

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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THE PARABLE OF THE WEDDING FEAST (1)

Matthew 22:1-14

The Parable of the Wedding Feast is the third in a series of three and forms the climax to the Parable of the Two Sons (Matthew 21:28-32) and of the Wicked Tenants (Matthew 21:33-46). It contains the good news of an open invitation to salvation. But as we will see, it also contains the sobering reminder of the seriousness of discipleship for those who respond to the invitation. Let's read the story. Matthew 22:1-14, the Parable of the Wedding Feast.

*Matthew 22:1. And Jesus answered and spoke to them again by parables and said:
2 "The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who arranged a marriage for his son,
3 "and sent out his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding; and they were not willing to come.
4 "Again, he sent out other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, "See, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and fatted cattle are killed, and all things are ready. Come to the wedding."
5 "But they made light of it and went their ways, one to his own farm, another to his business.
6 "And the rest seized his servants, treated them spitefully, and killed them.
7 "But when the king heard about it, he was furious. And he sent out his armies, destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city.
8 "Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy.
9 "Therefore go into the highways, and as many as you find, invite to the wedding.'
10 "So those servants went out into the highways and gathered together all whom they found, both bad and good. And the wedding hall was filled with guests.
11 "But when the king came in to see the guests, he saw a man there who did not have on a wedding garment.
12 "So he said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless.
13 "Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'
14 "For many are called, but few are chosen."*

The story

In this parable, the kingdom of heaven is compared to a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He asked his servants to deliver in person the wedding announcement. But people made it known to the servants that they wanted nothing to do with the wedding. Nevertheless, the king continued to make preparations for the forthcoming celebration. When everything was ready, he sent out again his servants to remind the guests that they were invited to the banquet. Not only did the guests pay no attention to the royal invitation, but they also acted in open defiance. One went to his

field, another to his business and others badly mistreated the servants. The king, then, took drastic action against the ungrateful guests, sending out his troops to destroy them.

In spite of these events, the king still wanted people to celebrate his son's wedding with him. Thus he ordered his servants to go out to the street corners and to invite anyone who wished to come to the banquet. The response was fantastic. People came in great numbers.

When the king arrived at the banquet, he surveyed the array of guests and he spotted one person who did not have the appropriate clothing. In amazement, he said to the man, 'Friend, how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man remained silent. Then the king instructed his servants to tie up that person and throw him out of the banquet.

Some questions

You could not have read this parable carefully without being puzzled. There is something problematic with the story. Look at the last few verses of the account. After these people on the streets had been invited and after they accepted the invitation, we are told that the banquet hall was full of guests. Then the king comes, he welcomes them and speaks to them. And he discovers there someone without a wedding garment. He asks this man, 'How did you get in here without a wedding garment?' The man could not say anything. He was speechless. And then, he is thrown out.

Notice this. The man did not reject the invitation. He had accepted the invitation. He was in the banquet already. But he ends up being thrown out because he was not wearing a wedding garment. So a key point in this parable is to explain the meaning of this wedding garment. What does it represent? How can its absence exclude a person from the wedding? We will deal with those questions later in our lesson.

There is another point which demands our attention. Look at the last verse, v. 14. *For many are called, but few are chosen.* This conclusion seems to be rather inappropriate at first sight. Why? Because what we see here is that many were called, and many responded. Remember that the wedding hall was filled with guests. But only one was thrown out - the person without a wedding garment. So the conclusion should have been somewhat different. We should have read something like, 'Many were called and only one was thrown out.' Not, 'Few are chosen.' Surely the conclusion must be that many were called and most of the people remained. Only one was thrown out. But Jesus' conclusion is most unexpected. 'Many are called, few are chosen.' How can 'few' be chosen? The 'many' and the 'few' don't seem to fit very well here. How should we understand this matter?

Few are chosen

The theme of 'many being called and few being chosen' is often used by the Lord Jesus to teach that while many accept God's invitation, only a few of these get into the kingdom. This is seen for example in Matthew 7.13-14 in Jesus' statement about the narrow gate.

*Matthew 7.13. Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are **many**.*

*14 For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are **few**.*

This passage forms the counterpart of 'many are called, few are chosen.' We find a similar message in Matthew 13 in the Parable of the Sower. There are many ways to hear the gospel, but only one way bears fruit. Only one reception, one kind of heart, is acceptable to God. We see it one more time in Jesus' sermon on the end of the world (Matthew 24:4-14) where the word 'many' refers to those who fall away.

But how does that fit the Parable of the Wedding Feast? We are told that many were called, and only one fell away.

Well, I think we have to come to the conclusion that the person without the wedding garment was not the only person at the feast who did not have a proper garment. There were many others, many who were not chosen. So I would like to suggest that we should view the person without a wedding garment as a representative of a whole group of people who were in fact present at the banquet without a wedding garment. Several people were not properly dressed and they were represented by that one man.

This aspect of one person representing a group of people is certainly used in other parables. Take for example the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30. The kingdom of God is compared to servants who are entrusted with talents. Three servants are mentioned. One servant received five talents. Another one had two talents. And the third one had one talent. These three people represent three types of persons. Each person received 'according to his own ability' (Mt 25:15). The different sums of money point out how God recognizes each person as a unique individual with varied circumstances and personality.

In the Parable of the Wedding Feast, the man without a wedding garment represents all the people who did not have a wedding cloth. The Lord Jesus does not address the whole collectively because He asked a question. And the question is, *How did you get in here without the wedding clothes*, which must be answered differently by different people.

You see, at the last judgment, which is what this passage is concerned about, everybody will have to answer for himself. God will address each one of us individually. You will not be addressed as a crowd. The Bible tells us that in the last day, at the judgment, the books will be opened and every person will be judged according to his or her deeds. Your name will be called out and in front of a multitude, you will explain to God why you did what you did, or why you did not do what you should have done. No hiding behind the crowd. Each person will have to answer for himself.

Matthew 8:11-12 is very close to this parable. It has to do with the banquet in the kingdom of God where the faithful servants of God, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are present. It also has to do with people who are being 'thrown into the outer darkness.'

*Matthew 8:11. I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven,
12 while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.*

Those who are thrown out are the people who should have inherited the kingdom. They are the sons of the kingdom. The very sons of the kingdom who should have inherited the kingdom are thrown out. Why? No wedding garment.

From this, let us look more deeply at the parable and try to understand the meaning of the wedding garment.

God's call

The parable begins with the idea of a call. The word 'call' (*kaleo*) occurs 5 times in the first 9 verses (vv. 3a, 3b, 4, 8, 9). The calling of a person is the same word that is translated here in Greek as 'invited.' You can see that there is not much difference in meaning between 'inviting' and 'calling.' When you invite a person, you are calling that person.

This word is used for the calling of the Israelites. We read in Hosea 11:1, *When Israel was a child, I loved him, and I called my son out of Egypt.* This verse is quoted in Matthew 2:15 where the Greek word *kaloe* is used. The same word is applied to Christians as well. In Romans 8:30, Paul writes, *Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.* If you are a Christian, you have been called, called to respond to God and to become His possession.

But observe this. Although you are a Christian, although you have responded to God's invitation to come to the gospel feast, to join the banquet of salvation, you may also turn away from that call, even after having first responded to it.

In the Parable of the Wedding Feast, those who were invited would already have received and accepted an earlier invitation. It was customary to send another invitation to inform those people that it is time to come. And it is this second invitation which is given in v. 3 and repeated in v. 4. Their double refusal is therefore going back on their previous promise. They initially said 'yes,' but now they say 'no.' It is like the disobedient son (Matthew 21:30) in the Parable of the Two Sons and like the tenant farmers (Matthew 21:35-36) in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, whose acceptance of their tenancy carried with it the obligation to pay the rent. The Parable of the Wedding Feast, then, is aimed at the already religious, not at outsiders who reject God's invitation at the first hearing.

So it is possible to be called, to respond to that call, and then to say 'no,' i.e., to turn away from that call. In Galatians 1:6, Paul said to the Galatians, *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel.* 'You have been called and you have first responded to that call. But now you are turning away from that call. And now you are saying 'no.'"

As I said, if you are a Christian, you have been called by God. And you have responded to that call. Now, how does that call come to you? It comes to you in an invitation. For example in Matthew 11:28, Jesus says, *Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden...* When Jesus says, 'Come to Me,' that is an invitation. It is also a call. When you respond to His call, then you become a Christian.

We find the same kind of call in John 7:37. *On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, "If any one thirst, let him come to Me and drink. 'Come to Me all you who thirst, and drink of the water of life.' And as Christians, we responded to that call. We drank of that water of life.*

A mixed community

Let's come back to the last verse of our parable. Jesus said, *For many are called, but few are chosen.* Here comes another point that we must consider. What is the difference between calling and choosing? Well, clearly, calling must be a form of choosing. If you invite people to your house, you have chosen these particular individuals to come to your house. I cannot call somebody whom I did not choose to invite. So calling is a form of choosing, and yet, they are not identical.

Why do I say that? Take for example Judas in John 6:70. The very word 'chosen' used in this passage is applied also to Judas. *Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?* They were called. They were invited. They were chosen. 'I have chosen also Judas, one of the Twelve. Yet, he is a devil.' That is, he is an enemy of God.

Even though one can respond to God's call, and in responding, he has been among the chosen, yet, he can end up being an enemy of God.

Israel is another example of this. The Jews were God's chosen people. *The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the*

earth, we read in Deuteronomy 7:6. They had the privilege of attending the Great Marriage Feast of God's Son. They first said 'yes' to the invitation. But they went back on their word by rejecting the invitation and killing the messengers of the King. As we saw in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, the kingdom was taken away from them and given to a new nation, the community of Jesus' disciples.

Now, Christians can be said to be the chosen people today, the new Israel. We are the 'new nation' that Jesus spoke about in Matthew 21:43 (Parable of the Wicked Tenants) and to whom the kingdom has been entrusted with. This new nation is symbolized in our parable by an indiscriminate collection of people from the streets who responded to the invitation, including both 'bad and good.' Notice, bad and good. When you read the story, you see that the second part focuses on one of those who turn out to be 'bad'. This bad person is consigned to the 'outer darkness' and the 'weeping and the gnashing of teeth.' So to be a member of this new nation is no more a guarantee of salvation than to be born into the old Israel.

This means that we must distinguish between two forms of 'chosen,' i.e. those who are chosen in the present will not necessarily be the people who are still chosen at the final judgment. The 'chosen' in this passage concerns the final judgment because it talks about the final banquet. So the important thing is not whether you and I are chosen right now, but whether on the last day we will still be among the chosen ones.

The concept of a mixed community, within which not all will make it through the ultimate salvation, is a recurrent feature of the Lord's teaching. We can think of Matthew 7:21 where Jesus said, *Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven*. In the Parable of the Tares and the Wheat (Matthew 13:24-30), both plants are allowed to grow together and are separated only at the final judgment. In the Parable of the Dragnet (Matthew 13:47-50), the kingdom of God is likened to a net that gathered fish of every kind prior to the separation of good and bad. In the Parable of the Ten Virgins, both wise and foolish bridesmaids are invited but only the wise get into the feast. You can see that the principle that bad and good are mixed together is often found in Jesus' preaching, and here that principle is applied to the 'new nation,' i.e. the church community.

Entry into the kingdom of heaven may be free, but to continue in it carries conditions. In the previous parable, the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, the warning was that the new tenants must produce the fruit (Matthew 21:41, 43). Here the warning is that one must wear a wedding garment. The man without a wedding garment symbolizes professing Christians who presume on the free offer of salvation by assuming that there are no obligations attached. The parable tells us that without wedding clothes, there can be no guarantee of security.