

The king was furious; he sent his armies and destroyed the murderers. The king rightfully brought judgment upon the offenders. Not only did they reject his invitation, but they also murdered his messengers. But, before we get too comfortable judging the inconsiderate party guests, we need to admit that they sound exactly like us. We don't wake up thinking, "I will reject God today." Rather, we say, "I have a lot going on. This is a busy season. I will get to God later." We all know that later rarely comes. Something always gets in the way.

Then, the king does something unexpected: he opens the doors wider. "If the invited guests will not come," he tells his servants, "Then go out into the streets and bring in everyone you can find." The good and the bad. The people who know how to behave at a banquet and the ones who might get a bit rambunctious. This is a parable about grace: those who were invited, and who came, were utterly undeserving of the invitation, much less the wedding feast itself. For a moment, it sounds like uncomplicated good news. Until it is not. Once the room is full and the party is in full swing, the king notices a man without the proper wedding clothes. Some commentators say it was customary for a king to offer his guests a garment to wear at such an occasion. If so, this man refused to don the party clothes. The tone shifts and the same king who threw open the doors is now asking tough questions; and when the man has no answer, he is thrown out.

Once again, we are uneasy; but this dis-ease allows us to hear God's message. We can handle grace being rejected. We can make sense of that. People are busy and distracted. But grace, freely given, that asks something of us? That does not sit well. We want the benefits of God's grace without the participation piece. We want grace to be either earned or meaningless; either we work for it, or it does not really matter. Jesus refuses both.

This is a parable about grace which is completely free and completely disruptive. The invitation costs nothing, but the transformation costs everything. We are profoundly uncomfortable with that tension. We want a God who invites us to the party and then leaves us alone once we get there. We want grace that gets us in the door but does not ask us to change once we are inside. We want forgiveness without reorientation. We want inclusion without conversion. We want blessing without alteration. Yet, Jesus tells a story that refuses to let us settle for anything less than a transformative experience.

We are like the man who arrived at the party wearing the wrong clothes: conspicuous by his difference and the king noticed. Preacher Charles Spurgeon describes it like this: "He came because he was invited, but he came only in appearance. The banquet was intended to honor the King's Son, but this man meant nothing of the kind; he was willing to eat the good things set before him, but in his heart there was no love either for the King or his

well-beloved Son." The problem is not really about his clothes; the problem is his refusal to change. He shows up, but he does not receive what is given. He wants the invitation without the investment and the party without the participation.

The man who did as he pleased at the wedding feast, instead of honoring the king and conforming to his expectations, suffered a terrible fate. This parable demonstrates that those *indifferent* to the gospel, those who are *antagonistic* against the gospel, and those who remain *unchanged* by the gospel will share the same fate. He was "cast into the outer darkness where there was wailing and gnashing of teeth." They threw him out into the night, where he realized – too late – his mistake and his loss. His refusal to accept the king's grace meant that he did not enjoy the king's feast.

This is where the parable stops being about someone else and starts being about us, because we are good at showing up. We show up at church. We worship. We come to the table. We know the words and the rhythms. We know when to stand and sit, and when to nod so it looks like we are tracking. We show up, but in our heart, we do not always participate fully. Jesus asks us to consider: Have we truly received what we are given, or have we simply learned how to attend without being changed? It is easier to talk about the people who rejected the invitation altogether; at least they are honest and clear about their priorities. The more dangerous place to be is inside the room, at the party, surrounded by grace, and still untouched by it. The warning in this parable is not that we might miss the invitation, but that we might accept it and remain unchanged or indifferent.

This is where the golden calf in the Exodus reading starts to shine in the background. The golden calf is not about abandoning God, but about reshaping God into something more visible, manageable, and predictable. We want a God who dances to our tune: a God we can carry; a God we can see; a God we can control. The Israelites were not trying to get rid of God; they were trying to make God easier, which is no different from what we do when we treat grace as optional or harmless. We want a grace that fits into our lives without rearranging them; a grace that comforts without confronting; a grace that gets us into the party but does not ask us to change clothes.

"Cheap grace" is the term Dietrich Bonhoeffer used for a grace that doesn't fundamentally change us. Cheap grace is accepting God's pardon while staying exactly the same and living just like the world. Cheap grace treats the forgiveness of sins like a cheap commodity sold on an open market. Cheap grace is offering baptism, communion, and absolution with no expectation of confession, remorse, or consequence. Cheap grace excuses bad behavior and assumes everything is free and automatic without costing the believer anything. The

opposite of cheap grace is costly grace. It is costly because it calls a person to surrender their entire life, take up their cross, and follow Christ; yet it is grace because it offers true, living relationship with Jesus.

Grace is a reality that reshapes how we think, how we act, and how we see the world. Grace is not just that we are invited to the party; grace is that we are being made into someone who belongs there. That takes time, surrender, and letting go of the version of us that was perfectly comfortable staying out in the field, working in the office, or standing in the corner of the party refusing to put on new clothes. This parable stings because it refuses to let us hide or to accept “cheap grace.” The parable stings because it refuses to let us reduce grace to simply showing up.

God’s invitation is real. The feast is ready. The doors are opened wide, and the grace that brings us in is the same grace that changes us once we are there. This is a message we need to hear because we live in a world which is good at showing up, yet resistant to change. We attend, consume, observe, and comment; then we move on to the next thing. Jesus will not settle for that kind of lazy participation. Jesus came for those who don’t deserve grace and didn’t earn grace. He came for us. Jesus expects us to receive his grace fully, be changed by it, and then look and act like people belong in his kingdom. This is about more than a party; it’s about a God who refuses to leave us as we are. God is not disappointed in us; God is not done with us yet.

So, the question is not whether you are invited: you are. The question is not whether there is a place for you at the table: there is. The question is if you are willing to receive the grace that welcomes you but refuses to let you stay the same. Because grace that does not change you is not grace, it is permission; and Jesus did not come to give us permission to stay exactly as we are. Jesus came to invite us to something better, something truer, something that looks like a feast where nobody belongs and everybody is welcome and, somehow, by grace, we are made ready to stay.

Prayer: Grace-giving God, I need You. Multiply Your grace to me today. Help me in my weakness, give me strength when I am tired, and guide my steps. Thank you for your love which I cannot earn, your mercy which meets me where I am, and your grace which transforms my life. I pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Sources:

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (Macmillan, 2008), 35.
- Carina Stathis, “The heartbreaking moment nobody turns up to little girl’s 5th birthday party — leaving her mum distraught: ‘She’s been so excited to celebrate,’” *Daily Mail*, June 22, 2023. <https://www.dailymail.com/lifestyle/family-parenting/article-12221237/Texas-mum-heartbroken-no-one-shows-daughters-birthday-party.html>. Retrieved April 25, 2026.

The Party You Can’t Control

Sunday, October 11, 2026

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Matthew 22:1-14

Exodus 32:1-14

Lex Fitzgerald organized a birthday party at a restaurant for her daughter Willa, but 20 minutes into the party not one guest appeared. A quick thinker, Lex reached out to a local Facebook group asking if anyone was available to come to the party. Thankfully, several kind families nearby hastily arrived with wrapped presents in hand. The heartwarming moment humbled Lex, grateful the community pulled through to help in a time of need. “We went from not a single person at her birthday table to not a single table open,” Fitzgerald said. “The entire restaurant was packed with families who refused to let my daughter celebrate alone.” One person commented: “Who says yes like that and just doesn’t show? Especially to a kid’s party. Unbelievable.”

Jesus tells a similar story about a party where the guests fail to appear, and the host opens wide the doors to everyone. The party in today’s text is carefully planned. The invitations went out in plenty of time. The king is ready to receive his guests. The caterers have food and drink prepared. The musicians are tuned. The feast is ready...but nobody shows. A wedding was the most significant social event of a person’s life. The wedding of a prince would be a spectacular event, and an invitation would normally be prized.

The guests fail to show; in fact, “They were not willing to come.” They simply refuse to attend. One guest goes back to his farm, and another to his business. So, the king sends out messengers to tell the guests that all is ready. A few decide it would be easier to kill the messengers than deal with the invitation. This sounds extreme, but it is not that far off from how we respond when God interrupts our plans. We may not kill the messenger, but we ignore the message, delay our response, excuse our inaction, and move on to something else. Just as there was no logical reason for the guests not to attend the wedding feast, there is no *logical* reason God’s good gifts are refused by us.

This parable hits too close for comfort. The problem is not that the king failed to invite anyone. The problem is that the invitation was *inconvenient*. Grace is rarely rejected because it is unclear; grace is rejected because it gets in the way of our well-laid plans. The king throws a wedding banquet, and everything is ready. “All things are ready” is the message of the gospel. You don’t come to God’s feast and prepare your own meal. God has made it *ready* for you; you come to receive. “But they made light of it and went their ways.” The reaction of those invited made no sense, but it does give an accurate description of the reaction of many to the gospel. They dismiss it without another thought.