

Who Are The 'Guests At The Wedding'?

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The Parable of the Wedding Feast in Matthew 22 begins by telling us it describes elements of the Kingdom of God and what it will be like. Who is involved? Who is the bride? The guests? Is the setting described here *just* at the return of Christ or does it refer to a wider period?

Last month's article showed that the "firstfruits" or first harvest at Christ's return consists of only 144,000 individuals who constitute the bride of Christ. Some have supposed that the first resurrection includes the bride as well as others who have not quite qualified as part of the bride but are there to share in the wedding as "guests." This assumes two levels of firstfruits, where some Christians make the grade as "bride" and others are perennial "bridesmaids," who are disappointed but hide their frustration by wishing the couple well.

After all, anyone who reads the New Testament with any comprehension wishes to be part of the bride of Christ. Can we imagine anticipating that reward, overcoming our nature, fighting through trials and tribulations and then hearing we barely missed the cut, but we can come along and cheer as bridesmaid forever? This does not sound like something God would do.

Revelation 14:4 limits the first-fruits to 144,000. Period. We understand the firstfruits to comprise the first resurrection, pictured by Pentecost. In other words, the 144,000 are the first harvest at Christ's return, followed by other harvests in their order (I Corinthians 15:23). Since these firstfruits are the bride, as Revelation 21 shows, what room is there for additional "guests"? If these "guests" are not second-rate firstfruits, then who are they?

The Context

First, to understand the marriage parable in Matthew 22, we need to understand Christ's perspective in the parables of the Kingdom in Matthew 19-22. In them, Christ addresses both His disciples and the leaders of Judah, particularly the chief priests and Pharisees then sitting "in Moses' seat" (23:2). For the time being, the Pharisees still carried authority, but Christ was in the process of deposing them. No longer would they sit in Moses' seat! Two themes recur through these parables: "So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen" (20:16).

Matthew 19:16-22 records the episode of the rich young ruler, who "went away sorrowful" because Christ commands him to give up his god, money. Afterward, when Jesus tells the disciples that it is easier for a camel to pass through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom, the disciples are perplexed, wondering if anyone can be saved. We learn that those who appear successful on earth are not necessarily first in the Kingdom. In fact, they may be last with God, as verse 30 points out!

The disciples, who had given up everything to follow Christ, then ask what their reward would be. Jesus replies that they will rule in His Kingdom over the twelve tribes of Israel (verse 28), which includes spiritual Israel (Galatians 6:16). These fishermen, tax collectors and other blue-collar workers, considered "last" by the Pharisees, would supplant the leadership of Israel *both then and in the future!*

Christ is explaining both the disciples future part in the government of God and the order of the resurrections. Physical Israel, who had "first shot" at marrying Christ and being successful, would be last, appearing in the Great White Throne Judgment. These disciples, who came later, would be in the first resurrection to rule on earth in the Kingdom of God! Jesus designed these parables to show physical Israel they had "missed the boat" for the first resurrection and to assure the disciples that they were on it.

Matthew 20 continues with the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, delivered to the disciples, not the Jews. It continues Christ's main thought, putting the two recurring themes together in one parable. *All* Israel had the opportunity to obey, but most had rejected Christ. He shows He can offer His rewards to anyone He wishes whenever He wishes. An Israelite genealogy, wealth, status or time of birth is not relevant; Christ can do as He pleases, even putting those who come last first.

In Matthew 20:20-28, the disciples show they understood what Christ was doing, but they immediately let the idea of such awesome power go to their heads by vying for the very top positions. Christ explains that His disciples must use authority in a godly fashion, not for self-aggrandizement as the Gentiles had used it.

Matthew 21:28-32 is a parable, not to the disciples, but to the chief priests and elders of the people, whose heritage or fine credentials alone would not give them the right to continue to rule. He tells the story of a son who says he will work and then does not as opposed to a son who says he will not but repents and does his father's wishes. The former son is the leadership of Israel who agreed to the covenant but rejected it. The latter son is the publicans and harlots whose lives were sinful but who were willing to repent. Similarly, in I Corinthians 1:26-31, Paul attests that Christ will build His church through the weak and base, not the ones men think should be first.

Matthew 21:33-44 contains another parable to the leaders of the Jews, where Jesus uses the example of a householder leaving his vineyard with a husbandman or manager. God had left these leaders of physical Israel in Moses' seat, but they beat His true servants and even rejected His Son. In response, God would reject these husbandmen (verses 41-45)! The chief priests and Pharisees perceived He was talking of them (verse 45). He was removing them from office! They would no longer mean anything as physical leaders of Israel, for Christ would give their authority to others! This enraged them to the point of trying to kill Christ on the spot (verse 46).

Those who had been in charge and *seemed* to be first in importance would be last in order of both resurrection and influence! Those who had been in the first marriage with Christ and rejected Him were no longer of any spiritual value until the second resurrection! They were being supplanted by a New Testament church whose leaders would now be in charge. Yes, God would offer them salvation later on, but not in the time and order they expected!

The Wedding Feast

With this background, the Parable of the Wedding Feast in Matthew 22 becomes much clearer. This parable is *not* directed to the apostles with the intent to show them their opportunity at salvation. Jesus addresses it specifically to the chief priests and Pharisees, continuing the theme of their removal from authority! Let's examine it carefully to see what Christ's message is!

The first part is fairly straightforward. Few would argue the King being God the Father or the Son being Christ. "Servants" probably refers to God's servants (prophets, kings, apostles, evangelists, etc.)

from both Old and New Testament eras. God has had "servants" in every age explaining who God is and the need to obey Him. Few have ever listened.

This parable is not just about the last generation of people who might be offered salvation right before Christ returns! Jesus gave it to the priests and Pharisees who, along with their forebears, had been rejecting God all along!

Had the Israelites kept the Old Testament marriage covenant with Christ, God would have offered them salvation at some point. But they rejected it, and He divorced Israel. They consistently killed God's prophets and others He sent them, as the citizens do in this parable. In verse 7, the King sends His armies to destroy them, including the Assyrian, the rod of His anger, whom God sent to destroy them in times past. He will soon unleash His armies on physical Israel once more, as they have continued to reject Him!

Verse 8 describes those who were bidden as "not worthy." We must remember to whom this parable is addressed: physical Israel and her leaders! Israel has continually rejected the true Son of God. The Pharisees and chief priests had rarely, if ever, represented the "servants" of the Father. The Old Testament prophets had. The New Testament prophets and apostles would shortly thereafter. The parable shows God's invitation being withdrawn from Israel and her leaders as a whole and put in the hands of a new set of servants, the New Testament church, to whom He would offer salvation by invitation only (John 6:44). The *real* commission to the apostles, given in Matthew 28:19-20, is to go into all nations and invite them to discipleship!

The context shows this is the change Christ was making! Matthew 22:10 reveals that the invitation goes to whomever will respond, the "bad and the good"—the wheat and the tares. It is an evangelistic type of effort. Ancient Israel did not respond, except for a few, so now God would open it to Jew and Gentile alike—any who would respond! They did not have to be the mighty, the noble, the recognized in society. They were the weak, base, murderers, harlots and publicans. God had called them to put on wedding garments of righteousness (Isaiah 52:1, Revelation 3:18).

By this invitation, God furnishes the wedding with guests. Christ zeroes in on these leaders and lets them know *they* are not invited. He would use His true servants to do any future inviting, and that they would not be inviting those whom men thought should be invited.

Not the Marriage Supper

It should be obvious that the setting of this parable is not "the marriage supper of the Lamb" when Christ returns and marries His bride (Revelation 19:9), but the preparations for it. God has been sending out the invitations throughout history.

Salvation is a process. Once acceptable for the wedding, God does not judge a person at the doors of the wedding supper. Peter says in I Peter 4:17 that judgment is *now* on the house of God, spiritual Israel, the church. Revelation 11:18 further shows that Christ will not judge His saints at His return, but is coming to *reward* the saints and begin the process of judging the nations who have not yet had opportunity at salvation—during the Millennium and the Great White Throne Judgment.

Once a true Christian dies, his judgment is complete. He will either be in the first resurrection and his sins never mentioned to him again, or he will await the third resurrection and death in the Lake of Fire. God does not resurrect him, make him find his way to the wedding supper and then reject him

because he does not have a wedding garment on! If he is qualified for the first resurrection, his salvation is accomplished, and he is automatically part of the bride.

This parable shows "both bad and good" at this feast. How can this be? Who are these guests, "both bad and good?"

In Matthew 22:11, the King comes and sees one who did not have on a wedding garment. Notice that to this point in the parable, no one has addressed the qualifications for acceptance. The King's very first concern was proper attire! Perhaps we are past the "invitation" stage—except for a few who come in at the eleventh hour—and are in the "garment donning" stage. Revelation 19:7-9 says those who are blessed have proper garments and have put them on. It is essential not only to have the truth, but to live it! Isaiah 61:9-10 shows the church as an example to the Gentiles of a godly bride and groom.

Can there be any argument about dressing and preparing the bride being the first area of concern? It certainly was to the King!

In Matthew 22:12 the King condemns this "guest" for not being properly attired. The Greek for "without" here, *me*, signifies rebellion, refusal. It is as if the guest says, "I *will not* put a wedding garment on!" Remember to whom Christ speaks! The leaders of His day rejected Him—would *not* don His teaching or accept His person. Perhaps some being called today are also rebelling at the idea of making the effort to become righteous. Is there not a tendency today to take God's way lightly, lukewarmly, as we pursue our business and the cares and entertainment of this life? As Haggai 1:4 says,

Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses and this temple to lie in ruins?

Matthew 22:13 describes the guests without proper attire being bound and cast into everlasting darkness—death. This cannot be speaking of those at the actual marriage of Jesus Christ. Once the firstfruits are "in the clouds" meeting Him and proceeding on to the marriage supper, God has already changed them "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye," made them incorruptible, and He will never cast them out (I Corinthians 15:51-55).

Many Called, Few Chosen

Jesus restates the theme again in Matthew 22:14: "For many are called, but few are chosen." This frustrated the Jewish leadership, so they sought to change the subject and entangle Him in His words. Christ is telling them that they are in danger of being cast out to weep and gnash their teeth, but they simply cannot accept His assessment of their spiritual standing!

The timing is not of the actual marriage supper, but of a time of calling, of inviting, of evangelism and even of warning. This parable seems to indicate at least three distinct time frames:

1. When God called a few firstfruits in the Old Testament (see Hebrews 11).
2. Christ's invitation for those who would listen. Most rejected Him, including the leaders of Israel.
3. Those invited by the apostles, continuing to today.

The simple answer to who are the "guests" is that they are the bridal candidates whom the Father has invited wherever and whenever He has seen fit to issue invitations throughout history. Many have been called, informed, invited, offered opportunity, but few are chosen, only 144,000 to be exact. We are invited today to eat at the wedding table—every word of God—but few are responding enough to be chosen. Since "no one can come to Me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44), any opportunity for salvation is by special invitation of the Father, automatically putting anyone called in the "guest" category. He must then don wedding garments or be cast out!

After the choosing, sifting and sorting, God selects a final number of 144,000, and rejects the rest. He will resurrect and change the chosen ones to spirit when Christ returns. At that point, the surviving "guests" or "invited ones" *are* the bride!

Notice the comment in Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, who tie Psalm 45:10 to this, showing that Christ is the bridegroom the Jews obviously reject:

But observe carefully, that THE BRIDE does not come into view in this parable; its design being to teach certain truths under the *figure* of *guests* at a wedding feast, and the want of a wedding garment, which would not have harmonized with the introduction of the Bride. (Comment on Matthew 22:2.)

Jesus could not have used the actual bride in the story, for He would have had to include as part of the bride those who had opportunity at salvation and rejected it, and therefore He would cast away "parts" of the bride. What a grisly analogy that would have been! This way, many are invited by analogy as guests, some of whom He can reject and still not reject pieces and parts of the bride.

Christ uses the analogy or figure of guests, but He refers to those who have the potential to comprise the bride. The invitation is no less than to salvation, yet we have seen from other scriptures that only the bride will be part of the first resurrection, so this parable must fit those scriptures as well as make sense as a plausible story.

Remember, this parable is about the Kingdom of God, not an actual wedding feast. Christ is marrying one bride, but she consists of many individuals. So to illustrate His point, He does not refer to the bride as a bride, but as guests. This allows the Father to "throw some out" before the actual wedding.

Herbert Lockyer, in *All the Parables of the Bible*, says this parable may tie in with I Kings 1:5, 9 and I Chronicles 29:24. These passages describe a pre-wedding feast, common in those days. In ancient Israel such a feast was given at the beginning of a king's reign, who "married" himself to his people. Today, some people do the same kind of thing. They give a pre-wedding dinner for the bridal party followed by a wedding rehearsal.

No "Second-Class Firstfruits"!

There are no "second-class firstfruits" in the first resurrection. We are either in or out! There are 144,000, no more, no less. The acceptance or rejection comes just before the return of Christ when the "sealing" is finished. Only the accepted rise to meet Christ in the air.

However, apart from the parable in Matthew 22, Revelation 5:6-14 indicates there are guests at the wedding after all—but not those we may have thought! In this passage, the redeemed, the bride, sing a new song and are made kings and priests to reign with Christ. In attendance is the heavenly host—

the angels, the beasts and the twenty-four elders—who ascribe power, riches, wisdom, strength, honor, glory and blessing to Christ, who has made this glorious wedding and coronation possible. These heavenly beings who have stood by wishing to "look into" this transformation of man to God (I Peter 1:12) will be the real guests at the wedding. Finally, they will see the mystery of God finished, man made higher than themselves! They will not be jealous, having witnessed Satan's attempt to exalt himself, but will give glory to Christ for having made such a perfect bride.

The "guests" of Matthew 22 are the glorious bride. Those in the heavenly host are the excited guests. The ones cast out are all those whom God has offered salvation until the first resurrection and whom for whatever reason failed to dress for the wedding.

Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready. And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. (Revelation 19:7-8)

Can there be any greater focus today than preparing the bride?