

October 9 2005 The Invitation

A Sermon by Pastor Brad Smith

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The Sermon in a sentence: The invitation to salvation is open to all, but it must be received through the righteousness of Jesus.

Why I am preaching it: So the congregation will consider their response to the Gospel.

The past two weeks we looked at two similar parables. First, we looked at God as a father with two sons. Both were told to go work in the father's vineyard. The one who originally seemed to be right on track answered, "I will, sir," but he ended up disobeying. The second one started out disobedient, but ended up in the vineyard.

Last week we saw God as the owner of a vineyard that was rented out to tenants. Once again, the original tenants rejected the authority of the owner, and they ended up getting replaced by ones who had originally had no place in the vineyard.

In both cases, we saw that the vineyard represented the kingdom of God. In each instance, the Jewish religious leaders were those who got cast out, and the original outcasts got in. At the time that Jesus was speaking, those who made it in were the repentant tax collectors and prostitutes. Taking a longer view, they were Gentiles who came to faith in Jesus—that is, people like us.

It seems to me that both of those parables are true-to-life. We can imagine a father instructing his sons to work. We can also imagine a son who says yes and doesn't follow through, and a son who starts out rebellious but has a change of heart. We were probably that way in our own families sometimes.

It's the same with the second parable. We can imagine how tenants would want to keep the entire profit of their work. We might even have a little sympathy for them. In recent years in Zimbabwe, which is right next to South Africa, landowners have been killed or driven off their land, and the tenants have become the new landowners. A local application could be the forced sale of Bishop Estate leased land. I suppose some of the Trustees might have identified themselves with this landowner who was denied his right to a return on his property. So these stories make some sense for us.

This week's passage is a continuation of the parables we have been considering. It includes two parables. One is about invited guests who refused to come to the wedding, and then the good and the bad guests who finally made it in. The other is about a guest who was not properly clothed for the banquet. I entitled today's sermon "The Invitation," but I could have called it, "Three Types of Guests." So as we look at these parables, let's try tracking with the guests to see what they were like and how things turned out for them. We will start with the guests who refused to come. Then the undeserving ones who were welcomed in anyway. And finally, the one who was improperly dressed for the wedding.

In some ways, today's parables are like the ones from the past two weeks. The focus is still on God, but this time as a king. Again, the original insiders are left outside, and original outsiders make it in.

But in another way, this week's parables are different. They are not true to our life experience. We do not know of anybody who received an invitation to a wedding from a king, and who beat and killed the very people who delivered the invitation. And we do not know of anybody who rudely passed up an opportunity to attend a royal wedding. And we have never heard of any king who opened up the greatest party of his lifetime to anybody off the street who wanted to show up. As Americans we do not have royal families. But even we can see that something is terribly wrong with the picture in these parables. Jesus meant to shock us with the examples he gives.

I have never been invited to a royal wedding, but I saw a king and a queen once. I was born and raised a few miles from Stanford University. When I was in elementary school, the king and queen of Thailand made a state visit to the United States. I think the king must have made a speech at Stanford, and then the royal couple were driven in an open car through town. Their route was printed in the newspaper beforehand, and it turned out that they were going to pass right in front of our house. Everyone was told to get their front yards as nice and clean as possible, and we all lined up along the sidewalks so we could see them.

The night before their visit, I made a copy of the Thai flag out of construction paper, put it on a little stick, and waved it as the royal car passed by. The queen saw it, and she waved at me. I felt proud that a real live queen had actually taken notice of me.

A few years ago I began working with Steve Peich at BIH. He is a former missionary to Thailand. I told him the incident from my childhood. He responded that Thais revere their king. Most Thais would have given anything to have had the experience that I did. He said that his years in Thailand gave him a whole new understanding of the awe, the reverence involved when the Bible speaks of God as our king. I imagine that Thai Christians understand better than we do what a powerful message Jesus is giving here about rejecting or accepting the invitation of God.

In these parables, this great king is celebrating the wedding of his son. Can you imagine how honored people must have felt to receive an invitation? It would have been a sign of royal favor. It would imply the blessing of the king. Think of the opportunities available to the person who was on such good terms with him. You would have royalty there, foreign ambassadors who sought the favor of the king, all the most important people.

In Jesus' time, wedding feasts might go on for days. The servants went and personally invited the guests, giving them the day but not the time of the feast. It simply was not possible to be that exact as to when all the food and entertainment would be ready. On the appointed day, the guests prepared themselves, and then waited for a second visit from the servants to let them know it was time to come. In Arab culture until recent times (and maybe even now) it was a serious insult to accept an invitation and then not to show up. The same may well have been true for the people of Jesus' day. This was a real slap in the face to the king.

Did you notice some of the details that Jesus put into this first parable? The king follows proper protocol in inviting the guests, and then sending the servants to announce the day. The first group of guests were inexcusably rude when they refused to come, and the king had every right to feel insulted. But notice that he chooses not to respond to the insult. He graciously goes far beyond proper protocol. He sends his servants out once again to invite these same guests, and takes the trouble even to give the details of the wonderful time that was awaiting them. And of course we know God is like that. He is patient, he continues to woo, to invite, to welcome.

But still some of them refuse, and for the most trivial reasons. They were not being thoughtless here; they were deliberately dishonoring their king. The scene reminds me of a movie I once saw that took place in Australia

early in the 19th century. Australia was settled partly by free people, but partly by prisoners who were exiled from England. In the movie, a woman arrived because either she or her husband had run into trouble with the law back home. She worked hard and was able to establish a prosperous business. The other women settlers in town were superficially polite to her.

At one point she planned a party, and set a long table with all the finest food and china. She invited the leading couples of the town. The time of the party came and went, and nobody showed up except one solitary lady. The hostess was deeply humiliated, which is exactly what the no-shows had intended. It was one of the saddest and most powerful scenes in the movie when the two women sat and ate at a table sent for twenty or more. I wonder if the screenwriter might have had this parable in mind when he wrote the scene.

But getting back to Jesus' story, some of the invited guests are far worse than the arrogant Australian settlers. Beating and killing his servants can only mean an all-out rebellion against the authority of the king. And at that point, the judgment comes. Once again, the parable reflects what the rest of the Bible tells us about God. Judgment will come to those who hardheartedly refuse his invitation. So judgment is the final end of the first guests.

But the king is so gracious that he must have guests to celebrate with. He is not willing to sit at an empty table. He invites and welcomes all those who never in their wildest dreams imagined that they would ever experience a royal banquet.

I think I have at least a small sense of how they would have felt. For many people on the Mainland, visiting Hawaii is the ultimate dream. For several years in high school I longed and prepared to come to the University of Hawaii. I still remember the moment that I received a letter of acceptance. For my first few years here I remember a sense of wonder. I would look at the vivid greens of the plants, or swim in the ocean so much more inviting than the cold waters off California, or eat a papaya, and I would think, "I'm in Hawaii. I can't believe this is actually happening to me!" Local people might get the same feeling when they first visit the Mainland, or if they move from an isolated plantation town to Honolulu. I think the newly invited guests must have felt the same way at this kingly feast.

The good and the bad, all welcomed, all thrown in together. And the feast begins. So the first parable ends with joy at the banquet, and the second group of guests celebrating in the kingdom of God.

In the next parable, we meet the third guest at the banquet. The king asked why he did not have the proper wedding garment on. We have seen before that this king is the king of second chances. He doesn't condemn his guest immediately, but cordially gives him a chance to explain his condition. Was he unable to obtain a garment? Did he not know what to wear? The king is ready to think the best. But the guest remains speechless. He has no excuse; there is nothing he can say to justify his behavior.

We can tell from the strong reaction of the king that this wedding garment must be symbolic of something more. St. Augustine taught on this passage that the king gave wedding garments to his guests. If that was the case, by not wearing the garment the guest was rejecting both the authority and the generosity of the king.

Isaiah [64:6] says that we have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts—that is, all of our self efforts-- are like filthy rags. On the other end of things, in Colossians 3, Paul told the believers to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, and so on—those beautiful character traits that can only come if we submit ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit and allow him to change us. Jesus may have been thinking along those lines when he spoke of the wedding garment. The third guest may represent anyone who wants the benefits of being in the kingdom without repenting of our sins and submitting to the transformation that God wants to make in us.

And the king sent him to the place of weeping and gnashing of teeth—that is, the place of bitter regret. The good and the bad are all invited to the banquet, but they are invited so that they can exchange their filthy rags for a beautiful wedding garment, so they can be transformed into new creations. The second guest refused to change.

What do you think of these two parables? Do they encourage you? Do they disturb you? Are they good news or bad news? It all depends on which of the three groups of guests we identify ourselves with.

The first group refused the invitation to the wedding. In the original parable, they represented the Jewish leaders, from those who had killed the prophets in Old Testament times to especially the ones that were preparing to get rid of Jesus. We wonder how anybody could do something so wrong, so crazy as to resist God in such a way.

It happened little by little. Superficially they honored God and his word. But at crucial times in Old Testament history when God was calling to nation to repent of their greed or their materialism or their worship of false gods, they resisted, and they killed the prophets. By Jesus' day, they had their traditions that little by little had become more important to them than what the Scriptures actually said. The leaders did not wake up one morning and say, "Let's resist God." It was a more subtle process.

And unfortunately, the process, the pull downward towards corruption, has occurred throughout church history. Last week Pastor Wayne mentioned the Protestant Reformation. The Catholic Church at that time had become corrupted by wealth and political power. When Luther, Calvin, and others sought to return the church to its biblical foundations, they received the same reception that the servants in the parable had received.

The same process is at work in Protestantism. When the Jesus Seminar scholars say that the Bible is not a trustworthy record of the life of Jesus, when you hear arguments that the Bible is simply a record of ancient religious life and that it is no longer authoritative in our lives, you are seeing the same pattern at work that we saw in the first guests.

For those people, there is a word of grace and a word of warning. The word of grace: God issues his invitation more than once. Have we as a congregation, as a denomination, or as a people become caught up in our own traditions? There is still time to repent and to turn to him. The word of warning: the opportunity does not last forever. You see in history that the time will come when we face the consequences of our declaration of independence from God.

The second group of guests accepts the wonderful word of welcome. They joyfully accepted an incredible invitation to the banquet. Does our congregation, do our families, do our small groups reflect the wonder, the joy of being invited to the banquet? Our sins are forgiven. We do not need to walk around burdened with guilt. We have a direction, a purpose, a hope

in life even during the toughest times. We have an ironclad promise of love and care throughout our earthly lives. We don't even need to be afraid of death, an event surrounded by all kinds of fears and superstitions in the rest of the world. And we didn't get in because we deserved it. We got in because God is loving, forgiving, merciful, joyful.

The first parable talks about two groups of guests: the ones who reject and the ones who accept the invitation. The second parable focuses on one guest. Maybe the application here is a more individual, personal one. People are around the edges of the kingdom for all kinds of reasons. It can be because they married someone in the church, or grew up in it, or they like the people. And there is nothing wrong with any of these in themselves. I married into Makiki, and I like the people here. But sooner or later the king will come and ask each of us about what we are wearing to his wedding. Is it the ugly rags of our own efforts? Is it the beautiful garment provided by Jesus when we repent of our sins and turn to him? As the hymn puts it, are we dressed in his righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne?

Let us pray.