

Dr. Robert C. Newman, Synoptic Gospels, Lecture 7, Parable Exegesis – Parable of the Marriage Banquet

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We're continuing our course here on Synoptic Gospels. We're in Unit 5 on Parables, and just previously, we spent a little time looking at definitions of parables and a little bit about how parables function as stories, analogies, or examples. We're going now to take a look at a particular parable, and this would be the Parable of the Marriage Banquet in Matthew chapter 22:1 through 14.

We'll go again with my own translation here, and occasionally I will make reference to some item related to the translation. Matthew 22:1, and Jesus responded, speaking to them in parables again, saying, the kingdom of heaven is like a human king who gave wedding festivities for his son, and he sent slaves to call those who had been invited, call those who had perhaps been previously invited, but they were unwilling to come. Then he sent other slaves, saying, tell those invited, Look, I prepared my meal.

My auction and fattened cattle have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the feast. But some were unconcerned and went away, one to his field, another to a shop.

The rest seized his slaves, abused and killed them. Now, the king became angry. He sent his army, destroyed those murderers, and burnt their city.

Then he said to his slaves, The feast is ready, but those invited were unworthy. Go then to the city gates and invite whomever you find to the feast. So those slaves went out on the roads and brought all they could find, bad as well as good, and the feast was filled with guests.

Now, when the king entered to observe the guests, he saw a man who was not dressed in festal clothing. He said to him, Fellow, how did you get in here without a wedding garment? Now, he was silent, possibly dumbfounded or dumbstruck. Then the king said to his attendants, Bind his hands and feet. Throw them outside in the darkness.

They'll be weeping and gnashing teeth out there. For many are called, or many are invited, but few are chosen, or few are selected—alternative ways of translating that 14th verse.

Well, that's our parable. Let's try to do a little analysis of it here. This parable's a narrative, okay, so we can attack it with some of the narrative features.

It's got characters, huh? It's got the king, and it's got the servants, and it's got those originally invited, and those subsequently invited, and then the fellow without the wedding garment. The king does really all the talking here pretty well. Then there's the events.

The king prepares a wedding feast for a son's marriage. The king sends servants to call the invited guests. The guests do not come.

The king sends them a second request, and some of these have better things to do, and others mistreat or kill the servants. The king becomes angry, sends his army to kill the guests and destroy the city, and then he sends servants out to get replacement guests. They do, though not all of these guests are good.

We'll need to think about that a little bit. The king visits the banquet hall, finds a guest improperly dressed, and is thrown out. The scenes are mostly unspecified, but presumably, we're looking at a throne room or something of that sort where he sends out his servants, and then there's wherever the guests are, and they presumably are in the city, and then there's the banquet hall.

The plots. Wellis actually has more than one plot, I think. One plot, pretty obvious here, is a gracious invitation is rejected, and you might wonder what some of the undercurrents are there.

Well, the responses, I think, indicate unconcern and rebellion, and the rebellion is judged, and then there's a gracious invitation to others who actually come, but unconcern is judged there also. If we think of Wilder's devices for storytelling, brief, this is longish for a parable, but it is short for the story. Unified, yes, but with a somewhat unusual extension at the end, this shift to this other guest.

A limited number of actions or a limited number of actors, excuse me, a rule of two. Well, the king, the servants, the guests, improperly closed guests, a fair number of actors, but only two of them actually speak. Direct discourse, yes.

Serial development, except for the army's activities, runs up to where the king sends out his army and then tells you what happens with that. The army burns the city down but then comes back, presumably about the time he sent them out, and has the king send out other servants to bring additional guests to fill the place up. Rule of three: well, there are three invitations, which is not super obvious, but, well, it might even be four invitations, so there are three that are obvious.

He sends the first servants out, they're refused, he sends them out again to that same group, and they're ignored or mistreated, and then he sends out a third invitation, which goes to this new group. And then we get kind of three responses, we might say. The ones who think they've got better things to do, the ones who beat

on the servants, and then this one who shows up with the improper garment, if you like.

Repetition, certainly in the rule of three with the repeated things there, you see some repetition of that sort. Binary opposition, black versus white, might be seen in the character of the guests who don't come off looking very good, though we don't have anything here explicitly stated about the good guests, okay, so it's really just the bad guests we're looking at. End stress, well, the harsh treatment of the guy improperly clothed certainly attracts attention at the end.

Often parables, as Wilder says, storytelling, actually, so stories, as Wilder says, have a resolution by reversal, and we have this guy who's in the banquet hall and then certainly a reversal of some sort going on there. Usually, it's two-level. Well, this one is a two-level story, okay? We'll look at the tenor and vehicle here below, and we'll give you a look at the two-level. Well, this is a parable, and it's not one of the sample parables, as we'll see when we start thinking about it, so it is an analogy of some sort.

The tenor, already suggested by the opening verse here, where Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a human king who gave a wedding banquet, etc. This actual opening shows you something else that's fairly common in Jesus' parables, and that's the question of whether, when he says the kingdom of heaven or something like this is like, and then he usually has a noun right after that, and the question is whether you're to identify the kingdom of heaven with that noun, the kingdom of heaven with a king, or whether you identify the kingdom of heaven with the whole story, and you have to look and see which of those occur, and you see that both in rabbinic parables and in Jesus' parable that this is like, and sometimes it's the next item mentioned that it's like, but often it's the whole story. So that's the tenor telling us something about the kingdom of heaven.

Vehicle, we're being told this by the way, means the story about a wedding feast, and the principal analogy here, I think you can see, is in the vehicle, there's the king, and the major emphasis on those invited if you like, and so the analogy is God is to humans as the king is to those invited. So, you're getting what is, in fact, a very, very common image in Jesus' parables and a very common image in rabbinic parables, and that's God is king. Often, when you see a king in either Jesus' parables or the rabbinic parables, in more than nine cases out of ten, the king is God.

So, the only parable of Jesus that I can think of where that's not the case is what king, if he has 10,000 soldiers and is going to meet somebody bringing 20,000, doesn't sit down and figure out whether he can handle the problem. There clearly, it's not that God is not the king there, but you're to imagine you're the king and think through how you'd handle something like that. Points of resemblance, I won't structure them here as we would if we were working out Cider's detailed points of resemblance, but

in the story of the tenor, you've got the servants calling the invitees, and you ask yourself, what does that correspond to? Well, God's servants, so disciples, Christians, something of that sort, and inviting the lost, inviting unsaved people to come to God's banquet, if you like.

So that's another one of the analogies, if you like, or points of resemblance. I think the response to the invitation is probably pretty straightforward. That is, they work the same way both in the tenor and in the vehicle in the story, in the tenor.

Some don't care, okay? They consider going out to their field or to their shop or something like that is more important, if you like, and suggest to us that some who hear a gospel presentation won't care. Other things are more important to them. The second response is some persecution, and not much, I think, of that sort has happened yet when Jesus gives his parable.

It's possible that the disciples have been run out of a town or two or something of that sort, but the real persecution doesn't come on strong until after Jesus has been crucified and risen, and the disciples then begin to go out. So, a response to invitations in the tenor, if you like, some persecute. And then a third response, some do come, and so as just as some of the invitees come to the wedding feast, so some of the people that we call to come to Christ will, in fact, come.

We see some more points of resemblance in the King's response. He brings judgment on the rejectors, and that's really only seen primarily in terms of the ones who respond with beating on his servants, where he brings judgment on them, burns down their city, and kills those murderers, as it says in the passage. But we don't see exactly what he does with those who don't care unless we imagine they're in the same city.

But I think that's basically one of these things where keeping a parable short doesn't chase through all of the cases, just as with the Parable of the Pounds, the story doesn't go after examples 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 either. In addition, with the King's response, we see that he won't put up with nonchalance, and that's, I think, rather clear in regard to the guy without the wedding garment. So, that's a quick look at the parable as an analogy.

It's helpful to look at the background in this sense. What would the original hearers have understood about this particular parable? We will catch more things now, coming centuries after the events, and see how some things have unfolded. But what else would they catch in the background?

Well, some of its symbolism. Jesus' parables, like those of the rabbis, frequently make use of common metaphors, often taken from the Old Testament. In this parable, it's very safe to conclude that the king represents God, and that is obviously

an Old Testament picture. God is a great king, says Malachi, etc., and that shows up again and again.

And that, as I said, shows up quite standardly in Jesus' parables and in rabbinic parables as well. So why does God represent the king? Common Old Testament metaphor, common New Testament metaphor. It fits the flow of the parable, particularly in view of the interpretive hints at the end.

Outer darkness, weeping, and gnashing of teeth show up in several of Jesus' parables and are clearly what we might call euphemisms for eternal condemnation. Two other symbols here appear to be marriage and banquet. So, the question is, how are those used? Particularly, how are they used figuratively in the Old Testament? Well, marriage, first of all.

Marriage is often figurative of God and his people. Some examples are Isaiah 54:5 through 7, New American Standard updated, for your husband is your maker, says Isaiah to Israel, whose name is the Lord of hosts, and your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel, who is called the God of all the earth. For the Lord has called you, like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, even like a wife of one's youth when she is rejected, says your God.

For a brief moment, I forsook you, but with great compassion, I will gather you. So here is a picture of God as husband and Israel as the wife, and here a rejected wife who is called back, looking, I think, at the end of the age. Hosea chapters 1 through 3, of course, is a very striking parable in terms of marriage representing the relationship between God and Israel.

There, the prophet is instructed in Hosea 1-2, when the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, go take yourself a wife of harlotry, and have children of harlotry, for the land commits flagrant harlotry, forsaking the Lord. And so then the whole thing about Hosea marrying Gomer, and then Gomer and Hosea having children, or at least Gomer has children, and then eventually she runs off with her other lovers, etc., and then she's going to be brought back, and spend actually a time of kind of uncertain status, where she will not be having relations with anybody else, but not be having relations with Hosea to represent how God is going to deal with Israel before the events of the end begin to come together. Ezekiel chapter 16 certainly picks up this idea of God married to his people, and of course, the traditional interpretation of the Song of Solomon goes in that direction as well.

So that's marriage, and as I say, that's often figurative of God and his people in the Bible, and so that would have been known to the hearers who are listening to this. Interestingly, the parable is largely about a banquet, but it happens to mention it's a marriage banquet, which of course would be a more important one than many others, and then it also happens to mention offhand that it's a marriage banquet of

the king's son, and nothing more is done with that in the parable, but it's left there I think as an interpretive hint. Banquet, as a figure, is not so obvious in the Old Testament but is more frequent in the New Testament and in rabbinic literature.

A few Old Testament possibilities, however, Isaiah 25 verses 6 through 8. The Lord of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all people on this mountain. Whatever this mountain is, we don't know where Isaiah is standing when he makes this proclamation—a banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, and refined aged wine.

On this mountain, he will swallow up the covering that covers all people, even the veil that is stretched over all nations. He will swallow up death for all time, and the Lord God will wipe tears away from all faces, and he will remove the reproach of his people from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. Well, I'd say that's pretty clearly eschatological of some sort, speaking in the end, because it's picturing God taking away death from the human race, apparently, so some kind of a banquet at the end of the age is pictured there.

In the 23rd Psalm, the Shepherd Psalm, some people have tried to read the whole Psalm as God as shepherd and we as sheep, but it looks to me like there's a transition in the middle of the Psalm from God as the shepherd and we as the sheep, to God as the host and we as the guest at his palace, a king host, and we as a guest at his palace. That's very appropriate, of course, for David because David had been a king, excuse me, David had been a shepherd when he was young and had sheep, a family flock, and then God, then David became a king, and he has household guests as is fairly common with kings, and we actually know the names of a couple of them. The fellow who is Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth, is brought in to be kind of a lifelong guest and eat at the table of a king, and then after David has fled from Absalom and is coming back, one of the guys across the river who had provided hospitality for him is Barzillai, and he's an old man.

I don't know how old that would make him, but he says, you know, too old to appreciate the taste of food and too old to appreciate music and dancing, etc. So, he says, take Kim Ham, and we're never told who that is, but almost certainly that's a son or grandson or somebody like that, and so Kim Ham goes to become a lifelong guest in the house of the king. So, when Psalm 23 says, you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies, you've anointed my head with oil, my cup overflows, we're probably getting a banquet scene in that kind of situation, in which David now views himself as the lifelong guest in the home of a king, and God is the king, and he is the guest.

Just one psalm earlier than that, Psalm 22, the picture there of the one who was surrounded by his enemies and that sort of thing, that psalm starts out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me, and all of the cry of this desolated person, and then

it suddenly turns to a psalm of praise in the last, say, ten verses, and the psalmist says, from you comes my praise in the great assembly, I'll pay my vows before those who fear him, the afflicted will eat and be satisfied, all those who seek him will praise the Lord, let your heart live forever. It sounds like a vow banquet. One of the procedures, which we don't deal with a whole lot, but it's mentioned a bit here and there in the Old Testament, is that for a certain type of offering, the vow offering, a fair bit of the animal comes back to the offerer, and that person prepares the thing and has a meal for his friends, and apparently it's typically in the temple precincts somewhere, and basically what is this celebratory offering for God answering the person's prayer, for which the vow is a part of that, if you do this for me Lord, I will do this, etc.

And so here apparently, we've got some picture of a vow feast, and yet it's going to be news of the deliverance of this person who's been forsaken by God, whose hands and feet are pierced, who's, you know, laid in the dust of death, and whose tongue is sticking to the roof of his mouth, and all his bones are visible, etc. He's been delivered, and it's going to become world news for generations. It's interesting at the end of that.

So here again is a banquet scene, and it sounds to me like it is eschatological also, so that at least two of these three were looking at some kind of an end times banquet, and that I think is what the rabbis would have called the Messianic banquet, which is that term is now being used in evangelical circles as well. So, the marriage, relationship of God to mankind, or to his people particularly, the banquet, particularly if it's got eschatological connotations, the Messianic banquet, etc. Another possible symbolic element is the garment, so I ask my students, in this handout sheet they've got for homework, how garments are used figuratively in the Old Testament. Obviously, garments are used non-figuratively in lots of ways, but a few ways. For instance, if you look at maybe four or five passages, 2nd Chronicles 6:41, Psalm 132:16, Isaiah 61:10 and 11, you see the garment used to represent salvation, for instance, in the last of these, Psalm 61:10-11.

I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, my soul will exalt in my God, for he has clothed me with garments of salvation. He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a gardener causes the things sown in to spring up, so the Lord will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all nations.

So, a picture here of garments representing salvation, righteousness, that sort of thing. That brings us to the next idea undergarments, and that's righteousness. We already just saw that one.

He's wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, and that occurs also in Psalm 132:9, Isaiah 59:15-19, and here's what Isaiah 132:9 looks like. Let your priests be clothed with righteousness, let your godly ones sing for joy, and contrast that with Zechariah 3, 1-10, where the high priest is dressed in filthy garments, and Satan is accusing him before God, and then God has his garments replaced with good garments, etc. So, righteousness or unrighteousness, typically represented by the cleanliness of the garments, perhaps could be represented by the color or not.

There are some other uses of figurative uses of garments. Psalm 132:18, garment representing shame, Isaiah 63:1-6, garment representing vengeance, Isaiah 52:1-2, garment representing strength. Let me hold up for a second here and get a little water.

Another question I asked them in our handout sheet, besides these regarding these symbolic elements, is whether you see any predictive hints in this parable that are now clearer as we look back hundreds of years later. And I suggested I saw two of them, I think. One, the remark that the king sent his army to destroy their city is now much clearer because we know that Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. You say the Romans are God's army? Aren't they nasty people? Well, yeah, but that's a biblical theme as well.

God sends Assyria in Isaiah 10, and God sends the Babylonians in Habakkuk, and yeah, but God uses whom he will to carry out that kind of punishment if you like. The other, the picture of the original guests turning down the invitation and being replaced by a second set, is now clearer in view of the official rejection of Jesus by the Jewish authorities over the past 2,000 years and the gospel spreading to other nations all over the world. At the original time when this was heard, people might have thought more about the Pharisees turning down Jesus and the poor people accepting Jesus, which was certainly going on then.

And in the rather parallel parable in Luke of the Great Supper, which is a private citizen rather than a king and such, I think you had that worked out a little more explicitly, going into the city to find people to fill up the guest list, and then when not finding them, going outside the city and such, which would perhaps give a better picture of that since there are two sets of replacement guests there. What sort of lessons might we find here? And it's interesting to try it this way. What sort of lessons might we find for Jesus' original hearers, then what sort of lessons might we find for early Christians, and then what sort of lessons might we find for us today who have seen at least many centuries of church history which the early Christians would not have seen.

Well, go back and think about the original audience. You've got obviously in the ones who go off to their field and to their shop, and the fellow who comes in with the improper garment, the danger of treating God's invitation lightly would have shown

up very much there. In regard to the ones who beat on the servants and such and killed some of them, the original audience would surely have seen the whole picture of foolishness on the one hand and rebellion on the other hand and rejecting the king's offer.

I mean, stop, think for a minute. How often have you ever been invited to a wedding banquet for a king? Well, we don't live in a monarchical society, so probably never. Well, how often have you been invited to a presidential banquet of some sort? Answer again: probably zero.

Or how often are you invited to a governor's shindig of some sort for your state? Or even some kind of mayor's reception for your city? I think most of them would have to say never, okay? So, it's kind of a once-in-a-lifetime sort of thing, and here that's being offered, and these people go out in their field, go to their shop, etc. It's a very foolish sort of thing. I think the original audience would also have seen it, given they make the connection between the king and God, that this is a warning of the wrath to come, and that certainly already has a good Old Testament background, so that that would not be mysterious in this particular parable.

Now, imagine we're looking at early Christians looking at this, and some of these might be before 70 and some after 70, that sort of thing. Well, there's this fellow who gets in but gets thrown out. And what's that all about? Well, I'm not sure what message that would have given to the original audience, but to early Christians, they were already seeing that the official Judaism of Jerusalem had rejected the Messiah and such and that there are now a lot of Gentiles coming into the church, and yet who's this guy that doesn't have the garment, etc.? Well, there is the danger of professing Christians treating the invitation lightly.

A question that often comes up is, would God have provided the garment, would the king have provided the garment for this guest, or was the guest expected to have his own garment? And I've heard people give very dogmatic answers on that immediately, but the parable doesn't tell us. And you say, well, do kings always provide garments? And the answer, I think, is no, but they sometimes do. So, you've got two possible candidates.

You've got a yes and no. If the king provides the garment, then it's easy to see it from Christian theology, as this is God's righteousness, which he has provided to those who trust in Jesus. And without that, you aren't in the banquet.

Okay. How about if it's not looking at the garment as something provided by the king but something you provide? Well, that's something else. And that is, a person who is really a believer will respond in a certain way in his lifestyle to what the king God has done for him.

And he will try to clean up his life and that sort of thing. And we see the biblical warrant for that kind of picture. Think, for instance, of the sheep and goat judgment and what Jesus has to say to those.

In as much as you did these things to these others, you did it to me. And that's not talking about God's grace to the believer. That's obviously a huge thing.

It's talking about our response. And so, I would say Jesus has apparently intentionally left that ambiguous in order to read both of those ways. So, the danger for early Christians is the danger of professing Christians treating the invitation lightly, either by thinking they don't need God's grace or thinking that having gotten God's grace, they don't need to do anything.

So, you might think on the one hand of antinomians and on the other hand of people who feel they don't need grace. So, both of those dangers perhaps hinted there. There's a hint about the gospel for the Gentiles in this passage as well.

And it's quite likely the original audience would not have seen that at all. But Christians looking back from a century or something of that sort would surely have seen that there's this other set of guests, including who they are and who they might be, etc. And then, once you're after 70, you see the city has been destroyed.

And that, for the original audience, would mostly have been a warning. Of course, if they'd listened to all of what Jesus had to say, certainly all of the discourse or something of that sort, they would have seen that there is such a warning explicitly in Jesus' teachings. But here, confirmed by the destruction of Jerusalem after 70 AD, certainly from, let's say, 30, 33, whenever Jesus' ministry on earth ended to 70, the Jews might have felt very justified that they had gotten rid of this fake messiah.

And look, we've barely got all this prestigious Judaism, and you guys are the scum that, as Paul speaks himself, of the apostles being the off-scouring of the earth and that sort of thing. But after 70 AD, the whole temple, the state, and Jerusalem all went down the drain, and things looked a little different, although Christians were by no means triumphing even at that point. Well, I suppose we go on and think about how this would come across to us today. What sort of things might we see? Well, the front part of this whole thing shows us God's great mercy in inviting sinners.

Here, this king has already invited these people, and apparently, the servants know who the invitees are, and presumably, the invitees know it as well. And now the servants are coming around to tell the people the feast is ready, come. That's a little different than our society with emails and invites and the sort of thing where you get the invitation and then you're expected to show up here with perhaps some slight uncertainty on exactly when it's going to start due to getting everything ready and such.

They send servants around. You can see that the servants come to get Haman to go to the banquet, etc. Well, so God's great mercy invites sinners, and then you see man's great foolishness in rejecting his gracious invitation.

You see something else, too, besides God's great mercy, God's great wrath and judgment that he comes down on those who have mistreated his people and destroyed their city and such. But you also see God's wrath and judgment on this other guy who's there but without the right garment. And that leads us to the last one, which we ought to be able to see today, and that is professing Christians must not presume upon God.

We must not, in our preparation for the messianic banquet, so to speak, act as though going to our field or a shop is more important than the kind of lifestyle we're leading and getting ready and that sort of thing. Well, that's our discussion of parables. There are lots and lots that can be said, but that's an attempt to take a look at some of them.

There's even more that could be said about that particular parable, but it is a very powerful parable of God's mercy and yet God's judgment, warning of the wrath to come, and the need for humans to make the right kind of response. Okay, we come to what we say in section six, session six, something of that sort in our Synoptic Gospels course, and this is the Gospels as Literary Works. And here we're going to think about several sorts of things.