

# THE CHANCE TO LIVE

by Ray C. Stedman

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For our concluding study of the Parables, I would like to turn to Matthew 22, and look with you at the parable of the marriage feast. In some ways this is the easiest parable of all to interpret because there is an obvious meaning lying right on the surface. This parable grew out of our Lord's controversy with the Pharisees during the last week of his ministry, when it was very apparent that he was on his way to the cross. The enmity against him had sharpened tremendously throughout the city and the Pharisees, scribes, and rulers were plotting together to kill him. Knowing this, Jesus spoke very sharply to them and informed them very clearly about what was going to happen. Part of that information was given in the form of this parable, which is built upon what he had said to them earlier, as recorded in Chapter 21, Verse 43: "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it." Here is his announcement to these Pharisees that they were to lose their privileged position and that the gospel was thereafter to go out to all nations everywhere.

In the first seven verses, we have our Lord's description of his own ministry of invitation to the nation, of the refusal of the national leaders to heed what he said; and then his prediction of the ultimate destruction of the city of Jerusalem:

**And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the marriage feast; but they would not come. Again he sent other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, Behold, I have made ready my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves are killed, and everything is ready; come to the marriage feast.' But they made light of it and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city."**  
{Matt 22:1-7 RSV}

What a clear prediction of what will happen as a result of the rejection by the nation Israel of our Lord's invitation! All of it is couched in this figure of the marriage feast. This is an Eastern wedding scene, as we have noted before in some of our Lord's other parables. The custom there was to invite people to the wedding feast a long time before it actually occurred. The invitations went out and were acknowledged and accepted. Then, when the preparations were complete, servants were sent out to bid those who had already accepted the invitation to come.

It is important to understand this because our Lord here clearly has in mind the nation Israel. Historically, they had been invited to the wedding long, long before, through the prophets whom God had sent them. The invitation was to come and have fellowship with the Son. (Notice that the marriage feast is for the son.) But now all things are ready. The son is there in their midst and is himself extending this final call, "Come now, everything is ready. Come and enter into fellowship with me." But they refused to heed the summons even though they had already accepted the invitation. That is the picture our Lord is drawing here. As a consequence, we read in the next section, a worldwide invitation goes out to all men, everywhere:

**"Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the thoroughfares, and invite to the marriage feast as many as you find.' And those servants went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good; so the wedding hall was filled with guests."** {Matt 22:8-10 RSV}

This is clearly our Lord's prediction that the gospel message, with its invitation to worship the Son, is to go out to all the world. Everyone is invited. It does not make any difference whether they have a respectable reputation, or are disreputable in the eyes of society -- bad and good as used here are only men's evaluation. No matter who they are, if people have a need, if they want life, whether they are of good reputation or not,

they are invited. We know that history has confirmed that this pattern has been followed exactly. The gospel has gone out to all the world, and it has been "whosoever will may come," {cf, Rev 22:17}. And through the centuries many have come in response, out of the highways and byways of life.

But that is only the understanding of this parable which lies right on the surface. You can hardly miss it, can you? But we would miss a great deal if that were all we saw because it has a deeper significance. So I want to take a closer look at certain of the elements in this parable which will unveil its significance to us here this morning, and its clear implications for our own day.

Notice first that this occasion is a wedding feast. Today we call them receptions, and it falls my lot as a pastor to be present at many receptions. Usually I find them joyful occasions marked by gladness, music, and laughter. In fact, sometimes people work up such elevated spirits that it is hard to keep them out of trouble. They tend to want to perpetrate all kinds of high jinks. That is why you often find the bride and groom driving off in a car that is a disgrace to behold, dragging old cans and shoes behind them. It is an expression of the cheerfulness, the joyfulness, the gladness of the occasion.

It is important for us to understand that this is the way our Lord characterized God's invitation -- the gospel. It is not an invitation to a funeral, even though some people act as though becoming a Christian is equivalent to being soaked for a week in formaldehyde. It is an invitation to joy. It is not an invitation to a formal state dinner, but to a relaxed, cheerful, joyful occasion. It is an invitation, in other words, to life. This is what we so desperately need to understand.

During this tremendously significant last week, when man landed on the moon for the first time -- and when we now even have pictures coming to us from Mars, and are really beginning to understand something of our solar system and the universe in which we live -- it struck me very forcibly how barren and dreary and desolate these places are. I don't want to live on the moon, do you? Once you have seen one square mile of the moon's surface you have seen it all. It seems to be the ugly repetition of the same scarred, barren, dreary landscape. When I first saw the picture from Mars, I mistook it for the moon. It looks very much the same. It struck me as highly significant that, so far, the only beautiful place in our solar system is earth. It was the only beautiful thing the astronauts saw on their trip to the moon -- the beautiful earth. As we look around on our planet we can see something of the goodness and the graciousness of God toward man. What a beautiful place he has prepared for us! How he has flung beauty abroad with a lavish hand! We see it on every side.

This is indicative also of what God has prepared for the spirit in man. His invitation to us is never to unhappiness or sorrow, drudgery or darkness, fear or death; it is to life and to vitality, to excitement, joy, and gladness. We will never understand the gospel unless we understand it in those terms. God is inviting men to come alive, to discover what makes life exciting, challenging, wonderful. A phrase in Paul's letter to the Romans comes to mind here: "For the kingdom of God does not mean food and drink [it is not made up of mundane things even enjoyable things such as food and drink] but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit," (Rom 14:17 {RSV}). That is what God is calling us to.

A few weeks ago a Christian young man was talking with me about what he should be doing for the next few months of his life. He said, "I have two choices before me, two things I can do this summer. One of them I would really hate to do. It doesn't have any appeal to me at all. I feel that perhaps I should do it, but I don't want to. The other is something I really enjoy doing. It's a ministry I delight in." And he looked at me and said, "Of course, it's not difficult for me to know which is the will of God. I know he wants me to do the hard thing, the difficult thing." I asked him, "Why do you say that?" He said, "Well isn't that what God always wants?" He wants us to do things that are tough and challenging and difficult." I said, "My friend, I'm afraid you don't know God very well yet. The Lord Jesus said, 'I delight always to do those things that please him.' It is great, it is exciting, it is challenging to do the things that please him."

This is the testimony of millions who have become Christians that they have found the secret of life. God has invited them to a joyful feast in fellowship with the Son of God.

A lady said to me a couple of weeks ago. "Oh, I had no idea that, when I became a Christian life, would be as exciting and wonderful as it is. I accepted the Lord fifteen years ago and I had no idea at the time that I would

ever enter into the kind of peace, gladness, and joy that I've been experiencing of late." That is the testimony of many.

I know there are exceptions. The philosopher, Nietzsche, once said about Christians. "If you want me to believe in your Redeemer, you're going to have to look a lot more redeemed." Some of us need an exhortation like that. But the important thing to understand is that when God issues the invitation through the gospel, he is inviting us to discover life -- life as it really is.

Notice also the nature of the call here. It is an invitation. It is not a summons from the draft board to report for duty; it is an invitation which recognizes the right of the ones invited to reject, if they so desire. It is without coercion or compulsion. When God offers to us this marvelous gift of life in Jesus Christ, he does not threaten us. He does not try to coerce or compel us to come; he offers it as an invitation which we are free to accept, or reject, if we want to. "Come, all you who are weary and heavy laden," says Jesus, "and I will give you rest," {cf, Matt 11:28}. "Come if you really want to live," is the nature of the invitation.

"Well," someone says, "wait a minute! Doesn't it say here that the king was angry when they refused to come? And that he sent his troops and destroyed these people and burned their city? That looks pretty compulsory to me." Yes, he did do that. But notice when he did it. He did not grow angry when they first refused the gospel invitation. Instead, he sent other servants to plead with them. Here is a revelation of the patience and kindness of God, is it not? There is no resentment on his part at this callous refusal to come when everything has now been made ready. Rather, he sends other servants and another entreaty, and he describes the feast to them, trying to entice them to come. "Everything's ready," he says, "I've made ready the dinner, the oxen and the fat calves." This was the greatest gastronomic treat they could expect in those days. It was all ready and he pleaded with them to come.

But notice the reaction of these people. Monstrous, really. The record says that they made light of the invitation. Now we could understand this reaction if it were a case of excessive demand on the part of God. All of us get tired of someone who is constantly demanding something from us. Our tempers grow short after awhile, and we say, "Leave me alone! I don't want to do it. I'm not interested." But that is not the case here. This was an invitation to enjoy what these people wanted more than anything else. It was what they desired, what they were looking for in life -- joy and gladness, fellowship, and companionship -- fulfillment in every sense. So when they rejected and refused it, they were refusing the very thing that they wanted most.

What stopped them? Why did they thus refuse? Matthew tells us "they made light of it." In a parallel passage. Luke says they began to make excuses. One man said, "I bought a field, so I can't come." Another said, "I've bought some oxen and I have to go try them." And a third said, "I've married a wife, and I can't come," {cf, Luke 14:18-20}. (His was probably the best excuse of all.) What does all this mean? It means that these men were putting the everyday concerns of their lives before this call to discover and enjoy the secrets of life. They were taking the ordinary, normal matters of business and counting them as of far greater importance than this which actually meant everything in life to them. This invitation, which was the embodiment of everything they wanted most of all, they downgraded and treated with scorn and indifference, in contrast to some of the less important matters of life. There is nothing wrong with the things that they set in its place; but obviously, the whole point is that they had lost their perspective. They could not evaluate things properly and they treated lightly this marvelous, gracious invitation to come to the fellowship of the Son.

Some went even further, the record tells us. They seized the messengers which the king had sent and killed them. They not only resisted the invitation and refused it, but they hated it. This is revealing, is it not? They murdered the ones who brought it. And it was then, only then, that the king became angry after they had descended to murdering the ones he sent. Then they had become criminals, and it was then that he came and destroyed the city.

All of this reveals a very great mystery about human lives. It reveals that what this marriage feast symbolizes -- this fellowship with the Son -- is so essential, so necessary to man that, without it, man cannot remain human. When he refuses this, something happens to him. He begins to deteriorate, to fall apart. Either he loses his perspective and life turns upside down, so that rather trivial things become all-important, while really important things are treated lightly and with scorn. That is, he lives then in an unreal world, a phantasmic world, an

*Alice in Wonderland* existence where everything is out of proportion, a world of unreality. Or, he becomes animalistic, fierce, hateful, and dangerous, so that he actually breathes out anger, hatred, and threatening against the very message sent to set him free.

Is it not striking that the two major problems of the day in which we live are meaninglessness and violence? It is because men turn a deaf ear to the message of the king to come to the wedding feast, to come to the fellowship of the Son. And when they refuse that, they are refusing such an essential element of human life that they no longer can remain human beings in the true sense but drift off instead into one or the other of these two extremes.

But, as the record tells us, the king is not defeated. He is determined to have guests at the wedding. So the invitation goes out, literally, "to the partings of the highways," to the place "where cross the crowded ways of life," where people mingle and mix without distinction, where there are all kinds -- the respectable and the disreputable, the up-and-outers and the down-and-outers. The invitation goes out to anyone who will hear, anyone who wants to live. If what you are after is to discover the secrets of life, then you can come. That is very much like what we have in the opening of the Sermon on the Mount. The Lord Jesus said. "Blessed are the poor in spirit [those who do not have anything in themselves to count upon] for theirs in the kingdom of heaven," {Matt 5:3}.

The parable takes a sudden turn here. A rather strange event occurs:

**"But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment; and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen." {Matt 22:11-14 RSV}**

The high point of the feast was when the king himself came in. After all, that is the chief value of this feast -- the opportunity for a personal acquaintanceship with the king. The king saw there a man without a wedding garment. He was what we would call today a gate-crasher. He came in without the prescribed proper dress. He was there on false grounds, in other words. At every Eastern wedding like this, the one who gave the marriage feast always provided wedding garments for the guests to wear. They did not cost them anything -- they were provided. All they needed was to put on the wedding garment and they could come to the feast. Yet when the king comes he finds a man there without one.

It is not difficult to interpret this, as we have garments used many times in Scripture as symbols of righteousness. The wedding garment is a picture of the gift of righteousness which the Lord gives to those who come with no righteousness of their own. It is a picture of that righteousness of Jesus Christ with which we stand clothed in God's presence if we are ready to renounce any dependence upon ourselves, or upon anything we have done, or our background, heredity, ancestry or anything else we might think of value to us. If we renounce our righteousnesses, which, as the Scripture says, are as filthy rags, then God has the gift of his righteousness to give to us.

This man was standing there without a wedding garment. And, in the original language, the account makes clear that his was a deliberate refusal. There are two Greek words for *not* and both of them are used in this account. In the first sentence we read, "But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had not a wedding garment." The word simply means the negative. He did not have one, that's all. A plain statement of fact. But when the king said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here not having a wedding garment?" he uses another Greek word. It is a word that implies a deliberate action of the will. This king is saying to him, "Look, friend, you are here under false pretenses. You are deliberately rejecting what has been provided. Your being here without a wedding garment implies that you are in rebellion against all that this wedding feast stands for. You are here as a phony, a sham."

And we read that the man was speechless; he had nothing to say. So the king said, "Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth." In other words, this man is as bad off as those who refused to come in the first place. He is in the same condition as those who actually hated

the king and fought against him. This is a picture, easy to see, of hidden rebellion of an outward pretense toward being what the king desires, but an inner refusal actually to go along with him. So, in view of this, the final pronouncement of our Lord is that he was cast out into the outer darkness, where men weep and gnash their teeth. "For," he says, "many are called, but few are chosen."

Many have wondered what that sentence means. Sometimes you hear it paraphrased, "Many are cold, and few are frozen," and that is getting fairly close to the truth of it. What our Lord says, literally, is, "Many are called, but few are called out." The words are related.

There are many adherents of Christianity, but there are few who actually become disciples. There are many who are willing to come without a wedding garment, they are at the scene of the wedding feast, in the presence of the fellowship of the saints with the Son, but they themselves do not actually enter in.

You can see how accurately and incisively descriptive this is of those who are present with the people of God, who profess Christianity, who are there Sunday after Sunday along with all the others, singing the hymns and reading the Scriptures, bowing their heads together at the right time. Yet they sustain an inner rebellion in their hearts, an inner refusal to accept the gift of righteousness of Jesus Christ. Instead they cling to something in themselves upon which they are depending for favor before God, and they refuse to heed the authority and acknowledge the lordship of Jesus Christ. For these the sentence is, "Bind them hand and foot, and cast them into the outer darkness; ... For many are called, but few are chosen."

You often hear people say, "The reason I don't go to church is that there are so many hypocrites there." Well, there are hypocrites in the churches. There is not one of us who is not a hypocrite, in one way or another. But what our Lord is focusing upon here is the initial entrance into the relationship of fellowship with the Son of God. That must be based solely upon the gift of righteousness, the gift of justification by faith. If we do not have that, then there is no possibility of development in the Christian life. Our Lord is highlighting for us the fact that we are dealing with God, who sees our hearts and knows our inner thoughts -- everything about us.

This is particularly significant and pertinent as we come to the table of the Lord, because, here, we are dealing with something which can easily be used as a mask, a guise of Christianity. All of us can partake of the table of the Lord. All of us can eat the bread and drink the wine. But God is watching the heart. He is looking to see whether that heart has really accepted the gift of life and has genuinely entered into an understanding of the joy, the gladness, and the glory that it is to know Jesus Christ.

We were singing earlier this morning a song that I love very much. A verse in it says,

He breaks the power of canceled sin,  
He sets the prisoner free;  
His blood can make the foulest clean;  
His blood availed for me.

Those words always speak to my heart because I have such a sense of having been cleansed, of having been foul, dirty, filthy, and of needing every day the cleansing of the blood of Jesus Christ. That is what this Communion table speaks of.

And God will be examining our hearts as we meet together here. That is why the Scriptures tell us not to treat this lightly, not to treat the table of the Lord as though it were a mere perfunctory ritual, for God is reading the attitude and the reaction of the heart as we participate together.

It is not the will of God to cast anyone out. He has made full provision for a wedding garment for us all. But only those who actually put it on will enter into the joy of the Lord at a time like this. As we participate together in this central sacrament of the Christian faith, will you be asking yourself these questions:

- What is the reaction of my heart to all of this?
- Is there joy there?
- Do I really know the glory of a cleansed life?

- Has God washed away any sins of mine?
- Am I free from my dark, sordid past?
- Is my inner life cleansed, as well as my outer life?
- Has God brought me into the place where I can rejoice and discover the joy of the Holy Spirit?

If you cannot say, "Yes," then I suggest that you face the Lord Jesus on other terms. Say to him, "Lord, until now I've been pretending to be a Christian. Up to now I've been doing all the outward, expected things. But I have never really trusted you. I've never really accepted from you the gift of life. Until now I've wanted to run my own life. I have wanted to be my own boss, make my own plans, and do all the things that I want to do. But now, Lord Jesus, I bow to your authority, to your right to be my Lord, and I thank you for your willingness to change me, to love me, and to lead me into the experience of life."

Will you pray that way?

### **Prayer**

Our Holy Father, thank you for the significance of this feast to which we come today. How luminous it becomes in the light of these words of the Lord Jesus. This is the feast intended to symbolize all the good things of life -- joy and peace and righteousness. And Lord, as we come to it, we pray that we may be honest, sincere, open, and transparent before you. We come, Lord, not because we feel that we have anything to offer. We partake only on the grounds that we have nothing in ourselves, but all things in you. And, Lord Jesus, we thank you for this. We pray that this will move our hearts and that we will experience anew what it means to be set free from the weight of guilt for our sins, to be forgiven, to be restored to be given the gift of life in Jesus Christ and to walk with him in daily fellowship. We thank you in his name, Amen.

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