

## Matthew 22:1-14

Most everyone in Philadelphia has an opinion on why the Cardinals are moving on in the playoffs. Most everybody in the St. Louis area has an opinion on why the Rams have not won a football game. Most everybody in the country has an opinion on who should be in the White House next November. And opinions like these about sports and politics are not easily swayed. People will stand by their opinions even when clear evidence proves their opinions to be wrong.

But nowhere is this more true than when it comes to people's opinions about God and religion. When someone gets it stuck in their head that good people go to heaven, and bad people go to hell, you will not convince them otherwise even if you argue with them until you're blue in the face. And this opinion of where people go in the afterlife, and why, is pretty much held by most in our country. They're born with this opinion, they live by it, and they die with this opinion. It's their religion, their belief, their god.

This morning I'm not going to give you my opinion, but God will give you His. It's the only one that matters. It's called the truth. And when God's Divine truth confronts our human opinions, His truth wins. And I pray this morning that it wins the day within your heart and mind.

Our text says, "Invite all you find to the wedding feast, (said the king), and the servants gathered all they found, both bad and good, so the wedding hall was filled with guests." These words of Jesus' parable do not stand alone. They agree with the Scriptures from cover to cover. The servants are not instructed to invite only the good. Both bad and good are invited to the wedding.

This is heaven, of course--the wedding feast of the Son of God; the eternal joys that await us in paradise. And the bad are invited. The thief on the cross is there right now. He was one of the bad. His whole life was bad. There was nothing good about him. He's the guy who keys your car because you were following too close. He's the guy who robs your house when you're not at home. He's the guy who steals your identity and ruins your life financially. He's the bad guy, and he's in heaven today. He has it just as good right now as Peter, James, John, and St. Paul, and others who gave their life for the sake of Jesus; who are known to the church as saints; who lived as saints and died as saints. The wedding hall is being filled with guests. Both the bad and the good are there right now, and you too, whether you are bad or good, are invited.

Friend, you are not invited because you are good. Being bad or good has nothing to do with being invited into God's kingdom. God is not pleased with you if the world sees you as one of the good guys. He is not angry with you if your whole life has been bad. God, the king in the parable, was angry because of one thing. And that one thing was not the disobeying of His rules and regulations. That one thing was the refusal to heed His invitation. That's the Gospel...the Gospel invitation. "Come to the wedding feast." "Come unto Me all you that labor and are heavy laden." "Arise and be baptized." "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." When the bad or good reject God's invitation, that is the one thing that makes Him angry.

But the Pharisees in Jesus' day just did not get it. They saw themselves as the good, and they saw the Publicans, the tax collectors, and the sinners as the bad. Why was Jesus eating with them? they wondered. The Pharisees did not care that these bad people were repenting; that they were turning from their sinful ways to follow Jesus. Their past way of life made them bad. Jesus should have been judging them, condemning them, throwing stones at them. But instead He was forgiving them, accepting them, He was inviting them, and that made the Pharisees angry.

Modern-day Pharisees think the same way. They can always find someone who is worse than them. This makes them the good compared, that is, to the bad. Modern-day Pharisees resent it when the Pastor and Elders confront them. "They should be speaking to those who are bad, not to me!" Modern-day Pharisees may be found in church, but they are not there because of the Gospel invitation. They do not have that many sins to confess...not like the bad people around them that they can pick out. And so they do not hunger and thirst for Christ, for His forgiveness, His body and blood given and shed for them.

Jesus did not care what the opinion of the Pharisees was in His day. And He does not care what people think today. His parable tells it the way it is. Anyone who is bad or good, and who has little use for the gracious invitation of Jesus; for His Holy Baptism, for His Divine Service to us, for His words of life, for His Holy Sacraments, is not worthy and will not be a part of His wedding feast.

But also, anyone who is bad or good and who makes Jesus' invitation their own; who hears Jesus' words of life, as the thief did, and responds in faith, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom;" who sees the way Jesus deals compassionately with sinners, as the tax collectors and harlots did, and follows Him; who believes that His baptism, His flesh and blood, His word of forgiveness is for him or her--this one, whether he or she is bad or good, is seated with joy at Jesus' eternal wedding feast.

"Go," said the king, "to the main roads (to the highways and byways) and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find." And so whether you live near Interstate 70, 64, 44, or 270; whether you take Highway 94, or 47, or Church Road in Augusta; whether you hail from Missouri or somewhere else, you are invited. Your past way of life does not in any way exclude you from the guest list. Your cursing and swearing, your negligence in coming to church, your dishonoring of father and mother, your sexual sins, and gossiping--none of that makes a difference. God does not look at your past when sending out His invitations. He invites you because of His mercy--because Jesus died for you.

But here is something else...God's invitation changes you. The thief on the cross had no thoughts of stealing or hurting others, not after Jesus welcomed him. The tax collectors had no desire anymore to take what did not belong to them. Zaccheus gave back the money he had stolen. Matthew left the money tables to follow Jesus. The harlots did not continue in adultery after Jesus received them. And neither will you desire to live for yourself when you believe that Jesus' invitation is for you.

Now at a wedding feast around here the invited guests bring gifts for the wedding couple. Not so with Jesus' wedding feast. The only one giving gifts is the Bridegroom, and the gifts He gives are for you. You, dear guest, are being given His gifts this very minute as Jesus' gracious words come into your ears. And the chief gift of all is the forgiveness of your sins. The Bridegroom went to the cross before you were even born and died for you. And God now, in Christ, does not count your trespasses against you. He forgives you. Everyone of you He forgives. You, as a forgiven guest, have as your possession the favor of God. He is at peace with you, and so you are able to live in peace. You have His promise of taking care of all your needs; of giving His Holy Spirit to work within you as you gladly hear His words, to nurture His gift of faith in your heart. And you have, in Christ, the hope of eternal life. For in believing that His gracious invitation is for you, God dresses you with Christ--His innocence, His holiness.

No one may enter heaven without Christ. Like the man in the parable who was thrown out the door, anyone who comes in dressed with their own good works, or good intentions, or with excuses, good

or not, to offer to God--all such people will be cast into the outer darkness. But you, friend, believing that Jesus is for you, that His baptism is for you, His words of forgiveness and life are for you, His body and blood, given and shed, is for you...you are now, and will always be, a welcome guest in God's kingdom, for you are dressed with Jesus Christ. Amen.