to October 31. One of my favorites was back in grad school. I love superheros, so I threw a Superhero Halloween party. I invited guests either to come as an established superhero or, if they were feeling creative, to make up their own hero. If they chose to make up a hero, they had to have at least two powers and one weakness.

I figured I might have gone too far with this theme - most people aren't as into superheros as I was. But I was shocked when nearly everyone came in costume, and with one or two exceptions, everyone created their own superhero [pics]. The party was hilarious and fun, in part because listening to everyone explain their hero and his or her powerset was hilarious. I was blown away by the amount of thought and effort so many people put into such a silly idea.

I know a lot of people hate costume parties. You get stressed out at just the *idea* of a costume party, specifically because of the whole costume bit. There's an understanding most of us have about costume parties: if you get invited, there's an assumption you'll come in some costume. The invitation implies an obligation not just to participate, but to participate in the right way. [a pic here of an invitation then an arrow to a costume?]

We're not really a culture of obligations anymore. In the not-so-distant past, we were expected to dress up if we were visiting the bank, coming to church or even flying. Visiting friends were obligated to bring a gift for their hosts. But for good *and* for bad, we're moving away from obligation as a culture. The places that still enforce a dress code are few and far between - even in many offices, "Casual Friday" is slowly creeping into the rest of the week. We're for the most part wealthy enough that we can host without asking our guests to bring anything (and therefore don't expect them to do so). We expect to be welcomed just as we are most everywhere we go.

This self-sufficiency and cultural bent toward radical acceptance is both good and bad. And that brings us to a story Jesus told about a wedding, and about the obligation his invitation implies. This story is in Matthew 22 - go ahead and turn there in your Bibles with me. If you grabbed one of our Bibles on the way in, it's on page XXXX. And if you don't own a Bible, please accept that one as a gift from us.

All summer we've been looking at stories Jesus told about the Kingdom of God, this new life he came to bring us. The parables are short, provocative and invite us to chew on them, to consider carefully the nature and character of what God is doing among us.

This month, we're exploring stories Jesus tells about the value of the Kingdom. Stories that display what our responses to God's new life ought to look like (or, in today's case, ought not look like). Jesus tells this particular story during the final week of his earthly life. He's ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey and been welcomed as Israel's true King. The day before he tells this story, he went into the Temple courtyard and drove out all the people selling animals for sacrifice and exchanging money for all the international pilgrims.

Everything he's done so far have made the religious and political leaders *very* uncomfortable. They're trying to figure out how to discredit Jesus. So today, the day he tells this story, is full of public verbal sparring. Essentially, the powers-that-be have sent their best Bible scholars to

publicly discredit Jesus. They want to expose him as a fool, turn the crowds against him, steal away his popularity.

As a general rule, it's a bad idea to pick a fight with God. So it's in the middle of all this Jesus tells this story: Let's begin in verse 2 of Matthew 22:

The Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a king who prepared a great wedding feast for his son. When the banquet was ready, he sent his servants to notify those who were invited. But they all refused to come! So he sent other servants to tell them, 'The feast has been prepared. The bulls and fattened cattle have been killed, and everything is ready. Come to the banquet!'

But the guests he had invited ignored them and went their own way, one to his farm, another to his business. Others seized his messengers and insulted them and killed them.

The king was furious, and he sent out his army to destroy the murderers and burn their town. And he said to his servants, 'The wedding feast is ready, and the guests I invited aren't worthy of the honor. Now go out to the street corners and invite everyone you see.' So the servants brought in everyone they could find, good and bad alike, and the banquet hall was filled with guests.

But when the king came in to meet the guests, he noticed a man who wasn't wearing the proper clothes for a wedding. 'Friend,' he asked, 'how is it that you are here without wedding clothes?' But the man had no reply. Then the king said to his aides, 'Bind his hands and feet 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 story has two clear sections: let's talk about that first set of guests, then move into the second set and the shabby guy.

A king (who represents God) wants to throw a wedding feast for his son. We've seen a couple of times throughout the summer that the Wedding Feast is often a symbol of God's Kingdom coming to fruition. It's the End, when all is as God intends. Here, Jesus says: the kingdom is like this wedding feast.

The king has this whole list of people who've been invited to the wedding. Today, we'd think of these people as church people. Religious insiders. That original audience in Jerusalem would've easily recognized Jesus was talking about Israel, and in particular all those religious leaders who were attacking him.

But the people God originally invited don't come. Soak in what Jesus is saying: God throws a party and *the religious people don't come*. Ludicrous, right? God sends more and more messengers to invite them to come, and yet they continually refuse - some even going so far as to abuse and kill the messengers.

Jesus' original listeners would've recognized Israel's history. These messengers are the prophets of Israel's history: people like Moses and Elijah and Isaiah and Zachariah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel. People who delivered God's invitation to participate in God's kingdom, to join in what God was

doing in the world, over and over and over and who were consistently ignored and abused and even killed.

By retelling Israel's story as a wedding feast, Jesus reframes this refusal as spiritual pride. In Jesus' day, most people (like 95%) lived at or below subsistence level - they only had just enough to eat every day (maybe). The idea of a feast was foreign to most people. Even those we would consider nobility had limited resources.

So when a king threw a wedding feast, it wasn't just a celebration. It was also an act of generosity on the king's part. A royal wedding feast was the best opportunity anyone in the land had to enjoy essentially unlimited feasting.

To refuse the king's invitation wasn't just rude; it was a refusal of the king's generosity. It was a tacit rejection of the king's provision. It said to everyone that you didn't *need* the king's provision because you had enough for yourself.

According to Jesus, these religious leaders were doing the same to God. They'd built a religion that didn't need God to function.

This is the self-sufficiency many of us recognize. Whether it's in our work, our families, our leisure, we don't *need* God. We might *like* God well enough, but we get along just fine on our own. We can do it ourselves, provide for ourselves, keep ourselves safe and secure.

We ought to worry that our religion so easily becomes Godless. As long as we read our Bibles or pray or give or come to Church, we don't actually need to connect to God. As long as we follow the rules and don't step out of line, we don't have to spend any time with God. We've made a list of what it looks like to live like God and it doesn't look very much like Jesus. We don't actually have to sacrifice anything or learn to discern how the Holy Spirit wants to lead us.

Our religion gets along just fine without God.

And according to Jesus, what we're really doing is rejecting our king's generosity. God's throwing a party and we're busy building our small, shallow lives. We're giving ourselves over to work, to endless entertainments, to empty pleasures. Or we may not even know exactly *what* we're doing, but it sure isn't partying.

Jesus says: If that's you, you lack humility. You *need* your king. You need God. It's possible to live without partying. To be religious without worshiping. To serve without being a servant. To give without sacrificing. And those all end up in death and destruction. That's not the path to life.

Whew. If you're like me, you expect Jesus to stop there. After all, that's a harsh word, and he puts the religious people in their place, which is what we love it when Jesus does. We imagine ourselves on the sidelines of this verbal sparring, eating popcorn and watching, high-fiving and calling out OH SNAP!

But Jesus isn't done. After the king destroys all those who rejected his invitation, he opens the party up to anyone. They fill the party with "good and bad alike". This is the Jesus we recognize, the Jesus we love. Everyone is welcomed, there's no guest list, let's all party!

This is *why* Jesus' work is such good news. *Everyone* is welcome. No one is excluded. This aspect of Jesus' message is (thankfully) growing in popularity among churches. For too long, we Evangelicals and especially Nazarenes, were way too far on the other end of the spectrum. We looked a lot more like those legalistic religious leaders who actively excluded those who didn't "measure up" to our standards.

So I'm grateful we're recognizing this radical hospitality at the core of Jesus' message. This conviction that God's new life is for everyone, not just the holy huddle in the Church.

But. As he often does, Jesus refuses to play nice at the end of the parable. A man accepts the invitation and comes to the party, but he's not dressed for the wedding. Now: there's no indication this man was too poor or didn't own the right wedding attire.

The sense of the parable is that he just didn't care to dress up for the wedding.

And that doesn't sound like such a big deal to us: plenty of our weddings today are casual affairs, and everyone's got that weird uncle who wears jeans to every wedding no matter how fancy. But in the ancient world, this would've been a *huge* insult to the king. It was taken as a sign of public disrespect every bit as hostile as those who refused the invitation in the first place.

If you're going to come to the wedding, you need to show up in wedding clothes. Just like if you're going to a costume party, you wear a costume. The invitation implies an obligation not just to participate, but to participate *in the right way*.

Outside the parable, in the real world, this means that while Jesus' new life is available to anyone, while everyone gets an invitation, not everyone chooses to participate the way the invitation requires.

This is what separates Jesus from the folk who claim it doesn't matter what you believe, so long as you believe it. Those who believe that all roads lead to Heaven, that all religions are really worshipping the same God, just in different ways.

Jesus says over and over in his teachings: there are many ways that lead to death. Only one way leads to life. And you can't take the road to Cincinnati and expect to end up in Cleveland. It just doesn't work that way.

If you want to accept God's invitation, you also accept the obligation that invitation implies. The obligation to allow the Spirit to form you into the image of Jesus.

That doesn't sound especially tolerant, but we know deep down it has to be that way. Imagine a person accepts Jesus' invitation. They say, I'm in. I want this new life Jesus offers. I'm setting aside all my death-bringing habits and embracing Jesus' life-bringing reality.

Except... I'm not going to quit being racist. I'll go to Church, but I'm going to continue to stereotype people who look different from me, or come from a different socio-economic background.

What? We'd say, that can't happen!

Yeah yeah, I'm into the Jesus stuff. I'll read my bible and pray and all that, but I'm not going to abandon those conversations I've been having online my spouse doesn't know about.

I won't give up that grudge I've been holding. Jesus can have everything else, but not that. I'm not interested in learning to forgive.

I'm not interested in learning to complain less, use my words to build up the people around me rather than tear them down

I want to continue to teach my kids the most important thing they can do is kick a ball into a net or get a certain grade in a broken educational system.

I don't care to learn to be responsible with my money, or to give sacrificially.

I won't learn to say No to things for myself or my family so we actually have time together.

I want Christianity without the Christ. I want Jesus to love me but not require anything from me.

I want to follow Jesus but I don't actually want to do the things Jesus does.

You hear how foolish that sounds? The moral of this story isn't that God's a spoiled brat who throws a tantrum if the party doesn't go his way.

The moral of the story is that God's party is life, and everything else is death. The moral of the story is that we *need* God and we need to be *like* God.

To the legalists who've build a religion that doesn't need God, Jesus says, wake up and come to the party! Quit playing at that terrible, depressing religion that no one actually wants to be a part of (not even you!). Remember when you first found God, how awesome it was. How thrilling, exciting. Come back to God! Get with the party!

And to the relativists whose religion doesn't need God either, Jesus says, Don't you know that all these other paths you're following only end in Death?! If you want life, real life, excessive, abundant, overflowing life, you can only find that at God's party. So quit those toxic, deceptive paths. Get yourself ready for God's party and lets get it started!

And we want to say, Which is it, Jesus? Is everyone invited or does everyone have to be like you?

With this story, Jesus says, Both! The Kingdom of Heaven is *both*. God's new life is *both*. It's holy *and* it's inclusive. There's not a single person in the entire world God doesn't invite to join in with Jesus. Not one person who's beyond God's ability to rescue. And God wants each and every one of us to become like Jesus because *that is what life looks like*.

So in Jesus' story, who are you? Are you the proud person whose religion has you all puffed up? Are you convinced you're good enough the way you are, that you don't need anyone else?

Or are you the comfortable? Are you fine the way you are? Do you have no desire to grow, to become more like Jesus?

I'm so thankful I'm part of a community that both accepts me for who I am and calls me to be better. I have zero interest in hanging out with people who don't want me to become better. Because I know I'm not perfect the way I am. I like myself well enough (obviously), but I want to be better tomorrow than I am today. I want to look more like Jesus next week than I do this week. And I need you as my Church to spur me on. To challenge and encourage me.

I'm also grateful to be part of a community who welcomes me as I am. I have some pretty rough edges. I'm glad that when I have a bad day (or bad week or bad month), my friends don't hold that against me, don't judge me by my worst days but by my best days. They give me space to grow, to fall and to get back up again.

I need both of those: welcome and challenge. You need both of them too. One of my favorite quotes about Jesus is that he came to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

Both. Always. Because that's what we need.

Invitation Examine

You should've received a sort of invitation when you came in today. Take it out

You may be a person today who needs a word of welcome. You've been told God doesn't love you, or that you're not welcomed in Church. I'm not sure why you agreed to show up today, but I'm really glad you did. Because I can tell you unequivocally that God is *for* you. God loves you and you're invited to the party.

Others of you here know you've been invited because you've accepted the invitation. But you're not living up to what the invitation obligates you to. It's time to take serious stock of your life, because you're in danger of missing the party altogether.

And some of you may have refused the invitation altogether. You've got your rules and standards and you've left precious little room for God in your religion. The life you're living looks more like a funeral than a party. It's time to accept God's invitation, loosen up and find the excessive, overflowing life Jesus promises.

Grammap:

Map with PARTY in the middle. On one side are the legalists who refuse God's invitation. On the other are those who've been cast out for not wearing the right clothes. In the middle is God and life.

Scriptures for Further Reading:

Clothe yourself...
Fruit of the Spirit