

Properly Dressed for the Occasion? [Matthew 22: 1-14](#)

An invitation to any wedding is full of excitement, joy and anticipation. The current restriction of only 15 people being allowed at a wedding gives an added poignancy to such a special day, and to how special it is to be invited as part of such a small gathering. In such times as this, to receive a wedding invitation is a particular honour.

But to be honoured with an invitation to a royal wedding? Your place in society and your future well-being could depend on you being there.



But, in our Gospel story, even a royal invitation to a wedding is not sufficient to make those initially invited leave their preoccupations with doing business on the farms and selling things. They would rather carry on with their own affairs. Indeed, some of the servants instructed to call in the guests, people who are simply following their master's orders, who come bearing what must surely be good news to share in great happiness are not just received apathetically, but end up being treated cruelly and murdered.

The king's reaction is in contrast to his previous joyful generosity, but not unsurprising. He sends out his forces to get revenge on the murderers, and destroys the centre of commerce and wealth in which they had set so much store.

The message in this first portion of the parable is clear. Jesus is addressing the chief priests and Pharisees, some of whom were so assured of their own good standing with God that they did not think that they needed to change their attitudes and make a response to the invitation to a new relationship with him to which Jesus was calling them. The last verses of Matthew 21 describe how the chief priests and Pharisees were desperate to have Jesus arrested (hence the pointed comment about how some of those invited to the wedding murdered the servants) but held off doing anything, out of fear of the crowds who gathered to hear him.

The second portion of the parable would have been very appealing to those crowds: those who were 'beyond the pale' of the chief priests and Pharisees, who had been captivated by Jesus' teaching and his miracles.

The gates which separate the "in" crowd from those "outsiders" have been completely broken down. Those who had previously viewed themselves as "worthy", are now discarded: "those I invited did not deserve to come." The servants were told to gather anyone they could find into the celebrations, "both good and bad" so that the hall was packed.

What a different kind of wedding party that would make from the first!

And we, too, may feel like rejoicing with the crowds sitting at Jesus' feet, laughing at the sour faces on the Pharisees.

Serves them right!

Now *we're* the in-crowd, and you're the outsiders!

We can see that the King's nature is stern, but generous and hospitable. His invitation is not simply limited to a select band. It reaches out to all sorts, it's blind to social status and even, it might appear, standards of behaviour.

But that's not the end of the story. That would lead us into a complacency just as dangerous as the Pharisees', a sense of cheap grace which requires no response.

For the King's stern judgement is not finished. The good and the bad from every highway and byway are indeed drawn in to this wonderful wedding feast. But one man is improperly dressed, and, with great courtesy (the king calls him "Friend") but firmness of purpose, he is tied up and thrown out of the banquet.



You may wonder, "How can the guest be at fault if he's just a poor person brought in off the street? How could he be expected to afford to have fine clothes to put on? This is unfair! Hasn't the king just changed the rules of invitation without explanation? How can anybody be assured of their place at this wedding banquet?"

Except this isn't the case. Rather than people having to pay for their own wedding clothes as we do today, the king would have provided special clothes for his guests to wear. They really were being treated royally.

What this man has done is that he hasn't changed in to the special clothes that he's been given for the occasion. He's assumed that simply turning up is enough.

The book of Isaiah uses this image of being given new clothing to convey God's salvation in Isaiah 61:10: "For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness." It's a picture of a lavish new set of clothes, the wearer elevated in status by putting them on.

This man at the wedding without the proper garments has assumed he can just come and enjoy all the delights of the feast without getting changed first.

So the king is not acting out of rage when he instructs the servants to take him away and cast him out. That word "Friend" is especially powerful. The king does not want to throw him out. He asks a question, and there is space for the man to give a response, to build up a relationship. But the man has no response, and the consequences are clear.

It can be comforting to try to put other people in the place of that man who was thrown out of the wedding party. We can insulate ourselves against its message. He wasn't one of the "chosen few". But the message of the parable is personal – to me, to every one of you. God has called each of us to his banquet, to be in his presence. He calls us "Friend". We are here because faithful Christian people in our lives, servants of God, have shown us the way. But we can't presume that simply sitting at the table is enough.

We have to respond, putting aside all our securities, self-sufficiency and pride, and clothe ourselves in God's love and grace.

Are you properly dressed for the occasion?

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