

[PARABLE OF THE KING WHO MADE A MARRIAGE FEAST FOR HIS SON. A BEAUTIFUL SERMON IN WHICH LUTHER STRESSES THE CHURCH'S SPIRITUAL MARRIAGE WITH CHRIST; THAT THROUGH BAPTISM AND FAITH ALL THAT IS HIS (HIS LIFE, RIGHTEOUSNESS, SINLESS-LIFE ETC.) BECOMES OURS AND ALL THAT IS OURS (SIN, DEATH, IMPURITY) BECOMES HIS.]

Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity; Matthew 22:1-14

A Sermon by Martin Luther; taken from his Church Postil. First published in 1523.

PARABLE OF THE KING WHO MADE A MARRIAGE FEAST FOR HIS SON.

1. This Gospel presents to us the parable of the wedding; therefore we are compelled to understand it differently than it sounds and appears to the natural ear and eye. Hence we will give attention to the spiritual meaning of the parable, and then notice how the text has been torn and perverted.

2. First, the King, who prepared the marriage feast, is our heavenly Father. The bridegroom is his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. The bride is the Christian Church, we and the whole world, in so far as we believe, of which we shall hear later.

3. God first sent out his servants, the Prophets to invite guests to this wedding; they were to bid them, that is, preach, and preach only faith in Christ. But those invited did not come; they were the Jews, to whom the Prophets were sent, they would not hear nor receive those sent to them. At another time he sent other servants, the Apostles and martyrs, to bid us come, and to say to the bidden guests, "Behold, I have made ready my dinner; my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready; come to the marriage feast."

4. These words beautifully picture to us and teach how we should make use of the life of the saints; namely, to introduce examples by which the doctrine of the Gospel may be confirmed, so that we may the better, by the aid of such examples and lives, meditate upon Christ, and be nourished by and feast upon him as upon fatlings and well fed oxen. This is the reason he calls them fatlings. Take an example: Paul teaches in Rom. 3, 23f. how the bride is full of sin and must be sprinkled by the blood of Christ alone, or she will continue unclean, that is, she must only believe that the blood of Christ was shed for her sins, and there is no other salvation possible. Then he beautifully introduces the example of Abraham and confirms the doctrine of faith by the faith and life of Abraham, and says, 4, 3: "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness." That is a true ox, it is properly slain, it nourishes us, so that we become grounded and strengthened in our faith by the example and faith of Abraham. Again, soon after Paul lays before us a fine fatling, when he cites David the Prophet of God and proves from him, that God does not justify us by virtue of our works, but by faith, when he says, Rom. 4, 6-8: "Even as David also pronounceth blessing upon the man, unto whom God reckoneth righteousness apart from works," saying in Ps. 32, 1-2: "Blessed are they

whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not reckon sin." Behold, that fattens and nourishes in the true sense, when we use the example and doctrine of pious saints to confirm our own doctrine and faith. And this is the true honor that we can give to the saints. Follow now further in this Gospel:

5. "But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his own farm, another to his merchandise; and the rest laid hold on his servants, and treated them shamefully, and killed them." These are the three barriers that prevent us from coming to the marriage feast. The first, or the farm, signifies our honor; it is a great hindrance that we do not think of Christ and believe in him; we fear we must suffer shame and become dishonored, and we do not believe that God can protect us from shame and preserve us in honor. The second go to their spheres of business, that is, they fall with their hearts into their worldly affairs, into avarice, and when they should cleave to the Word, they worry lest they perish and their stomachs fail them; they do not trust God to sustain them. The third class are the worst, they are the high, wise and prudent, the exalted spirits, they not only despise but martyr and destroy the servants; in order to retain their own honor and praise, yea, in order to be something. For the Gospel must condemn their wisdom and righteousness and curse their presumption. This they cannot suffer; therefore they go ahead and kill the servants who invited them to the dinner and the marriage feast. They were the Pharisees and scribes, who put to death both Christ and his Apostles, as their fathers did the Prophets. These are much worse than the first and second classes, who, although they despised and rejected the invitation, yet then went away and neither condemned nor destroyed the servants.

6. Further, the Gospel says: "But the king was wroth; and he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers, and burned their city." That happened to the Jews through the Romans under Titus and Vespasian, who burned Jerusalem to the ground, to its very foundation. However I prefer to have it understood spiritually, since the whole Gospel is to be explained spiritually. Hence this came to pass when God totally destroyed and burned to the ground the synagogue at Jerusalem, he entirely abandoned faith, scattered the people hither and thither, so that none remained together and they were robbed both of their priesthood and of their kingdom; so that there is not now a poorer, a more miserable and forsaken people on the earth than the Jews. Such is the end of the despisers of God's Word.

7. It now follows: "Then saith he to his servants, The wedding is ready, but they that were bidden were not worthy." This has also come to pass; for the Jews have not desired to know anything at all of Christ; they put him to death, also the Prophets and Apostles, and from that time to the present they have not been worthy to hear a word concerning Christ.

8. Further: "Then he said to them, Go ye therefore unto the partings of the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage feast." Hence they went out into the highways, namely, to us heathen, and gathered us together from the ends of the world into a congregation, in which are good and bad.

9. Then the King goes in to behold the guests. This will take place on the day of judgment, when the King will let himself be seen.

10. Then he will find one, not only a single person, but a large company not clothed with a wedding garment, that is, with faith. These are pious people, much better than the foregoing; for you must consider them the ones who have heard and understood the Gospel, yet they cleaved to certain works and did not creep entirely into Christ; like the foolish virgins, who had no oil, that is, no faith.

11. To them the King will say: "Bind him hand and foot, and cast him out into the outer darkness," that is, he condemns their good works, that they no longer avail anything; for the hands signify their work, the feet their walk in life, and he will then cast them into the outer darkness.

12. Now, this outer darkness is in contrast with the inner light, since faith alone must see within the heart. There our light, our reason must be covered and cease, and faith alone lighten us. For if a person will act according to reason and open it, there is nothing but death, hell and sin before his eyes. Reason then considers itself a candidate for death; yet it finds no help in any creature, all is a desert and dark. Therefore reason must be barred out here, or it must despair and surrender itself as a captive to the light of faith alone. This same light then sees that it is God in heaven who is interested in us, who cares for us, upon whom the heart can meditate, who rejects all aid of reason and depends upon no creature; then man will be sustained. Now this is the sense of the words, that those cast thus into outer darkness will be robbed of faith, and thus cast out. Since they do not cleave to God's mercy alone through faith, they must despair and be condemned.

13. Let us now briefly notice what is taught by this marriage feast. First, this marriage feast is a union of the divine nature with the human. And the great love Christ has for us is presented to us in this picture of the wedding feast. For there are many kinds of love, but none is so ardent and fervent as a bride's love, the love a new bride has to her bridegroom, and on the other hand, the bridegroom's love to the bride. True love has no regard for pleasures or presents, or riches, or gold rings and the like; but cares only for the bridegroom. And if he even gave her all he had, she would regard none of his presents, but say: I will have only thee. And if on the other hand he has nothing at all, it makes no difference with her, she will in spite of all that desire him. That is the true nature of the love of a bride. But where one has regard to pleasure, it is harlot-love; she does not care for him, but for the money; therefore such love does not last long.

14. This true bride-love God presented to us in Christ, in that he allowed him to become man for us and be united with our human nature that we might thus perceive and appreciate his good will toward us. Now, as the bride loves her betrothed, so also does Christ love us; and we on the other hand will love him, if we believe and are the true bride. And although he gave us even heaven, the wisdom of all the Prophets, the glory of all the saints and angels, yet we would not esteem them unless he gave us himself. The bride can be satisfied by nothing, is insatiable, the only one thing she wants is the bridegroom himself; as she says in the Song of Solomon, 2, 16: "My beloved is mine, and I am his." She cannot rest until she has her beloved himself. So is Christ also on the other hand disposed toward me: he will have me only, and besides nothing. And if I gave him even all I could, it would be of no use to him; he would have no regard for it, even if I wore all the hoods of all the monks. He wants my whole heart; for the outward things, as the outward virtues, are only maid servants, he wants the wife herself. He demands, that I say from the bottom of my heart: I am thine. The union and the marriage are accomplished by faith, so that I rely fully and freely upon him, that he is mine. If I only have him, what can I desire more?

15. Now, what do we give to him? An impure bride, a dirty, old, wrinkled outcast. But he is the eternal wisdom, the eternal truth, the eternal light, an exceptionally beautiful youth. What does he give us then? Himself, wholly and completely. He does not cut a piece off for me or give me a little morsel, but the whole fountain of eternal wisdom, not a little brooklet. If then I am thus his and he mine, I have eternal life, righteousness and all that belongs to him. Therefore I am righteous, saved, and in a sense that neither death, sin, hell, nor satan can harm me. If he gave me only a part of his wisdom, righteousness and life, I would say: That is of no help to me, but I want thee, without thee nothing is real and true. When he gives me his servants, his Prophets, he gives me only a part and a morsel; the gifts are only concubines, among whom there is only one who is the true bride. They are distinguished thus: there are many souls to whom gifts are made, as, wisdom, love and the like; but they are not the true brides, for they do not say, Thou art mine: but they court your purse on the side, for they love the gifts. But the true bride says: Thee alone will I have, thou art mine, and not the ring, not the jewel, not the present. The above is all spoken of love.

16. Now, what do we bring to him? Nothing but all our heart-aches, all our misfortunes, sins, misery and lamentations. He is the eternal light, we the eternal darkness; he the life, we death; he righteousness, we sin. This is a marriage that is very unequal. But what does the bridegroom do? He is so fastidious that he will not dwell with his bride until he first adorns her in the highest degree. How is that done? The Apostle Paul teaches that when he says in Tit. 3, 5-6: "He gave his tender body unto death for them and sprinkled them with his holy blood and cleansed them through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit." He instituted a washing; that washing is baptism, with which he washes her. More than this, he has given to her his Word; in that she believes and through her faith she becomes a bride. The bridegroom comes with all his treasures; but I come with all my sins, with all my misery and heart-grief. But because this is a marriage and a union, in the sense that they become one flesh, Gen. 2, 24; Mat. 19, 5, and they leave father and mother and cleave to one another, they should embrace each other and not disown one another, although one is even a little sick and awkward; for what concerns one, the other must also bear.

17. Therefore, the bride says, I am thine, thou must have me; then he must at the same time take all my misfortune upon himself. Thus then are my sins eternal righteousness, my death eternal life, my hell heaven; for these two, sin and righteousness, cannot exist together, nor heaven and hell. Are we now to come together the one must consume and melt the other in order that we may be united and become one. Now his righteousness is truly incomparably stronger than my sins, and his life immeasurably stronger than my death; for he is life itself where all life must be kindled, Therefore my death thus vanishes in his life, my sins in his righteousness and my condemnation in his salvation. Here my sin is forced between the hammer and the anvil, so that it perishes and vanishes. For now since my sin, my filth is taken away he must adorn and clothe me with his eternal righteousness and with all his grace until I become beautiful; for I am his bride. Thus then I appropriate to myself all that he has, as he takes to himself all that I have; as the Prophet Ezekiel 16, 6f says: "I passed by thee, and thou wast naked, and thy breasts were fashioned and were marriageable; then I spread my skirts over thee and covered thy nakedness, gave thee my Word and put on thee beautiful red shoes." Here he relates many kind acts he did for her; and later he complains in verse 15, how she became a harlot. He tells us all this, that he clothed us with his riches and that we of ourselves have nothing. Whoso does not here lay hold of this as sure, that he has nothing of himself, but only Christ's riches and cannot without doubt say, Thou art mine, he is not yet a Christian.

18. Now since Christ is mine and I am his: if Satan rages, I have Christ who is my life; does sin trouble me, I have Christ who is my righteousness; do hell and perdition attack me, I have Christ, who is my salvation. Thus, there may rage within whatever will, if I have Christ, to him I can look so that nothing can harm me. And this union of the divine with the human is pointed out in the picture here of the marriage feast, and the exalted love God has to us, in the love of the bride.

19. Now the wedding garment is Christ himself, which is put on by faith, as the Apostle says in Rom. 13, 14: "Put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ." Then the garment gives forth a lustre of itself, that is, faith in Christ bears fruit of itself, namely, love which works through faith in Christ. These are the good works, that also flash forth from faith, and entirely gratuitously do they go forth, they are done alone for the good of our neighbor; otherwise they are heathenish works, if they flow not out of faith; they will later come to naught and be condemned, and be cast into the outermost darkness.

20. This is indicated here in the binding of his hands and feet. The hands, as said, are the works, the feet the manner of life in which he trusted and failed thus to cling to Christ alone. For we blame him that he had not on the wedding garment, that is, Christ; therefore he must perish with his works; for they did not sparkle forth from faith, from the garment. Hence will you do good works, then believe first; if you will bear fruit, then be a tree first, later the fruit will follow of itself.

21. The mistake is also readily observed here, by which many have perverted the Gospel in that they say: Although the Pope and his following are wicked, yet we must obey him and acknowledge him as the head of Christendom. Let him do what he may, and yet he cannot err, and although he may not have on the wedding garment, nevertheless he is in the congregation. But they are not so good that one might compare them to the one who had not on the wedding garment. They are the villains and murderers who killed the servants of the King; and even if they were worthy to be compared to him, yet the Gospel in this parable does not teach us to follow them, but to cast them out and protect ourselves against them. For whoever has not on the wedding garment does not belong to the congregation, is filth, like the slime, pus, and ulcers in the body; it is indeed in the body, but it is no part of the healthy body. Counterfeits are among money, but they are not money; chaff is among the wheat, but it is not wheat; so these are among Christians, but they are not Christians. This is sufficient on to- day's Gospel. Let us pray God for grace, that none of us may come to such a precious and glorious marriage feast without a wedding garment.

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