

"A Wedding Invitation From God"

How many of you have ever gotten an invitation to a wedding? Or sent invitations to your wedding? It's sometimes hard to decide whom to invite, right?

Jesus told a story about a wedding feast, and the guests who were invited. "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'" (Matthew 22:1-2).

Scene 1. It's the day of the wedding. There's joy. There's excitement. Butterflies in nervous stomachs. The household is buzzing – people scurrying around with last minute preparations. A young man is in love. His heart flutters as he thinks about the beautiful woman he is about to marry. This is no ordinary young man. He is *the King's son!* If this were today, it would be like the President's son (or daughter) getting married. Or like a royal wedding in England. There'd be TV cameras and crews, news reporters galore, making sure everything's timed perfectly for worldwide coverage.

The King then sends his servants out to notify those who had been invited that the day and hour had arrived for the wedding! In Jesus' time, wedding invitations were different. A guest received an initial invitation, but with no date or time yet given. So the guest had to be ready. Then when everything was prepared, the guests were asked to come.

This is a parable Jesus told. The fact that this is a "king" hosting the wedding feast is a dead giveaway. Who is the "king"? The king is *God*.

God is inviting people to a joyful wedding feast! Our Creator, the Giver of every good and perfect gift, is the royal Host. He has set His table of delights and invites us to come! We're invited to His Son's special event – to enjoy a wedding feast with His Son.

This is a parable about *the kingdom of God*. To celebrate and enjoy the abundant life that Jesus offers now! To be part of that humongous banquet feast of all the redeemed at the end of time. To share in the incredible riches of heaven forever, as children of God!

Not too many people see being a Christian as being a joyful kind of thing! If you're a Christian, you're saddled with a bunch of "thou shalt nots". You've got to be.....well.....religious. Religious people aren't often regarded as being fun-to-be-around human beings! But here it is: God invites us to a gala wedding feast! Being a follower of Jesus is a joy-producing life!

You may counter, "Yes, but doesn't Jesus say if we follow Him we have to deny ourselves and take up a cross? Isn't there suffering that goes along with being a Christian? Yes. Being a Christian (as we know) isn't all fun and games. God demands obedience. Turning from sin. Making sacrifices for Christ. But that's not the whole story! Jesus didn't say, "I have come, that My followers can lead miserable lives!" He said, "I came, that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Jesus didn't say, "I have told you all of this so that my sadness and

disappointment can be in you. He said, "I have said these things to you, so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:11). "Abundant life." "Complete joy". That's the Jesus follower! The real Christian!

I like what Pastor Jess Moody claims: "Having been in the ministry several years and met thousands of the good Lord's children, I can assure anyone that (God) has hosts of children who are humble, happy and hilarious...they make the urbane, sick, bored secularists seem, at their best, an indigestion brown...a rock ribbed follower of the happy Christ has more fun at a funeral than a non-Christian has at a ball...I have given both sides a fling and the non-Christian way tastes very much like swamp water."

Scene 2. (A little later). The banquet hall is almost empty. (If this were a modern head of state wedding, an hysterical TV producer would be screaming, "C'mon. Get your act together! We go "live" in 19 minutes!" A concerned chef's worrying how to keep the delicacies crisp and the choice cuts of beef from being too well done and tough. The beleaguered bride and groom, with each new update on the situation, plead, "You're telling me none of the guests are here! It can't be!" Did you ever make careful plans for a meal, or party, then be stung by a bunch of "no-shows"?

Actually, *none* of those invited came! "He (the king) sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come" (Matthew 22:3).

Why do people refuse God's invitation to a banquet? His invitation to salvation, wholeness, abundant and eternal life? Many reason, of course.

One is, they don't see this joyful life in people who say they're Christians. Part of that really *is on us*, if we say we're Christians. Would I want everyone to be as joyful and full of life as I am? But the other side of that is many unsaved people think Christians should be perfect. Christians aren't perfect – we're only under construction!

But there are some other reasons why people ignore or reject God's invitation to be part of His kingdom, to be among the redeemed at the wedding banquet. We see some of this in the parable.

Some people joke about it, and don't take it seriously. "But they made light of it..." (Matthew 22:5). For some people, faith and religion is a joke. Do you remember Jesse Ventura, the pro wrestler who became governor of Minnesota? He had this to say about organized religion: It's "a sham and a crutch for weak minded people." Other people say, "What. Me go to church! That'll be the day!"

Others are just too busy to accept God's invitation to life in Christ and a place in His eternal kingdom. "But they made light of it, and went away, one to his farm, another to his business" (verse 5). Isn't that like many people today. Too busy working. Too busy running the kids from this activity to that activity. Too busy with our hobbies. Too busy even doing *good things*, but neglecting the most important thing: our relationship with God.

And then, some people are hostile – hostile towards Christians, hostile towards the Church, against the whole idea of religious faith and commitment to Christ. "The rest seized (the king's) slaves, mistreated them, and killed them" (verse 6). This is more and more the case in our American culture. It's blatantly true of places in the world where Christians are persecuted. God invites us all to a feast, and we resent and reject the invitation in a hard-hearted way. *So the banquet hall is full of empty seats.*

Scene 3. The king's inner chamber. Reality is sinking in. *Everyone* on the guest list said no. *Everyone!* *You just don't do that to a monarch – a king!* The king is flabbergasted. Humiliated. Enraged. So what does he do? Two things. "The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city" (Matthew 22:7). (This is not out of line for what a king back then would have done).

There is a sense in which God is like that. No, God's not a wild-eyed king taking vengeance because his emotions are out of control. Rather, God is holy...and righteous. To ignore or make light of Jesus' death on the cross and the salvation He bought for us brings enormous consequences. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God...whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but will endure God's wrath" (John 3:16-18, 36).

But look at what else the king does. "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" (Matthew 22:8-10). This king isn't satisfied with an empty banquet hall! God longs for His house to be full, His family to be complete. So he invites *anyone and everyone* he can find!

We see this in the ministry of Jesus. John's gospel says Jesus, the Son, came into the world, and the world didn't receive Him. He came to His own people (the Jews), and they didn't receive – but to all who received Him and believed in Him he gave the right to become children of God (see John 1:10-13). Does this mean if some of us consistently put God on hold, or are preoccupied with other things, or flatly say "no" to God's invitation, that God will go to others and invite them? Yep!

This brings us to the final scene. *Scene 4.* Back at the banquet hall. It is packed. There is noise and excitement and laughter. The huge room is filled with both "good and bad". But not the people originally invited.

We see this happen today. People who grew up in a Christian home, with believing parents. Came to church – then got to be 18 or so and stopped coming. Or they still come to church, but

have never taken Christ seriously, or allowed Him to take control of their lives. Meanwhile, someone else finds the Lord. Is truly converted, and discovers the joy of the new life in Christ. They find their way into a church. Maybe they're rough around the edges. They don't know all the do's and don'ts about church life, or all the committees. Maybe some of their ugly pre-conversion behaviors surface at times, and they're not very likable. But they've found a new life in Christ, and they bring a new level of joy and excitement to that congregation!

A man named Todd tells of attending a family reunion at a local park. Everybody was excited about re-connecting with relatives they hadn't seen for a while. But as the family settled in for the picnic, he noticed one young man who seemed out of place. Thin, dressed in threadbare clothing. No one recognized him. It slowly dawned on the family that this young man was probably homeless, and definitely hungry, and that he had wandered into the family reunion hoping to get a good meal. What did they do? They decided to make him a member of their family that day. They fed the young man platefuls of food, and included him in their games and activities. It was a great day!

God extends His gracious invitation to everyone! No matter how good we think we've been...or how bad we know we've been. To everyone spiritually homeless and hungry, God offers the food of life in Jesus!

When you and I send out wedding invitations, we are selective. We only prefer if certain people come. *But God doesn't work that way! God extends to everyone His invitation to joyful life in Christ, a place in His eternal kingdom.*

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