

“Dressing for the Banquet”

Matthew 22:1–14; Revelation 19:6–10 (CEB)

Will you show up when God invites you to his banquet?

Will you be ready?

In his book, *The Bible Makes Sense*, Walter Brueggemann urges Christians to learn how to read the Bible as an insider. A key to this is learning to appreciate some of the most powerful biblical images, such as the image of God’s banquet.



My family may be like yours; we use food to celebrate everything. It has always been this way. Even in ancient Israel, battlefield victories were marked by a great banquet. Not surprisingly then, the Old Testament prophets used the image of a great banquet that would celebrate God’s final victory over evil. Because the final victory would mark the arrival of God’s Messiah and God’s kingdom, we sometimes refer to this celebration as God’s messianic banquet. For example, “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear” Isaiah 25:6 (NRSV).

Imagine how those words would sound to people who lived on a subsistence diet, with hunger never far away. Isaiah makes concrete the promise of God’s kingdom. Jesus also often used the image of a wedding banquet to help people grasp the nature of God’s kingdom. Such banquets are hopeful, joyful celebrations of love, relationship, and family; thus, would be life in the kingdom of God.

Today, we turn to one of Jesus’ many parables about a wedding banquet.

The King’s wedding banquet

The context for the parable is important. Jesus’ confrontation with the Jewish leadership has quickly spun out of control. Jesus has cleansed the temple. He has cursed a fig tree, symbolizing what will soon befall the temple and all Jerusalem. He has told a story of tenant farmers of a vineyard who murder the son of the vineyard owner. Now, Jesus begins by telling his listeners that the king is putting on a wedding banquet for his son. The identity of the king and his son would be crystal clear to all in earshot that day.

As with all such banquets in the ancient world, double invitations went out. The first one invites the guest and tells them roughly when the banquet will take place. But because there was no reliable way for everyone to tell time, when the banquet was ready, a second invitation would go out letting the guest know that the banquet is starting.

In Jesus’ story, when the second invitations go out, the guests all have something better to do, excuses of one sort or another. Some even grab the king’s messengers and kill them. There was no greater dishonor that could be shown a king than this. So, the king sent men to find the murderers and burn their city. As for the party...the king’s servants are sent to all the wrong parts of town to invite people, both evil and good, to the king’s party celebrating his son’s wedding.

It doesn’t take much imagination to get the point of the parable. But then the story takes a strange turn in verse 11. During the party, the king spots a man who hasn’t bothered to put on any wedding clothes. Speechless that he could be so dishonored at his own party, the king has the man tossed into the outer darkness.

We are comfortable with the parable until this last turn. All the wrong sorts – the sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes – are welcomed to the king’s table. That sure sounds like Jesus. But the business with the wedding clothes, outer darkness and all? Hardly.

The reference to wedding clothes could be to clothes that the host would have provided but this person refused to wear. Or it could simply mean the clothes were dirty—thus disrespectful. In any event, the guest has dishonored the king, perhaps insulting the king by presuming on the king’s grace. Those who eat at God’s table must do so with respect, striving to be people who genuinely love God and love others. To presume that God’s grace will be poured out on us even as we pursue our own way rather than God’s way, is to turn our backs on God and on the very outpouring of grace we’ve presumed is ours. Indeed, many are invited (called) to God’s table—the whole world is invited—but, sadly, many fewer seek to come to the table in humility and love.

There is yet another wedding banquet that we need to contemplate today: the marriage banquet of the Lamb from Revelation.

The bride and groom

Marriage as a metaphor for God's relationship with his people is one of the most enduring and profound of all biblical images. The power of the metaphor is grounded in the significance of covenant. The marriage of a man and a woman is a covenant, instituted by God, to which both are expected to remain faithful. The relationship between God and his people is lived out in a covenant – to which both are expected to remain faithful. Thus, just as adultery is forbidden in a marriage, even making the Top Ten list, the prophet Hosea¹ uses adultery to describe Israel's relentless chasing after other gods (Hosea 2). But Hosea also describes God's determination to woo his bride anew so that "she shall respond as in the days of her youth" (Hosea 2:15).

Thus, it is not surprising that Jesus is repeatedly referred to as the bridegroom. John the Baptist is even cast as a friend of the groom (John 3:22-30). When Jesus is asked by the Pharisees why his disciples don't fast, he tells them that the disciples are wedding guests who won't fast while they are with the groom (Mark 2:18-22). As we've seen, numerous parables liken Jesus' ministry and the coming kingdom of God to a wedding feast.

All this prepares us for the images in John's visions in his apocalypse, the Revelation. The vision of the wedding comes near the end of the story. The Lamb, Christ, is almost ready for his marriage to his bride, the Church. Jesus' second coming will be the consummation of this marriage. An angel then arrives, bearing a message of salvation, the third of the book's seven beatitudes: "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb," recalling Jesus' parable of a wedding feast that focuses on invitations rejected and accepted (Matthew 22:1-14). John is so overcome by all this, that he falls on the ground to worship the angel. He is, of course, scolded by the angel, for we are to worship only God.

The marriage supper

We often make the mistake of thinking of time as only linear. But we live post-Einstein. According to his theories, which have been borne out, time passes more slowly for an astronaut circling the earth at high speed than it does for us on the ground. The astronaut's "after" is my "before." If the astronaut's "before" and my "before" aren't the same, why should I assume that "before" and "after" have any fixed meaning with God?

We struggle to make sense of the New Testament's perspective that God's kingdom has come already, but not yet. We struggle to grasp that the people of God are not just waiting to be the bride but are already the bride. We are called now to the banquet. In the glorious images of Revelation 21, God comes to dwell with his people. And yet God dwells already with his people. We are God's temple. The Holy Spirit is God dwelling amongst us.

All this takes a massive feat of imagination, and Revelation is written for the imagination. John's visions are meant to help us imagine the truth of a reality larger than we see and touch in our daily lives. But if we can begin to have such a God-shaped imagination, then perhaps we can fully embrace our part in our transformation, our work toward worthiness, our striving in gratitude for God's love and grace. If we truly grasp the depth of the invitation, how could we do anything else?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Who do we think would never be invited to the wedding banquet of God's son? How can we come to embrace the truth that all are invited – even those on the furthest margins of our society?
2. What can we do to make ourselves ready for the banquet? What concrete steps can we take to better love God and others?
3. Excuses. They may not be the main point of the parable, but it is hard to miss Jesus' desire that we stop making excuses. You might begin by making a list of excuses that Christians make for not being in worship each week. What are our excuses for not joining a Bible Study? Or for serving? Or caring for others? So often, it simply comes down to priorities. How can we get better at setting the priorities as God would hope we'd set them?

¹ The book of Hosea has some of the most remarkable biblical imagery weaving together the marriage covenant with the covenant between God and his people.