

March 18, 2012 - Invite Them In

Good morning everyone. Good to see you all this morning. We're in the final stages of going through Matthew. We've been in the series for some time and we're just kind of in the final stretches in these last few weeks. I hope it's been a blessing so far and that you will get a few more helpful things out of our series as we continue.

I'm going to start this morning by asking some questions, as we often do, but you know, every now and then you have to address the BIG questions of life. Have you ever had to address the big questions of life? I mean like, the really big questions of life like, paper or plastic? Or I guess nowadays it's cloth or plastic. Which one are you going to go with? Coke or Pepsi? That's a big choice in life. A big question in life. Kirk or Piccard? Another big question in life. Trying to be equal opportunity here: heels or flats? Which one do you go with? When you show up on your date, especially if you're a little bit late, do you bring the flowers or do you go with chocolates? Which one of those do you go with? Or perhaps the question is between Kit Kat and Arrow? That used to be the question now it's not the question anymore, now it's between Kit Kat and Kit Kat and Kit Kat .... There are dozens of Kit Kats to choose from. So you can't just go and get a Kit Kat anymore, you've got this big question over which Kit Kat should I choose and when I saw all those different kinds of Kit Kats, the only thing I could think of was 'Give me a break!' Big questions in life anyways.

But there are other big questions that are actually more serious. Big questions that we have to face...that we all ask ourselves from time-to-time in life. Questions like: Who am I? And Why are we here? What is the meaning of life? Does God really exist? Is there really a God out there somewhere? And if there is a God out there somewhere, where exactly is it that I stand with Him as I go through my life? I think as we go through the Gospels, Matthew and the other Gospels, Mark, Luke and John, the four books that kind of record the life of Jesus for us, Jesus addresses most, if not all, of these questions several times. In our text this morning, Jesus is going to do just that for us. He's going to address the question: Where exactly do I stand with God. But, before we get into that, we need a little bit of context. So, here we go for a really quick and fast review. Some of this should look a little bit familiar for you if you've been here through the rest of this series. If you haven't, don't worry, we're going to get you up to speed in about 90 seconds, hopefully.

We started out, and I told you as we entered this series, that Matthew kind of likes to group his material into collections. So, he gathers a whole bunch of stories and puts them together into collections and works that way through his Gospel. So, we started out with 'Collection One' which was all about *the pedigree* of Jesus, that he was a descendant of David and Abraham and he was acclaimed by the Magi, he was recognized by John the Baptist, he was endorsed by God and victorious over Satan in the desert. That was kind of how Matthew kicked off his Gospel in Collection One and this is kind of the pedigree of Jesus coming in.

And then we had *the preaching* of Jesus in Collection Two. This is the sermon on the mount. Matthew 5, 6 and 7. It starts with the beatitudes, that list of things: Blessed are the people who do this, and blessed are the people who are that. And then, we had those two short passages about being the ‘salt of the earth’ and the ‘light of the world’. And then a series of more practical, series of examples of how to live the life that Jesus was going to espouse to us.

Then we got to Collection 3 and in Collection 3 we saw *the power* of Jesus. There was story after story of Jesus’ power as he raised the Jarius’ daughter from the dead; as he cleansed the leper; as he healed the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years; as he calmed the storm with just a few words; as he healed the Centurion servant from miles away; the paralytic who was dropped through the roof; he just said “stand up, pick up your mat and go home”. Just the power of Jesus in all these stories to do all these things that were really unthinkable for anyone else to do.

Collection Three kind of blends into Collection 4 and we get *the parables* of Jesus and Jesus is just telling story after story after story. The parable of the sower; the parable of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price; the parable of the lost sheep; the parable of the vineyard; the parable of the unmerciful servant; the parable of the mustard seed. Just over and over again, Jesus just telling story after story after story.

Then, in a couple weeks from now, we’re actually going to get to Collection Six which is *the Passion* of Jesus. This is the last week of his life and includes things like The Last Supper, which our Communion was modeled after; and his arrest; and his trial; and his death on the cross; and his resurrection from the grave three days later. So that’s Collection Six.

Right now, we’re kind of in the middle of Collection Five. Collection Five is all about what I call “*The Predicament*”. Collection Five started out last week as Jesus came in and cleared out the Temple. It’s a series of stories from Chapter 21 to 25 where Jesus is continually interacting with the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law and the Religious leaders of Israel and he’s trying to, at least to the best of his ability on his part, trying to address a predicament that he sees they are in. So, this week and next week, we are going to be in Collection Five, looking at the predicament that, I think, the leaders were in, but I think we also find ourselves in this predicament, an awful lot as well. So, there’s some really relevant stuff in there for us.

Before we get to that, let’s set the stage. In the movie The A Team, which came out a few years ago, in the opening scene, I’ll boil it down real simple for you, there’s good guys and there’s bad guys and the bad guys are chasing the good guys and that’s basically what’s happening in the opening scene. So, the good guys have got themselves a beat up old ambulance helicopter and that’s what they’re flying trying to escape from Mexico where the bad guys are. The bad guys, of course, have a big gun ship with guns and missiles and all sorts of things and this is what they are pursuing them with. And so, they go along and there’s a big chase through canyons and under bridges and at one point, they actually go totally upside down

and stall out their engines because their pilot isn't exactly, totally sane and so they keep being pursued by the bad guy and eventually, at one point, the leader of the good guys gets on the radio and calls back to the man chasing him and shooting at him in the other helicopter and he says "You have engaged American military personnel" and the bad guy says "No, no, no, you guys started this, you engaged us." And the good guy gets on and says "No, you've engaged American military personnel, over U.S. airspace." You see, cause what had happened, is while the bad guy was so focused on catching the good guys he hadn't noticed they had flown over the border and they were now into the U.S. And so, the big climax of the scene is a fighter jet shows up and shoots some missiles and game over for the bad guys.

Now the bad guy got so wrapped up in what he was doing, he completely and totally lost sight of where he was. And that's exactly the same thing the religious leaders had done in this section of Matthew. They got so wrapped up in making up rules and following rituals, so preoccupied letting everyone know just how godly they thought they were. They were so obsessed at pointing out every little fault that they could find in other people; every little short coming in the lives of others, they were so wrapped up in all of these things, they completely lost sight of where they actually stood with God. Which is what sparks this series of discussions between Jesus and the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law.

As you read through these stories, please try not to view them as angry confrontations as least not for Jesus' part. I think on the Religious Leader's part, once they get into the mindset of trying to find a way to kill him, there's some angry confrontation there. But on Jesus' part, that's not what was happening. On Jesus' side of these discussions, it was more loving attempts at recalibration. And our text today is one of those recalibration attempts by Jesus. And parts of it, at first glance, might seem a little bit harsh but the goal of this story and even the goal of the story last week of the cleansing of the Temple, the goal is to help people get an accurate view of where they stand with God, for the purpose of, allowing them to make the needed adjustments so they can get where they really want to be. So, let's read our story for this morning. It comes out the Matthew, Chapter 22:

"Jesus told them other parables, he said "the Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a King, who prepared a great wedding feast for his son. When the banquet was ready, he sent out his servants to notify those who were invited, but they all refused to come. So he sent other servants to tell them 'The feast has been prepared. The bulls and the fattened calves have been killed. Everything is ready, come to the banquet.' But the guests he invited ignored them and went on their own way. One to his farm, another to his business, others seized his messengers and insulted them, and killed them. The King was furious, he sent out his army to destroy the murderers and burn their town and he said to his servants "The wedding feast is ready and the guests I have invited are not worthy of the honour."

I don't know how many of you are Royal watchers. I am not particularly one but I know some of you are, so to try and put that story into a little context for us, I want you to imagine, if you will, that on the news tonight, you hear a story that explains that Saskatoon was mistakenly

overlooked at the Royal tour last July. To make up for that error, Will and Kate are going to be coming to Saskatoon in the very near future and they're coming for a week-long celebration, right here in Saskatoon, all week long. On Monday, you go to get your mail and in the mailbox, there is an envelope. You open the card up and it is an invitation to this week-long festival with Will and Kate, celebrating their marriage last year. There's no specific time or date on it, it just says, they're coming, it will be soon, be ready, we'll let you know. A few weeks from now, you get a call, it says the Royals are arriving tomorrow. But you have plans, you have schedules, you have appointments to keep, and so you don't show up at the reception when Will and Kate arrive. In fact, no one shows up when the Royals arrive. The next day a Royal emissary knocks on your door and says "Why didn't you come? Will and Kate are here, everything is ready, we've got this extravagant affair set up, we've spared no expense setting up this week-long celebration. You are a special invited guest, why didn't you come? But still, you decline. Other people who get this same message, some go as far as assaulting the messengers who say "Come, come, come on to the festival come to the celebration." A few of the messengers are even killed by the people they are trying to bring to this great celebration. Now, even if you are not one of those people who stayed up all night to watch the Royal wedding last year, you can see the proposterousness of this parable. Who would turn down such an invitation? Who would respond so drastically to the messengers? And if you feel like this story doesn't make any sense, then you're probably on the right track.

You see, Jesus is trying to get the religious leaders to see exactly how ludicrous their position really is. They initially accept the invitation with jubilation, but when the time comes, they choose other things instead of coming to the feast. They are the younger brother in the story that Dave read for us earlier (Matthew 21:28-32). Now, just to clarify, the correct answer is "The son who said yes and actually went" that's the one who most pleased his father. But that's not an option in the story we're given, and so we deal with what we have. And so, the religious leaders, they are the second son, in the story the one who said "I will go" but in the end doesn't. The one who agrees to follow his father and do the work he is given, but in the end, they have decided to do things that are more pressing, more of a priority, or just simply more preferable. And likewise, the religious leaders who have agreed to follow God and do His work, in the end have chosen to do other things instead. Jesus is trying to get them to see just how ridiculous that is. Just to see what it is that they are missing out on. To see what that decision does to where they are standing with God and it is not leaving them in a good place.

Matthew adds a little extra punch to this story by including a line that the other Gospel writers do not. It's Verse 7 and he says: "The King was furious. Sent out his army to destroy the murderers and burn their town."

Now, to understand the impact of that verse, you have to understand that Matthew is writing maybe as little as a decade after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. The siege and ransacking of the city by the Roman army. So imagine how this verse must have sounded to Matthew's first and earliest readers as they read what Jesus had said.

Now, we're going to save most of the discussion that comes out of this for next week, but suffice to say, those of us who claim to be followers of Christ, should take heed to his warning. There is nothing we could ever do to beg, buy, borrow, or steal or earn, an invitation to be part of God's Kingdom. Paul says, "The wages of sin are death, but the *free gift of God* is eternal life through Jesus our Lord." But once we have made that choice to follow God, God expects us to show up. To follow through. To do His work. Our "Yes we will go" should be followed by "actually going and doing."

The term Christian is meant to be a verb not a noun. It's not simply a title we wear, it is a description of our actions. Now, there's lots more we could say about that, but we'll save it for next week.

Moving on. Our story continues. "Now go to the street corners and invite everyone you see. So the servants brought in everyone they could find the good and the bad alike and the banquet hall was filled with guests. For many are called but few are chosen."

We're introduced to our second group of characters in this section of text. Those who missed or declined the initial invitation. People who for whatever reason, have ended up in the wrong place. I remember one time when we had just first moved to Vancouver and Michelle was temping and she was going to a different place every day and that was a challenge for us because we were new to the City and didn't know how to get around very well. And so, one day I took her to a place, the map is kind of small but I think you'll get the point, I took her to a place that was roughly about there. After I dropped her off, I drove down the street and then I took a turn. The only problem was, when I took this turn, I thought I was taking this turn. So instead of following this road and heading in this direction, I actually ended up going down this road and going in that direction. It wasn't till I finally came to a street that I recognized that I realized exactly how far off track I had come. I wasn't anywhere near where I thought I was. In fact, where I thought I was isn't even on this map, it's somewhere over here. But, that's what happens and sometimes that happens in life as well, doesn't it? Whether by bad choices or bad luck. Whether by our actions or by accident. Whether by deeds or by default. Whether by carelessness or by circumstance. We end up somewhere other than where we intended to be. We find ourselves farther away from God than we ever expected we would go. We realize that somewhere along the way we must have declined the invitation and now we are out on the proverbial street.

Whatever the reason we find ourselves casted as the older brother in the earlier parable. The father called him and the son said "No, I'm not going to go." And there's a multitude of ways to get to this point in life. There are an infinite number of reasons for the choices we make but the message of both of these parables is very clear. The son who once said 'no' can have a change of heart. The person who finds themselves far from God can still be invited back to the Kingdom. Jesus ends the parable by saying "Many are called." The word 'many' in this passage, the way it's written, it could actually be translated 'everyone'. It's the same word and usage that we find in Matthew 20 when Jesus said "For even the Son of Man came not to be

served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for *many*.” In other words, God’s invitation is extended to everyone. It doesn’t matter how often you’ve said “No” to God. It doesn’t matter how emphatically you’ve said “No” to God. It doesn’t matter how often you wandered away from God or even how far away you’ve wandered. Wherever you find yourself today, God’s invitation is extended to you. “Come to the feast”; “Enter the Kingdom”; “Work in the vineyard”; the invitation is yours, the question is, will you say yes.

A movie came out recently. Not my typical kind of movie, but it was called “Twenty-seven Dresses”. In this movie Katherine Heigl is the living embodiment of the saying “Always the Bridesmaid, Never the Bride”. And so she has this closet packed full of bridesmaid dresses. Some of which are not so bad and others of which are just downright atrocious. And so, she has this closet full of all of these bridesmaid dresses. Some of you, especially the younger people among us, might still have several of these types of things in our closets. Dresses or ties or suits that they’ve inherited from being in one bridal party or another. I actually have a Zoot Suit in my closet somewhere, that I have left over from one wedding, complete with the pocket watch and the long chains and the spats and the hats. The whole works, I have sitting in my closet left over from a wedding that I was a part of. At that wedding, the bride and groom actually bought and paid for all of the suits and dresses themselves and then let the wedding party keep them afterwards, which often does happen in these situations. Now, keep that tradition in mind as we read the final part of this story together.

“But when the King came to meet the guests, he noticed a man who wasn’t wearing proper clothes for the wedding. ‘Friend’ he asked, ‘How is it that you are here without any wedding clothes?’ But the man had no reply. Then the King said to his aides, bind his hands and feet, throw him into the outer darkness where there’s weeping and gnashing of teeth, for many are called but few are chosen.’

I’ll admit to you that the many times I read through that passage I was perplexed by reading it. It didn’t seem to fit. It seemed to go against everything else we see happening in the parable. Why would the King, who so graciously invited everyone to come to the feast so that he could fill up his dining hall, why would he then go and toss a guy out for not being dressed up. Remember these people are being herded in off the street at the last moment. It seems a little bit unfair and it seems a little bit odd and perplexing to me. As I studied deeper during these last weeks, I discovered that it was not entirely uncommon for a wealthy person and especially a king, to actually provide wedding garments for his guests. If that’s the case in this story, the King’s reaction is not only understandable, it’s warranted. If the King has provided wedding garments for all of his guests, then there’s no reason why someone should show up in holey jeans and a worn out tee shirt. Now the message that Jesus wants us to get out of this passage has nothing to do with dressing up for church. Jesus’ message here is that God has provided everything we need to enter the King’s presence. First, He has given us the invitation and beyond that, the proper attire. Peter explains it this way:

“By His divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a Godly life. We have

received all of this by coming to know Him, the One who called us to Himself by means of His marvellous glory and excellence. Because of His glory and excellence, He has given us great and precious promises. These promises that enable you to share His divine nature and escape the world's corruption caused by human desires. In view of all this, make every effort to respond to God's promises. Supplement your faith with generous provision of moral excellence and moral excellence with knowledge with self control and self control with patient endurance and patient endurance with godliness and godliness with brotherly affection and brotherly affection with love for everyone. The more you grow like this, the more productive and useful you will be in your knowledge of our Lord, Jesus Christ. But to all who fail to develop in this way are short sighted and blind forgetting that they have been cleansed from their old sins. So, dear brothers and sisters, work hard to prove that you are really among those that God has called and chosen. Do these things and you will never fall away. Then God will give you a grand entrance into the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.”

You see, God not only invites us into the Kingdom, He prepares us for it. He not only changes our location, He changes our vocation. He not only gives us new life, He teaches us a new lifestyle. When we accept that invitation but ignore the application, God is neither fooled nor pleased. The Rabbi's used to tell a story, a parable about a King who entrusted to his servant some royal robes. Those who were wise, took the robes and carefully stored them and kept them away in all their pristine loveliness. Those who were foolish, put on the robes, wore them to work and got them all dirty and soiled and stained and worn out. The day came when the King asked for the robes back. The wise handed them back fresh and clean and the King laid the robes in the treasury and bade them to go in peace. The foolish handed back their stained and soiled and worn out robes. The King commanded that the robes be sent to the laundry to be cleaned and that the foolish servants be cast into prison.”

The text that we read says that the King called the man in the improper clothes, friend. However, it's the same word that Jesus used to greet Judas when he came to have him arrested in the Garden. Which might give us a little insight into how God feels when we choose to accept His grace but deliberately refuse to alter our lifestyle.

Paul describes it this way:

“So put to death the sinful earthly things lurking within you.”

That's a perfect description, isn't it? The 'sinful earthly things that are lurking inside of you.’”

“Have nothing to do with sexual immorality; impurity; lust; and evil desires. Don't be greedy, for a greedy person is an idolater worshipping things of this world. Because of these sins, God's anger is coming. You used to do these things when your life was still part of this world. But now is the time to get rid of anger, rage, malicious behaviour, slander, dirty language. Do not lie to each other for you have stripped off the old sinful nature and all of it's wicked deeds. Put on your new nature and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like

Him. In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, civilized, slave or free, Christ is all that matters and he lives in all of us. Since God chose you to be a holy people He loves, you must clothe yourself with tender-hearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience. Make allowance for each other's faults. Forgive everyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourself with love which binds us all together in perfect harmony and let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For you are members of one body and you are called to live in peace. Always be thankful. Let the message about Christ and all its richness fill your lives. Teach and council each other with all the wisdom He gives. Sing songs, hymns, spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to him through God the Father."

You see, accepting God's invitation calls for more than just showing up. God calls His people to prepare themselves.

Three different groups of people, three different responses to the King's invitation. Which one best matches where you're at, today? Whichever character you can most relate to, remember this one truth: God's invitation is a joy and a blessing, not a job and a burden. Imagine the greatest thing you could ever possibly be invited to. This is better. God has invited you to something that is spectacular, that is wonderful, that is incomprehensible, and there are neither words nor pictures that do justice to what God has offered us. Indescribable, is the best description of what we are talking about. Wonderful, great, awesome, pale in comparison to God's reality. Fantastic, terrific, glorious, fall short of true life in the Kingdom. The feast is ready, your invitation has arrived, what will your answer be? And once you have made your choice and you have become part of the Kingdom and you've started to adapt your life to Kingdom living, please don't forget: The King has also set a place at the table for your friends, your neighbours, your co-workers and family members. In light of the unbelievable life you have found in the Kingdom, God asks "Will you be the one to go, invite them in?"