

### ***r u kidding?* Part 3: The Invitation**

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Scripture: Matthew 22:1-14; Galatians 3:24-29

*"Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.*

Jesus – Matthew 18:3-5

In this series we've been claiming that many of Jesus' stories, parables and sayings that seem confusing or disturbing are clarified, and even made inviting, when seen through the eyes of a child.

Last week, many of you reported that Jesus' parable of the vineyard workers, where workers who start at different times of day are all paid the same wage at the end of the day, came alive when you saw what was going on through the eyes of a child. The generosity and love of the master became clear as a bell for some of you for the first time in your lives. (Written copies of that sermon are available in the Foyer if you missed it.)

This week you may doubt whether any amount of child-like perspective can help you see the Good News behind what seems like a real downer of a story from Jesus. A king invites society's upper-crust to a wedding celebration only to kill them and burn their city when the invitation is refused. As if that weren't bad enough, this same king eventually invites everyone to the party – the good and the bad alike, not just the A-Listers – only to throw into the outer darkness one man who isn't wearing a wedding garment. Where was he supposed to get a wedding garment, anyway, when he's been pulled in off the streets to celebrate? Oy vey! Do we ever have a doozy of a parable on our hands this week!

As is often the case when confronted with a difficult word from Jesus, many well-meaning adults rush in to try to explain away the offensiveness. Many biblical scholars, for instance, claim that Jesus would never have told such a parable. They say it was Matthew's fault; that he deliberately altered the words of Jesus or accepted the testimony of someone who had.

There were no tape recorders or video cameras in Jesus' day, so it's not like Matthew had a word-for-word version of Jesus' story, but before rushing to get Jesus off the hook, I suggest we look at this parable as Jesus would have us look at it – through the eyes of a child – before rushing to conclusions.

Have you ever read Grimm's fairy tales? I mean the real fairy tales, not the modern, sanitized versions of them. They're pretty violent! Take, for instance, the tale of Little

Red Riding Hood. In the original version of the story, Little Red Riding Hood walks through the Dark Wood to deliver food to her sickly grandmother. Curiously, one translation of the original German has her delivering wine and cake – food typically served at a wedding celebration – calling to mind our parable! I don't know what to do with that but it's just a fun aside. In any case, Little Red Riding Hood was on strict orders from her mother not to stray from her path. As she walks through the Dark Wood, a wolf begins to stalk her, finally approaching the girl, asking where she's headed. Naively, she tells him exactly where she's going.

Seeing an opportunity to eat two people, not just one, the wolf suggests that Little Red Riding Hood veer from her path to pick some flowers for her grandmother, which she does. In the meantime, the wolf goes to grandmother's house, gains entry by pretending to be the girl, and swallows her whole. Then, the wolf dresses himself in grandma's clothes so that when Little Red Riding Hood finally comes round, she gets close enough for him to swallow her up whole, too. And this is where the original version of the story ends.

Later generations of parents apparently didn't like this bloody ending to a child's tale, so in comes a hunter (or a lumberjack, depending on the version) who saves Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother by splitting the wolf's stomach open with an axe. That ending is a little less violent, but some parents apparently needed to sanitize the story more, so they changed the tale to have the wolf simply hide the grandmother in a closet rather than eat her, and the hunter/lumberjack saves Little Red Riding Hood before he has a chance to set his jaws on her.

We tend to clean up Grimm's fairy tales because the violence makes us uncomfortable, and well-meaning parents want to protect their children from nightmares. But as often happens when one tries to solve one problem, you end up creating others. Through the uncomfortable parts of seemingly every fairy tale that has ever been written for children, from Grimm's fairy tales to Bambi, we end up creating an unrealistic and bloodless world for our children. The net effect is that our children come to believe the world owes it to them to treat them with generosity and kindness and that there are no real or lasting consequences for making poor decisions. Of course, these children eventually grow up to become adults, many of whom continue to believe that world owes them favors and should reward them for bad decisions.

I've never been one to glorify violence – either for children or adults – but I have to wonder which story is ultimately more compassionate: one that offers a startling but memorable and realistic warning about strangers who encourage you to stray from your path home, or a tale that suggests that the world is too full of goodness to ever let something bad happen even when you stray from your path?

When it comes to Jesus' parables, we often neuter them or explain them away to make them more palatable – and more forgettable – but end up erasing the good they were trying to teach us in the first place, and obscuring the view of Jesus' compassion.

So this morning, I suggest we take in Jesus' parable "straight up, no chaser." And we take a cue from our children who are often far better able to separate the cartoonish violence from the loving reality behind these stories than we give our children credit for.

When Jesus speaks of A-List wedding invitees who refuse the invitation, abuse and kill the messengers who invite them, and then meet their own death in the process, he's trying to tell us something important, if we're not too literalistic about the violence.

In Jesus' day, royal weddings weren't just about love and romance. They were about alliances. When a king wished to form an alliance with another kingdom, it was customary to solidify the alliance through marriage – either the marriage of a son or daughter or the king himself to the offspring of another king. That way, the other king would be encouraged to act in the best interests of both nations, not just his own, and both nations would have a strong disincentive to make war on each other. In other words, you married into the other kingdom in order to provide the best assurance of peace and prosperity.

Those who attended a royal wedding would not just be anyone but members of the king's royal court and representatives of other kingdoms who were also in alliance with the king. Attending a royal wedding was a way of showing support for the new alliance the king was forging. It was also an obligation. Failure to attend – for whatever reason – was nothing short of an act of treason. Skipping the wedding effectively said, "I don't approve of the kingdom with whom you are making an alliance." Killing the king's messengers who invited you was a way of saying, "Not only do I disapprove, but I no longer recognize your authority." It was, in effect, the first act of declaring mutiny at best, and outright war at worst.

When modern-day biblical scholars (all of them adults) read this parable, they interpret the burning of the A-Lister's city as a reference to the Roman destruction and burning of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. Since this took place well after Jesus' time, they assume that Matthew wrote or altered Jesus parable to include this horrific reference. They explain that Matthew was just another anti-Semite who blamed the Jews for not accepting Jesus and saw the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans as an act of God's judgment upon them. Never mind the fact that Matthew was himself a Jew, writing for a predominantly Jewish community who, more than any other gospel writer, took great pains to link Jesus with mainstream Judaism. It seems that a concerned scholar, like a concerned parent, will come up with just about any way they can to make Jesus more politically correct and inoffensive to those who believe Jesus was crucified for being too nice and unassuming.

But if Jesus told this story, then his audience would never have been thinking of *this* destruction of Jerusalem – which wouldn't occur for nearly 40 more years. They would be thinking instead of the destruction of Jerusalem by *the Babylonians*, six centuries earlier.

Seen from this angle, what Jesus is telling them in no uncertain terms is that they need to learn from history. The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in the 586 B.C.E.. At that time, the Jewish people – or at least the A-List leaders - were so confident that God loved Israel more than any other nation that they believed God would protect them from harm if they seceded from the Babylonian Empire, effectively declaring war against the greatest superpower in the world in their day. But according to prophets like Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Ezekiel – all of whom were actively preaching at the time – God was working out God’s will through the Babylonians even as God actively disapproved of many of their actions.

I suspect that in Jesus’ view, God was actively seeking a deeper relationship with the Babylonian people – effectively trying to enlist the most powerful empire on the planet into God’s Kingdom – in and through their relationship with Israel. Do you remember the promise God made to Abraham, that God was making a great nation out of Abraham’s offspring who would later become a great blessing to the nations of the world? But instead of going with God’s plan, accepting an alliance that had God’s approval, Israel revolted.

God didn’t punish Israel for her revolt. The *Babylonians* did! In hindsight, God had been at work through God’s prophets for decades, trying to *save* Israel from the very fate they brought upon themselves.

I would not be surprised, either, if Jesus was exhibiting some foresight through his parable. In his day, there was great ferment against the Romans. Zealots were arising from seemingly every quarter, advocating violent revolt against Rome. There were so many, in fact, that Reza Aslan wrote a book recently about Jesus, claiming that there were so many zealots in Jesus’ day that Jesus himself must have been one. This couldn’t be further from the truth.

We know in hindsight that the Roman Empire would eventually convert to Christianity. While the Romans would do much to corrupt Christianity as well, they corrupted it no more than any other nation has, including our own. No, looking back, we see that God’s will was for deeper relationship with the Romans. Just as God’s will had been to bring the Babylonians into God’s Realm through their distinctive relationship with Israel, so God’s will was for the Romans of Jesus’ day.

Jesus was an anti-Zealot. He saw clearly that the path of revolution against Rome was just as foolhardy in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century C.E. as it was against Babylon six centuries earlier. He was warning them in the clearest possible way to recognize God’s desire to enter into deeper relationship with the Romans – to make them citizens of God’s Kingdom – not make war on them.

Jerusalem’s fall in the 70 C.E. was not God’s punishment for Israel’s failure to acknowledge Jesus. It was brought about by the Romans for being in open revolt. If Jesus was aware of what was coming at all, he was trying to prevent it.

In light of the many ways that Rome would corrupt Christianity once it converted, one is tempted to wonder how things might have been different if the Jews had never revolted and both Judaism and Christianity therefore had not experienced centuries of oppression and maltreatment. Would both faiths have been able to hang on to the love and grace of their God better than they did when their theology was developed in a cauldron of persecution? Idle speculation, I know. Unfortunately, the world was never given a chance to find out.

Real world decisions. Real world consequences. Are you starting to get a feel for the love and grace behind Jesus' warnings to the A-List religious and political leaders in the first half of the parable? But what about the second half of the parable, where the guy without a wedding garment gets thrown out of the wedding feast? Again, we'd best approach this question like a child.

When you were a child, did you ever have the experience of making friends with a kid who didn't like one of your other friends? What did that friend tell you? Johnny says, "I hate Becky. If you're going to be friends with me, you can't be friends with Becky!" Now, Becky may not have liked Johnny either, but Becky never made you choose between Johnny and herself. She liked you so much that she'd play with anyone else you wanted to play with so long as you were friends with her.

Who was the true friend to you: Johnny or Becky; the one who made you choose between them, or the one who never presumed to dictate who you could be friends with?

When you think about it, who would you consider to be a happier person, Becky or Johnny? Who is the lonelier, more isolated child? From one point-of-view, perhaps Becky is the lonely one – desperate enough for friends that she's willing to make friends with you despite her misgivings about Johnny. Then again, perhaps the lonely, isolated one is Johnny. If he's going to make such a stink over Becky that he's willing to drop his friendship with you entirely, could you really assume that Johnny doesn't pull this stunt with others? How many friends does Johnny really have?

Then again, perhaps both Johnny and Becky are both lonely and isolated. Johnny keeps burning bridges, while Becky is glad to walk over any bridge that's extended her way. For the sake of argument, let's assume that both are equally lonely and isolated. How do you respond to Johnny's ultimatum?

Well, if you're being child-like, not merely childish, I'm assuming you'll choose to be friends with the one who doesn't force you to make a choice. You'd love to be friends with both, but in accepting Becky's friendship, Johnny stomps off in a huff, back to his old, self-imposed loneliness and isolation.

What does this child-like dilemma have to do with Jesus' parable? Only everything.

In Jesus' day, God was inviting everyone to the wedding celebration, not just the A-List religious and political leaders. In Jesus, God was inviting prostitutes, tax collectors,

lepers, drunkards, disreputable fishermen, and anyone at all whom others presumed could never come within a hundred miles of God's party. But not everyone was happy about it, even among God's supposed "friends." When some friends showed up to the party and saw the others there whom they would not accept, they refused to join in the fun. They refused to celebrate.

So God did the only thing that a loving God would do, even though God loved everyone who had come to the party – the good and the bad alike, according to Jesus. God chose those who were happy to be at God's party no matter who else God invited.

The one who wasn't wearing a wedding garment was a lot like our "friend" Johnny. He looked around, saw all kinds of people he wouldn't be caught dead celebrating with, even at God's party, and refused to participate. So God effectively says to "Johnny" what God says to you or me when we insist that God must choose between being friends with people we don't like or us. God says, "You were lonely and isolated before you heard my invitation to the party. Now I'm afraid you'll have to return to where you came from – at least until you're ready to be here on my terms, not your own.

Are you starting to see the Love and Grace here?

Perhaps you're wondering about the wedding garments. How is it that everyone else who had been brought in from the streets just happened to have been carrying wedding clothes with them when they never expected to be invited in the first place?

The garments that the party-goers wear aren't garments they have brought with them. They are *spiritual* garments. (Imagine that: Jesus telling a parable that's really about our spiritual life ...) In fact, they are *spiritual wedding dresses*. Did you notice that the only character who is not in Jesus' parable is the bride? This omission wasn't by accident. In fact, it wasn't an omission at all.

At the wedding feast to which God has invited you, Jesus is the groom and YOU are the bride. If you will allow Jesus to choose YOU for a bride, without making Jesus choose between you and every other person in the room—the "good" and the "bad," the Catholic, the Protestant, the Jew, the Muslim, the Republican, the Democrat— then you are wearing everything you need to enter a life-long, committed, loving relationship with Jesus. All that is left for you to do is say, "I do."