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Introduction

In 1971, Shah Reza Pahlavi of Iran gave a four-day celebration commemorating the Persian Empire's 2,500th birthday. A celebration that is probably the most amazing party ever staged. The focal point of the event was a huge banquet feast, the banquet hall being a gigantic silk tent lighted with \$840,000 worth of coloured lights! The guest list matched the occasion: the Shah invited more than 600 dignitaries from 69 nations, to join him over the four day event. The cost to the Shah's estate for this festival? Just over \$100 million US dollars! And that was back in 1971!

1. The Invitation

What a party! I wonder what it would have been like to go to? Well in Matthew 22, Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like that sort of a party. For Jesus goes on to describe an ancient king, preparing for the wedding banquet of his son. And this is a party not to be missed. The crème de la crème of society have been invited. The palace has been prepared. The fatted calf has been cooked. Everything is ready. So he sends out his servants to bring in the guests.

Now a bit of background information will be helpful here. In that place and time, there was a two-stage process of being invited to a wedding. The invitation was actually sent out well in advance of the banquet and everyone sent back their RSVP. Then, those who had said "yes" received a courtesy reminder on the day of the banquet itself. So this is not the first invitation that these people have received. Its actually a last second reminder, of the biggest bash going around.

Now don't forget this is a parable. So the details of this story are important. The Kingdom of heaven Jesus is saying is like a party, in fact its like God throwing a wedding banquet for his son. It will be a time of feasting, of joy, of laughter. It will be something so good that you don't want to miss it. One day everything will be ready. God will have prepared everything even down to the minor details. In the meantime the invitations go out. The time of celebration is near.

Now no -one would want to miss out on the party of a lifetime, would they? No one would refuse an invitation if their Creator God invited them to the biggest bash in the history of the universe, to the wedding supper of his Son Jesus would they? This is bigger than the footy grand final at Cheryl's in a couple of weeks time! Its bigger than an invitation to the Lodge or to Government House or even to Buckingham Palace. So its strange that in the parable, straight after the invitation, Jesus describes

2. The Rejection

Because guest after guest, refuse to come to the party! They paid no attention to the invitation! One goes off to his field, there's some weeds I need to dig out. Another goes off to his business, there is a new contract I want to seal. While others catch up

on their filing, clean out their sock draw, or decided to walk the dog.

Its not as if these things don't need to be done, sometime. But not now. We have a chance of a lifetime beckoning here. The King's son, and it might even be the heir to the throne, is not going to get married every day of the week. The food is ready. The fun is just about to begin and the guests are consumed by everyday things. They have got their priorities wrong, horribly wrong. Continuing their every day routine and turning their back on the honour of being with the King.

But some are not just dismissive of the king's invitation, they are outright rude. They reject what he has to say and do so violently. For the parable tells us that some actually seize the servants, they mistreat the servants, even kill the servants. They are not content with ignoring their king, they actually want to defy their king. They reject their king. They want to hurt their king.

Now what would be the equivalent of that today? Imagine Kevin Rudd inviting a whole stack of people to dinner at Parliament House and hearing that some had decided instead to go to a Titan's rugby league game instead. Others had preferred to catch up on some gardening, while one person even volunteered for an extra shift at Mc Donalds. But some invitees are not just dismissive of the Prime Minister's invitation they actually were rude to the couriers and there is a report of one couple actually shooting the messenger, they were so angry at being invited.

This is the height of rudeness. But once again lets remember this is a parable and it all means something. God has this celebration planned for his people and he sends out his prophets, his priests, his supporters out across the land of his people and they don't want to have a bar of it. While there are some who no doubt accepted God's invitation, there were many who paid no attention to what their Creator was inviting them to do. Work, family, sport, sleep, leisure were more important than God. And some don't just ignore God, they oppose God. They killed the priests, they stoned the prophets, they abused God's messengers. They reject what God is offering them.

No wonder the king in the parable is angry. No wonder God is angry. To give people life, health, family, work, money and homes and to be ignored or opposed is beyond the pail. And so the king sends his army and destroys those who have physically opposed him. He judges them and so they get what they deserve.

So where to for the King? What does he do next? He has a wedding banquet prepared and not enough guests to enjoy what he has arranged? It reminds me of what happened to New York socialite, Nicole Contos. She was scheduled to be married in a Manhattan church. She showed up, 250 invited guests showed up, but the groom didn't. He took off for Tahiti where they had planned to honeymoon. So there she was with a \$100,000 reception and no wedding. What did she do? She did the only thing she could do. She said, "The food is ready, the drink is ready. We're gonna have a party. And she did." Well the King in Jesus parable does something similar.

3. The invitation, the rejection and **the Resolution.**

The King resolves to have the party anyway. Those I invited didn't deserve to come and so I will open up the doors to anyone. Go back into town and find society's

rejects. Tell Woodie, to come. Tell pretty Tony, to come. Tell fast Fannie, to come. Tell sweet black, to come. Tell Ned the wino, to come. Tell one leg Larry, to come. Tell wheel chair Willie, to come. Tell hot pants Paula, to come. If any body asked, Tell them the King said; "Whosoever will, let them come!"

In other words, it doesn't matter whether you are beggar or a billionaire, you drive a Roller or sleep outside of a roll a door. The King wants his wedding hall to be full. And so the servants went out into the streets and gathered all that they could find, both the good and the bad and soon the wedding hall was filled with guests.

Once again this a picture of God inviting us to his heavenly banquet. If the Jews don't want to follow their King, then God will send out his invitation to the Gentiles. If the religious don't have time for God, then God will make an offer to irreligious. If the good are not interested, there is always the bad. If the rich aren't interested, then there is always the poor.

Do you get the point? Heaven is not just for the good, the moral, the rich, the religious. In the end, everyone has an invitation to heaven. God doesn't just so love the Church that he send them his only Son. He so loved the world that he gave us his one and only son. God isn't just interested in the middle class, he is also interested in the poor. Not just the wife, husband and two kids, but the single mum, the divorced, the street kids, those in prison. God doesn't just care for the Jew or the Australian or the American, he cares for the Palestinian, the Indigenous, the Afghan.

Sure God choose the Israelites in the OT and sent them prophets, priests and kings. But they were meant to be a light to the nations, they were blessed to be a blessing to the people around them. But when they got too carried away with their own importance, God opened up the offer of eternal life to all people. And the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, says that when we get a glimpse of heaven we will see people from every nation, every colour, every language group, there in heaven.

And who is to send out this invitation, but none other than God's servants, the Church. We are the ones who are given the task of delivering God's invitations to God's people. We are the ones who cant just stay in the palace getting ourselves ready for the party of a life time. We are the ones who should be out there, inviting, encouraging, pleading, hoping, praying, leading people back to the King, back to their God. Calling the good, the bad and the ugly to come back to God. To come and join in the celebration of what Jesus has done. To fill heaven with as many people as it can cram in.

God's preparations are almost complete. The time of great joy and feasting will soon be ready. The invitation is available to all. And so we Christians had better get on with the task of getting God's invitation out to as many people as possible.

4. The invitation, the rejection, the resolution and **the Expulsion.**

But like many of Jesus parables there is not a happy ending, there is instead a sting in the tale. You see it would be great if the parable ended at verse 10, with the clinking of champagne glasses and the murmurs of excited guests. But it doesn't. For in verse 11, the King comes in to see the guests and he notices that one of the men enjoying

the festivities is not wearing wedding clothes. Friend, he asked, how did you get in here without wedding clothes. The room goes silent and the man is speechless. Get out. Get away from me. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.

At first, you might wonder how any of those who accepted the king's invitation could have been expected to come properly attired. They had been rounded up from every part of the land, and many of them had been taken off the streets. Even if they had time to dress properly, they didn't have any clothes appropriate for such an occasion as the wedding of the king's son.

But commentators tell us that in that day and time the king supplied the wedding garments himself. So all the guests had to do was just put it on. But here was a man who didn't even make the small effort involved in putting on the proper clothing

At first glance, it seems a small thing, but it's not. This guy without a wedding garment thought he could come to the king's feast on his own terms, thinking his own clothes were good enough. Forget about what the king wanted or had provided for the occasion. I'm going to do it my way, he says to himself.

No your not, says God. The invitation may be for anyone, it may be an act of grace. But you do need to show some gratitude. You do need to change your ways to be a guest of the king. You do need to acknowledge your King's instructions and respond accordingly.

Likewise, anyone can come to heaven at the invitation of the King. But you can't do it your way, but only his way. You can't be unchanged by God's mercy. You can't just continue as if nothing has happened. As someone has said, *It's true that the door of salvation is open to all men, but when we come through that door we must put off the old man and put on the new man. Grace is not just a gift; grace is a responsibility.*

Friends don't do what that man did. If you want to feast at God's table of grace you have to come on His terms not yours. You have to put on Christ. You can't come in your own goodness, the Bible emphasises you have to put on the righteousness of Christ. You have to accept what God offers to you. It has to change how you act and how you look to the people around you.

It reminds me of a story I read recently about a guy called Ken who was a labourer on the Alaskan Pipeline. He spent a year or so up there, made lots of money and then he came back home and went to visit his old Church. The first Sunday he walked through the doors and sat in the back seat and he looked just like Grizzly Adams - beard and all. But at the end of the service there was an invitation to come back to God and this man responded and became a Christian.

The next Sunday he came back to the services but not one recognized him, he was dressed in a 3 piece suit and no beard! When he was asked what caused him to shave and dress up he said, 'Jesus changed me on the inside and I want people to know it - so I changed the outside.'"

That's what this parable is saying to us today. Yes the invitation is available to anyone, but once you have accepted the invitation, God changes the inside and we

need to bit by bit change the outside. We need to become more and more like Jesus. We need to take off the old self of sin and put on the new self of righteousness. For we can't afford to stay the same. We need to show our gratitude to God for his wonderful invitation, by becoming, over time, someone that reflects his son Jesus.

5. The Question.

And that Jesus ends with the question. Are you invited or are you chosen? For many are invited, in fact all our invited. But only a few are chosen. Many are invited but some are too busy with their everyday lives to get back to God with an RSVP. Many are invited but some are too angry with God for what he allowed to happen to their wife, their husband, their daughter, themselves that they don't want to have a bar of what God is offering. Many are invited but some want to do things on their own terms, the Frank Sinatra way, I did it my way, and so are not open to change or to accepting what Jesus has done for us. Many are invited, but few are chosen.

Few have allowed God to enter their lives. Few have allowed the Holy Spirit to bring them back to God. Few have found that Jesus death was for them and so allowed the call of God on their lives to take root within their souls. Many are invited but few are chosen.

So are you invited or chosen? Have you embraced God's invitation or ignored it? Have you been saved by grace and now are you being changed by grace? That's the question. But there is another question implicit in this passage. Once you have been chosen, are you out there sharing God's invitation with others? Are you hoping, praying that the next person who hears the God's news about Jesus will not just be an invitee, but a chosen son or daughter of God? Are you ready to go to the highways and the byways to ensure that every person in your family, in your street, in your suburb and ultimately in your world, knows how wonderful God's invitation on their life really is? And are you supporting the Churches effort to get that good news out there, or have you failed to comprehend how amazing God's grace really is?

Friends these are important questions. These are our great challenges. This is what the local Church here should be all about. But let me end with a story taken from author Tony Campolo's book called "The Kingdom of God is a Party." In chapter one, he tells the story of a trip to Honolulu in the mid 80's. He arrives and needing breakfast at 3:30am local time, he ends up in a greasy diner ordering a donut and a coffee; and while consuming this wholesome breakfast in walks 8 or 9 prostitutes.

The place is small, Campolo is surrounded, and like most of us decides the best thing to do is to get out of there. Then he overhears one of them say, "Tomorrow is my birthday; I'll be 39." Somebody else tears into her. "So?? Whadya want me to do about it?? Want me to throw you a party, bake you a cake, sing "happy birthday???" The first shot back, "Come on! I've just never had a birthday party my whole life"

If you've heard of Tony Campolo, you probably have an idea what happens next. He hangs around till they leave, then asks the guy who runs the place if those people come in every night. They do, so Campolo asks if he could throw that one prostitute a big birthday party that next night. They get excited about the idea, make all the arrangements – Campolo decorates the diner, the chef bakes a cake, somebody gets

the word out on the street. This is how Campolo describes the scene:

“By 3:15 every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. It was wall-to-wall prostitutes ... and me! At 3:30 on the dot, the door of the diner swung open and in came Agnes and her friend. When they came in we all screamed, “Happy birthday!”

Never have I seen a person so flabbergasted, so stunned, so shaken. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit. As she was led to one of the stools along the counter we all sang “Happy Birthday” to her. Then, when the cake was carried out with all the candles on it, she lost it and just openly cried.”

She couldn't blow out the candles. She couldn't cut the cake. In fact, she was so overwhelmed that she asked if she could just keep the cake for a little while. The gruff chef said, “It's your cake. Go ahead.” And so Agnes picked the cake up and carried it home as if it were the most precious thing imaginable.

The crowd was stunned into silence. Not knowing what else to do, Campolo said; “what do you say we pray?” And he did. He prayed for Agnes, for her salvation, for God to turn her life around. At the end, the chef turned to him with a trace of hostility in his voice and said, “You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?” Campolo replied, “I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning.”

Friends, that is what the Kingdom of God is like. That is what Jesus came to do. That is what we should be on about in the Church. We are all sinners, just like that prostitute. We don't deserve to be invited to a royal wedding feast. But the invitation has come. Have you accepted the invitation? And are you passing that invitation on to all the people around you?

60 Second Spots

1.

Stories. We love stories don't we? The most popular movies of our times are those that have great story lines, where we get caught up with where the movie is taking us. Jesus was a great story teller. He was always telling stories, which we call parables, to help explain to us what God was like and what heaven was like. This morning we are going to look at the story or the parable of the Wedding Banquet. It's a great story and one that you don't want to miss. Not because it will keep you on the edge of your seat wondering whether the boy will meet the girl and they will live happily ever after. But because it will talk to us about God's wonderful invitation for us to come to heaven. This is one story that can not just change our life, but our eternity. So stick around and hear what Jesus has to say.

2.

Do you remember that ad for lamb that was on a few years back? A young girl wins a radio competition to have dinner with Tom Cruise, when he was the hottest date on the planet. And what does she do? She turns it down, because her Mum was cooking a lamb roast. It was a great ad, because it reminded us that a meal with our Mum is something immensely valuable, even more valuable than a date with a star. Jesus says in the book of Matthew, that heaven is like banquet with our Father, our Heavenly Father. And so an invitation to that meal is so valuable that it will be worth saying no to lots of other things. Do you value God's gift of heaven? If you do, you will need to say no to some of the offers that our world makes all around us. It might mean missing out on what some people think is fun, but in the end, I'm sure that going God's way will bring much, much, more joy than any other way. That's been my experience and I'm sure that will be yours as well.

3.

Billy Graham once shocked many people by saying, "one of the great mysteries of redemption is this: while many bad men will go to heaven, many good men will go to hell." Billy's right, you know. For the Bible says it is not about whether we are good or bad people in God's eyes. Its about whether we are forgiven or unforgiven people that is the important thing. For the Bible says in Romans chapter 3, verse 23, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." All have sinned. The good have sinned. The bad have sinned. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But luckily that is not the end of the story. For it then says in the next verse "that we are justified (or made right again) freely by God's grace through the redemption that came through Christ Jesus." To all sinners, God gives us the gift of trusting in Jesus and those who accept that gift will find that Christ himself opens up for them the way to heaven. So don't try and work out whether your life has been good or bad, that's irrelevant in the end. Make sure that you look to Jesus for your salvation. For that's the only way that bad people like you and me can get into God's heaven.

4.

Parties. Everyone likes an invitation to a party don't they? Good friends, good food, good atmosphere, it's a great combination. So whether it is a birthday party, an anniversary or just getting your mates together, if you get an invitation to a party for one of your friends, you want to be there. It's interesting, but Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is going to be like a party. But it's not like any old party but like a wedding banquet. So it's like the best food, the best drink, the best atmosphere and you and I are invited. There's just one catch. You have to RSVP. You have to accept the invitation. You have to do more than just turn up, you have to clear your timetable for the big party. So don't leave it too late to RSVP. Don't get distracted with everything else on your plate. Get down on your knees today and tell God you will take up his offer. Because you wouldn't want to miss out on this party would you?

5.

Back in the 1500's, Ivan the Terrible became the first Czar of Russia. Ivan, like his name suggests was not a very nice man. He was known far and wide for his cruelty, for his immorality, for his violence. But did you know that when the Ivan the Terrible died in 1584, historians tell us that those who prepared his body for burial were instructed to shave Ivan's head and to dress him for burial in the robes of a monk. Now why would Ivan have wanted them to do that? Apparently he wanted that done, because he hoped that God would only see his clothes and think that he was a good and simple monk and thus Ivan the Terrible would slip in under the radar, and get to heaven. Now although that sounds silly, many people do the same today. They dress themselves up on the outside and hope that God will not see who they are on the inside. But God does see and God will not let any of us slip in under the radar. So let's make sure that rather than dress ourselves up on the outside we ask God to clean us up on the inside. Today why don't we trust in what Jesus did for us, dying on the cross to forgive us for our sins. Then we will be ready for God on the last day and we will start allowing him to change us from now on, from the inside out.

6.

At the end of World War II, the Russian head of state gave an elaborate banquet to honour the British prime minister Winston Churchill. The Russians arrived in their best formal wear -- military dress uniforms -- but their honoured guest did not. Churchill arrived wearing his famous zipper coveralls that he had worn during the German bomb attack in London. He thought it would provide a nostalgic touch the Russians would appreciate. But they didn't. They were humiliated and insulted that their prominent guest of honour had not considered their banquet worthy of his best clothes. When God asks us to turn up to his banquet at the end of the world, he too wants us to be in our best clothes. But not the clothes woven together with our own pride, and our own achievements. He wants us to put on the robe of Christ. Make sure that when you get to God's party that Christ has become so much a part of your life, that his humility, that his compassion, that his holiness and that his love has rubbed off on you. Then you won't insult your heavenly Father and you will be ready to enjoy all that God is offering you.

7.

For many are invited but few are chosen. Jesus today has been telling us that we are all invited to the his wonderful banquet in heaven. That every single one of us have got that invitation in our hot little hand right now. But not everyone will accept the invitation. Some will be too busy to give it a second thought. Others will be offended that God would let in the undesirables and so reject the offer. Others still will say that there isn't even a God in the first place so all this talk of an offer must just be pie in the sky when you die. But in the end it doesn't matter what others think, the truth is that each one of us have that offer. So what are you going to do about it? Accept it or Reject it? Take it or leave it? Humble yourself or be filled with pride? I think its an offer too good to refuse. So take it. And then show your gratitude to God by from now on putting Him first. "For many are invited, but few are chosen".

