

Changing Clothes
Exegetical Reflections on Matthew 22:11-14
By Kathy Beagles

Everybody loves a wedding. Well, no, I know that is not strictly true. Someone here may actually feel uncomfortable at weddings for one reason or another. Perhaps you just don't like having to get dressed up on a Sunday afternoon. But a really good reception doesn't usually put many off, particularly if there is a great, sit-down meal and an interesting program. Sometimes that alone is worth getting dressed up for.

Somehow, clothing plays a big part in a wedding. Few other events in our everyday world have such specific clothing expectations. If we are going to one, we want to look our best. If we are in one, as part of the wedding party, we usually have to wear what the bride and groom want us to. Let's look at a wedding in the Bible that had very specific clothing requirements.

I'm reading from Matthew 22:11-14. *"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. [12] 'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless.*

[13] "Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

[14] "For many are invited, but few are chosen."

Have you ever been to a wedding with a bouncer [attendant] to throw you out if you weren't dressed well enough? Would you even *want* to go to a wedding like that? Yet some Christians feel the same uncertainty about whether or not they will be dressed well enough to go into the marriage feast in the heavenly kingdom when Christ returns. They expect that there will be attendants at the door to throw out anyone who tries to come with less than spotless garments.

And isn't that the truth? Isn't that what the Bible teaches?

Let's look at another passage in the Bible that includes inappropriate clothing, and being turned out. **I am reading Genesis 3:8 and 3:21-24.**

"When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. [7] Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

[8] Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. [9] But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?"

[10] He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

And verses 21-24:

"The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. [22] And the Lord God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever." [23] So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. [24] After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life."

The couple in the beautiful garden lost the kind of clothing they needed to stay there, and they were thrown out. Here we have the first Biblical discussion of clothing. The first humans

lost their original garment of light and innocence. They tried to make other garments of their own. But God did not consider them sufficient and made them different ones. His were symbolic ones of animal skin for the Lamb of God who would have to die in order for this pair and their descendants to have the right clothing to get back into their Garden home and the heavenly Kingdom.

Nothing humans could make to cover their nakedness could take the place of the garment of light God had originally dressed them in. Any clothing humanity could devise for themselves, was insufficient for getting back into the Kingdom. Listen to how **Isaiah** describes it: *“All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away (Isaiah 64:6, NIV).*

What connections are there between the two incidents—one from Matthew and one from Genesis? We have two stories of people, without the appropriate clothing, being cast out of the place they want to be. We also have God providing appropriate clothing for them, since He couldn't accept clothing they provided for themselves. We also have the beginning of all “clothing” problems, and the end of all “clothing” problems.

Let's return to our original story in **Matthew 22:11-14**. We have a King, obviously the main character of the story. He comes in, sees someone out of place, and speaks to the person. Then he instructs his servants to remove the person. The only other character we really “see” in the story is the miss-dressed guest. But he says and does nothing in this little narrative. He was speechless. He was shocked. After all, he had accepted the invitation, hadn't he? The King's servants had actually begged him to come. And now he was going to be thrown out? Have you ever wondered if that is what might happen to you **when God inspects professed Christians?**

But let's learn a little more about this king and this guest. **Matthew 22:11-14 is a story within a story.** We will have to pull some of the details from a connected incident in the verses before this. Read with me, please, verses two through seven of the same chapter—Matthew 22.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. [3] He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.

[4] “Then he sent some more servants and said, ‘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.’

[5] “But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. [6] The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. [7] The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

So, now we know a little more. This king is honoring his son with a wedding feast. He sends out his servants with the invitation. **It was typical in biblical times for there to be two “invitations,” one announcing that there was an upcoming event, and the second announcing exactly when everything was ready and it was time to come.** Notice in verse four that this king even sends a third invitation. It seems almost more of a plea. He lets the potential guests know that the food is already prepared, and will be wasted if no guests arrive. At this third invitation the ungrateful invited guests mistreat and kill the servants who have come and called them a third time. Can you imagine being so dead set against going to a specific wedding that you kill the postman who brings the invitation? The king is filled with righteous indignation at what has happened to his servants and brings justice upon the murdering invitees.

Those verses, in themselves are also a complete story. A problem and a resolution. Justice is done.

Now we come to still another little story. The conflict or problem is that there is still a banquet, all prepared, with lots of uneaten food. What to do?

We'll find the king's solution in verses eight through ten.

[8] "Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. [9] Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.' [10] So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests."

Notice that the king now invited anyone, bad and good. One translation states it, "both rogues and honest men."

In Luke 14:21-23 there is a similar story which sheds even more light on the type of guests that finally filled the banquet hall. Again we have a banquet scenario. Invited guests. Lots of excuses. A servant who goes out to find other guests. Let's read who is found.

[21] *"The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.'*

[22] *" 'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.'*

[23] *"Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full.' "* (NIV).

From this similar story told by Jesus we can clearly see that **the feast giver really wants to fill up the place with as many guests as he can find.** He also doesn't mind that they are off the streets. He even invites the ones from the back streets and the dirt roads. In the Matthew story, the new guests are categorized as the good and the bad. In the Luke story, the guests are the disabled and street people. Obviously the king is not picky about the kind of person who comes to the banquet. He can't expect much from them by way of fancy attire or expensive gifts. He just wants them to celebrate his son with him. **He is the one who is going to give them the presents.**

Finally the hall is filled. The feast can get underway. Another problem and resolution. **What a story of grace**—undeserved favor!

But wait. Are we sure? Back to **Matthew 22:11-14.** The king is coming in to greet his guests. And he notices that one guest is not dressed the way he wants him to be. The poor man, we might be tempted to say. Moments ago he was hanging out on a street corner, and now he gets accused of not being clean enough. **That's how many people think religion works.** Just a bunch of holier-than-thou do-gooders who bring people in off the street pretending to do them a favor, and then start coming down on them for everything they're doing wrong.

What *can* we say to justify the king's action toward this man? There's not a lot on the surface of the story here for us to work with, is there? The king finally gets some poor people to come to his feast, and then he asks his attendants to throw one of them out. We had better go a little deeper and see if we can understand this king. What is the deal with the special clothes?

We've already observed that **it wasn't the goodness or badness, the richness or poorness, the wholeness or lameness of the guest that the king objected to.** The king just didn't like this one man's clothes. But what did he expect him to do on such short notice?

Somewhere around Jesus' time there was a parable credited to a **Rabbi Jochanan ben Zakkai** about a king who gave an invitation to all his servants to attend a feast. Some of the servants, who knew that there would be lots of good food, got cleaned up and came and sat by the door waiting for the second invitation—the one that announced that everything was ready. Others of the servants figured that preparations would take awhile, so they kept working, and

when the second call did come, they were still sweaty and dirty and unable to sit down and eat with the others.

We can understand the reasoning in that story. Clean yourself up, put on your best clothes, you've been invited to a wedding. The people Jesus was speaking this parable to may have expected that to be the message of his story. But Jesus loved to take stories to which his listeners thought they new the punch line, and turn them upside down to show how different His kingdom was from what they expected. As He often did, **Jesus took conventional wisdom of the day and put a spin on it that shocked the audience.**

In the story Jesus told, unlike the Rabbi's story, none of the guests have the time or the means to prepare themselves. How could people being brought in off the streets at the last moment be expected to be prepared as if they had been waiting for this banquet for a long time?

No, there must have been a way, even coming in off the street, or from under the bridge, to be dressed appropriately for the wedding. Everyone else was dressed appropriately except the one man. And I'm pretty sure the others had not gone out and rented tuxedos.

Much tradition states that it was the custom in biblical times for the king to provide the wedding garment for the guests. Although historical proof of that is not substantial, it stands to reason that would be the case for these last-minute guests, and for a king who demanded appropriate attire. In one way or another, the king had to supply the special wedding garment. That, of course, **changes the story a little**. This is not just a king who is still angry because his first set of guests disrespected him by not accepting his invitation. This is a king who wants to share his son and all his good food so much that he will even provide the necessary garments. This is another example of grace. Not only is there the **gracious invitation**, there is also the **gracious supplying of wedding garments**, whatever is needed to truly take part in the feast.

A guest's not taking advantage of provisions like that was another insult to the king, perhaps even worse than not having been willing to come in the first place.

And so the guest who tries to get by with his own clothes is turned out into the darkness where he will regret and deeply mourn his foolish action of dishonoring the king by not accepting his gracious gift. Perhaps this guest was one of the wealthiest of the poor, street people. **Perhaps under the street lamp on the corner where he used to hang out, his clothes really were nicer than anyone else's.** But that wasn't enough. In the bright light of the banquet hall they undoubtedly stood out for the filthy rags they really were.

Of course, this story is also for us. **We are the guests** that were invited in off the streets of sin. We are the guests provided a garment by grace. We are the guests who, in gratitude for that garment, must put it on.

But (1) what is this garment? (2) where do we get it? and (3), what does it do for us besides making sure we do not get "bounced" out of the heavenly wedding?

(1) We are told in the book *Christ's Object Lessons* that the garment is **"the righteousness of Christ, His own unblemished character, that through faith is imparted to all who receive Him as their personal Saviour" (COL 310).** With this robe on we are appropriately dressed for the wedding. Ready to go into the banqueting hall. Most of us know and accept this. The garment is a gift of grace. We accept Jesus as our Saviour and believe that His righteousness is accepted in place of ours. As far as the king is concerned, we are dressed correctly for the wedding whenever He arrives to look over His guests. Not for us will be the regret and deep mourning for the foolishness of turning our back on the King's gracious gifts.

(2) We get the garment by simply asking for it. The unfortunate wedding guest in our story might not have thought he needed it, so didn't ask for it. We, today, are warned in

Revelation 3 that we are naked, just as Adam and Eve found themselves, and that we are to obtain from Jesus “*white clothes to wear, so [we] can cover [our] shameful nakedness*” (Rev. 3:18, NIV).

(3) And what does the garment do for us besides getting us into the heavenly wedding? Well, that would be enough, wouldn't it? But this garment does much more, ***it starts restoring us to the way we were intended to be***. The way Adam and Even were before they lost their garments of light.

But let's look at our story from one more angle. Is it possible that the ungrateful wedding guest put on the gift garment offered to him when he first came into the banquet hall, but for ***some reason or another took it off again***, deciding that his own clothes were good enough after he had gotten through the door? I realize that is not written into the story, but I know there are Christians who believe that Christ's robe of righteousness is what saves them and makes them blameless before God, but who also believe that their behavior from then on is what keeps them saved. In other words, ***Christ's character gets them justified, but their own gets them sanctified***.

I may be treading on shaky ground now. Any time you compare one thing to something else, at some point the comparison breaks down. It is wise not to press an analogy too far. The truth that is being illustrated by the analogy can become distorted. But I am going to try it anyway. What drives me is this very idea that people need the gift garment to be justified, to get into the banquet hall, but that they ***need to have white enough garments themselves*** to stay in the banquet hall and eventually sit down to the banquet. Another quotation in the same book, *Christ's Object Lessons* seems to indicate that when read alone. It says, “[b]y the wedding garment in the parable is represented the pure, spotless character which Christ's true followers will possess” (COL 310).

That statement almost sounds like it could justify the situation we just posed—a guest putting on the gift garment to come in, but then deciding that his own garments were good enough to actually sit down at the table and eat. Doesn't it? But keep in mind this fact—in the story the guest who was not wearing the gift garment right when the king came in to inspect his guests was thrown out by the king. He didn't belong there. He might as well have been naked as to have his own garment on, just like Adam and Eve. ***Naked, or dressed in their own creations, they were still not allowed to stay in the kingdom.***

Let's talk about clothes again for just a moment. I remember one year of school when all the girls had to wear navy blue, pleated skirts every day. It was the closest I ever came to having a school uniform. I grumbled about it with the rest of the girls, but down deep I was relieved that every morning, when I reached into the closet, I knew that, to be appropriately attired for school, I had to put on the garment the school required. Nothing of my own would work.

Going to the closet and feeling that you have nothing to wear is a cliched joke in our affluent society. But it is actually a great spiritual insight if we realize that we, ourselves, *don't* own anything to wear into God's kingdom but the one garment He has provided—the righteousness of Christ.

But back to the part of this analogy that I want to press a little farther. All of us who have accepted Jesus as a personal Saviour are ***just inside the banquet hall, in the foyer***, so to speak. We asked for Christ's spotless garment, put it on, and were allowed inside. But there is a little time before we actually go into the banquet hall itself and sit down and eat. And in real time, this is obviously taking more than a few days. ***What happens in this foyer that explains how the gift garment can be both the “unblemished character of Christ” and “the pure, spotless***

character which Christ's true followers"—us—possess?

It can't be that we have taken off the gift garment because finally our own garments are good enough. If that were the case, then the man in the parable, thrown into the darkness of separation from God was thrown out for nothing.

Our invitation to the king's banquet is forever. We are being invited permanently into His household. We have no need to return to the street corners and lamp posts. This wedding garment is not a rented tuxedo that has to be returned after the wedding. It is provided for us to put on, and keep on permanently. **Each day that we are waiting in the foyer we have a choice of digging out our old garment or of keeping on Christ's spotless character.** And day after day, as we choose to stay clothed with the gift garment of Christ instead of our own garment, **it becomes more and more a natural part of us, not only hiding us in Christ, but also transforming us, restoring us back to the innocence Adam and Eve had before they realized they were naked.** It is truly a supernatural garment, provided by grace. It is both Christ's righteous character, and **at the same time, becoming ours as we choose daily to keep it on.**

Our original little story ends with the words, "For many are invited, but few are chosen." Or, in other words, "Many are invited, some come, **but few choose every day to stay covered by the gift garment of grace and to allow themselves to be transformed into the image of the Son.**"

So, that is what's up about the special clothes. No wonder the under-dressed guest in the story wept and gnashed his teeth when he realized how foolish, proud, and short-sighted he had been in not admitting his nakedness and putting on, and keeping on, the supernatural grace garment.

And as for you and me, can you see any reason why *we* should be afraid of the banquet hall bouncer?

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