

Sermon

February 8, 2015

Title: R.S.V.P.

Text: Matthew 22:1-14

What's In a Wedding?

Machaerus:

High on a mountaintop overlooking the Dead Sea lie the remains of what was once a mighty fortress. Originally built by Herod the Great to defend his eastern border with Arabia, it is most famous for a birthday party thrown by his son, Herod Antipas.

It was there that Salome danced for the king and the king promised her anything she wanted. It was there that she requested the head of her mother's enemy, John the Baptist. And it was there that John lost his life. Josephus locates John's execution in this lofty fortress:

And so John, out of Herod's suspiciousness, was sent in chains to Machaerus, the fort previously mentioned, and there put to death. (Josephus, Antiquities)

Herod's Wives:

The thing that got John the Baptist killed was a protest against Herod's marriage to Herodias. Herod had originally married the daughter of a neighboring king, Aretas IV, no doubt to secure the eastern border of his kingdom. But then Herod fell in love with his brother's wife. She demanded that he divorce his first wife before she married him. When his first wife, Phasaelis, learned of the plan, she escaped to Machaerus and was escorted back to her father's kingdom by his army.

Meanwhile, John the Baptist condemned Herod's marriage to Herodias as incestuous and contrary to Jewish law. Matthew tells us that this is what landed him in Herod's custody:

Matthew 14:3-5 NIV

Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, for John had been saying to him: "It is not lawful for you to have her." Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered John a prophet.

Herod had little trouble getting rid of John the Baptist. King Aretas IV, his former father-in-law, was a different story. Aretas was so offended at the treatment of his daughter that he went to war against him and destroyed his army. Josephus tells us that:

... it was the opinion of the Jews that out of retribution for John God willed the destruction of the army so as to afflict Herod. (Josephus, Antiquities)

What's in a wedding?

As we can see, a king's wedding was a really big deal. Royal marriages were usually based not on romantic attraction, but on the practicalities of alliances with other kingdoms and the consolidation of power. Just look at how much trouble Herod caused by divorcing Aretas' daughter.

Loyalty to the king meant loyalty to his marriage. We can see what happened to John the Baptist when he dared to oppose Herod's marriage to Herodias. Josephus tells us that it was considered an *act of rebellion* to turn down an invitation to the wedding. And that brings us to another one of Jesus' parables.

The Parable of the Wedding Banquet

The Parable of the Wedding Banquet – part 1:

Jesus' story begins like this:

Matthew 22:1-7 NIV

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.

"Then he sent some more servants and said, 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.'

"But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city."

Here's a story about a royal wedding, in this case, the wedding of the crown prince. The king no doubt hopes to secure his kingdom and its fortunes for the next generation through this match. For him, and for his son, nothing could be of higher importance.

But there's trouble in the kingdom – trouble that surfaces in the refusal of the invited guests to show up at the wedding. First, they turn down the invitation. Then, when pressed,

some of them walk out on the king's servants to take care of their own concerns. Finally, some of them turn on the servants, torture them and kill them. The king responds by putting down the rebellion.

Make or Break Moment:

The king in the parable shows remarkable patience with the people he invited to the wedding. After they refuse to come, he gives them a second chance, complete with the explanation that the dinner has *already* been prepared. Now is the time.

It's a make or break moment. The king is making sure that they understand the consequences of their decision to not attend the wedding. If the guests reconsider, they still have time to make things right with the king. But if they refuse, there's no turning back. The moment of opportunity is gone forever.

The Messianic Banquet:

The prophet Isaiah had promised that one day the Great King, the Creator God, would restore His people's fortunes and invite them to a great banquet:

Isaiah 25:6-8 NIV

*On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.*

*On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever.*

*The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove his people's disgrace
from all the earth.
The LORD has spoken.*

"This mountain" was, of course, the same hill upon which the Temple stood – the very place where Jesus told His story. The banquet was the great Messianic Banquet that would come at the end of this Age, complete with the resurrection of the dead and the unveiling of God's New Creation.

But in His story, Jesus is saying that the Messianic Banquet – thought to be in the far distant future – is *ready now*. *The invitations have been sent by the Son Himself. The New Creation*

has already burst into this old world with the coming of Jesus. To refuse to come to the banquet is to refuse God's King.

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The Parable of the Wedding Banquet – Part 2:

But Jesus isn't finished with His story. He continues with might be thought of as "Part 2":

Matthew 22:8-13 NIV

"Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.' So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. He asked, 'How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?' The man was speechless.

"Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

The wedding is still on, even if the invited guests refuse to attend. Instead, the King opens the doors to everybody – "the bad as well as the good." Jesus said just this when He healed a Gentile soldier's servant:

Matthew 8:11-12 NIV

"I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

In God's New Creation, the whole human family is welcome. Jews and Gentiles sit side by side at the table. But those who refuse to come to the wedding are excluded.

Called or Chosen:

Nonetheless, it's not enough to just "show up." Jesus tells about a guest who didn't bother to get dressed up for the wedding. When he is discovered and has nothing to say for himself, he is thrown out of the room.

Jesus' conclusion to the parable says it all:

Matthew 22:14

"For many are invited, but few are chosen."

It's not enough to get the invitation; you have to attend at the wedding. It's not enough to just show up; you have to be properly attired. The man with the wrong clothes was just as out of sync with the wedding as were the people who thought that going to their fields or businesses was more important than attending it in the first place.

"Many are invited." God's call goes out to everyone. We're all welcome at His table. But with the invitation comes the responsibility of arriving properly attired. In the Bible, clothes often speak of our moral character. When John writes of the Messianic Wedding Banquet he says:

Revelation 19:7-8 NIV

*"Let us rejoice and be glad
and give him glory!
For the wedding of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready.*

*Fine linen, bright and clean,
was given her to wear."*

(Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God's holy people.)

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So, the invitation has arrived and now you have to decide: Am I going to the wedding or not? And if I am going, what am I going to wear? Do I want to be part of God's New Creation or do I want to stick with my old way of doing things? Am I ready to drop everything and step into God's New World, or am I going to stall for time? And if I am going, how much thought am I giving to my wardrobe?

Take a moment and think about what needs to change in your life *right now* in order for you to be both *present* and *properly attired* for God's Wedding Banquet. What do you need to do to "make yourself ready"?

The invitation is already in your hand. How will you R.S.V.P.?