

Three golf buddies died in a car wreck and went to heaven. Upon arrival they discover the most beautiful golf course they have ever seen. St. Peter tells them that they are welcome to play the course, but he cautions them that there is only one rule: Don't hit the ducks in your first 3 months here. The men all have blank expressions, and finally one of them asks, "The ducks?" "Yes," St. Peter replies, "There are millions of ducks walking around the course and if one gets hit, he quacks then the one next to him quacks and soon they're all quacking to beat the band and it really breaks the tranquility. If you hit the ducks, you'll be punished, otherwise everything is yours to enjoy."

Upon entering the course, the men noted that there were indeed large numbers of ducks everywhere. Within 15 minutes, one of the guys hit a duck. The duck quacked, the one next to it quacked and soon there was a deafening roar of duck quacks. St. Peter walked up with an extremely homely woman in tow and asks, "Who hit the duck?" The guy who had done it admitted, "I did." St. Peter immediately pulled out a pair of handcuffs and cuffed the man's right hand to the homely woman's left hand. "I told you not to hit the ducks," he said. "Now you'll be handcuffed together for all eternity."

The other 2 men were very cautious not to hit any ducks, but a couple of weeks later, one of them accidentally did. The quacks were as deafening as before and within minutes St. Peter walked up with an even uglier woman. St. Peter cuffed the man's right hand to the homely woman's left hand. "I told you not to hit the ducks," he said. "Now you'll be handcuffed together for all eternity."

The third man was extremely careful. Some days he wouldn't even move for fear of even nudging a duck. After 3 months of this he still hadn't hit a duck. St. Peter walked up to the man at the end of the three months and had with him a knock-out gorgeous woman, the most beautiful woman the man had ever seen. St. Peter smiled to the man and then, without a word, handcuffed him to the beautiful woman and walked off. The man, knowing that he would be handcuffed to this woman for all eternity, let out a contented sigh and wondered aloud, "I wonder what I did to deserve this?" The woman responds, "I don't know about you, but I hit a duck."

OK, enough nonsense. First, some background on what seems to be a very odd gospel. Once again we are talking about the 'kingdom of heaven may be likened to....' Many Jewish parables depicted God as a king; here the son is presumably Jesus. Because the size of wedding banquets displayed a person's honor, hosts usually invited as many people as possible. Refusal to accept a banquet invitation insulted the inviter; but to insult a king was treason, and punishable by death. Such invitations were normally done with a first 'save the date' with an RSVP, followed up by a second notice once the food was ready. Thus the people now refusing to come, at the 2nd notice, had already agreed to come at the first invitation ("Those who have been invited). Their refusal now was therefore a conspicuously deliberate and provocative insult.

Also a fatted calf alone could feed a village; this king has made massive preparations – we're talking about oxen and fatted CALVES. The meat had to be consumed quickly or it would spoil. So it was imperative that the guests come immediately. All ancient readers would have agreed that slaughtering messengers was an offense worthy of death. By universal ancient law, heralds – or messengers – were to be exempt from any harm, even during times of war.

We are then told that the king burned their city. Conquerors burned resistant cities; a generation after Jesus' ministry, Rome's army burned Jerusalem. The king then instructs that they invite everyone they find.

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The first invited guests had dishonored the king; the only way to recoup some honor would be to find other guests before the food could spoil. And then the strangest detail of all about the man without the wedding garment. In another Jewish parable possibly of the same century, wise servants waited at a king's gate, awaiting the promised banquet; foolish servants kept laboring with soiled garments and were unprepared when his banquet was ready. Regarding the parable, some scholars suggest that the host would have provided special garments; others simply note that coming to a wedding banquet in soiled clothing would insult the host. The king asks how the man made it past the servants guarding the doors; the intruder's refusal to answer suggests that the insulting act was deliberate. If the first invited guests represent Jerusalem's leaders at Jesus' first coming, the rudely dressed man perhaps represents professed followers of Jesus unprepared for His second. (all taken from CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS STUDY BIBLE, p. 1669-1670)

OK, so what does this have to do with us? Point 2. Parables tend to sneak up on us, like a Trojan Horse. While we are watching these intended wedding guests fail so miserably, we may not be aware that the parable may suddenly turn on us, as our easy judgment on these wedding invitees boomerangs back to strike us. We mostly assume that we fall in the happy lot of those who finally attended the wedding feast, drawn from the highways and byways by a king who offers yet another round of grace, and who allows us to enter the full joy of his full house. But there is more. While this is a story about grace, it is also a story about judgment. God is gracious, but God is also just. The good news is that God's grace is offered to all. But we are sadly mistaken if we believe there are not consequences for rejecting that same grace.

This parable tells us that an invitation from God is not a trivial matter. It is a gracious gift extended to all who will receive it. We will see that God goes on to expand his invitation, but we dare not miss the fact that ultimately, God's invitation has eternal implications for us. Our response matters. We ignore God's invitation at our own peril.

The good news of this parable, of course, is that the king does not give up. He sends his messengers out again, expanding the invitation to everyone. God's grace is for everyone because everyone needs it. And it would be wonderful if the story ended there, but it doesn't. And that gives me my third point!

Finally, we have that troublesome little detail about the man not properly dressed. It is a dangerous thing to presume too much. The final verses contain a warning even to those who do accept the invitation to the wedding feast. It is a sobering reminder to consider always the magnitude of God's grace, to remember that this king who is so unbelievably patient and generous, is also unbelievably insightful. The guest who is dressed inappropriately is one who fails in this regard, not with respect to clothing, but with regard to the nature of his attitude and heart. The first invitees failed the king, to be sure, by their refusal to show up. But it is also possible to fail the king, even if one shows up, if one still takes the grace of the invitation too lightly.

The classic example of this is the folks who show up for mass every week, drop a few dollars in, and proudly proclaim "I'm a good Catholic." NOT SO FAST! The invitation is far more involved, requires far more of a response. God wants our heart, not a quick punch of a heavenly ticket. We are expected to LIVE as a disciple of Christ, and that means far more than worship for an hour and a couple of dollars. Where is Christ? Where is love? Where are we working to make the kingdom of heaven? What have we done for the poor? With our treasure? How have we reconciled and made peace? How have we worked at being peacemakers in our fractured country? These are the wedding garment we are supposed to be concerned about.

We don't *ask* for our place on God's invitation list. It is just that God is fundamentally generous. Like this king in the parable, God wants His banquet hall full. He does not tend toward exclusivity, but inclusiveness. Only God would throw a party as lavish as grace, and then invite the whole of creation to enjoy

it. It is for us to remember that even though the invitation list is as vast as the heart of God, it is no less eternally valuable for each of us. AND, the invitation requires a response. It is not to be refused, or put off until later. God is hosting a wedding for His Beloved Son. And we, all of us, are invited.

And here is the truly mind-boggling part: we are not just invited to attend the wedding as guests – that would be honor and grace enough for any of us – no, we are invited to come as the Bride, for we, as the church, are the Bride of Christ!

RSVP. And remember, wear white. Amen. (help from PROCLAIM, 11 October 2020, p. 2-3 and GRACEWORKS, 11 October 2020, p. 14)

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