

## THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

### Lesson 72, Chapter 22

Today we open Matthew chapter 22. It begins with quite a long Parable. Unlike some of the other metaphorical and symbolic illustrations that Jesus has been using to instruct and to reply, this is a true Parable in the Hebrew literary sense and thus we have to recognize it as such. This means that we have to set aside our contemporary Western mindsets, and put on a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish mindset to get the most out of it.

I'll remind you that a true Parable is a fictional story. It has only one moral to it. It always employs people, things, and circumstances that are familiar to Yeshua's Jewish listeners. It is not an allegory, the details are relatively unimportant and often hyperbole is used to heighten the tension in order to draw in the listener. In fact, to pay too much attention to the details will lead us away from the single important point that the Parable is attempting to make. Perhaps one of the more complex challenges of every Parable of Christ is that it is told 100% within the Jewish cultural mindset and experience of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. This is one of the several reasons that we spend as much time as we do with the historical background of the Bible characters and setting since it is not general knowledge that Bible students and God worshippers in general possess or (sadly) are taught.

So if a Parable has but one single point (that is, like the one we're about to study the point is stated at the end of it), then why are some so long winded and elaborate? It is because they were meant to be heard, remembered, and then passed along to others by the spoken word. Therefore the detail was added in order to embellish, make it interesting, and more easily memorable. Let me give you a very simple example.

A very wealthy older man lives in a 100 room mansion on a 1000 acres of beautiful and well maintained grounds. His curious granddaughter comes to him one day and asks if he would tell her how it happened that he became so wealthy (since she knew that he came to America as a poor immigrant), and she also asks how this beautiful house came to be. He replies: I was poor. Then I got rich. I bought land. Then I built this house. End of story. Not very satisfying and not very memorable. And while what he said was true and factual, a little more information and color would have made for a beautiful story this young girl might have cherished and then handed down to her own children. So a Parable is constructed in a way that adds details for the sake of color and depth and to make it feel more relevant to us and to our daily lives. It takes us to the same truth as if it was told coldly and abruptly, but instead it makes the story into something enjoyable, informative, unforgettable, and more likely to be communicated to others.

When I said that the details of a Parable are not important, I meant it in the sense that they can be a distraction if we're not careful. For a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish listener the details woven into the Parable were of familiar concepts and common knowledge, and so the scene Jesus was setting and its several cultural nuances were easily grasped. In fact, as more and more ancient Jewish literature is discovered and translated, and then carefully studied, it seems that nearly all of the illustrations and Parables Yeshua spoke had already existed and were in use in some form. In the times immediately following Christ, we find some these sayings and Parables written down by the Rabbis in the Mishna and Talmud. Yet for us of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we can easily misconstrue the meaning of Yeshua's Parables and illustrations because we are so far removed from the biblical era and culture. So I will explain some of the details so that we can appreciate how those ancient listeners would have understood it, and therefore how we must understand it. The meaning of Christ's Parables does not evolve over time; they remain the same. It's only how to apply the moral of the story in this modern, fast moving technological world we live in today.

Open your Bibles to Matthew 22.

### **READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 22 all**

This is one of those situations that would it have served us better if the chapter change and verse markings that were added to our Bibles 1000 years ago weren't there at all, because what was going on in chapter 21 simply flows

uninterrupted into chapter 22. The chapter and verse format as it appears to us in our Bibles makes it seem as though what was happening in chapter 21 has come to an end and chapter 22 begins a new scene with Jesus speaking to other or different people. That's not the case. The final words of chapter 21 were:

**CJB Matthew 21:45-46 <sup>45</sup> As the head cohanim and the P'rushim listened to his stories, they saw that he was speaking about them. <sup>46</sup> But when they set about to arrest him, they were afraid of the crowds; because the crowds considered him a prophet.**

And then the scene continues with verse 1 of chapter 22 saying: "Yeshua again used Parables in speaking to them". So the scene of chapter 21 continues with more conversation. The "them" are the same fellows we were reading about in chapter 21. So Jesus was in Jerusalem, at the Temple, and still jousting with the same chief priests and Pharisees. In other words, Yeshua was doing battle with both sides of the Jewish religious system that were engaging Him; the Temple side and the Synagogue side. And these 2 sides that under normal circumstances were quite separate and had little use for one another found a common enemy in Yeshua of Nazareth. The all important context that we must hold onto throughout this Parable (and really all of chapter 22) is Jesus criticizing and warning these representatives of the Jewish religious leadership. Not necessarily ALL of the Jewish religious leadership, but only those who thought and behaved as those standing before Him. This was NOT a diatribe against the entire religious leadership nor the Jewish people in general, but it was part of a Christ-led reformation of their biblical Hebrew faith that had become so muddled and polluted with manmade Traditions that it obscured the holy and true Word of God. Yeshua's words were directed and nuanced towards the misguided leaders who held such great authority and sway over the common people in Jewish society. Whatever these men said, right or wrong, the people believed. After all, these leaders were considered to be (and held themselves up to be) the experts of all matters concerning the Jewish faith. A good and proper analogy of the Jewish religious leadership of that era would be the Rabbis, Pastors, Ministers, Bible teachers and commentators of our time.

Notice how the opening words of the Parable are spoken in classic Parable style: "The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to..." So the instruction Jesus is about to give is to explain something important about the Kingdom of Heaven; and to do so He is going to use a familiar illustration within Jewish society to lead His listeners to His point. So the fictional story is about a king that is throwing a

banquet. Kings, farmers, and women were often used as the fictional foils in Jewish Parables. Immediately there is a detail provided that would have been common knowledge to the 1st century Jews but can escape us. It is that this is not just any lavish banquet, it is a wedding banquet. That the groom of the wedding is the king's son simply adds to the gravity of the situation.

In that era there was little more socially important than a wedding. So what we need to pay most attention to is the actions than to the specific people involved. If one was invited to a wedding, it was far more of a social **obligation** to attend than it was to any other kind of event invitation with an accompanying banquet. To choose not to go was to bring shame to the one holding the event, and the one who skipped it would normally have been looked at as being a rather bad person. That a king is holding the event really makes the invitation more of a summons with terrible authority behind it.

Since this Parable is constructed within a Jewish cultural context, then we need to look for a connection to something else in a Jew's common reality that they would have easily recognized. I suspect that that something was Proverbs 9. We'll read the opening verses... but before we do I want to remind you that Yeshua was seen by His followers as well as His mere admirers as possessing the spirit of Solomon (the spirit of the Son of the David). Part of the Tradition about Solomon is one we're most familiar with: His God-given Wisdom. So Wisdom was seen by many who looked up to Jesus as one of His extraordinary attributes.

<sup>CJB</sup> **Proverbs 9:1** *Wisdom has built herself a house; she has carved her seven pillars. <sup>2</sup> She has prepared her food, spiced her wine, and she has set her table. <sup>3</sup> She has sent out her young girls [with invitations]; she calls from the heights of the city, <sup>4</sup> "Whoever is unsure of himself, turn in here!" To someone weak-willed she says, <sup>5</sup> "Come and eat my food! Drink the wine I have mixed! <sup>6</sup> Don't stay unsure of yourself, but live! Walk in the way of understanding!"*

Wisdom in the Oriental cultures of that era was thought of as a person, in a similar way to how many Christian denominations view the concept of the Trinity as consisting of 3 persons. Wisdom was seen as a divine entity; much more than a virtuous attribute. So in this Proverb we have a feast prepared and we have Wisdom as the one who is hosting the feast. All are invited, even the weak-willed. So the themes of Proverbs 9 and of this Parable of Jesus are quite similar in their

nature and likely Christ's listeners would have made the connection and felt that His Parable was a sort of midrash... a commentary... on Proverbs 9.

Before we proceed, it is good to notice that Mark's Gospel doesn't contain this particular Parable, but Luke's does have something similar. The majority of commentators ancient and modern see Luke 14:15 - 24 as the parallel to what we read in Matthew 22:1 - 14. So let's pause to read it in Luke. However I want to start reading a bit earlier in the chapter so that the context for the Parable in Luke is better displayed.

### **READ LUKE CHAPTER 14:1 - 24**

Notice that in Luke Jesus told this Parable on Shabbat, in the personal home of a leading Pharisee, and somewhere along the road to Jerusalem. Yeshua was dining with this leader and with others. Verse 7 explains that Yeshua watched how the guests were attempting to seat themselves according to their own perceived social status and rank. Therefore in verse 12 He says to His Pharisee host that he shouldn't invite only the aristocrats and his relatives to his home, but also the poor and the lame. A person at the table with Yeshua was so overcome by the truth and wisdom of Christ's words that he exclaimed how blessed people will be who eat bread (who eat at a feast) in the Kingdom of God. And then Yeshua responds with a Parable about a man giving a banquet, inviting the wealthy and the land owners, but they shun the invite because they have other things they feel are more important. So the man orders his servants to go out to the highways and byways and invite strangers, common folk, to eat the food that is otherwise going to go to waste. That's pretty much the end of the Parable.

My opinion is that this Parable in Luke while built upon a similar core truth and having a few other similarities to the Parable we are studying about in Matthew 22, also has many differences. There seems to be a common mindset...a kind of unconscious assumption, if you would... among Bible academics and teachers that when we read about things Christ said in the different Gospels that He only would have said them one time and in one way, and we'll never hear of them again. Therefore a contest among intellectuals erupts to determine which of the Gospels is telling us the most correct version of the story, or which is the actual original story from which the other Gospel writers drew their information, but they modified it. Again, this assumes that even though (as with our current Parable) the setting of the Parable between the 2 Gospel accounts is different, some of the most important elements of the story are different, and even the characters

are different, nonetheless the Parable in Luke 14 is the same event, at the same moment, telling the same Parable as in Matthew 22; and that this Parable was spoken only this one time. Folks, that is simply not how people genuinely operate and I don't for a second believe Christ operated that way. He would have told similar stories in different settings at different times using somewhat different words, each story tailored to the circumstance at hand, even though the moral or the point of the story was similar to other stories we read of Him telling. That is, He would have told the same story or Parable to make a point that would have varied just a bit to fit the application and audience at hand. So, no, we should not compare the Luke Parable to Matthew's and say they are the same, with one account of it being more accurate than the other.

It is always better that we look at the same story as told in the various Gospel accounts in order to gather the most information available in order to achieve the most well-rounded understanding of it that we can. That said, we will look no further at Luke 14 because it doesn't contain the same Parable we are reading about in Matthew 22, nor do we find this Parable in the Book of Mark.

In verse 3 of Matthew 22 notice the careful wording: the king sent servants to summon those he had invited. In other words, the invitations had been sent at an earlier time as a notification of an upcoming event. Now that the banquet has been prepared, the guests are summoned to come immediately. That is, the assumption in the Parable is that the invitations to the wedding were accepted and now it is time to act by coming to the feast. But what happens? The guests refused to come! Yet the unusually patient and benevolent king then sends a second group of servants to summon the guests in order to give them a second chance that they might have a change of heart. The servants are to tell the guests that all the preparations have been made. The bulls and cattle have been slaughtered and cooked. Everything is completely ready. But the guests were unmoved. Some said, no I can't come because I have to mow my lawn today. Others said, but I need a day to rest and put my feet up because we stayed out late last night. Still others said, I'd normally come but there's a great football game on today. Still others said... OK it doesn't say that. But that's essentially in modern terms what the ungrateful guests responded with. In the Parable one went off to his farm (to oversee it's operations no doubt), another to go look after his business (that is, to continue to make profit). But worst of all, the remainder of the guests grabbed hold of the king's servants, abused them and then murdered them!

I remind you, this is a fictional story... an exaggerated fiction... with a goal of leading us to a moral. I'm going to pause here to preach something that I think is from the Lord, and admittedly in doing so I'm going to use allegory. Yet this Parable of the king's son's wedding feast uses some powerful elements that I can't let pass by. Just as the wedding guests in the Parable were obligated to get up from their comfortable homes, and to leave behind what seemed at the time to be more important to them to come the wedding feast thus honoring the king, so are followers of the God of Israel and His Son Yeshua obligated to obey Him, to worship and glorify Him, and to gather together in holy assembly if at all possible.

What we are doing today and other days when we come together as a community of Believers is to worship and glorify the Lord in music, praise, prayer, and in learning His ways through learning His Word. It necessarily begins with our presence. It begins even earlier with our determination that despite the business of life, and the many opportunities and options that we have to do other pressing or especially enjoyable things, we will make gathering together in order to communally worship God as a top priority in our lives. Whether you are sitting in this sanctuary before me today or watching this at home, setting aside the time to worship and praise God... and especially in the company of fellow Believers... is not merely a nice thing to do, it is our duty as far as it is up to us. It is one of the several ways we are to acknowledge the importance of the Lord in our lives... not acknowledge it to others, but to Him by our actions.

Over and over we are warned by Jesus that merely claiming belief is not enough. Thousands... millions... at the moment Judgment Day arrives will jump up and confidently shout "Lord, Lord". But Yeshua says He will respond to so many startled people saying: "I never knew you". He didn't mean "you're a stranger to Me". He meant that despite what you claim, you never acted out what you say you believe. There's too little actual evidence of your stated devotion to Christ to count you as one of His. Listen: I've sat where you are seated. A long time ago, I went to Church services only if I had nothing else that needed to be done or that I preferred to do. I saw it as purely up to me, an option, that in no way affected my relationship with the Lord. He'll understand, I told myself. But then tragedies in my life proved I was wrong. Not because I think the Lord cursed me with tragedy, but because if I had worshipped Him and stayed closer to Him, I probably would have made different and better life choices that likely would have averted some, maybe most, of those tragedies.

I learned that we can't have it both ways. Trust in God can't be a slogan, or only

skin deep. We must make every effort to come to the King when we're summoned, to demonstrate to Him our loyalty and allegiance, and to sit at His feet to learn His Wisdom, as we gather with like-minded Believers whom we can befriend, encourage, love and help; and this comes only out of fellowshiping for the purpose of worshipping the Creator. Or God allows us in our foolishness to ignore the summons, have it our way, and eventually pay the inevitable price. May those with ears, hear.

Going in another direction: by this early point in the Parable the questions as to whom or what the King and his son, the wedding banquet and the invited guests represent come front and center to the Christian Church. The King, it is usually said, represents God. The son, of course, must be Christ. The wedding banquet is the same as the Wedding Feast of the Lamb that we read about in Revelation 19; so this Parable is actually a prophecy of the far future. The invited guests that won't come are assumed to be the Jewish people. And as the replacement guests that the king ordered his servants to go out and gather are the gentile Church. Folks, just as I used some elements of this story to allegorize and make an application, my application was not at all the moral or point of this Parable. And neither are any of these traditional identifications of the people in the story correct. That is because the nature of the Parable is NOT to have each of these characters as an allegorical or symbolic representation of someone or something. They are just details added to embellish the story in order to get and hold our attention and lead us to the point.

We, as gentile Christians and Messianic Believers, have had through the centuries a troubling tendency to set aside the Jewish cultural context of the Bible stories and their characters... and thus the points being made... and to replace them with ideas that in no way existed at that time among those people, and would not come into existence until centuries later and only among gentiles... not among Jews. Yes, we can legitimately borrow from this Parable and fashion some excellent and appropriate metaphors and illustrations to talk about the Father and the Son, the End Times, and use them to explain some important spiritual and practical things about our faith. Frankly, that's what most good preachers and speakers strive to do. But that doesn't mean that our allegories and applications are what Yeshua was actually teaching at the time or what the people that heard Him thought a particular teaching meant. The idea we are to obtain at this point of the Parable is of the shocking faux pax of social etiquette by these invited guests who had the gall to refuse to attend their king's son's wedding banquet. But even more shocking is that they didn't just leave it there;

some of them murdered the messengers! In other words, they exposed their absolute and resolute rejection of the king, of his authority, and his summons. So, what's the king to do?

This time, instead of sending his servants as messengers, the king sends armed soldiers. The gracious invite and summons that was rejected, was exchanged for merciless retribution. On behalf of the king, his soldiers killed the murderers and burned down their city. Let's pause again. In the gentile Christian world of allegorical interpretation, the majority of Bible scholars see what is occurring in the Parable as God's judgment upon the Jewish people. The burning down of the city is most often interpreted as the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. (some of this because so many scholars say that the Book of Matthew was written after the destruction of Jerusalem). This burning down of the city is meant to show the king's fury and the collateral damage that comes with it. Although because this story is aimed at the Pharisees and the chief priests, it's hard not to think that Jesus didn't intend these Jerusalem-based religious leaders to assume that He meant the place of their government (Jerusalem) would be laid waste.

After the king's retribution has run its course, he decides that since the ones he invited didn't come, he would extend the offer to other people. In the Jewish understanding the invited ones are the wealthy and the aristocrats. I mentioned in earlier lessons that the Jews believed that wealth and high societal position was a blessing from God. Therefore, the wealthy and the aristocrats had to be closer to God than the common folks could ever hope to be. So in this Parable, from the Jewish perspective, the king rejected the aristocrats and wealthy who were closer to God, and instead went seeking the poor, the common, and the under privileged classes of people (who were not as close to God) to favor with his fine banquet. Something that was near unimaginable. Again: this added more shock value to the story.

We're told in the CJB that the servants went out into the **streets** to find more people. The Greek word is *hodos* and it more means road. Other English Bible versions say "highway". That's a bit better translation because the word street seems to indicate something small and local. But that can't be the case because the city with its streets has just been destroyed by the king! No; it means the king's servants are looking for people who live outside the city; people coming on a highway from other places. Let's pause again. The rather standard Christian interpretation over the centuries is that the king is looking to replace Jewish invitees with gentiles. In other words, the Jews rejected the offer from the king, so

gentiles would be sought out and they would happily accept the offer. The Church (gentile of course) replaces the Jews. But even the conservative Bible scholars such as Davies and Allison, Ben Witherington, and Daniel J. Harrington all scoff at such a notion because no such implication is warranted. There is no change in ethnicity implied here; this is a Jewish context start to finish just as with all of Christ's teachings and Parables. So the change of guests is not a switching-out of ethnicities; it is a switching-out of those belonging to a certain level of social status. The least social status replaces the greatest social status. The poor who had been further from God, replaces the rich who had been nearer to God (at least as it was seen in Jewish eyes). Ah, but there's more. There would be no discriminating between the good and the bad among the new batch of people invited. No judging (at least for the moment) between the evil and the righteous. All people that came within the sight of the servants were to be invited to the wedding banquet at the call of the king.

Yet it seems that all is still not well. Although the net is widely cast to gather in guests of all kinds to come, there are entrance requirements. The replacement guests arrive and the king comes in to look them over and welcome them to his son's wedding banquet. But lo and behold there's a problem. There was one man that wasn't properly dressed for the occasion. In other words, he didn't come prepared as he no doubt knew that he should. So the king confronts the unprepared guest and demands to know just how he got into the banquet without being properly dressed. The man was speechless because he knew he was wrong and apparently was hoping he wouldn't be noticed or that perhaps the wedding garment requirement had been abolished. In that era it wasn't uncommon that a host would provide proper garments for his guests to a wedding banquet because there was a cost for such fine clothes. Therefore no one had an excuse for not honoring the host by being properly attired for such an important occasion as a wedding feast. This ungrateful, impertinent guest is summarily thrown out of the king's palace; tied up and bound, he is put outside into the dark where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth. The Church interprets this as speaking of the grave, or perhaps Hell; maybe the Lake of Fire, or simply complete separation from God. However this interpretation is reading some far later Christian doctrine back into this story.

Almost certainly when the words of the king kicking the man into "outer darkness" are used, the idea being expressed is the Hebrew concept of **choshek** that Christ is thinking and describing and was well understood in the Jewish culture. **Choshek** means darkness, but not like the darkness of nighttime (which

is *layil* in Hebrew). **Choshek** means an evil darkness... something depressing if not terrifying... the total absence of Godly illumination. For this reason it is indeed a place or a condition of wailing and despair that reminds a Jew of their exile in Egypt and one of the plagues that consumed Egypt in darkness. But what it would **not** have mentally pictured to the Jewish listeners was a spiritual place of eternal pain and torment like Hell.

Then the Parable ends with the moral to the story so we don't have to piece it together or wonder: "for many are invited, but few will be chosen". Because this is such a long Parable, I'll repeat; this is Yeshua speaking directly to the Pharisees and the chief (or senior) priests at the Temple in Jerusalem. He's aiming this at them and they are well aware of it. And despite all the great opportunities for meaningful illustrations by Bible teachers, Rabbis and Pastors that is found in this meaty Parable, there is one and only one moral and point to it: "for many are invited, but few will chosen". Who are the many? At this point in the story we find out that the many could said to be "all"... everyone... rich or poor, righteous or unrighteous, highly or lowly placed in the **Jewish** social hierarchy. The aristocratic Jews didn't respond to the invitation and while many of the common Jews did, some were good and some were bad. An example of the bad was the man who wasn't wearing a wedding garment. He was thrown out and so he clearly represents the class of common folk who are invited, but some are not righteous, and so they won't be chosen. Let's not go outside Jewish ethnicity in the meaning of this Parable because that's all that is being contemplated at this time. It's only after Yeshua's death and resurrection that the gate will be opened wider and gentiles will be pursued and welcomed to join with believing Jewish brothers and sisters.

Let's address another matter of later Christian doctrine that also gets read back into this story, with Calvin being one of the more notable contributors. Some of you may already have guessed it: it is the issue of predestination or predetermination. That is, that God has already chosen from eternity past those from among the many who will be the few He accepts. And while I don't accept such a doctrine, those Christian leaders who do would be better to abandon pointing to this Parable as one of their proofs because any way one wants to look at it, the reason for God NOT choosing anyone in the story has solely to do with that person's own failures and not out of serendipity or some kind of unchangeable destiny. The chosen are those who respond appropriately to the king's invitation. In this case it is the failure of a man who indeed responded to the invitation, but then behaves inappropriately, knowing better than to be found

without his wedding garment at the wedding banquet of the most important person he'll ever encounter; the king.

With the ending of the Parable the chief priests and the Pharisees, stinging from Yeshua's hard hitting words, go off to plot a way to rid themselves of this Galilean Holy Man that is stirring up such a pot of trouble for them. So later they send some others to try to entrap Him with what they think is a question that no matter how He answers it, He will condemn Himself. That's what we'll study the next time we meet.