

Say What?

Hard Sayings of Christ:
There Will Be Weeping- Matthew 20:1-17

Background for the Parable

Often Jesus will start a parable by saying something like, “The kingdom of heaven is like...” (Matt. 20:1; 22:2). This does not mean that Jesus is comparing the kingdom only to the first thing he states. For example, he is not just comparing the kingdom to a king in Matt. 22:2. Rabbinic parables often began with, “To what may such and such be compared?” or, “Such and such is like...” In these parables the phrase meant that the subject was being explained by the whole analogy that followed, not just by the next word (Craig Keener, *IVP Bible Background*, IVP, 83).

In Jewish story telling, a wedding frequently depicted the fellowship of the Messiah with his people at the end times (Matt. 8:11; Luke 13:29; Revelation 19:9). The people originally invited to the banquet clearly represent Israel. Their reaction to the king's invitation proves shocking on both the natural and spiritual levels of the story. Their refusal (22:3) literally says, “they were not willing.” The sending of the servants corresponds to the standard Ancient Near East practice of issuing an invitation to an event without specifying the exact time until a later date (326-327).

One member of the new group of guests appears without proper wedding clothes (22:11). While some people think the ending of the parable doesn't fit with the rest of the story, there is nothing in the passage that says that this man has not been given time to find proper dress or that he was unable to locate any. Moreover, it is quite possible that the imagery here reflects the custom of a king providing festive clothes for those he invites to a banquet. So the king is understandably amazed and he rebukes this man, asking him why he has behaved as he has. The man offers no excuse (22:12). Only imprisonment and punishment- eternal judgment- remain in store for such people. At this point Jesus abandons any attempt to retain a meaningful story line at the literal level and speaks purely allegorically (Craig Blomberg, *The New American Commentary: Matthew*, Holman, 326-327; 328-329).



**Digging
Deeper**

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*“Tie his hand and foot, and
throw him outside, into the
darkness, where there will
be weeping and gnashing of
teeth.”*

Matthew 22:13

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available for download at
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In parables, rabbis often compared God to a king, whose son often represented Israel; the setting was also often a wedding feast for the son. Wedding feasts were frequently large gatherings; a very wealthy person could invite an entire city to one. Coming to a wedding feast required some commitment of valuable time on the part of guests (Jewish hearers would assume a feast lasting seven days, and a king would expect his guests to remain throughout the feast); this commitment would be difficult for peasants working the land. But the honor of being invited by a king- and the terror of displeasing him- would have motivated intelligent invitees to attend. The invited guests may have been aristocratic landowners anyway (22:5), who had the leisure for such activities.

Ignoring the king would be scandalously rude, would probably suggest treasonous feelings and would certainly invite a king's wrath. This parable's original hearers would thus feel incensed at these subjects' unbelievable stupidity.

The mistreatment and killing of the servants would have obviously been illegal, but servants of a king had higher status than most free persons, and as a king's messengers they represented his person. Ancient peoples universally despised the mistreatment of heralds, or emissaries. In addition, the mistreatment of royal representatives was outright treason, constituting a declaration of revolt. Yet this was the treatment God's servant-messengers, the prophets, were known to have received (Keener, 104-105).

You might notice that Jesus told a very similar parable when he was visiting the home of a Pharisee in Luke 14:16-24. Jesus undoubtedly told his parables in many different settings. One of the distinct advantages of the parable is that its major truth may be applied in various contexts. We should see the accounts in Matthew and Luke as separate but related parables told on different occasions in order to illustrate or strengthen basic truths. It would be highly unlikely for Jesus to have told each of his parables on one occasion only (Robert Mounce, *Matthew*, Broadman & Holman, 205).

Few Are Chosen

Many people hear the summons of the gospel, but only a certain percentage responds properly. In light of the imagery of the parable itself and in view of common Semitic usage, "many" here may well mean *all*. "Few" may thus imply nothing about how many are saved except that the number is noticeably *less than all*. This is interesting use of election terminology. "Called" here is to be taken in the sense of "invited." Those responding properly may be said to have been chosen. The elect are the true community of the people God chooses to save, even as Israel had once been so chosen. But those people must freely respond to the Spirit's work in their lives. The imagery here is in fact more that of corporate than of individual election. Divine sovereignty and human responsibility are again finely balanced. Neither can be jettisoned at the expense of the other. The man's behavior demonstrates he is not elect. Election does not violate free will nor occur irrespective of the man's conduct (Blomberg, 329).

Understanding the Parable

In the parable, the wedding garment was probably provided by the host so that everybody was properly attired and the poor did not feel conspicuous. In the same way, salvation is personal and individual. We must accept what God gives to us- the righteousness of Christ- and not try to make it on our own. Since these parables had a definite *national* emphasis, this *personal* emphasis at the end was most important. The nation's leaders were guilty of spiritual blindness, hypocrisy, and deliberate disobedience to the Word.

Instead of accepting this indictment from Jesus, and repenting, they decided to attack him and argue with him. The result: judgment. We should be careful not to follow their example of disobedience (Warren W. Wiersbe, *Meet Your King: Matthew*, Cook Publishing, 156).

This parable points us to the fact that the kingdom of God does not center around a place or a nation or anything of this world, but it centers on a *person*: The king. God himself is the source and sustainer of everything that happens. He gives a wedding banquet. This demonstrates that the kingdom of God has nothing to do with efforts of people. It is *God* who acts. It is *he* who prepares the royal banquet. We must therefore take note of something that no one could assert by themselves: God wants to prepare a feast for us. He wants us to be his free guests. He wants us to have fellowship and peace with him.

No one could ever fairly arrive at this idea by himself. God has no reason whatsoever to take us seriously or even to “love” us. The very fact that this God should invite us to his table is in itself a great miracle. If anything, human behavior towards God points to the fact that we are unworthy of God's love and care (Helmut Thielicke, *The Waiting Father: Sermons on the Parables of Jesus*, Harper & Brothers, 183).

The Reality of Hell

The Bible uses several images to depict the future state of the unrighteous. Jesus said, “Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels'” (Matt. 25:41). He likewise described their state as outer darkness: “But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:12). The final condition of the wicked is also spoken of as eternal punishment (Matt. 25:46), torment (Rev. 14:10-11), the bottomless pit (Rev. 19:1-2, 11), the wrath of God (Rom. 2:5), second death (Rev. 21:8), eternal destruction and exclusion from the face of the Lord (2 Thess. 1:9).

If there is one basic characteristic of hell, it is, in contrast to heaven, the absence of God or banishment from his presence. It is an experience of intense anguish, whether it involves physical suffering or mental distress or both. There are other aspects of the situation of the lost individual that contribute to his misery. One is a sense of loneliness, of having seen the glory and greatness of God, of having realized that he is the Lord of all, and then of being cut off. There is the realization that this separation is permanent. Similarly, the condition of one's moral and spiritual self is permanent. Whatever one is at the end of life will continue for all eternity. There is no basis for expecting change for the better. Thus, hopelessness comes over the individual (Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Baker, 1242-1243).

What should we think of the doctrine of hell? It is hard for us to think of this doctrine today, and this is the way it should be. If our hearts are never moved with deep sorrow when we contemplate hell, then there is a serious deficiency in our spiritual and emotional sensibilities. When Paul thinks of the lostness of his kinsmen the Jews, he says, “I have *great sorrow* and unceasing *anguish* in my heart” (Rom. 9:2). This is consistent with what God tells us of his own sorrow at the death of the wicked: “As I live, says the Lord God, I *have no pleasure in the death of the wicked...*” (Ezek. 33:11).

The reason it is hard for us to think of the doctrine of hell is because God has put in our hearts a portion of his own love for people created in his image, even his love for sinners who rebel against him. As long as we are in this life, and as long as we see and think about others who need to hear the gospel and trust in Christ for salvation, it should cause us great distress and agony of spirit to think about eternal punishment. Yet we must also realize that whatever God in his wisdom has ordained and taught in Scripture is *right*. Therefore, we must be careful that we do not hate this doctrine or rebel against it, but rather we should seek, insofar as we are able, to come to the point where we acknowledge that eternal punishment is good and right, because in God there is no unrighteousness at all (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan, 1152).

Home Group Questions

1. How would you describe the character of God in this parable?
2. Is the way that God is portrayed in this parable different from the way you normally think of him? If so, how?
3. What warnings does this passage offer to people who don't have time for God?
4. What does it mean to have on the wrong clothes at the wedding banquet?
5. Is it unfair for God to send people to hell? Why or why not?
6. How can the reality of hell help us to live with an eternal perspective?

Questions for Personal Application

7. Have you responded to God's invitation? Have you ignored God or rejected him, or have you accepted the salvation he offers us through Jesus?
8. Does the reality of hell cause you to share the Gospel with those who need to hear it? If not, why?