

Sermon – October 11, 2020
“Many are called, but few are chosen.”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Matthew 22:1-14

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word. Amen

Good morning! It is so wonderful to be in the house of the Lord and to have our worship extended to those viewing the live stream. Welcome to all. All of our charge conference paper work that is due has been submitted, and it is time to begin again to live out the mission of our church. Please be in prayer about where God is leading us, through the Holy Spirit, to join in Jesus' mission here in Northumberland during the rest of this year and in the coming year. Where are our hearts being stirred to join with Jesus? Who is the Holy Spirit putting on our hearts to serve? Ourselves through spiritual growth? Our families through love extended to them? Our county, those around us here in the Northern Neck? Our nation through loving actions to others? Devote time in prayer over these areas and see where the Holy Spirit is stirring our hearts now and in the coming year.

Jesus is still in the temple with the crowd he was teaching, but he is still addressing the group of religious leaders who have come to demand he tell them the source of his authority. So far, Jesus has told the religious leaders two parables, the first about his authority coming from God, and the second that his presence in Israel marks the beginning of something new. Jesus will now tell the religious leaders a third parable that gives insights into the nature of the new kingdom he represents. This parable also addresses consequences for those who refuse to accept who Jesus is, the Son of God. Jesus will make this clear through a parable so as not to make this claim in words the religious leaders would consider blasphemous and would have him killed for, but he will tell them in a parable that makes clear to them the consequences of their actions.

Let's look at this short parable. It has three movements. The first is an invitation to and a response from those invited to a royal wedding. Being invited to a royal wedding is a great honor as it is the wedding of the king's son. The king has sent his servants to tell those invited

that the time has come for the wedding feast. All is ready and they are now to come. Those being invited to such an event have already received a “save the date” invitation or a previous invitation. This is the second call, a call that lets them know now is the time to come. Notice that those invited refuse to come, but the king is kind and sends more servants a second time with news that there are oxen and fatted calves ready for the feast, an attempt to make clear that this is a feast of abundance. Those invited refuse again. One goes to his farm, another to his business, and others abuse the servants and even kill some. In response to the refusal by those invited and their actions against his servants, the king sends his troops, destroys them, and burns their city.

Remember that Jesus is talking to the religious leaders as he tells this parable. These are the leaders of the chosen people of God, Israel. God has sent his prophets to them to invite them back into the kingdom, but they have refused. Now God has sent his Son to them to invite them into the kingdom of God, but they refuse to recognize Jesus. They also are those who are refusing to respond to the invitation. Jesus tells them through the parable that they will be judged for their refusal to recognize him, turn to God, and enter the new kingdom God is bringing about through Jesus. Those already invited to the wedding feast are the religious leaders and the Jewish nation. Notice the excuses that are offered by those who reject the invitation. One goes to his farm. He goes to take care of what he has instead of responding to the invitation to the feast. This one treats the things he has as more important than the invitation to the king’s banquet. Another’s excuse is that he has to care for his business and cannot come. This one lets his desire for more money be more important than an invitation to come to the king’s feast. These two types of responses from those invited represent those who today still refuse an invitation to come to Christ. They are too busy with their own interests to respond. These are not necessarily bad or sinful endeavors, but those seeking them are allowing blessings to have priority over their inclusion in the kingdom of God.

After the king has judged those not worthy, a clear message to the religious leaders that they will be judged and the city they think they protect will be destroyed, the parable moves to the second phase. The king abandons those judged not worthy and sends his servants out into the streets to bring in all, the good and the bad. This second phase is the new kingdom that Jesus is teaching about. It is a kingdom where tax collectors and prostitutes, sinners, are included in the feast. They are invited to the royal banquet and the wedding hall is filled with guests. Notice that those who come are both good and bad guests. This is a mixed group. Those compelling these

guests to come to the feast make no judgments. This phase of the parable represents the amazing grace of the kingdom of God. Those who respond to the invitation come and are welcomed into the feast, a royal feast. The good and the bad are together in the hall. This is the grace that is extended to all people. It is the blessing that Jesus makes available to all people. It is an open invitation to come into the kingdom of God. It is abundant grace, bought with the price of the life of Jesus on the cross. It is a gift freely given to all, the good and the bad. If the earlier phase of the parable spoke to the religious leaders of their failure to respond to God's invitation and their judgment for that failure, this phase speaks to the nature of the kingdom of God as a place where the tax collector and prostitute are welcomed, a place where those who are despised by the religious authorities are welcomed as they respond to the invitation, repent and accept the grace given to them and joyously come to the royal feast in celebration. But there are good and bad people present in this place, just as there are good and bad people present in our churches today. Our churches are not filled with perfect followers of Christ. Our churches are hospitals for sinners, the broken, the outcast, those in need of the healing love of God. Churches are places where grace and forgiveness abound. The presence of the good and the bad brings Jesus' parable to the third and final phase, the arrival of the king to see the guests.

When the king arrives, he sees a man not wearing a robe. The wedding robe is not some special wedding garment that is required. It is the clean white garment that every person would have in their wardrobe. It is their best suit of clothing and not the clothes they wear to work. But when the king comes to see the guests, there is one present who has not taken time to go to his home and change his clothes. There is one who is not prepared for the coming of the king. There is one present who is not wearing what is required for one who comes to a royal banquet. The king sees him and calls him friend, an expression that recognizes this guest as one who has what is needed but has not taken the time to prepare for the feast. The unprepared guest is judged for his decision, bound to stop his actions, and cast out into the outer darkness. This is the final judgment, a time when all are judged for what is in their hearts. This is the time when being part of those present is not enough, only those who are bearing the fruits of the kingdom remain and are accepted into the kingdom. This is the time when the good and the evil present in the church are separated, not by the leadership of the church, but by God through righteous judgment.

At the end of this parable, and the end of the three parables that Jesus tells to the religious leaders, Jesus makes an unusual statement; "Many are called, but few are chosen." This

statement Jesus shares is a statement about the kingdom of heaven that is arriving or breaking in with his arrival. It is a kingdom that is already, but not yet fully present. It is a kingdom which will replace the current temple and chosen people of Israel with a new kingdom and a new nation, one where many are called, but few are chosen. We need to ask ourselves, what does this statement by Jesus mean about this new kingdom, the kingdom of God? What does this statement mean for us? Let me offer a few thoughts to get us started on understanding this closing comment by Jesus to the religious authorities. First, grace is for all. Let me say that again, grace is for all. God's steadfast love is available to every person from the religious leaders who don't think they need it to the despised sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes who are seeking grace to redeem them to God. Grace is for all. Grace is for all, but grace is not cheap. This gift from God will demand that Jesus die on the cross and shed his blood. It will demand that he endure the suffering of a flogging, beatings, the pain of the cross, and the pain that my sin and all of our sins brought as they were placed on him, separating him from God as our sins were born by him upon the cross. Grace is not cheap. Grace is abundant. Grace is for the good and the bad. Grace is the entry into the lavish royal feast the king will hold. It is the invitation given to everyone, the good and the bad. This means that sitting in the pews of the church are those who have received grace, and this means that not everyone sitting in the church or on the roles of the church is good. It means that those who make up the church are a mixed group. Good and evil are in the church. It should come as no surprise to us who are in the church that we struggle with sin. We struggle to live into the grace that we have been given. We are a fallen people seeking to be redeemed. Being baptized does not get us into heaven. Being on the roles of a church does not get us into the kingdom of God. Grace is abundant but it is not cheap. Grace is abundant, but so are the demands of the kingdom. Many are called. Many come to the feast, many join the church, many are baptized, many attend Bible studies, many go on mission trips, many work for social justice, many give a drink of water to the least of these, but only a few are chosen. God is the judge, the righteous judge who looks upon the heart and knows those who are chosen. The man at the feast without proper attire represents those who answer the call to come to the feast but are unchanged and are evil. He represents those who are called but who do not bear fruit for the kingdom. Those chosen are those who bear fruit for the kingdom. They are those who hunger and thirst for God, those who have recognized they are a sinner, received grace, turned from their sinful ways, accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and are at

work in his kingdom, in his mission bearing fruit for the kingdom. The chosen are the ones who have put on the righteousness of Christ and are seeking to grow into his image and lose their own. Bearing fruit is the demand of the kingdom. Those who do not bear fruit are judged by God and cast out into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Many are called and many respond to the call for whatever reason, but only those who bear fruit are chosen. They are the elect.

What are some of the attributes of the kingdom of God we can glean from Jesus' parable told to the religious leaders and written down by Matthew in his Gospel for us? First, being born into a chosen people does not get us into the kingdom. The religious leaders and the people of Israel were not coming into the kingdom by being born into the family of Abraham. Being born into a Christian family does not get you to heaven. Jesus gets us the opportunity to be redeemed to God. Second, there are distractions of life, what we own and what we seek or desire, that if we are not careful with the way we balance the time we allot to them, will keep us from the kingdom of God. John Wesley's guidance rings true here: Earn all you can, save all you can, and give all you can to all the people you can in all the places you can in all the ways you can. Be one through whom life flows and not one who is barred from the kingdom of heaven by our focus on our desires. Third, all are invited to join the banquet through the abundant grace that Jesus purchased for us through his suffering and death on the cross. Fourth, only those who are called, accept the invitation, and put on the proper covering fit for a royal feast go to the kingdom of God. Only those who are changed and found by the king bearing fruit are allowed to remain at the feast. And finally, the church is filled with both good and bad, but they will be separated by a righteous judge who will welcome the good to the wedding banquet and cast the evil into the outer darkness.

I think this brings us to a couple of closing questions to consider, "Are we going into the royal banquet, the kingdom of God? Are we bearing fruit for the kingdom of God and dressed appropriately for the eyes and approval of the king?" Jesus told those who thought they were in the kingdom of God, the religious leaders, that the tax collectors and prostitutes were going into the kingdom of heaven before them and they would be destroyed. These going into the kingdom of God are the sinners, those with no hope for redemption who are redeemed by the blood of Jesus shed on the cross. No sin is too great for this mighty one to redeem. No one is beyond his reach. Nothing we have done or failed to do is beyond the grace that Jesus has for us. All are

called to the kingdom of God. The tax collectors and prostitutes repented of their sin, turned to God, obeyed his servants' call, followed Jesus, and bore fruit, urgently loving others to keep them from judgment. What are we to do to put on a robe worthy of the kingdom? We are to repent, turn from our sin, pray, seek to know Jesus through his word, grow into his image, set aside self, love one another, and seek to be those who are bearing fruit for the kingdom of God. Many are called but few are chosen.

Pray with me: Father, we desire to be among those bearing fruit for your kingdom. Jesus, come and change us through the power of the Holy Spirit to be a people known as those who bear fruit. Father, we repent of our sins and we desire to put on the righteousness of Jesus Christ and to join him in his mission. Change us to be your people, a people who are a blessing to all the nations of the world. Amen