

Return to Sender
Sermon on Matthew 22:1-14
by
James Murphy
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Children's Church Invitation and Prayer

Brief mention of Mother's Day and thank you to all the mothers

INTRODUCTION:

Good morning. I am James Murphy. It is my privilege today to bring to you God's Word. And today's passage is found in Matthew 22, the first 14 verses. But before we turn there, I would like to relate to you a story from our own time with a similar pattern.

As you are aware I am sure, presidential inauguration ceremonies are *kinda of a big deal*. Thousands fill the DC mall, as people of both parties young and old turn out to see the historic event of an American President taking the Presidential Oath of Office and entering into his first term as our Chief Executive, Head of State and Commander-in-Chief. Former presidents, and other recognizable dignitaries also turn out to witness the ceremony.

Beginning with FDR's second inauguration and the enactment of the 20th Amendment in 1937, Inauguration Day has occurred on January 20th, or in cases when the 20th fell on a Sunday, it has occurred on the 21st. - And as you would guess, the weather is often very cold.

On one particularly cold inauguration day, many of the invited guests actually didn't show. During the morning hours leading up to the swearing in ceremony, temperatures hovered in the low to mid 20's. The wind was gusting from 20-25 mph, putting the wind chill down to around 10 degrees. As the ceremony approached, the grand stands behind the podium were

nearly empty. Now, invitations went out as soon as the election was decided back in November, and because of the tight security and extensive procedures involved with gaining access to an area so close to so many people vital to our government, the invited guests were told to arrive early and to be in their seats behind the podium hours before the ceremony began. It wasn't long before it became apparent to the officials that many of the seats in full view of the shivering standing-room-only crowd, and more importantly the rest of the country and the world, would be vacant. As the new president raised his hand and affirmed his oath, and as he delivered his big speech, images would be beamed to warm living rooms that would seem to suggest, the country wasn't behind our new leader. People everywhere would wonder, who would refuse such a high honor? Couldn't the new president drum up a few hundred supporters to sit in the stands behind him on his big day? What would the world think? The impending embarrassment had to be averted.

Soon presidential staffers were dispatched throughout the Capitol Building to gather in worker bees from the halls of the Capitol. These were citizens who did not receive the first invitation. These were average working folks like you and me, not famous politicians, not powerful campaign donors, not hollywood stars, or business moguls.

As it happened, I was working in the Capitol that day. At the time, I worked at the White House as a Marine Officer responsible for air operations planning for the President, and I was one of the average folks pulled out of hallways and invited to sit in the stands. As I said, many of those who were invited simply did not come. They made excuses about the cold, and ignored the high honor given to them by the most powerful man in the world. Well, the seats needed to be filled, and by the time the new President stood in his place, cameras rolling, the stands were full.

Today we continue our study in Matthew, beginning with the 22nd chapter. We will see here a similar story with a message much more relevant to us than the decision of some big whigs to avoid uncomfortable temperatures. We will see an original invitation sent and rejected, like a improperly addressed letter stamped Returned to Sender. And we will see a subsequent invitation received and accepted by many others until the banquet hall was full. Please join me as I read Matthew 22:1-14. I will then

open us in prayer. Pay careful attention, as this is God's Word, which is faithful and true.

Matthew 22:1-14 The Parable of the Wedding Feast

22 And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, 2 "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, 3 and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. 4 Again he sent other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, "See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast." 5 But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, 6 while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. 7 The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. 8 Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. 9 Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.' 10 And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests. 11 "But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. 12 And he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. 13 Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' 14 For many are called, but few are chosen." - This is God's Word.

"The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord endures forever."

OPENING PRAYER:

Let us pray - Heavenly Father, thank you for your abundant grace toward us, your church. Thank you for your Word today. Holy Spirit, thank you for enabling us to understand and apply your truth in our own lives, as we examine again this wonderful book, and consider how we might know and love the Son more. Thank you Dear Jesus for your gracious invitation to us, poor undeserving sinners, to join you at your glorious wedding feast.

Please help us to grasp more firmly today just how wonderful it is to know you and to be known by you. May we live today and always for your glory. We, your Church thank you in the matchless name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

So we have come again into this wonderful Gospel here in the 22nd chapter, into a continuing discussion between Jesus and the Jewish chief priests and elders. This section is actually the climatic parable in a series of three that we have been studying over the past several weeks. In chapter 21 we studied Christ's arrival as the humble King of Israel seated upon a donkey on Palm Sunday. We saw his wrath on display in the outer court of the temple as he overturned the tables of the money changers. We witnessed the indignant response of the chief priests and scribes when he healed the outcast, blind and lame, enabling them to enter the inner courts. We read about the fruitless fig tree, representing Israel, that was cursed by Jesus for not producing the fruit for which it was made. The conversation with the chief priests and elders before us today in chapter 22 began in verse 23 of chapter 21 when they questioned Jesus' authority. And in the Parable of the Two Sons, these same Jewish leaders were told by Jesus, "Truly I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom before you." Ouch! I am sure that didn't go over well.

In Jesus 2nd parable in this series, the Parable of the Tenants, He said to them, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits." Well the news for the chief priests and elders isn't going to get any better in today's parable. However, let us remember that God's word is not just relevant to its first audience. The warnings and blessings in today's passage are also relevant to us. So pay careful attention.

Here in Matthew 22:1-3 Jesus continues his discourse with the Jewish religious leaders. **"And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come."**

A quick word on the cultural context. As Jesus' first audience heard this parable, they would understand the importance of the invitation. They

would have understood that the invitation of a king was a very big deal, and that it was really more a command than an invitation. Like the invitation to sit behind the President on Inauguration Day, but way more important. They would have also understood that a wedding feast, particularly one thrown by someone important, in this example a king, would have been a multi-day affair, probably lasting an entire week. Turning down such an invitation by a king would be very improper, and would most certainly invite punishment. Christ was telling the Jewish religious leaders, and Israel by extension, that the kingdom of heaven is like this wedding banquet. The son in the parable is Jesus. They and their fathers had the promises. They are the people to whom God sent the prophets. They are the king's invited guests. The Jews are the ones, who just one chapter ago shouted, **"Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"** And yet in less than a week, many of the same people would stand in a nearby courtyard and shout, "Crucify Him!"

Reading on we see that the king of the parable sent his servants out multiple times. And we know from the Bible that Yahweh sent His prophets to Israel, including John the Baptist, multiple times to tell them to repent and believe. Not long after the account we are reading today, Jesus sent out His Apostles. And each time God's servant messengers went out, many ignored God's invitation. Many of God's servant messengers were killed. Resuming in verse 4, **"Again he sent other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, 'See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.' But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them."**

Today, equipped with God's Word and the Holy Spirit, we are God's servant messengers. We are the ones going out into the streets, into our offices, out to ball games and into living rooms carrying the King's invitations. The preparations are ready. Christ's sacrificial work is complete. The banquet hall awaits.

Notice in the passage that the people ignored the previous invitation. Here again, they impolitely ignore the servants when they offer the king's second invitation. Instead they offer excuses. One goes to his farm, one to his business. The point is that both farmers and merchants, rural people and city folk, turn aside to routine mundane pursuits and pass on the king's feast. Now we all know people today that say they are too busy to consider the Gospel, life in the Church, a relationship with the King. They say they don't have time; they are not interested; or perhaps they will wait until they get married; start a family; or until their kids are older. Or they say they will wait until they "get their acts together" before they "get into religion". Just like the people in the parable, each of these folks puts off the King for everyday things they find more important.

Notice also in our passage how disinterest turns into violence toward the servants. Here we are reminded of how Yahweh's prophets were often slaughtered, how Christ himself was killed, and how nearly all of Jesus' Apostles die as martyrs. I can't help but sense that Christ is speaking to us, His servant messengers today. Many today are "treated shamefully" for the sake of Christ. Many are even killed for being His messengers to the lost or for simply believing the Gospel. You see, being a servant of the king does not mean that you will given a life of ease in the glow of the banquet. Believers, you are made to go out as His servant messenger to bring the light from the banquet table out to a dark world.

Returning to the passage, we see that the king is zealous for His kingdom, and disobedience and rejection of His invitation results in punishment. First the king sent two sets of servants with invitations. This time he sends troops with judgement. We read on, vv 7-8, **"The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy.'"**

Here we have reached the main point and key verse of this passage. The king pours out his wrath upon those who did not accept his gracious invitation and declared, "those invited were not worthy". I imagine in the ears of the chief priests and elders, this statement must have further infuriated them. Our passage today is in fact bracketed by accounts of their reaction. Last week we learned that the Pharisees knew that these

parables were about them. Next week we will see how they plotted to entangle Jesus in His words and get him in trouble with the Roman authorities. But this parable is bigger than the religious leaders who first heard it. In the immediate context it is about the chief priests and elders, and the people of Israel, who were rejecting their promised Messiah. But by extension, it is about people today, who have heard the Gospel and have ignored and rejected God's invitation to an eternal relationship with Him; who have turned aside to the mundane common pursuits of life instead of enjoying the very real and tangible, and everlasting peace of Yahweh's wedding banquet.

Graciously, the king sends more servants out with a new round of invitations. Continuing in vv. 9 and 10, **“Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.’ And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests.”** This time the king sends his servants out to the main roads, and likely the intersections of roads where people gather. This time he sends his invitation to new people, and by this we (and the religious leaders Jesus was addressing) are to understand that God's invitation is going outside of Israel. God's New Covenant in Christ is not just for the Jews. It is not just for the genetic descendants of Abraham. It is for all who believe in Jesus and trust in Him as Messiah, both Jews and Gentiles. Let me take a moment here and point out that none of us is worthy of God's grace. Romans 11:6 tells us that if we could make ourselves worthy of God's acceptance by being good, “grace would no longer be grace”. In that sense, no one is worthy. Each of us who hears the Gospel is invited. But only by grace through faith are any of us saved.

Notice in the passage how the servants gather in all that they find, both bad and good? The job of the servant wasn't to discriminate. It wasn't to pre-judge or weigh the suitability of the invited. Believers, do you find yourself doing that? The servants in our passage were charged with inviting all that they found. The word order here interesting, and I believe it is significant that the people who the servants bring in are described as both “bad and good”, in that order. You see, the striking thing about these people is not only that they were not on the original wedding banquet invite list, but that there were both “bad and good” people invited. This

description must have really rattled the Pharisees. After all, for them being good was the name of the game. Obeying the Law was paramount. Of course, we know from God's Word, that the Law serves to reveal to us our inadequacy in following it, and ultimately brings us to the foot of the Cross where our imperfection and sinfulness is covered by the righteousness of Christ's perfection. Friends, we are certainly not "basically good" as the world suggests. We all fall short of God's perfect standard and are only invited into fellowship with Him by grace, which is again, unearned, undeserved, favor from God.

Here in this passage, Jesus' point I believe is to show the Pharisees that the King's invitation, having been rejected by them and many other Jews, was going out to other people outside Israel, and that "goodness" was not a prerequisite for being invited. Jesus was telling them that the wedding banquet hall of Christ would be filled, and that they would be left outside.

This next section has some hard things in it for us. Let's read on, beginning with verse 11, and again please pay close attention. **"But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. And he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless."** First thing to notice here is the access of the king. He walks among His guests and sees them individually. He doesn't look down from a distance from some Heavenly balcony. The passage says he comes in to the banquet hall to "look at the guests". Believers, we worship a personal God who is Emmanuel, God with us. When we join together in this building as a church, and join our worship with believers across the globe every Lord's Day, we do so in view of, indeed in the presence of, the King. As we lift our voices in song and in prayer, as we worship Him through the study of His Word, He is here with us. He sees us and hears us. He is with us. In the parable, there is no mention of fear among those who belong at the table. Here at Potomac Hills, there is joy as we consider that our Heavenly Father is here with us. However, in the passage, the king sees someone at the wedding banquet who does not belong. He comes up to that individual and addresses him directly, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?"

Have you ever been thrown out of some place you didn't belong? I have. Have you ever hunched down in your seat, hoping that some authority would not see you? Have you ever sat in a class, unprepared, dodging eye contact with the teacher during the lesson? This is how I picture this guy, this interloper at the banquet. The king is walking among the guests. The interloper watches in dread as he moves through the crowded hall, weaving through the tables. He knows that he does not belong.

The same day I was invited to sit in the stands behind the new president as he was sworn in, I was ejected from another scene, on the other side of the Capitol Building later that day. As the aviation planner for the President, I was responsible for orchestrating the departure aboard Marine One of the outgoing President at the conclusion of the ceremony. So standing near the President's limousine, on the back side of the Capitol, opposite the DC Mall, radio in hand, helicopter ready to depart, I stood with a pair of my colleagues waiting for the outgoing President to come out of the building, get into the limo and drive the 100 yards to the awaiting helicopter. As it happened there was an unscheduled delay, and we stood there for quite some time. Suddenly an email arrived on one of my colleague's Blackberrys. It was one of those ominous emails in ALL CAPS with lots of exclamation points. I am sure everyone here knows that ALL CAPS is the electronic text equivalent of yelling. It simply said, "YOU ARE IN THE SHOT! GET OUT OF THERE!!!!" You see all of the network cameras were positioned on a platform and aimed directly at the limo and at the door we were standing beside. With the action on the other side of the building over, and the departure of the outgoing president expected at any moment, the three of us were on TV, on all of the networks! You see in our line of work, it was highly inappropriate for us to be noticed at all, much less plastered on millions of TV sets. So, even though we thought we were important, even though we thought we were in the right place, we were unceremoniously ejected and cast out of view. In fact, I remember reading the email and practically jumping out of my skin as we immediately leapt behind one of those big stone columns. It must have appeared to everyone in TV Land like the three of us were suddenly taking fire from the press box. A few nervous moments later, we oozed out of sight and exited stage left, hoping we weren't going to get in any trouble from the higher ups. I am sure I even gnashed my teeth at some point during the whole debacle.

But how do we handle this out of place guest in our passage? There are multiple ways to interpret this passage. One might say that he represents a believer, who hasn't corrected his worldly behavior and wasn't suited for the party. Or perhaps, this is an unbeliever that doesn't belong because he hasn't earned the honor of sitting at the table. Some commentators suggest that this is someone who hasn't put on the wedding clothes provided to him by the host, and like the first case, has not sanctified himself enough through good works and proven his right to remain at the table. In any case, we see that the man is speechless. He has nothing to offer the king in his defense.

Understanding how to read this passage is very important because the parable is about to take a dramatic turn. Verse 13, **“Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’** We had servants with invitations for many, then soldiers with judgement for a city, now we have attendants with handcuffs for an individual. What do we do with this? It all sounds pretty severe. Who is this guy who gets kicked out of the party, and why?

First, it is important to realize the banquet is a picture of the visible church here on Earth. It is not a picture of our fellowship with God in Heaven. No one will be admitted to Heaven, only to later be ushered out. And in this life, no believer will lose his salvation once received by genuine faith in Christ's completed work. And no person will earn or keep his salvation because of his own work. You don't keep your salvation because you look the part. You aren't given salvation as a result of cleaning up your act. So we have Christ's visible church in view in these verses. The visible church is what you see here, in this room, and in churches of many denominations all across this globe. The visible church is made up of all sorts of people. Some of those people are not believers. Many are. The believers are what constitute the invisible church, the universal church with a Big “C”, the true church. And the point here in this part of the parable is that God, like the king, sees and knows the difference. He knows who belongs.

So what? Why is all this important? How is it relevant to us here at Potomac Hills? The point of all this is that God gave His grand story of sin and redemption, rebellion and salvation, to His people from the very beginning. And we read here in Matthew 21 and 22 three parables saying there are consequences for rejecting the promised Messiah. In verse 13 we learn that God knows if you are playing church, if you are trusting in the faith of your parents, your friends, in your attendance record, your giving, or your goodness or good intentions. The king knows who belongs at the banquet hall. Those who do not belong are taken away and separated from the glow and fellowship of the wedding feast. They are put in an inescapable, graceless eternal existence where they will weep in conscious awareness of the salvation they rejected. They will grind their teeth endlessly in anguish as God's Forgiven feast at Christ's table. The thought of such a fate should make us shudder.

Our last verse today, verse 14, continues, **“For many are called, but few are chosen.”** The Gospel message, goes out to many. You have heard it today. If you attend here it is hard to miss. The songs we sing, the prayers offered, the sacraments administered, the Biblical teaching from this pulpit, in Sunday School classrooms, our Home Groups, prayer meetings, Men's and Women's Bible studies - week after week, they are all permeated with the Gospel. The Gospel is at the very center of who we are and everything we do here. The Gospel is the "Main Thing" at Potomac Hills. But if you missed it, here it is again - Christ, the sinless God-man, perfect only son of our Heavenly Father, was sent here to give His life as a payment for sins. He did this not because you deserved it, not because you earned it, not because you attend church, not because you are a "good person", not because of ANYTHING you will ever do. His sacrifice continues to satisfy the righteous requirements of a just and holy God who cannot leave sin unpunished. 1 Cor 5:21 says, **“For our sake he made him [that is Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”** Belief in Christ's work on your behalf - His obedient substitutionary, sacrificial death on a Roman cross and His resurrection three days later - is the only way to avoid being eternally punished for your sin. Simply put, either Jesus Christ is punished for your sin, or you will be. Friends, it is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone that we "become the righteousness of God." Apart from faith in Christ there is no way to please God, no way to have a seat at his

eternal wedding feast, and there is no way to fully enjoy His blessings at His banquet in this life either.

It has been said that churches have three types of people in them: Believers, Non-Believers, and Make-Believers. Friend, what are you? God knows the difference, even if we do not. Attending church does not save you from the judgement of God. Only faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ can save you - only your faith, not your parents' faith, not your spouse's faith, or your friend's faith - YOUR faith alone in Christ alone.

In today's passage we have seen again how Yahweh's people, the Israelites, rejected their kingly Messiah. In the weeks and months to come in Matthew we will see their rejection of Christ further unfold. We have heard Christ's proclamation that those who were invited first, that is the Jews, were not worthy. We saw how Christ sent his servants out to the streets to gather in his people. We have also seen that merely being among the guests, doesn't ensure you belong at the table. God knows who is a genuine child of the king. He knows who has trusted him for salvation. The rest are excluded from the banquet.

Have you trusted in Christ? Do you believe the Gospel?

Everyone here has heard the Gospel today. My prayer is that you would be drawn by God's Spirit to receive by faith His invitation to join Christ's great eternal wedding feast. I pray that today you would begin to enjoy the abundant eternal life Christ purchased for you. I pray that by faith you have a permanent seat at His wedding banquet.

Believers, we are God's servants charged with going out into the streets to invite as many as we find, leaving our prejudices and preconceived notions about the suitability of those we invite behind. We invite. God will do the work of sorting out those who respond. God's charge to us believers is to live a life that is inviting; to speak graciously; to administer mercy; and to serve and love your neighbors humbly. Believers, we need to BE the invitation. We also need to invite, not just invite people to church, but invite them into friendship. Invite them to lunch or dinner, or to just hang out. We need to engage the culture, engage our neighbors, our friends, spend time with them, find things you have in common, things they enjoy and meet

them there. We need to be good employees, good neighbors, good friends. We need to return tools when we borrow them, share our tools when others need them, ask for forgiveness, give forgiveness, give our time - to our neighbors, our co-workers, our families. I had a pastor who said often, "We need to love people who are like us, people who are not like us, and people who do not like us." In short, we should be living examples of what grace looks like. Do that, and people will know that you have something they need. Without clubbing them with Scripture verses, or cornering them with forced out of place questions, they will know you belong to the king. At a minimum, you will have debunked their bad impressions of Christians and won a new friend. In the end, they will see the invitation in you.

Please take a few moments to consider what you have heard today. Ask yourself, "Are you going through the motions? Are you playing church? What are you trusting in? Are you trusting Him for your salvation? If you do Friend, God's word promises you that He will never leave you or forsake you. Sadly in this life, relationships with other people often fail. But God will never fail you. He will never leave you. Believe the Gospel and you will immediately begin to enjoy a relationship with your King that will never end. He will forever forgive you and make you permanently acceptable and righteous in His sight.

If you are a believer here today, ask yourself, "Am I a living invitation for the Gospel? Do people know that I belong to Christ? What am I doing to bring people to wedding banquet of the king?"

The point of today's parable is that there are consequences for rejecting the Messiah's invitation. Please do not reject the king. Consider those things for a few moments and I will close us in prayer.

Closing Prayer:

Let us pray - Heavenly Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we thank you first for your amazing grace. The fact that anyone of us might be invited into a relationship with you is evidence of your mercy and grace. As the psalmist said, "You have not treated us as our sins deserve". Instead you have embraced us with forgiveness and love we could never earn and will never deserve. Thank you Father for your amazing love toward us, demonstrated

so humbly by your Son. I pray Father that we would be moved to patiently, graciously, and humbly share the Gospel with those who do not know you; that our very lives, the way we act, the things we say, the way we respond, the way we serve, would be your invitation to a lost and hurting world that does not know what it means to enjoy the peace and fellowship that comes with being your children. I pray that those here that do not know you, would be drawn by your Spirit this very day, to believe and to trust in Christ, and take a seat alongside your Church in a celebration that will never end. Thank you Lord for this day that you have made. May we give you all the honor and glory. Father, we thank you for our mothers and the mothers here among us, and those special women who serve as mothers to us. May they feel loved and appreciated every day of the year. We pray all these things in accordance with your perfect will and in Christ's matchless name. Amen.