

Kingdom Parables: The Wedding Feast

The parable of the wedding feast can teach us a lot about how to approach finding the meaning in these texts. Lots of commentators read a rejection of Israel and substitution of Gentiles in the plan of God from this parable. Yet, on the face of the text, this is not readily apparent. Why is such a meaning read into the text? Often, this is done because parables are treated as allegories. Commentators expand the scope of the text to include subject matters it does not attempt to talk about, or they read God, Jesus, Heaven, the Kingdom, or other people or ideas into characters of the parable. When the writer introduces a parable that "may be compared to" something (in this case, the Kingdom of God), he is telling us that we must transfer the meaning or judgment of the parable to that subject. It does not mean that the characters in the parable are just faces for God, Jesus, sinners, saints, or otherwise.

We find this parable in two separate texts, Matthew 22 and Luke 14.

The differences between the two are important to notice and so are the similarities. Both narratives start with a master giving a feast and end with judgment on those who refused. In Luke's account, those invited give reasons why they cannot attend. In Matthew's account, an additional point is added about the difference between called and chosen which gives the parable a climactic point. Luke does not bring the parable around full circle with the same force as Matthew. Before we get into the details, we should understand more about this feast idea and what it means to the initial hearers of this parable.

We have to remember that our culture is very much different than that of the first century. They lived in an honor and shame culture in which it was considered better to die, than to endure shame. It would have been better to deceive and receive honor. That was just how their society worked then. So, when a wealthy man gave a feast and invited you, if you refused, you would endure shame. You deemed that feast unworthy of your presence and the man's invitation as worthless. You felt that you had something better to do than receive honor from an honorable person. On the other hand, when the man giving the feast would find out that none of his guests were attending, he received shame. His character and honor were attacked because he was rejected; he would lose his place in the society.

There is an interesting example found in the Talmud about this very idea of honor and shame around a feast:

But when Bar Maayan, the village tax collector died, the whole town took time off to mourn him... Now what was the meritorious deed which Bar Maayan the village tax collector had done? Heaven forbid! He never did a meritorious deed in his life. But one time he made a banquet for the councilors of his town but they did not come. He said, "Let the poor come and eat the food, so that it does not go to waste".

We see a very similar situation here. The tax collector was shamed because no one showed up! How did he regain his honor? By inviting everyone else he could find, so the food would not go to waste and his house would be full. There are many other Jewish parables that contain this idea of the feast.

Rabbi Eleazar told a parable of a king who prepared a great banquet and charged his steward: "Invite me merchants; do not invite me artisans." Thereupon his steward said: "My lord king, so abundant is thy banquet that the merchants will not be able to eat it all, unless the artisans are part of the company." Even so, David said:

"According to Thy mercy remember Thou me, for Thy goodness' sake, O Lord," as is said The Lord is good to all (Psalm 145.9).

The Rabbinic parable stresses the inclusion of all people because of God's goodness and vast mercy. In the Rabbinic parables that share this feast theme, the feast is often related to the age to come, what Jesus called the Kingdom. These same situations still occur today as well. In 1857 W.M. Thompson lived in the Middle East, well before any westernization occurred there. He reflected on this very parable when he saw the exact same process take place in the village in which he lived.

One more comment about the excuses given of the invitees. When a feast was being prepared, there were two invitations. The first was to let you know that there was a feast and that preparations were being made. Of course, this took a very long time, a week or more depending on the size. So, when everything was done, a second invitation went out. In the parable, it was the second invitation that was being rejected. They had accepted the first invitation and gotten involved with other activities to their own shame to miss the second invitation.

To get back to the text, the excuses are interesting because we find similar ones in the Old Testament:

Deuteronomy 20:5-7

The officers also shall speak to the people, saying, "Who is the man that has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him depart and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would dedicate it. Who is the man that has planted a vineyard and has not begun to use its fruit? Let him depart and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would begin to use its fruit. And who is the man that is engaged to a woman and has not married her? Let him depart and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would marry her."

Two of the excuses given in Luke match two reasons for a man not to go to war to protect Israel. Yet, Jesus says that for the Kingdom these excuses are not good enough! The Kingdom is of the highest importance to Jesus.

Another interesting aspect of this parable is the inclusion of all peoples. This included the blind, lame, crippled, and poor. The Essenes did not allow the blind, lame, or crippled into their own community. They did not allow them because they saw themselves as a priesthood, and the Pentateuch did not allow those such as the others to be priests.

Jesus was strictly opposed to that kind of sectarianism. Jesus, and the disciples after him, stressed taking care of the poor. Of course, God will accept them and take care of them in His Kingdom; He already makes provisions for them in this life. The law ordained the families to take care of themselves, and those without families are taken care of by the immediate society.

To prevent us from allegorizing this parable, we have to take only what we are given. Jesus says the feast of the wealthy man is compared to the Kingdom of God. For this reason, the principles Jesus tells us about the feast, we can apply to the Kingdom. We seek to point out which character Jesus is in the story. We seek to define exactly who (a sinner? a believer who falls away?) the person who gets into the wedding without wearing the right clothes is. That level of allegory is not useful. The principles are important. We can glean two important principles from this parable. One, God has made an invitation; let us be ready for the second invitation! Do not let us

be caught in other ambitions. Two, many are called, but few are chosen. How are we to understand “chosen?” Those who enter the feast, enter the Kingdom, are chosen.

It represents divine election. However, this divine election is not separated from the choices and will of the individual. Israel was elected (Romans 11:7, 28), divinely chosen as God's people; yet, the entire first generation died in the wilderness because of their actions and unbelief. They refused to act on God's promise of the land. So, now Jesus says all are called, but few are chosen. Those who deny the invitation are cast out into destruction. They shame God by not accepting His gracious offer. God does what is just to those who deny grace and mercy. What will you do with your invitation?

Where is the Kingdom on your list of priorities? Above your house?
Above your spouse? Above your job?