

THE PARABLE OF THE MARRIAGE FEAST

Matthew 22:1-14

[Luke 14:15-24; Revelation 19:7-9]

In Matthew 22:1-14, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a king whose invitations to his son's wedding feast are ignored twice for varying reasons. The first time because the guests were "unwilling to come" (Matt. 22:3). The second time because "they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business" (Matt. 22:5). The last wave of the king's servants is severely mistreated by the rejecters (Matt. 22:6) and thus this provokes the king, and so he "sent his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and set their city on fire" (Matt. 22:7).

The parable takes a dramatic turn at midpoint, when the previous group of rejecters is no longer called, but rather, the invitation goes out to the public at large (Matt. 22:8-10). The second half is more sharply contrasted to the first half with the unexpected inclusion of a man found without proper royal wedding feast attire (surprisingly, it would seem) within the feast itself (Matt. 22:11-12). Having made this discovery, the king orders his servants to "bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 22:13).

This is one of twelve parables in Matthew concerning "the kingdom of heaven" and one of three which speak of "the outer darkness" (which only occurs in Matthew's Gospel, 8:12; 22:13; 25:30), and a place where there "shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (cf. Matt. 8:12; 25:30). Because of the king's reaction to the man who attended the royal wedding feast improperly clothed, and the man's reaction ("he was speechless") and his ultimate reaction ("in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth"), the prevailing interpretation of this parable concerns the loss of a believer's eternal salvation, or a person who in reality was never truly a believer in the first place.

It will be demonstrated that such an interpretation of this passage thoroughly ignores the context, thus resulting in an interpretation which is not meant. And by forcing a non-contextual interpretation, one is left with (1) an erroneous view of salvation by God's grace through faith; (2) an erroneous view of the purpose of the Church Age; (3) an erroneous view of the coming judgment of Christians which will determine whether or not they will be part of the Bride of Christ; and finally, (4) an erroneous view of the absolute and perfect justice of God.

How important is it to correctly interpret this parable? An erroneous interpretation of this parable will close the door to its correct interpretation. Error will lead to more error, leaving a believer bewildered and adhering to an erroneous system of theology, a position wherein he cannot possibly escape and therefore, unable to correctly understand our Lord's present and future dealings with believers in regard to their faithful obedience and His promise of just recompense.

I. The Parable's Setting in Matthew 22:1-14

The Context of the Parable

Matthew's parable occurs in the midst of great conflict between Jesus and the Jewish religious authorities. The Lord has made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1-11) and has shown His indignation on the moneychangers, buyers, and sellers in the Temple (Matt. 21:12-17). Following the incident of Jesus cursing the fig tree in Matthew 21:18-22, the chief priests and elders confront Jesus with a question concerning His authority (Matt. 21:23). After confounding them with a question of His own (Matt. 21:24-27), Jesus responds with three parables.

The first parable in Matthew 21:28-32 condemns the leaders for not heeding the message of John the Baptist. In the second parable, Matthew 21:33-44, Jesus compares the authorities to some wicked vinedressers who kill the son of the owner of the vineyard. The final parable of this trilogy, our passage before us, is the parable of the royal wedding celebration. From Matthew 22:40 and following, are the efforts of the Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees to trap Jesus with difficult questions to find some charge against Him. Knowing their intentions, Jesus skillfully answers each one and then follows with a question of His own concerning the identity of the Son of David (Matt. 22:41-45). According to Matthew 22:46, no one was able to come up with an answer nor was anyone willing to question Jesus any more. Indeed, this is the last confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish authorities until His arrest in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:47-56).

The Introduction of the Parable (Matthew 22:1)

“And Jesus answered and spoke to them again in parables, saying”

The parable opens in a typical way. Parables were the means by which Jesus often chose to teach people. A parable is simply a pictorial story drawn from everyday life that is designed to teach important spiritual truths. It can function like a metaphor or simile or just simply as an example.

The recipients of the parable are identified by the pronoun “them”. This refers back to “the multitudes” in Matthew 21:46.

[There are three reasons why “them” (*autois*) refers to the multitudes: (1) The nearest grammatical antecedent to “them” in Matt. 22:1 is “the multitudes” (*ochlous*) in Matt. 21:46. Greek pronouns agree with their antecedents in gender and number. “Them” is masculine and plural. The nearest masculine plural antecedent is “the multitudes” in Matt. 21:46; (2) Matt. 21:45 specifically states that the chief priests and Pharisees heard the previous parables and knew that they

were directed at them. It does not say that the following parable in Matt. 22:1-14 was also directed to them; and (3) According to the parallel account in Mark 12, the chief priests and Pharisees leave Jesus when He finishes the parable of the vineyard owner.]

Within the immediate context (Matt. 21:46), the crowd considered Jesus to be a prophet (cf. Deut. 18:15-19). Previously, at the triumphal entry, the crowds called Jesus a prophet (Matt. 21:1) and proclaimed Him as the Son of David (Matt. 21:9). This ties back to the testimony in Matthew 20:30-31 of the two blind men on the road out of Jericho: "Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David". Because this entire episode is full of messianic implications, it seems most reasonable to see the parable of the wedding celebration as being addressed to a crowd of people, many of whom believed Jesus to be the promised Messiah, and not the religious leaders who had rejected Him. We would thus expect the lesson of the parable to be primarily directed to those who had believed in Christ.

II. The First Call of the King (Matt. 22:2-3)

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king, who gave a wedding feast for his son. And he sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come".

The parable proper begins in verse 2. The setting of the parable is a royal wedding party and it is compared to "the kingdom of heaven".

"The kingdom of heaven" is synonymous with "the kingdom of God". "The kingdom of heaven" occurs thirty-two times in Matthew and is unique to his Gospel. That the kingdom of heaven is equivalent to the kingdom of God is first demonstrated in comparing parallel passages in the other Synoptic Gospels where Mark and Luke use "the kingdom of God". An example of this is found in Matthew 11:11 and Luke 7:28. In Matthew Jesus says, "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen *anyone* greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he". Luke reads, "I say to you, among those born of women, there is no one greater than John; yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he".

Perhaps the most compelling evidence for equating the two terms is found in Matthew 19:23-24: "And Jesus said to His disciples, 'Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God'". From this passage, the two terms are synonymous.

[This type of correspondence between "the kingdom of heaven" in Matthew and "the kingdom of God" in Mark and Luke also occurs in Matt. 4:17/Mk. 1:15; Matt. 5:3/Lk. 6:20; Matt. 13:11/Mk. 4:11/Lk. 8:10; Matt. 13:31/Mk. 4:30/Lk.

13:18; Matt. 13:33/Lk. 13:20; Matt. 19:14/Mk. 10:14/Lk. 18:16; and Matt. 19:23/Mk. 10:23/Lk. 18:24].

The predominant significance of a “wedding celebration” (*gamo"/gamos*) in the New Testament is eschatological. The Jews generally associated the concept of the wedding feast with the future reign of the Messiah. The kingdom of God is the future, eternal, and righteous reign of the triune God, manifested by the incarnate Son of God, over the creation and the earth (Dan. 2:44-45; 7:13-14, 27; Lk. 1:33; Heb. 1:8-9; Rev. 11:15; 19:1—20:3).

The first characters of the parable are “the king” and “his son”. The imagery of “the king” here refers to God the Father with Christ being “his son”. That this is so can be shown from the identical terminology of Matthew 18:23. This is the only other time the expression “a man, that is, a king” is used in the New Testament and it is explicitly identified by Jesus as God the Father (Matt. 18:35).

The term “wedding celebration” occurs sixteen times in the New Testament (Matt. 22:2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12; 25:10; Lk. 12:36; 14:8; Jn. 2:1, 2; Heb. 13:4; Rev. 19:7, 9) with the unambiguous meaning of “wedding” or “wedding celebration”. It occurs most often in an eschatological setting, the best example of this being the description of the marriage of the Lamb in Revelation 19:7, 9. There, the faithful saints are symbolically bound together in marriage to their Lord.

The wedding celebration had great eschatological symbolism for devout Jews. The marriage of God and Israel is illustrated in the Old Testament passages like Isaiah 62:4-5; Jeremiah 2:2; 31:2; Ezekiel 16:32; and Hosea 2:2. In Isaiah 25:6-9, 65:8-16, and Psalm 22:26-29, the messianic reign is compared to a feast or banquet.

Thus, the introduction to the parable in the first two verses establishes the eschatological setting of the parable. This is due to the imagery associated with the wedding celebration. Whatever the parable is about, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to it.

The Invitation (Matthew 22:3a)

The time had come for the wedding celebration to begin. Therefore, it is also time for the people who had been invited to come.

In accordance with Jewish marriage customs of the day, the king sends “his servants” to contact those who had previously been invited and to advise them to come to the wedding celebration. Typically, at some time prior to the banquet, invitations were sent. Then, when the time for the celebration itself arrived, the servants were sent to advise that everything was ready and it was time to come.

The Response (Matthew 22:3b)

Those initially invited reject the offer: “they were unwilling to come”. They were expected to attend the royal function but refused to do so [the imperfect tense of “wish” indicates a persistent and deliberate refusal]. To decline an invitation by a commoner without a legitimate excuse would be insulting. However, to do this to a king would be even more so. This repudiation of the king sets the stage for the second call to the wedding celebration.

III. The Second Call of the King (Matthew 22:4-6)

“Again he sent out other slaves saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited, ‘Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast’.’ But they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them”.

The Second Invitation (Matthew 22:4)

The king now issues a second invitation. The king sends more servants to the same group of people. The message is more specific than before, possibly to provide added incentive for them to come. The first part of the message concerns the nature of the wedding banquet. This meal is now ready and waiting. The king has already prepared everything in advance, anticipating the acceptance of his invitation to the banquet.

The menu of “oxen and fattened livestock” indicates a feast of great magnitude. In addition, since the animals had already been slaughtered, they must be eaten immediately. There is, therefore, a sense of urgency in the message.

The message is summarized in the phrase, “everything is ready”. The king has gone to great lengths to prepare the banquet for the people. Based on their expected acceptance of his invitation, he has made everything ready.

Notably, the invitation ends with a final plea: “Come to the wedding feast”. The king earnestly desires the presence of the people he had invited to the wedding celebration. He has expended much effort in preparing the feast and has overlooked their first rejection.

The Second Response (Matthew 22:5-6)

Those invited a second time respond in two ways. Some are apathetic; some are openly antagonistic. The rejection of the first group of people is found in verse 5. The

attitude of these people is one of indifference. They leave the servants and return to their own affairs. The first rejection was very insulting to the king since the invitation to a royal function is both an honor and a command. To do this on the grounds of routine business commitments is even more insulting.

A second group of invitees responds with open rebellion and violence: “and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them” (v. 6). The word “mistreated” denotes mistreatment, which is of a violent nature and may involve both verbal and physical abuse.

[“Mistreated” is used four other times in the New Testament: Lk. 11:45; 18:32; Acts 14:5; and 1 Thess. 2:2. Our English word “hubris”, “insolent pride or presumption”].

This abuse went one step further, because they also killed the king’s servants. Their second refusal of the king’s graciousness now sets the stage for his second response.

IV. The First Judgment of the King (Matthew 22:7)

“But the king was enraged and sent his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and set their city on fire”.

The king, who had previously responded graciously, now responds in wrath. First, those who killed the servants are destroyed. It seems as though the persons of verse 5 who were merely apathetic are spared.

The second act of destruction is the burning of the city of the murderers [this is the only occurrence of “burned” in the New Testament, but it appears forty-six times in the LXX. All but twice, it refers to the physical destruction of something with fire, most commonly cities]. This verse seems to be a clear reference to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70. The repeated rejection by Israel of the invitation of God through His servants culminated in the sacking of that nation’s capital.

The king has now issued two invitations to those he invited to the wedding celebration for his son, and has twice been refused. The second refusal brought some a deservedly harsh judgment by the king. The verses as a whole concisely depict the sad history of Israel’s nation. God, through His servants, repeatedly offered His people an invitation to attend the wedding celebration for His Son, the Messiah. Their persistent refusal culminated in the Romans destroying Jerusalem.

V. The Third Call of the King (Matthew 22:8-10)

“Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast’. And those slaves went out into the streets, and gathered together all they found, both evil and good; and the wedding hall was filled with dinner guests”.

Now the king renews his efforts to reward a select group of people with the honor of attending the wedding celebration of his son. He sends out his servants with new instructions. First, an explanation is in order: “The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy”. The king did not deem the ones he had originally invited as deserving of a place at the banquet.

The new orders for the servants involve an expansion of the invitation. Verse 9 says, “Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast”.

[The phrase translated as “main highways”, literally is “the streets of the ways”. F. F. Bruce comments: “It is impossible to determine with certainty what is meant by the expression in the text. It may either signify the roads leading out from the town into the country, or the crossing of such, or the streets leading into open places and squares in the town. The general idea is: places where men are likely to be found, whether in town or in country”. *Parabolic Teaching*, pp. 459-460].

The imagery depicts the extension of the invitation to the banquet to all people, including the Gentiles. This echoes what Jesus had just told the authorities in Matthew 21:43: “Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and be given to a nation producing the fruit of it”.

The Response (Matthew 22:10)

The obedience and success of the servants is reflected in verse 10a. The servants obeyed their king, went out, and amassed a new collection of people to attend the banquet. Although the text does not explicitly state that an invitation was issued, it must be inferred that one was given and that these people responded affirmatively.

The people are described as “evil and good”. This signifies the varying moral states of those who accepted the invitation to the banquet. The servants did not discriminate as to whom they invited. All who were willing to come were welcome. Zane Hodges provides an example of this from the New Testament:

“The two named converts of the Evangelist Philip—Simon Magus and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:9-40)—were opposites of the kind suggested in this parable. One was steeped in sorcery, the other was steeped in Scripture. But both, on Scriptural testimony, became Christians (8:13, 38). The “bad” and the “good” were gathered in” (*Grace in Eclipse*, p. 87).

The results of the expanded offer are expressed in verse 10b. The desire of the king to have many people in attendance at the wedding celebration for his son is finally realized.

VI. The Second Judgment of the King (Matthew 22:11-14)

“But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw there a man not dressed in wedding clothes, and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth’. For many are called, but few *are* chosen”.

The Evaluation of the Guests (Matthew 22:11-12)

The scene shifts to the banquet itself (v. 11). The wedding party is now in progress and the king enters the palace to observe the guests. He immediately notices a man dressed unsuitably for a wedding, and a royal wedding at that! It was customary for each person who would attend such an affair to clothe himself appropriately before going. The man obviously did not prepare himself in a fitting way for a royal banquet [this one man is representative of a class of people; that is, he illustrates the principle].

The “wedding garment” is best interpreted as being a picture of good works. This is most clearly seen in the description of the marriage of the Lamb in Revelation 19:7-9:

“Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready’. And it was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. And he said to me, ‘Write, “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb”.’ And he said to me, ‘These are true words of God’.”

The marriage supper of the Lamb of Revelation 19:7-9 is also the only other eschatological wedding celebration in the New Testament where the clothing worn by the participants is mentioned. The wedding clothes in Matthew 22:11 correspond to the clothes worn by the bride at the wedding of the Lamb in Revelation 19:8. She is said to be

clothed in “fine linen, bright and clean”. Furthermore, this fine linen is described as “the righteous acts of the saints”. Moreover, in the previous verse, it states that she “has made herself ready [middle voice in Greek]”. This is in definite contrast to the man without the garment in Matthew 22:13, who did not make himself ready for the royal wedding feast.

There are two main views found in the commentaries concerning the identity and meaning of the wedding garment. First, the wedding garment could be symbolic of the positional righteousness imputed by Christ when a person believes. The guest without the wedding garment, therefore, would be an unbeliever. However, if the man in question was an unbeliever, then it seems that he would not be present at the banquet in the first place.

The second position relates the wedding garment to the righteous lifestyle, which can be expected of “true” believers. The improperly clothed man is therefore either an unbeliever or a believer who has lost his salvation. The latter of these two options must be rejected outright. The former is problematic because, as before, the man is already present at the banquet. If he is, in reality, an unbeliever, how was he able to enter the banquet to begin with?

The most reasonable conclusion is that the wedding garment is a figure for righteous living. Therefore, this man did not faithfully perform the good works that are necessary to be present at the wedding banquet. This also leads to the conclusion that eternal salvation is not an issue in this passage. This is because of the clear testimony of the New Testament that salvation in the eternal sense is by faith alone. Good works have absolutely nothing to do with securing eternal life. However, according to this parable, they have much to do with presence at the wedding celebration. Hodges concludes:

“But it is to the wedding itself, and not merely to the Kingdom as such, that the call is extended. That certainly implies a saving belief in the message about the King’s Son. However, it involves more than that. It involves also a willingness to be His disciple, to love righteousness and hate wickedness as He did, to take up our own cross as He took up His.

“In short, it involves a willingness to enter the Kingdom prepared for its special privileges. It means coming to the wedding properly dressed!” (*Grace in Eclipse*, p. 88).

The king goes on to question the man: “Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?” (v. 12a). The king has recognized that the man has not adequately prepared himself to come to the royal affair, and so questions him as to why not. However, the offender offered no reply, “But he was silent” (v. 12b). The man had no defense for his negligence.

To summarize, the imagery of this section represents a scene of judgment by God. For many expositors, this is a “final judgment” wherein the righteous redeemed are separated from the unrighteous lost. However, as has been demonstrated, it is a viable, and a better interpretive option, to view the people at the banquet, including the inappropriately clothed man, as believers (this interpretation will be further developed in v. 13). Therefore, it is perhaps more natural to understand this occasion as depicting the Judgment Seat of Christ wherein God observes and evaluates the life and works, both good and bad, of believers. He does this to either recompense, or to deny them reward, in participating in the Lamb’s Supper. Participation in the wedding celebration, then, can reasonably be viewed as a reward for good works done in a believer’s life.

More specifically, the wedding supper can be construed to relate to a faithful believer’s co-reigning with Christ. According to Hebrews 12:2, the author states “Jesus”, as “the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of God”. The reference to “joy” is most likely a reference to Christ’s future joy as King (cf. Heb. 1:8-9), for which He “endured”. In addition, Jesus will be pleased to give the joyful privilege of reigning with Him to believers who likewise will endure. “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me. He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (Rev. 3:20-21).

Finally, the idea of reigning with Christ seems to be related to dining with Him. In Luke 22:28-30, Jesus, speaking to His disciples, said: “And you are those who have stood by Me in My trials; and just as My Father has granted Me a kingdom, I grant you that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel”. Therefore, to be at the wedding banquet, to eat and drink at His table, is to reign with Christ! The authority given to believers by Christ in the kingdom, and the honor of sitting at His own table, the chief table in the day of His royal feasting, are plainly promised as superior rewards for superior devotion.

The Consequence of the Evaluation (Matthew 22:13)

The king responds to the impropriety of the man in verse 13a: “Then the king said to the servants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness’.” From the outset, the king’s evaluation must not be understood as *punitive*, but *restrictive* judgment. For in that day, not being tainted with sin, our desire will be to rule with our Lord (Psa. 110:3: “Thy people will volunteer freely in the day of Thy power; in holy array, from the womb of the dawn”). However, those who are unfaithful now, will be restricted later to rule with the Messiah.

The man is tossed out of the wedding celebration into “the outer darkness”. Wedding celebrations typically lasted long into the night and so, in the imagery of the

parable, the man is cast into the darkness of night outside the well-lighted banquet hall. It is best to understand “the outer darkness” as a figure for exclusion from the joy of co-reigning with Christ, an exclusion which will produce tears and regret. Since his feet and hands are bound, he is unable to serve in Christ’s government, and so misses the joy of the wedding celebration. This is the most plausible interpretation for four reasons:

1. There is nothing inherent in the phrase that would automatically make “outer darkness” refer to Hell [commentators generally relate “outer darkness” to a place of eternal torment away from God which is reserved for the unbeliever]. Nothing in Matthew 22:13 indicates that “outer darkness” is to be associated with the sort of punishment described in 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9. There, “flaming fire”, “vengeance”, and “punishment with everlasting destruction” are the prescribed consequences for the unbeliever. However, there is no punishment like this mentioned in Matthew 22:13 and to believe it is inherent in the concept of darkness is to import an idea into the text that is not required.
2. The wedding feast celebration is not the kingdom of God; it is in the kingdom of God. Many consider the banquet to be representative of the kingdom, so that when the man is cast out of the banquet, he is cast out of the kingdom. This is problematic because there is nothing in the parable itself that indicates this. In fact, it is more natural from the text to see the banquet hall as being in the kingdom, but not the kingdom itself. There is every indication that the king is a great king. He had many servants, had the resources to put on a great wedding celebration, and commanded an army. The people he invited lived in a city. It is only reasonable, therefore, to assume that his kingdom must extend beyond the confines of the palace. This man is most assuredly put out of the palace itself. But it is more natural by far to view him as still being in the kingdom.
3. This position is supported by the other two occurrences of “the outer darkness” in Matthew 8:12 and 25:30. In Matthew 8, Jesus encounters the centurion whose servant was sick. After commending the faith of the man in verse 10, Jesus says, “And I say to you, that many shall come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:11). The expression “sons of the kingdom” are those who are natural and rightful heirs of the kingdom. The only other time “sons of the kingdom” occurs is in Matthew 13:38. There, when explaining the meaning of the parable of the wheat and the tares, Jesus identifies the good seed as the “sons of the kingdom”. Therefore, the sons of the kingdom belong in the kingdom. And yet, because they were not worthy of reclining at the same table as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, they were cast into “the outer darkness”. From

this, it seems best, from the perspective of Matthew, “the outer darkness” is within the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 25:14-30 records the parable of the talents. The servant who did nothing with what his master gave him has his talent taken away (v. 28) and is cast into “the outer darkness” where “there is weeping and gnashing of teeth” (v. 30). Although some consider this third unprofitable servant an unbeliever, it is more reasonable, because of context, to regard him as an unrewarded believer.

[There is no problem with the traditional view assigning the first two industrious slaves to the realm of the “saved”. However, when it comes to the unwise third slave, who is said to be cast into “the outer darkness”, the interpretation changes. Because “outer darkness” is equated to Hell, the third slave “must”, by interpretive tradition, be designated as unsaved.

Yet the very method which is used to establish this conclusion is at the same time violated in the very same passage. The word “slave” (doul o" /doulos) is used to describe all three individuals, not just the first two. The text offers no differentiation in their relation to their master. To consistently use the “stock phrase” method, we must apply the status of “saved” to all three individuals. Yet we cannot do this because that would violate the same method used for “outer darkness”. What we wind up with is a hopeless situation involving inconsistent reasoning and arbitrary hermeneutical decisions.

The word “slave”, used many times by Paul to describe himself, is pregnant with meaning and significance. We cannot arbitrarily dismiss the third slave as being “unsaved” simply because we do not understand the cryptic, hard-to-understand expression “outer darkness”.]

Again, it seems as though “the outer darkness” is associated with one who is in the kingdom. Huber supports this position:

“The details of the contexts of both 8:12 and 22:13 set the figure of the wedding feast in the millennium. The context and details of 25:30 argue for all the servants of the parable to represent regenerated men. Thus in all three passages the ‘outer darkness’ may not refer to eternal punishment in hell. A probable alternative is that it refers to the loss of a specific reward in the millennial kingdom. The common denominator in all three passages is that special joy to be inherited by the faithful believer, implied by the wedding feast in 8:12 and 22:13 and specifically mentioned in 25:30. The ‘outer darkness’, then may very likely refer to the loss of this special joy in

the millennial kingdom” (“The Concept of the ‘Outer Darkness’ in the Gospel of Matthew”, pp. 63-64).

4. The term “outer darkness” appears nowhere else in the New Testament outside of the three verses mentioned. However, it occurs 23 times in the LXX and always in relation to the Tabernacle or Temple of God, or the palace of the king (see for example, Ex. 26:4; 1 Kgs. 6:29-30; Neh. 11:16; Esther 6:4). Most significantly, the term is used fifteen times in Ezekiel to describe the outer court of the Temple (Ezek. 10:5; 40:19, 20; 41:15, 17; 42:1, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 14; 44:19; 46:20, 21). Once, it describes the outer gate of the Temple (Ezek. 44:1). It may be noteworthy, considering the eschatological imagery of the subject of the parable that the dominant use of the term is in relation to the millennial temple in Ezekiel-40—48. In light of this, it seems reasonable to conclude that the improperly clothed man in Matthew 22:11-12 is thrown into the outer court of the palace. However, it does not necessarily follow that he is cast out of the kingdom.

To summarize, “the outer darkness” depicts the experience within the kingdom of God of the unfaithful believer. Charles Stanley likewise concludes: “To be in the ‘outer darkness’ is *to be in the kingdom of God but outside the circle of men and women whose faithfulness on this earth earned them a special rank or position of authority*” (italics in original; Stanley, *Eternal Security*, p. 126).

The darkness outside is characterized by “weeping and gnashing of teeth”. The experience of the man cast out of the banquet is further described as an experience of sorrow (v. 13b). This expression occurs six other times in the New Testament (Matt. 8:12; 13:42, 50; 24:51; 25:30; Lk. 13:28). Like “the outer darkness”, the phrase “weeping and gnashing of teeth” is unique to the New Testament.

The occurrence of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” with “the outer darkness” in Matthew 8:12 and 25:30 has already been discussed. In Matthew 13:42, 50, it is associated with “the furnace of fire”. In this context, we clearly have the end of the unbeliever. In Matthew 24:51, it occurs where the “hypocrites” are and where the wicked servant of Matthew 24:48-50 will be when the Son of Man returns. In Luke 13:27-28, the “workers of iniquity” are not in the kingdom of God. When they see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the prophets in the kingdom of God, “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 13:28).

From this, it can be concluded that the significance of the phrase “weeping and gnashing of teeth” with regard to eternal judgment depends on the context in which it occurs. There is nothing inherent in the expression, which automatically associates it with eternal judgment of the unbeliever. It is clearly related to remorse and sorrow. As with “the outer darkness”, nothing in the text of Matthew 22:13 indicates that physical

punishment is the cause of the weeping and gnashing of teeth. For example, Jesus wept over Lazarus (Jn. 11:35). In Acts 7:54, the accusers of Stephen “gnashed at Him with their teeth” because of his words of condemnation toward them. In neither case is physical punishment being inflicted; likewise, it is not necessary to see punishment in Matthew 22:13. Hodges comments:

“We do not need to embellish the parable with the lurid colors of eternal damnation. There is no fire and brimstone on the king’s handsome estate, no worms of corruption creeping out from under the boulders of his well-kept grounds. This is what has been read into the story. However, it isn’t there. A parable, after all, has its natural limits and these we must be careful not to breach” (*Grace in Eclipse*, p. 90.).

In conclusion, it is viable and consistent to interpret the imagery of Matthew 22:13 as relating to a denial of the joy of being at Christ’s wedding banquet; that is, of co-reigning with Him. This will be the consequence for the believer who has lived an unfaithful and unproductive life. Stanley paints the imagery thus:

“Now, imagine standing before God and seeing all you have lived for reduced to ashes. How do you think you would feel? How do you think you would respond? Picture yourself watching saint after saint rewarded for faithfulness and service to the King—and all the time knowing that you had just as many opportunities but did nothing about them.

We cannot conceive of the agony and frustration we would feel if we were to undergo such an ordeal; the realization that our unfaithfulness had coast us eternally would be devastating. Therefore, it will be for many believers.

Just as those who are found faithful will rejoice, so those who suffer loss will weep. As some are celebrated for their faithfulness, others will gnash their teeth in frustration over their own shortsightedness and greed” (*Eternal Security*, p. 127).

One must be careful, though, not to overemphasize the negative aspect of missing out on the wedding supper. To do so is wrongly to read into the parable an excessively negative view of the kingdom that is not there. It is enough to say that the failing Christian has missed a splendid experience of co-reigning with Christ, with all the multiplied joys that experience implies. Whatever else eternity holds for him, he has at least missed that!

The Explanation of the Result (Matthew 22:14)

Jesus concludes His parable with these words: “For many are called, but few *are* chosen”. This fitting conclusion functions as the explanation by the king for his actions (and may sum up in a general way all three of the parables beginning in Matt. 21:28).

The conclusion begins with the plain statement that “many are called”. This summarizes the king invited many people to the wedding celebration for his son. Invitations were extended in verses 3-4, and 9-10.

Despite this fact, only a “few are chosen”. The idea is simply that only those who are appropriately clothed in a wedding garment are chosen to partake of the wedding banquet. The traditional view holds that “chosen” pertains to the doctrine of election. The chosen ones are “true” believers whom accepted the call of God and demonstrated their faith and worthiness to take part in the banquet by the performance of good works. Thus, the banquet is synonymous with the kingdom. The man without the garment is representative of either an “unbeliever”, since he did not manifest his salvation in works of righteousness, or a believe who loses his salvation because of disobedience. Either way, he is not chosen and is cast into hell.

However, it is not necessary to see the word “chosen” as having soteriological significance here. It is more suitable to the immediate context to see that it simply means that the ones properly clothed are “chosen” to be at the banquet. As has been suggested, the wedding garment is representative of the good works done by the believer. Since faith, not works, is the only requirement for eternal life in the kingdom, entrance and life in the kingdom are not the issues here. It has been shown that the wedding banquet is not representative of the kingdom, but rather is an occurrence within the kingdom. The experience symbolized by the wedding celebration is reserved for the obedient believer.

The parable of Matthew 22:1-14 concludes in verses 8-14 with an extension of the offer of a place at the wedding celebration of Christ to all people, including the Gentiles. Many accepted the invitation and prepared themselves with faithful and righteous living which is required for participation in the banquet. The unfaithful and disobedient believer who did not prepare himself for the banquet found himself excluded from the joy of co-reigning with Christ at the banquet.

The Wedding Feast in Luke’s Gospel Luke 14:15-24

Outside of Matthew’s Gospel, the parable of the wedding feast is found only in parallel in Luke 14:15-24. Characteristic of the Lucan passage is its notable omission of the severe mistreatment of the king’s servant, of his subsequent destruction of the perpetrators’ city, and of the incident involving the improperly dressed man. Because of these omissions, some have suggested that the two parables are entirely different. However, there are no adequate grounds for this conclusion. Instead, Luke’s Gospel reveals some valuable insights into Matthew’s usage.

The emphasis of Luke's account is on sacrificing worldly interests and pleasures for the sake of discipleship to Christ. The distinction thus is not between believer and believer, but between the faithful and the unfaithful believer. This is a major theme of Luke, and the preceding context, as far back as Luke 12, deals with this very subject. The parable of the rich man in Luke 12:13-21 is a good example. So, too, the parable of Luke 12:35-40 deals with readiness and preparation for the master when he returns from the wedding feast. Jesus gives these teachings, including the warnings, not to unbelievers, but to His twelve disciples (cf. Lk. 12:32-34).

Most significant for the parallel to Matthew found in Luke 14:15-24 is the passage that immediately follows, Luke 14:25-35. It is here where Jesus gives one of His most famous sayings: "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple" (Lk. 14:27). Where the parable in Matthew is essentially the same as Luke's (cf. Matt. 22:5 with Lk. 14:18-19), the basic idea in Matthew is also the same as Luke's. Though Matthew's special details shift his emphasis a little, Matthew 22:5 deals with the priority of discipleship just as does Luke 14:18-19, read in the light of Luke 14:27 (see 14:33). This is where Matthew 22:11-14 fits into the scheme.

Some feel that Matthew 22:11-14 is hardly suitable as a conclusion to Matthew's parable. However, once it is seen that the traditional view of the "outer darkness" and "gnashing of teeth" must be rejected here, and once the connection with Luke's parable is made, there is no problem seeing how verses 11-14 fit into Matthew's parable. These verses could easily follow verse 24 of Luke's parable. In fact, Luke 14:24 is a summary statement for which Matthew 22:11-13 is an example. That is, the improperly dressed man in Matthew's parable is one of those of the group that gave priority to worldly interests and therefore was not adequately prepared for the royal wedding feast.

The invitation originally went out for the noon meal (*τὸν ἀριστόν/ariston* in Matthew 22:4), but due to the difficulty in getting people to attend, the afternoon wore on. It was not until the evening meal (*τὸν δεῖπνον/deipnon* in Luke 14:17) that enough people were gathered in for the feast finally to take place.

When the improperly dressed man quite unexpectedly showed up at the evening feast, it was apparent that he had spent his afternoon concentrating on his worldly interests rather than preparing for the royal wedding feast. Because he placed his own interests above those of the king, he was cast out of the feast into the night where he felt deep remorse and anguish. **Thus, it seems that he really did want to attend the feast, but he made no personal sacrifice to be prepared for it.**

APPLICATION

Matthew's inclusion of our Lord's instruction concerning the "outer darkness" and a place where "there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" clearly raises the issue of what grace really means and how unconditional God's love really is.

What, then, is grace? Have we now so lost sight of the true meaning of this precious word that we must go to great lengths to define it in terms of its unconditionally? It appears this is the case, because how Christians have tried to interpret the improperly dressed man in Matthew 22:12-13 and God's reaction to it, is a nagging example.

The traditional view (the improperly dressed man represents his "unsaved" or "loss of salvation" condition and that the "outer darkness represents eternal punishment) suggests a disquieting, and even disturbing lack of authentic grace in God's character. God, having "saved" the improperly clothed man "enough" so that he is, in fact, in heaven (amillennial view) or in the Millennial Kingdom (premillennial view), now evidently reneges on what was originally presented as a free and everlasting gift! God is thus portrayed as One who cannot (or will not) keep His promises and is, in fact, a liar (cf. Jn. 1:12-13; 3:16; 5:24; 20:31; Rom. 5:15; 10:10; Eph. 2:8-9; Tit. 3:5)! Nothing is more demeaning to the trustworthiness of the character of the Divine Parent than this.

But it will be objected by the traditional proponent: "The improperly clothed man was not really a *true* believer but simply an unbeliever who acted like a believer who was eventually found out for what he really was". To this same critic these questions must be addressed: How then did this "unsaved" individual get into heaven under the eye of the omniscient God? In addition, if God lets him in "by mistake", how can one put his trust in a God who either errs or changes His mind and reneges on His promises?

Grace, by definition, is unconditional and thus unmerited. What does this mean? It means that God "risked" everything on our behalf including allowing for the possibility of our choosing to turn from Him after having taken His gift. However, that gift is so free that it cannot be taken back (cf. Rom. 11:29). It is pure and untainted grace. It means, therefore, that God's grace allows for improperly clothed Christians. It allows for those who have been "born from above" and may have once been excited and active in their new spiritual life, but the "everydayness" of life and the priority of seemingly more important endeavors have slowly and quietly, over time, eroded their deep intimacy with their Heavenly Father.

[Oddly enough, there is a reasonable amount of agreement among conservative evangelicals that Scripture teaches there will be rewards and a forfeiture of loss on the behalf of believers. A clear passage often used by eternal security proponents is 1 Corinthians 3:10-15. This is where Paul states that a person, once having laid the foundation of Christ (clearly indicating a saved individual), may then go on to build on that foundation a layer of "wood, hay, and stubble". These materials

represent a lack of Christian integrity, and they are said to be “burned up”. “He will suffer loss (but not rewards, since he never had them to begin with!)”, Paul emphatically states, “but he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames”. Here is a saved individual who actually goes through “fire”, but clearly is not in Hell. It is incongruous how certain evangelicals can hold to this idea of loss, but are emotionally scandalized when it is suggested that the “outer darkness” is simply an example of what they (and we) already believe!]

Grace is so free that it gives unconditionally, with full knowledge and without the expectation of return. It is without the subtle threat that unless certain conditions are met (for example, moral living, participation in “Christian” activities, obedience, etc.) this gift of salvation will be nullified or withdrawn on God’s part.

It is this “conditional eternal security” that is ravaging the Church today by robbing the believer of the only transforming power available to him or her for breaking the shackles of emotional and spiritual bondage. Many Christians, frustrated by years of attempting to be a “good Christian”, are flocking to counselors’ offices with burned-out lives. Regrettably, their church has only offered them a form of grace without “the power thereof”, that is, without the power of unconditional love and grace.

In contrast, the parable of Matthew 22:1-14 is a message of the importance of righteous living by believers after receiving the unconditional gift of God’s salvation from eternal damnation, and the relation of that righteous living to the position of the individual in the future millennial kingdom.

Our Lord’s parable of the royal wedding celebration provides insight into the enhanced position of relationship and authority to and with Him which will be enjoyed by faithful and obedient believers in the millennial kingdom and possibly on into the eternal state. This is portrayed in the parable as a glorious wedding banquet. Great joy and fellowship with Christ would naturally accompany such an occasion. At the same time, exclusion from such close fellowship would be a cause for sadness and remorse.

The parable also contributes to the understanding of the requirements necessary to participate in the “celebration”. The basis for being present at the banquet is a wedding garment, which depicts the good works done by the believer. This corresponds with the New Testament picture of a life of consistent faithfulness and discipleship as being requisite for reigning with Christ, represented by attendance at His banquet.

One valid motivation for being faithful to Christ is the glorious prospect of receiving rewards and, as Matthew 22:1-14 teaches, reigning and fellowshiping with our King in His millennial kingdom. In the words of Paul and John, these kingdom privileges are reserved for those who “suffer” (Rom. 8:17), “endure” (2 Tim. 2:12) and “overcome” (Rev. 3:21). In the words of Christ, they are for the ones who are clothed in the “wedding

garment” of good works. The one not so clothed will be consigned to “the outer darkness”, which is figurative of an experience in the kingdom with serious restrictions. For the truth is, while all believers are eternally redeemed, only faithful, committed believers will co-reign with Christ. It is one thing to be a child of God and saved forevermore; but it is quite another thing to be a son of glory (Heb. 2:10) who will ascend the throne with Christ in His kingdom.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the context in which this parable finds itself in Matthew’s Gospel?
2. Who are the “them” in verse 1?
3. Are the phrases “kingdom of heaven” and “kingdom of God” synonymous? Prove your answer.
4. To whom does the characters “king” and “son” represent in this parable? How do you know?
5. The king sent out invitations to the same group twice in verses 3 and 4. To whom does this refer? Why twice? To what does this historically, refer?
6. What was the reaction of the first group to whom invitations were sent? Why? What was the reaction of the king to this group in verse 4?
7. Whom does the king’s last invitation include in verse 9?
8. Why was the improperly dressed man speechless? In addition, why does the king bind him hand and foot? What does this symbolically represent?
9. What does the wedding garment represent?
10. What does the phrase “outer darkness” mean in Matthew’s Gospel?
11. What does the phrase “weeping and gnashing of teeth” mean?
12. Who are the “called” and who are the “chosen” in verse 14?
13. How do you apply this parable? Keep in mind that your answer must be consistent with New Testament revelation.

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