

11/17/19

The Proper Way to Prepare for a Wedding
Matthew 22:1-14, Revelation 19:6-9
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From September 21 to October 26, I had four weddings in five weeks in three states. Jill and I flew and drove more than 8,500 miles to attend them. It was an adventurous and enjoyable few weeks, and we had experiences we'll always remember. Hopefully, weddings are fun for everyone involved, but they also cause more than a little stress. Weddings are stressful because so much work, planning and preparation goes into the countless details and decisions that are a part of leading up to the wedding day and everyone's expectations are high. Once someone says, "Yes," to a proposal, a process begins of choosing a date and a venue for the wedding and the reception, asking someone to be the officiant, and one of the hardest parts of all, deciding on the guest list and who sits where at the reception. There are decisions about dresses and tuxedos or suits, flowers, what kind of food to serve, and what kind of music to play. Weddings tend to reflect the couple and their families. They can be simple and small or elaborate and large. They don't tend to be inexpensive. Here are some photos from the four weddings of first, Heidi Tubman and Frank Korinko, Tory Summey and Alicia Frank, Brittany Bakanowski and Alex Perry, and John Barr and Sarah Holden. You can see one thing all the couples and families have in common is how happy they look. They got to celebrate the most special day of their lives with family and friends who in many cases traveled great distances to be part of their wedding celebration.

But imagine how you'd feel if you were getting married, or as the mother or father of the bride or groom, to go through all the work and preparations of hosting a wedding and having the joyful expectation of a wonderful celebration, but then everyone you invited declined to come, didn't even respond, or worse. Jesus tells a parable about the kingdom of heaven that involves exactly that scenario in *Matthew 22:1-14*. "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**. He sent his slaves to call those who had been **invited** to the **wedding banquet, but they would not come**. Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been **invited**: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the **wedding banquet**.'" **But they made light of it and went away**, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. 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.

'But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a **wedding** robe, and he said to him, "**Friend**, how did you get in here without a **wedding**

robe?" And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." **For many are called, but few are chosen."**

In case there's any doubt what this parable is about, the word "wedding" is mentioned **eight times**. Weddings can be quite elaborate, costing thousands upon thousands of dollars for clothes, flowers, photography, reception, and food. Weddings have a way of becoming all-consuming for people, so much so that sometimes important details can be overlooked. Eighteen years ago, on July 22, 2001 after the last worship service of the day in the Chapel, I was greeting people downstairs a little after 12:00 noon when Jill came to tell me I had an urgent call from the Old Sea Pines Inn. I called the Inn and the owner told me they had a wedding that was supposed to take place at 12:30, but there was a problem. They didn't have anyone to perform the wedding. For some reason the couple who had come from off Cape thought part of the package the Inn provided was an officiant to do the ceremony. The Inn obviously assumed the couple had arranged for someone to officiate. So now both families and all the guests were gathered at the Inn decked out in their finest clothes, the food for everyone was prepared, the Inn was all decorated, but they had no one to marry the bride and groom. I told them I'd be right down. I grabbed a wedding ceremony out of my files, ran next door, jumped in the car, and went to the Inn. When I arrived, the looks on people's faces were priceless.

I introduced myself to the grateful owners, the anxious father and the bewildered bride. I looked at the bride and asked, "What's your name? What's the groom's name?" Then I went and found the groom and best man and made sure they had the rings. I told everyone to relax and that everything was going to be fine, I'd done this many times. No later than many weddings, we got everyone to their places, then the women and finally the bride and her father came down the aisle, everything went as smoothly as the women's silk dresses. It was a lot of fun for me and afterward everyone was so grateful. I told them: "Now you'll always remember your wedding and you'll have a great story to tell." Jill came with me to the wedding because that day was our 12th wedding anniversary and we had planned to go out to eat to celebrate, which we did.

That is the most extreme example from my experience of people forgetting something important at a wedding. I've also had a couple who forgot to get a Marriage License which is also a significant oversight. While both those situations worked out fine, sometimes there are consequences for not being prepared for a wedding. **Today's parable is an allegory about the consequences of not being prepared for a wedding.** An allegory means that each character, object or event represents something else. In the parable of the wedding banquet, the king who gives the wedding banquet is God and his son is Jesus. The slaves who are sent out to invite people to the banquet are prophets. This is a parable of judgment. God is gracious and generous in sending out the invitation, not once but twice. The food is prepared and on the table. The big elaborate banquet is all set, and that's when things don't go as

expected. Let's look at the parable and what it teaches about the proper way to prepare for a wedding, especially the wedding of the Son of God.

The first thing we need to do to properly prepare for a wedding is to confirm we'll attend. In the parable, God gives the invitation but those who were invited "**made light of it and** went away." They didn't grasp the significance, importance and urgency of the invitation. Can you imagine how hurt you'd feel if you invited people to your wedding and they didn't even have the courtesy or respect to respond? Or even worse, if they told you they were coming so you planned accordingly and paid for their meals with the caterer. And then on the day of the wedding, they told you, "I've got to work today, I've got stuff to do, I'm not coming." How upset would you be? In the parable, this is no ordinary invitation to consider and no typical wedding. As the angel says in *Revelation 19:9*, this is "**the marriage supper of the Lamb.**" This is the messianic banquet that Jesus mentions in *Matthew 8:11-12*, when he reveals that many of the folks who were first invited aren't going to end up with seats at the banquet table. Jesus said, "many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

There is plenty of evidence in *Matthew's Gospel* that the author was deeply disturbed by the mixed state of the church. In his view, there were too many false prophets and false disciples whose lives weren't consistent with what true followers of Christ are to believe and do (see *Matthew 7:21-23*). This is still very much the case today. This is the third parable about this issue in *Matthew*, the others being the Weeds in the Wheat (*Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43*), and the great net and the fish (*Matthew 13:47-50*). In today's parable, the king sends the slaves out again to bring in everyone they find, "Both bad and good."

The second thing we need to do to properly prepare for a wedding after confirming we'll attend is to wear appropriate clothes. One of the situations that frequently happens with people ordering rental tux's and picking them up the day before the wedding is sometimes, they don't fit, and urgent changes need to be made to make sure someone is properly dressed. Different types of weddings call for different attire. The part of Jesus' parable in *Matthew 22* that most people find uncomfortable is about the guest without wedding clothes. Why is the king so harsh to a man who was suddenly and unexpectedly invited to a wedding banquet? After all it was the king who told his slaves to bring in everyone they could find. Remember, however, this isn't a news report; it's an allegory. The wedding banquet is the age to come. The king asks, "**Friend**, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" The word translated as "**Friend**" occurs three times in *Matthew*: with the unhappy early worker in the parable of the generous landowner in chapter 20:13 where the landowner says, "**Friend** I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?", second with this man who isn't properly attired for the wedding celebration ("**Friend**, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" 22:12), and finally with Judas in the Garden of Gethsemane after he has betrayed Jesus with a kiss ("**Friend**, do

what you are here to do." *Matthew 26:50*). **Each time "Friend" is used to reproach a person who is clearly in the wrong.** In Matthew's view of the world, we don't want to be remotely like these three people—we don't want to be selfish, ungracious, unprepared, or to outright betray the Lord by our actions.

The required wedding outfit the man is missing is **righteousness, that is, behavior in accordance with Jesus' teachings** (*Matthew 28:19*). Perhaps that's why the language of changing clothes is used so many times in the Bible to describe giving up our old way of life and putting on our new identity as one who belongs to and is becoming like Jesus. In one of Jesus' best-known parables in *Luke 15:22*, when the son who had gone off and gotten himself in all kinds of trouble returned home, his father said, "Quickly, bring out **a robe**—the best one—and put it on him." Paul writes in *Galatians 3:27*, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ **have clothed yourselves with Christ.**" In *Colossians 3:12*, Paul says, "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, **clothe yourselves** with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." (See also *Romans 13:12-14*; *Ephesians 6:11*; *Revelation 3:4*; *6:11*; *19:8*). According to Jesus and Paul, each of us needs to do this; we need to be properly dressed by being both **clothed with Christ** and **in the fine linen of righteous deeds**, bright and pure for the wedding supper of the Lamb.

In today's parable, the man is speechless because he has no defense; **he accepted the invitation of the gospel but refused to conform his life to the gospel.** The parable is seeking to encourage vigorous effort on our part to live the Christian life because there are dire consequences to accepting God's invitation and doing nothing except showing up. That's not the proper way to prepare for a wedding, and it's not the proper way to prepare for the Last Judgment. Sometimes we can have trouble even showing up. In the late 1990's a wedding was scheduled for the Chapel. The wedding party was staying at Ocean Edge right down 6A and everything went fine at the rehearsal Friday evening. On Saturday, the bridal party told their limo driver to simply turn left out of Ocean Edge and the church was two miles down the road. Unfortunately, no one in the limo was paying attention when the Limo pulled out of Ocean Edge, turned left and started driving. The problem was the driver had pulled out of the Ocean Edge entrance on Route 137 and not 6A. They ended up driving around Harwich while Phyllis Van Nest played and played and played the organ. The frantic bride and her attendants arrived about 30 something minutes after the wedding was supposed to start as the guests baked in the afternoon heat.

We want to be people who do more than show up because this parable is a warning to Christians like ourselves who are in the church that just showing up isn't enough. Our Christian faith is to be manifested in deeds of love, mercy, generosity, compassion, justice, and truth.

We prepare for a wedding by taking the invitation seriously, clothing ourselves appropriately, and thirdly, by making any necessary changes to be ready for the big

day. Just as a wedding requires commitments and changes by everyone involved—on those getting married as well as their parents, families and friends—so we're to be continuously changing as we follow Jesus and do what he taught.

When my friend from seminary, Todd was married in Minnesota 31 years ago, I was in the wedding. Our classmate David officiated at the ceremony. David told the story of a very nervous bride who couldn't calm herself before the ceremony. He said, "The pastor tried to assure her, 'All you have to do is walk down the aisle, stand before me at the altar, and we'll sing the hymn.' You can imagine everyone's surprise to hear the bride saying loudly enough for others to hear as she came forward, 'Aisle-Altar-Hymn,' (I'll Alter Him)."

While I don't advocate seeking to change our spouse as an approach to a successful marriage, when it comes to following Jesus, it's the Lord who says about us, "I'll alter him, I'll alter her." When it comes to wedding clothes and people, **we all need alterations.** We all need the humility to recognize in ourselves the habits we have that the Lord could alter for the better.

I can say Jill and I took marriage seriously because we went for six sessions of premarital counseling, **before we got engaged.** We talked about marriage, our family backgrounds, and we decided to go forward. Others are not as serious about the idea of being married as Jill and I were. Like the woman who was married four times to four very different men. She married a millionaire, an actor, a pastor, and a funeral director. When asked why she married such vastly different men she replied that she, "Married one for the money, two for the show, three to get ready, and four to go."

Matthew shares the parable of the wedding banquet because he wants each of us to be ready to go. He wants us to live as Jesus teaches and to enter the wedding supper of the Lamb clothed in righteousness, prepared to lift our voices in praise and adoration. He doesn't want us getting complacent as disciples of Jesus or worse to be utterly deceiving ourselves or others. As Paul says in *1 Corinthians 10:12*, "So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall."

God's invitation is extended to each of us to attend a banquet given in Christ's honor. It's an invitation to be taken seriously and not lightly because it has eternal consequences that begin now. Jesus' parable makes the point that just saying "Yes," and showing up is not enough. Saying we want to come to the wedding celebration means that we clothe ourselves appropriately with the virtues and qualities Jesus taught and demonstrated. Finally, we recognize that the Lord is going to have to make some alterations in us with the help of the Holy Spirit so that our wedding garment of righteousness is a good fit.

If you don't want to be shut out of the celebration, then you need to commit yourself to Jesus as your Savior, Lord and Tailor. A tailor measures you every time you come in and doesn't make assumptions or take your word about your size because we can easily deceive ourselves,

or others, about our dimensions. Jesus takes our measure not just once when we make a decision to follow him, but daily, and if you give him permission he'll help you with the alterations you need to make each day to be properly prepared and dressed to attend the wedding banquet of the Lord.

Revelation 19:5-9, "And from the throne came a voice saying, 'Praise our God, all you his servants, all who fear him, small and great.' Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out, 'Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure'— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, 'Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.' And he said to me, 'These are true words of God.'"

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What is one of the most memorable weddings you've ever attended? What made it special?
2. If you're married, what do you remember about your wedding day?
3. In the parable of the wedding banquet, what do we learn about those who are originally invited? How do they respond to the invitation?
4. Who does the king subsequently invite to the wedding banquet? What's the problem with the one guest (*Matthew 22:11-12*)?
5. What does it mean to be in the presence of the king without proper "wedding clothes"?
6. What does this parable suggest about the kingdom of heaven?
7. How do you understand the phrase (*Matthew 22:14*), "For many are called, but few are chosen."? How can you make sure you're properly attired for the king's wedding banquet?