

SI: We're studying Jesus' kingdom parables, which he explains are the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven for believers.

In other words, these parables are about things we should understand and expect as we live in God's invisible kingdom in this world.

Spiritual principles and dynamics that are at work in the world.

INTRO: Several years ago the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America was held in Mobile.

Allison does not usually go to General Assembly because I'm in meetings for three days and sometimes I've been on committees, and also, I see old seminary buddies who I want to hang out with.

But the dates of this particular General Assembly coincided with our anniversary.

Plus, I was staying in a swanky hotel.

So I convinced Allison to go with me and I promised to spend as much time with her as I could.

We got to the hotel and it was magnificent. It was the Battle House Hotel right in downtown Mobile close to the conference center.

We were oohing and aahing in the lobby and talking about how great this was to be here on our anniversary and the desk clerk overheard us.

So when we checked in he said:

I've upgraded you to one of our posh suites free of charge. Happy Anniversary!

We were delighted. He said, because you are in this suite you also get complimentary hors d'oeuvres at 6:00 pm at our rooftop lounge.

Well, we were pumped.

So we went to the rooftop lounge and were munching on hors d'oeuvres and a waiter came up to us and said, Sir, would you and your wife like a cocktail or a glass of wine. And we said, Yes. Of course.

We did that for three nights. When came time to check out, I was looking over the bill and I was stunned to see an exorbitant charge for alcohol.

And I said to the clerk. What's this? Well, it appears you and your wife had drinks.

I said, There appears to be a misunderstanding.

We were told the rooftop lounge was complimentary.

He said, Yes, the hors d'oeuvres were complimentary, but not the drinks.

I'm sorry you misunderstood.

Just so you know. Your tithes and offerings paid for our hotel room, but not

for our drinks. That was on us.
It was an expensive misunderstanding.

We can laugh about that, but sometimes misunderstandings are more serious
and can even have eternal consequences.

I'm talking about misunderstandings of the Gospel.
Misunderstandings of God's grace and salvation.

This parable of the wedding feast addresses three common misunderstandings
that have led to the spiritual ruin of many people.

These are the three deadly misunderstandings:

First, I can come to God any time.

Second, God accepts me just the way I am.

Third, God wants me to be happy.

Let's jump right in.

MP#1 First misunderstanding: I can come to God any time.

The parable starts with a king who has prepared a wedding banquet for his son's marriage and he sends out his servants to call the guests to come.

Back then a wedding invitation didn't say 3:00 Saturday afternoon, June 2.

A wedding banquet took weeks to prepare so the exact date was not known. And when it was finally prepared, there weren't telephones and cars.

It took days for the guests to be notified and arrive and assemble.

So this is the important detail you shouldn't miss.

These guests had already been invited and they had already said yes.

The servants of the king were simply telling them, it's time.

Now is the time to get dressed and come. You said you were going to come, So come on! But they didn't come. Again the servants invited. But they didn't.

Who do these people in the parable represent?

Who says to God, I'm coming. But then doesn't come?

Remember the context of these chapters.

Jesus is addressing the religious leaders of Israel.

He's talking to churched people.

That's who these people in the parable represent. Churched people.

When you join a church or attend worship, you're saying to God. I'm coming.

Every time you take communion, you're promising God that you're coming.

Think of the times when you've been in trouble or had some crisis in your life

and you've prayed to God, please help me. I promise, if you help, I'm coming.

What does that mean that to promise to come to God's banquet?

It means that you promise to get serious with him.

It means you promise to make God first in your life.

It means you promise to prioritize what God loves and wants you to do.

These are churched people who say over and over through their religious activities

God, I'm coming. But they don't come.

Why don't they come? Because they have other things that are more important

to them than God. Their farms. Their businesses. Their priorities.

It says they paid no attention to the servants. They were indifferent.

And underneath indifference to God is hostility to God's invitation to make him the priority in life. Nobody tells me what to do.

So next, the invitation goes to a different group of people who do come.

We'll talk more about them in a minute.

But the point is that salvation only comes by God's invitation.

There are some of you here this morning who are feeling an invitation from God.

You are feeling God calling you, pressing you, challenging you.

It may be in a very specific area of your life where you know God wants you to obey him, and doing so means following Christ completely and seriously.

But you don't want to give yourself to God completely.

You're willing to do some religious things, go to church, but you don't want to come to God yet. You tell yourself you will get serious with God later.

I can come to God any time.

But because salvation is an invitation, that means you are incapable of coming to God when you want to come.

You can't tell someone who invites you to a banquet, I don't want to come to your banquet tonight, I want to come next month. Because the invitation is for now.

God is calling you to follow him now.

What happened to the people in the parable who strung the king along?

Who said yes, we'll come, but they didn't come after he sent his servants twice. They got hostile and abusive so the king quit sending invitations and killed them.

There are deathbed conversions. They are very rare. Don't pin hopes on them.

Because most people who ignore God's invitations over and over cross a threshold after which God quits sending invitations and they become his enemy.

They may have years of life left, but hell is their certain and chosen destination.

That's the warning to all of you who are putting God off and putting Jesus off.

I can't stop here because I know pastorally that there are some of you who hear this and it makes you worried about your salvation.

You are struggling with temptations and failures, doubts and fears.

You want to be a faithful follower of Jesus but you feel defeated.

When it comes time to take the Lord's Supper this morning, you're wondering if you should even take it at all.

For you, this same message is not a warning, it should be a comfort.

Because salvation is by God's invitation, you didn't invite yourself.

He invited you.

So all the fears and worries and doubts you have about your salvation and about your relationship with God, all your longings to be certain—those are all evidences he has not only called you, but he has chosen you.

Because his call has produced in you a longing for him and for heaven.

Many are invited, but few are chosen. How do you know you are chosen?

Because you long for God and for his salvation and are moving toward him,

even imperfectly.

No, you can't come to God any time. You can only come when he invites you.

If your heart is moving toward him, even imperfectly, rejoice in that.

If you're putting him off, be warned.

MP#2 Second misunderstanding: God accepts me just the way I am.

The most difficult detail of this parable to interpret is the part at the end about the guest who is not wearing wedding clothes.

The king questions him and then orders him to be tied up and thrown outside into the darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth—which is obviously a reference to hell.

What does that detail mean? What is Christ teaching us?

Let's imagine Jesus had told this parable without that detail.

He tells the first part how the landowners, the business owners, the respectable people, the solid citizens were invited to come and said yes, but when the time came, they were interested in other things and refused to come.

They represent church people, religious, moral people.

Then Jesus ends with verses 8 through 10.

The king said to his servants:

“The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.” So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

If the parable had ended that way, I think we would say the interpretation is that

God doesn't require church or religion or morality or respectability,

he accepts everybody from the street corners, just as they are.

God doesn't judge anybody, the bad and the good.

It's a nice, neat, feel-good package.

But then there's this awkward ending with one of the people from the street corner who God does not accept. Instead, God judges him for not wearing the right clothes and throws him into hell.

This awkward ending has so bothered liberal New Testament scholars that they argue Jesus didn't really say it.

Jesus ended the parable with verse 10, God accepting everybody bad and good.

But later, when the Gospels were written, church leaders added this ending.

They added it because they wanted to reintroduce the ideas of morality and

requirements, so that they could hold that over people.

No, you can't do that. These are Jesus' words.

We have to figure out what they mean.

These people on the street corners are not like the first group.

They did not have a long-standing invitation. They did not have time to get ready. They did not have wedding clothes at home, and even if they did, they didn't have time to go home and put them on because the servants came and gathered them. They all came unattired to the wedding.

So where did they get their wedding clothes?

It doesn't say, but the implication is obvious. The king provided them.

As all these people came in, it didn't matter if they were good or bad, respectable or not, they were all clothed in a beautiful robe.

That explains why the man was speechless when questioned by the king.

He couldn't say: I don't have wedding clothes, I'm too poor.

He also couldn't say: I have wedding clothes at home, but didn't have time.

He's speechless because the king was providing them at great expense to himself and handing them out at the door.

This man out of pride or stubbornness refused to take one and put it on.

What is the wedding garment? I don't have time to trace this symbolism for you, so you'll just have to take my word for it. It's the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

It's his perfect life and his substitutionary death.

The white robe in Scripture in which believers are clothed represents the righteousness of Christ and the life and record we get in him.

The only way to get into God's banquet is to be wearing that robe, which means literally, to be trusting in Jesus Christ for your salvation.

We should never say that God accepts you just the way you are.

That's just an excuse to avoid God and never change.

We should say that God accepts you just the way you are in Christ!

Because God doesn't want to leave you as you are.

He wants to change you into a beautiful, righteous person.

And that begins by covering you with Jesus whether you are good or bad.

Isn't that great? Isn't that wonderful?

At great expense to himself, the king has given his only son so that we can be accepted and enter the banquet hall. Jesus gets the glory.

MP#3 Third misunderstanding: God wants me to be happy.

I'll never forget a dramatic moment in the parking lot of Marco Presbyterian Church, the first church I served in after seminary.

The pastor, Bruce Fiol, my boss, was a very gentle, kind man.

I saw him talking to a woman, a church member, and then she began to speak very loudly and stormed away, got in her car and drove off.

I asked him what happened and he said.

I'm going to tell you this in confidence because this is part of your pastoral training.

I was gently challenging her because she has started living together with a man, unmarried. I asked her what the Lord wanted her to do.

So I asked him what did she say? I could tell she was upset.

He said: She told me God wants me to be happy.

Let me ask you a question.

In the ordinary rhythm of human life, what are the happiest occasions?

I think you could make the case for weddings.

Now not all weddings. Some you feel obliged to attend, so you go and make an appearance and leave as soon as you can.

But when you attend a wedding in which you love the bride and groom.

Maybe they are dear friends, or maybe they are the children of old friends.

And when you arrive at a wedding like that, everywhere you turn you are bumping into other old friends who you haven't seen in years.

The bride is beautiful. The groom is handsome.

The wedding ceremony is sweet.

Then you go to the reception and there is food and drink, music and dancing—all generously provided by the father of the bride.

And when he sees you he gives you a bear hug and pounds you on the back and says: Thank you for coming and sharing our joy. What an honor.

The warmth, the generosity, the conviviality, the beauty and wonder of two lives becoming one through the mystery of marriage is truly a happy moment.

And in this parable Jesus tells us that a wedding banquet is the best picture on earth of the joys of God's salvation.

You see, the misunderstanding is not that God wants you to be happy.

Of course he wants you to be happy. He wants you to be supremely happy.

Through Jesus Christ, he wants you to be filled with joy.

The misunderstanding is that we think we know what is going to make us happy,

so we latch on to those things instead of following Jesus.
Sometimes those things that are good in themselves, like the farms and businesses that the people in the parable owned. We say, this is what God wants for me. Sometimes we latch on to things that God has clearly forbidden, but they are comfortable and easy for us and make us happy right now. And then, as a way of justifying ourselves, we baptize them. We say this must be what God wants for me.

C.S. Lewis said we were like a child who is offered a trip to the beach but he wants to keep making mud pies in a slum because that's all he knows. The Lord Jesus wants you to quit making mud pies and come to his banquet. It's by trusting him and following him that true and lasting happiness is found.

Perhaps some of you pushing back and saying:

I'm a Christian but this has not been my experience.
You say God's banquet banishes sadness? I'm still sad at times, feel loss, regret.
You say God's banquet satisfies hunger? I still hunger for inner peace, acceptance.
I know Jesus has forgiven my sins and saved me, but life is still hard.

I agree. To fully understand the invitation to God's banquet, you have to look beyond this parable to the very end of the Bible, Revelation 19.

"Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!"
What that tells us is that the final great banquet is still being prepared.
So your experience of it now not complete.
Now you have God's promises and you have foretastes.

Those of you who are sometimes sad because of losses or regrets.
Have there not also been days in your walk with Christ when you have felt God's comfort and been convinced he will make all things new? Maybe that did not last long, but it was a foretaste of the feast God is preparing.

Those of you who struggle with feelings of emptiness, loneliness.
Have there not been days in your walk with Christ when you had a tangible sense of his presence that calmed you? You knew you were loved.
That was the sound of the wedding reception band warming up in heaven.

When the banquet comes, every good longing will be satisfied.
So why doesn't God do it right now?
Deliver me completely from all the bad stuff.
Fill me completely with joy and satisfaction.
Have patience. He is preparing the banquet.

God is calling you, he is inviting you to follow his Son, Jesus our Savior.

Don't put off his invitation because it might not come again.

God is providing the righteous life of Christ to be your covering, the white robe.

Don't be proud and think you don't need to be forgiven or you will be cast out.

The great banquet is being prepared, the wedding supper of the Lamb.

Christ's promises are not empty. He came to banish sadness and hunger.

He is preparing the feast and you are invited.

Don't make the grave mistake of chasing after other things for your happiness,
or you will end up missing him.