

## **“The Importance of Wearing Clothes”**

*Reading: Isaiah 25:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14*

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

The Bible begins in a garden and ends with a party. As we look over the entire scope of what God has been doing in this creation He has made, He begins by speaking order into chaos and crafting a space for peace and beauty and growth and fruitfulness. After that garden paradise is subjected to the chaos of humanity's decision to sin, God embarks on another long creative and redemptive act to restore the harmony that was lost, and as we look at the various descriptions of what that redemption involves, it often involves gathering in celebration. The quiet and near-solitude of the Garden of Eden grows into a joyful throng gathered to celebrate the fruit of God's work. One of the first things God tells His newly-made humans is that they should be fruitful and multiply, and of course later in salvation history, He calls His people to gather together as a body in worship and service; God seems to love a good party.

God loves His creation and He loves His people, so it's only fitting that as He talks about the goal of His work among us, He describes it in terms of a gathering and a celebration. I have to assume that in this party there will be a few quiet corners for us introverts, but the invitation is broad enough that there is room for everyone.

The party is not always described in the same way. Sometimes, as in our reading from Isaiah 25, it's a celebration of what God has done. It's just a big party with lots of the best food and drink. It's a celebration of what God has done, swallowing up death forever, saving the poor, protecting the defenseless, and bringing the nations together under His throne. Sometimes the party is a victory celebration, a feast recognizing God's defeat of an implacable enemy. In Ezekiel 39, the enemies of God gather in a giant demonic horde to make war against God and His people, and God defeats them, and He calls the birds together to a feast over the carcasses of God's fallen enemies. It's a sacrificial feast in celebration of God's victory. Or in other places, it's a wedding party. The book of Revelation describes the end as a celestial wedding between God's people and the Lamb Who Was Slain, Jesus Christ. It's a consistent image throughout the prophets and the New Testament.

Time and time again, when God points us to the end of what He is doing among us, He points us to a feast, a party, a celebration. Things may be bleak for now, but the end is worth celebrating. We can have hope; the end is good. And what's more, the end is not boring and stark and austere, it's a party. It's full of joy and laughter and good stories and good food.

Maybe that's why Jesus spent so much time at parties. I know that I tend to picture Jesus as being sort of serene and mystic-looking, dispassionate and emotionless, as though He were a flat painting come to life, walking around dispensing wise sayings and then letting everyone soak in His wisdom. But we know that's not quite accurate, because Jesus was clearly passionate about many things during His ministry. He cried, He debated, He told jokes. And He was apparently pretty good fun at parties, and I don't just mean boring, stuffy parties where everyone is there to look important and be seen with other important people. One of the things that He was criticized for was being a glutton and a drunkard, and for hanging out with the wrong sort of people. Jesus' first miracle was performed at a wedding party, after all, when He turned water into wine. It's extremely fitting that

the arrival of the kingdom of God was revealed, in part, by glimpses or foreshadowings of the final party that will take place when God has completed His work.

What all of that means is that God takes partying seriously. His kingdom is intended to be a place of joy and celebration. Salvation should not lead to petrification, it should lead to a life lived fully and well. The good news is not drudgery, it is *good* news. What's more, it's good news for eternity. God's kingdom ends with a party.

And that's all part of the biblical background for the parable of Jesus we read today. Jesus was familiar with the prophets, so He was surely familiar with all the different types of party they described as the culmination of God's work. He knew that this glorious celebration of God's work was expected to be a part of the arrival of God's Messiah: when God moves His work into the final phase and begins to complete the process of making all things right, there will surely be a feast of celebration. And so Jesus attended parties, because as He traveled He proclaimed the arrival of the kingdom and He enacted the arrival of the kingdom by healing the sick and feeding the hungry, and so naturally there were celebrations for what He did.

And in our parable for today, the parties are working their way into His teaching. Some people are celebrating, but others aren't. The parable tells a rather unlikely story of a king who throws a wedding party for his son, but none of the invited guests will come, even after a couple of invitations. They all seem to think they have something better to do. Life with all its busyness is more important to them than celebrating the good news. In fact, these would-be guests even go so far as to attack the king's messengers for some reason. They're not just ambivalent toward the king's good news, they're overtly hostile toward it. So the king changes his tactics and fills the hall with anyone who will come: those for whom the feast was prepared refuse the king's generosity, so the king's generosity will find other objects.

The point of Jesus' parable is that many are called, but few are chosen. The invitation to the party is about as broad as it can get, but there are few who will actually join the party in the end because they reject the king's generosity for one reason or another. Better things to do, it would seem. Surely many of them knew well in advance that the party was coming, and they had plenty of time to get their schedules figured out, but they didn't really care, in the end, about celebrating the good news. Jesus was preaching to the people of His day, of course, and especially to the religious elite and the power players who knew the promises of God and should have been prepared to see the kingdom when it came, but they resisted because it interfered with what they wanted to do instead.

But then there's this second chapter of the parable, an epilogue of sorts that pushes Jesus' point even further. The king encounters a guest at the party who isn't dressed for the party. When confronted, the man says nothing, and so the king responds in what seems a pretty harsh manner: he has the guest bound hand and foot and thrown out into the darkness. And we're left wondering why the king is suddenly so harsh in his judgment, when he was recently so extravagant in his invitation. Basically everyone was invited, after all, both the good and the bad, so there seem to be few qualifications for joining the party other than accepting the invitation. Why would the man's clothes provoke such a harsh sentence?

It's certainly true that clothes can provoke a harsh sentence in our culture today. Some people place more of a priority on their appearance than others, but it's extremely common for us to make all kinds of judgments on a person based on what they look like. Some people shop off the clearance rack, while others insist on having the latest wardrobe from a designer. Some people take pride in their appearance, while others take pride in not caring about their appearance. Some people have a signature look, while others don't really think about it. We live in a time when we're getting more and more casual; it used to be that there were rigidly defined rules for who wore what when, and so you really could tell an awful lot about a person based on their clothes. That's much more difficult now, but it's still very true that many people try very hard to project certain things about themselves based on their clothes.

We want other people to think certain things about our insides based on our outsides. And in this parable, it turns out that that's exactly what's happening. The clothes aren't really clothes here; they're an indication of the heart of the person. Though this guest was surely invited, his lack of appropriate clothing calls into question his motive for being there. When asked, he doesn't answer, and when someone is speechless, it's a fair assumption that they don't have a good answer. Presumably he knows he's been caught. Is he just there for the food? Or is he there to be seen by important people? Whatever his reason, he's apparently not there to celebrate the son's marriage, which is the whole point, and so he gets thrown out. In this case, the clothes reveal the heart. It's a common image in God's parties: in the book of Revelation, those who are righteous are given white robes to wear to symbolize their purity, and paradoxically, the whiteness comes because those robes have been dipped in the blood of Christ.

Many are called, but few are chosen. The invitation to the celebration is wide open, but the expectation is that you come to celebrate. There are lots of reasons to be attracted to the party, but in the end, the reason for the party is to celebrate the good news. People are attracted to the kingdom of God for lots of reasons — to socialize, to do good deeds, to enjoy the music or the traditions, or because their parents or their spouse makes them come, or because they want to look like a good, upstanding citizen — lots of reasons to come, but in the end, if you're not here to celebrate the arrival of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ, you'll find yourself on the outside. Many are called, few are chosen. And you may be able to make your way into the party without the right clothes, but you won't fool the party's host.

What's interesting is that both the good and the bad are invited to this party. Worthiness to join the party is basically irrelevant, because the people who would seem to be the most worthy, the VIPs who are first invited, are so often the ones who spurn the invitation and think they've got something more important to do. The good and the bad are invited to come, but in order to stay, you've got to be there to celebrate. This celebration, this kingdom of God, is a place where all sorts rub shoulders, where the good and the bad, the cream and the dregs, the saints and the sinners are all welcome. What you've done in your past matters less than what's in your heart now: the circumstances in which you got your invitation to the party, whether you were in the penthouse or the gutter, are basically irrelevant. What matters is what you're wearing at the party. God reveals the true state of your soul, whether you're good or bad, what matters is that we are gathered in the name of Christ to celebrate what He has done. And if you're at the party to celebrate the good news, you're welcome to stay.

The strange truth is that of course clothes don't really tell you anything about the inside of a person. Many people work very hard to project their desired appearance, thinking that the right clothes will make them look rich or important or smart or strong or beautiful or fashionable or rebellious. We show what we want others to see, and we don't show what we don't want them to see, and we even go so far as to cover up those parts that we're really ashamed of. Literal clothes tell you nothing about a person; sometimes they function as a mask. But when it comes to the kingdom of God, ultimately there is no hiding or masking. Each of us will be revealed for what we are, for why we have come to the party, for what we hold as being more important than heeding God's invitation. Our true attire will be evaluated, and we will either be invited to join the party, or tossed out into the back alley.

Our cry in our church is that God would find us to be people of integrity, who are gathered in His name, rejoicing at what He has done for us, being continually transformed by His love as we carry that love with us out into the world. Our cry is to be deep, beautiful, fearless people for Jesus Christ: people who dive deep into the grace of Christ, who are willing to wrestle with hard questions and trust God deeply; beautiful people who have been transformed and renewed by the grace of God and radiate with that grace; and fearless people who hold nothing back in love and generosity toward others. Are your party clothes revealing what's in your heart? Are your motives and your actions, your words and your thoughts, your inside and your outside in integrity?

Benediction: The wedding banquet is ready, so go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you can find.



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