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## *Ready to Rumble: Making the Short List* Matthew 22: 1-14

Last week the Toones received a card from Stacy Haddon. Stacy is a daughter of this church and, as a high school student, was a mentor to my daughter, Rachel. She has been one of the most influential persons in Rachel's life, so getting a card from her mattered. It was a save-the-date card. Stacy is getting married this summer. Now, this isn't the **actual** wedding invitation. This is the **pre-**wedding invitation. It's the invitation to the invitation.

And it is a very ancient practice. It's how they did it in the time of Jesus. First you sent out an invitation announcing that the wedding was coming. No exact date or time... just a heads up. Then, after the plans had been finalized and preparations made, a second invitation was sent: "OK...we're ready! The food is just about on the table. Come!" That's how it was supposed to work. But listen to what happened in Jesus' story.  
(Read Matthew 22: 1-14)

Weddings were a big deal in Jesus' time. The higher a person was on the social ladder, the more important the wedding was. And you can't get much higher than the king! The King's son is getting married. He sends out his "hold-the-date" invitation to everyone who was anyone. And everyone says, "Yes! I'll be there."

So, the day comes. The king's kitchens are working overtime to produce the finest feast for this most joyous of occasions. This is going to cost a bundle...but it's worth it! They have the guest count, the servants have prepared enough food, and now, the king sends his servants running in all directions: "OK...we're ready! Come quick, before the food gets cold!" **And what is their response?** They don't come! Wait a second! You said "yes" to the king's invitation! What do you mean you won't come?

Maybe they didn't understand. So the King sends out a new bunch of messengers: "Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet." The word for "come" is, literally, "Hither! Hither to the wedding banquet!" Now...once again... who is speaking these words? The **king**. When the King says, "Hither," what do you do? You go hither!!!!

Now remember, this is the second wave of servants going out to **plead** with guests... who have already said "yes" to the banquet that has been prepared for them. It's sitting on the table! It feels kind of pathetic, doesn't it? Why should any host have to chase down guests and beg them to come to a feast? But especially, **the king?**

But out they go with this second invitation. And they don't do any better than the first crew did. Some invitees pay no attention and go off to their work. How insulting! But get this—others seize the messengers and kill them! What? This is crazy! Finally the king has had enough of this insult! He sends out his troops and they destroy the murderers and burn down their city. And we say, "Serves them right!"

Of course, while all this pillaging is going on, there is still one little problem. What? The banquet! The veal is overcooked. The ox ribs are getting cold. So the king has **another** message for his servants. "Forget that first group; they are all snobs! They didn't deserve my kindness. You go out and invite every person you see. I don't care if they are good or bad, street people, whatever...you invite them. I paid for this feast. It's been prepared. My son deserves a party. And he is going to get one."

And so it happened. The wedding hall was filled, not with the names from the A-list... but with Z-list folks.

So what does this story mean? So far, Jesus' parables have been directed at the Jewish religious leaders. They should have taken care of God's people. Instead, they weighed them down with impossible burdens. They should have recognized and followed the Messiah. Instead, they considered him a threat to their power and plotted to kill them. Can you find the Pharisees in this parable, too? Certainly they would be among those who were invited to the son's celebration but refused and violently rejected the king's rightful authority.

But this parable goes beyond the religious leaders...and encompasses the larger Jewish nation who didn't believe in Jesus. Think about it. The king sent out a preliminary invitation to his A-list to come to his banquet. They said, "Sure, we'll come." In other words, God said to his chosen people—his preferred guests—will you be a part of my plan to save the world? I am preparing a

wonderful, joyous celebration for my Son, and I want you to be my honored guests. Will you come?” And they said, “Yeah, sure... we’ll come. Why not?”

But then the time comes—the time of the beloved Son arrives—time to party!!! And the response is an overwhelming national yawn. “Not interested! Got other things to do!” God says, “But you promised! We made a covenant. I would be your God; you would be my people. Together, we would bless the entire world.” “Yeah, whatever. That is so old news! We’ve got better things to do.”

Notice, there were two kinds of rejection to the king’s invitation. One group was brutal! They murder the messengers! Think about it! All they were doing was bringing an invitation from the king to come and party with him. And what do they get for their efforts? The axe! Literally.

Christians who live in certain parts of our world and who dare to share the joyous news of the gospel risk exactly this kind of treatment. To dare to tell another person, especially in certain Muslim countries, that God loves them and has proven it in the person of Jesus... that can have the same consequences. It can get you killed. And even in our own country, the response to the gracious invitation of Jesus is increasingly angry. I heard last week of a teacher who is suing a student who gave her a Bible for Christmas. Why don’t evangelical Christians—that’s us—witness more? Because our middle class respectability is very important to us and we know for certain that talking about Jesus will damage our reputations.

Those who killed the king’s servants were rebels. They were in outright rebellion to the invitation of the king. And there are some in our culture who might fall into that category. But there are many more that fall into the second: **Indifference**. In Luke’s version of this story, those who declined the invitation at least gave excuses. But Matthew’s story is more brutal. They don’t even bother. They just turn their backs and go about their daily life. One has a field to attend to; the other a business to care for.

Is there anything wrong with taking care of business or tending to our fields? Of course not! That is part of God’s call upon our lives. To work hard; to be good stewards of our opportunities. But this is a vivid illustration of an important life principle: **the good can be the enemy of the best**. They were so preoccupied with good things—taking care of business, tending to their flocks—that they just ignored the best thing: the invitation of the king to enter into his joyful communion.

This parable is a sweeping indictment of the larger nation of Israel—all those who did not receive Jesus as Messiah. Lots of them did; but most didn’t...or didn’t care. The King of the universe invited them to come...to be with him...to celebrate life with him...to bless his world. They said **yes** at first, and then for all kinds of reasons they changed their minds. And when Jesus spoke of the army descending upon these ingrates and destroying them...he was prophesying what happened 40 years later. In 70 A.D. Rome sacked Jerusalem and burned the temple to the ground.

But this isn’t quite the end of the story, is it? Did you notice that last little piece? The king makes a grand entrance into the banquet and walks up and down, greeting his guests. Suddenly, he stops. He sees a man sitting there in his soiled street clothes. “Where is your wedding garment,” the king asks. The man is speechless; he doesn’t have an excuse. And the king has thrown out of the banquet.

Now wait a second. How does this make sense? First, the king goes out, begging for people to come to his party. So, this guy accommodates him. He comes off the street and plops down at a table; then he gets thrown out because he’s not dressed right? And he doesn’t just get thrown out into the street. He gets thrown into a very nasty place with lots of weeping and teeth-gnashing. Last time he goes to that king’s party!

Right here is where you and I come into the story. The first group invited was the Jews; God’s specially chosen people. But when most of them rejected God’s invitation, he turned to us. The Gentiles! You may not realize it but we were a source of huge controversy in the early church. Was the Jewish savior really the savior for non-Jews, too? Could Gentiles really be a part of God’s church? The answer was yes. It was scandalous at the time, but Paul taught that after the gospel was first presented to the Jews, and largely rejected, it became the opportunity for the **rest** of us to discover God’s love. The whole world. This parable is a wonderful illustration of God’s grace.

So then, why throw the poor guy out? If God invited everyone—the good and the bad—to enter his kingdom, did he change his mind? Maybe it’s not grace at all. Maybe our Mormon friends have it right. Maybe you have to work hard, dress right, behave yourself in order to be good enough to be accepted into God’s party? Is that how it works?

Well, there is one more little piece to the story that might help. Often, when hosts invited people to their party, upon arriving, they were **presented** with a new wedding garment as a gift! Not only would the host wine and dine you, he’d even dress you for the event! That makes sense in this case, doesn’t it? The servants were pulling people right off the streets to fill the party. How could anyone have been properly dressed? They didn’t have time to go home and change.

So when the king finds a man sitting at the table without a wedding garment, it means that he refused his at the door. In essence he says, “Thanks for the invitation. Sure I’ll come to your party, but I’ll come on my terms. So what if I’m in filthy clothes; that’s just the way I am. If you want me in your party, you’ll have to take me filth and all.”

But that’s not how it works. The king says, “Listen...you come to my party. Come to the joyous feast of my son. All are invited. And I will even clothe you. I will exchange your filthy rags for a brand new, spotless garment. I will do all of this for you... all by my grace. All you need to do is come and put on the garment I have provided. **You may come to me the way you are, but you may not stay the way you came!**”

I wonder how many people are sitting here this morning in their filthy clothes? Sure... okay... they’ll come to God’s party. But they will do so on their terms. If God wants them, God will just have to take them the way they are because that is the way they are going to stay! **It doesn’t work that way.** “Many are called but few are chosen.” What does that mean? Exactly the parable that Jesus just told. God cries out to people across the whole world: “Come to me! I love you. I long for you to be with me. No matter who you are, what you have done, how filthy you might be... I invite you to come to my party. And look what I will do. I will even make you clean! I will do it all. If you will come and receive my gift of righteousness.”

But God goes on: “But don’t show up without my robe of righteousness on; don’t show up clothed in your own achievements or good deeds. Or worse, don’t show up clothed in your own sense of what matters and doesn’t, your own pride that you can run your life and my church any way you see fit because **you** are the one who is the measure of all things and not Me—the Creator, the Savior, the Messiah, the King!”

How many know the hymn, “The Solid Rock?” Remember the last verse?

When He shall come with trumpet sound,  
Oh, may I then in Him be found;  
Dressed in His righteousness alone,  
Faultless to stand before the throne.

Here’s the great paradox. The king wants every one of us to come to his party. And not one of us is worthy to come to his party. And unless he cleans us up—unless he covers us with his garments of righteousness—we cannot stay. We will be pitched out on our ear. So, have you received what God longs to give you?

This is the whole truth! It is the whole story of God’s grace! And it is a sobering warning to every one of us who thinks that God is lucky to have us in his posse. God will take you any way he finds you...but you cannot stay that way. He insists on making you clean.”

## **Sermon Discussion Questions**

1. Did you ever throw a party and no one showed up? Share your most embarrassing party moment.
2. Our sermon series theme, “Ready to Rumble,” seems more apt every week, doesn’t it? There is an outrageousness to the parables of Jesus as the last week of his ministry draws to a close. Review Matthew 21. What is outrageous about each of the stories or teachings? What is outrageous about today’s parable? Why is Jesus’ presenting these parables in such uncomfortable, stark terms?
3. Who does each of the characters in the parable represent?
4. Can you think of a time when God “invited” you to participate in something...and you declined? What and why?
5. Explain the man who comes in the inappropriate wedding clothes. Why would God be so eager to fill his banquet and then, on the other hand, so quick to cast out someone who was wearing the wrong garments? What does this represent?
6. If many are invited and few are chosen, how do you know if you are among the chosen?