We’re continuing our course here on the Synoptic Gospels. We are in unit five on parables, and we previously spent a little time looking at definitions of parables and a little bit about how parables function as stories, analogies, or examples. We are going now to take a look at a particular parable, and this would be the parable of the Marriage Banquet in Matthew 22:1-14. We go again with my own translation here and occasionally I will make reference to some item related to the translation.

Matthew 22:1: “And Jesus responded speaking to them in parables again, saying, ‘The Kingdom of Heaven is like a human king who gave wedding festivities for his son. He sent slaves to call those who have been invited, call those who had been previously invited, but they were unwilling to come. Then he sent other slaves saying, “Tell those invited: Look, I have prepared my meal. My oxen and fatten cattle have been slaughtered and everything is ready. Come to the feast.”’ But some were unconcerned and went away, one to his field, another to his shop. The rest seized his slaves, abused them, and killed them. Now the king became angry and sent his army and destroyed those murders and burnt their city. Then he said to his slaves, ‘The feast is ready, but those who were invited were unworthy. Go then to the city gates and invite whomever you find to the feast.’ So those slaves went out on the roads and brought in all that they could find, bad as well as good, and the feast was filled with guests. Now when the king entered to observe the guests, he saw a man not dressed in festive clothing. He said to him, ‘Fellow, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ Now he was silent, [possibly dumbfounded or dumbstruck]. Then the king said to his attendants, ‘Bind his hands and feet; throw him outside in the darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth out there. For many are called [or many are invited], but few are chosen [or few are selected].’”
They say there are alternative ways of translating that 14th verse.

Well, that’s our parable. Let’s try to do a little analysis of it here. This parable is a narrative. So we can attack it with some of the narrative features. It’s got characters in it. It’s got the king, and it’s got the servants. It’s got those originally invited and those subsequently invited. Finally, there is the fellow without the wedding garment. The king does really all the talking here.

Then there are the events. The king prepares a wedding feast for his son’s marriage. The king sends servants to call the invited guests. The guests do not come. The king sends them a second request, and some of these have better things to do; and others mistreat or kill the servants. The king becomes angry sends his army to kill the guests and destroy the city. Then he sends servants out to get replacement guests. They do, though not all these guests are good—we will need to think about that in a little bit. The king visits the banquet hall, finds a guest improperly dressed, and he is thrown out.

The scenes are mostly unspecified, but presumably we are looking at a throne room of some sort where he sends out his servants. Then there is wherever the guests are, and they presumably are in the city. Then there is the banquet hall.

The plots: this actually has more than one plot, I think. One plot, pretty obvious here, is a gracious invitation is rejected, and you might wonder what some of the undercurrents are there. Well, the responses, I think, indicate unconcern and rebellion, and the rebellion is judged. Then there is a gracious invitation to others who actually come but [are] unconcerned, [and this] is judged there also.

If we think of Wilder’s devices for storytelling being brief, this is longish for a parable, but it is short for [a] story. Unified? Yes, but with a somewhat of unusual extension at the end—this shift to this other guest.

Limited number of actors, rule of two: There is the king, the servants, the guests, improperly clothed guest. So there are a fair number of actors, but only two of them actually speak.
Direct discourse? Yes. There is a serial development, except for the armies’ activities. So it runs up to where the king sends out his army, and then tells you what happens with the army that burns the city down; but then [Jesus] comes back to the time he [king] presumably sent them out, and has the king send out other servants to bring additional guests to fill the place up.

Rule of three: well there are three invitations; that’s not super obvious. Well, there might even be four invitations, but there are three that are obvious. He sends the first servants out, and they’re refused. He sends them out again to that same group, and they’re ignored or mistreated. Then he sends out a third invitation, which goes to this new group. We get three responses, we might say: the ones who think that they have better things to do; the ones that beat on the servants; and then this one that shows up in the improper garment, if you like.

Repetition? Certainly in the rule of three, with the repeated things, you see repetition of that sort.

Binary opposition? Black verses white: you might see it in the characters. The guests who don’t come off looking very good, though we don’t have anything here explicitly stated about the good guests; so it’s really just the bad guests that we are looking at. In stress of all the harsh treatment of the guy improperly clothed certainly attracts attention at the end. Often parables, as Wilder said, are storytelling actually. So stories, as Wilder said, have resolution by reversal, and we have this guy who is in the banquet hall and then thrown out. So certainly a reversal of some sort is going on there. Usually there are two levels. Well, this one is a two level story. And we’ll look at the tenor and vehicle here below, and that will give us a look at the two levels.

Well, this is a parable, and it’s not one of the sample parables as we’ll see when we start thinking about it. So it is an analogy of some sort. The tenor is already suggested by the opening verse here where Jesus says the Kingdom of Heaven is like a human king who gave a wedding banquet, etc.
This actual opening shows you something else that’s fairly common in Jesus’s parables, and that’s the question of whether—when he says the Kingdom of Heaven or something like this, and then usually he has a noun right after that—and the question is whether you are to identify the Kingdom of Heaven with that noun, the Kingdom of Heaven with the king, or whether you identify the Kingdom of Heaven with the whole story; and you have to look and see which of those occur. You see that both in rabbinic parables and in Jesus’ parables that this is like.

Parables, and Jesus’s parable that this is like, and sometimes [others], it’s the next item mentioned that it’s [i.e, Kingdom of Heaven] like; but often it’s the whole story. So that’s the tenor telling us something about the Kingdom of Heaven.

Vehicle: we are being told this by means of the story about a wedding feast; the principle analogy here, I think you can see, is in the vehicle. There’s the king and the major emphasis on those invited, if you like, though the analogy is [that] God is to humans as the king is to those invited. So you’re getting what is, in fact, a very common image in Jesus’ parables and very common in rabbinic parables: and that is God as king.

Often when you see a king in either Jesus’ parables or [in] rabbinic parables, in more than 9 cases out of 10 the king is God. The only parable of Jesus I can think of where that is not the case is: what king is he if he has 10,000 soldiers and is going to meet someone bringing 20,000. Clearly, God is not the king there, but you imagine you’re the king and thinking through how you’d handle something like that.

Points of resemblance: I want to structure them here as we would if we were working out [Ron] Sider’s detailed points of resemblance. In the story, the tenor you’ve got [is] the servants calling the invitees, and you ask yourself: “What does that correspond to?” Well, God’s servants—so disciples: Christians or something of that sort, and inviting the lost, inviting the people to come to God’s banquet, if you’d like. So that’s another one of the analogies, if you’d like, or points of resemblance. The response to the invitation, I think, is probably pretty straightforward. That is, they work the same
way both in the tenor and [in] the vehicle. In the story—in the tenor—some don’t care; they consider going out to their field, or to their shop, or something like that is more important, if you’d like. This suggests to us that some who hear a Gospel presentation won’t care; other things are more important to them.

The second response is some persecution, and not much, I think, of that sort has happened yet. When Jesus gives his parable, it’s possible that the disciples have been run out of a town or two, something of that sort, but the real persecution doesn’t become real strong until after Jesus has been crucified and risen, and the disciples then begin to go out; so the response to the invitation in the tenor, if you like, are some persecuted.

Then a third response is some do come. So just as some of the invitees come to the wedding feast, so some of the people that we call to come to Christ in fact come.

We see some more point of resemblance in the king’s response: he brings judgment on the rejecters, and that’s really only seen primarily in terms of the ones who respond with beating the servants, and brings judgment on them, and burns down their city, and kills those murderers as it says in the passage. But we don’t see exactly what he does with those who don’t care, unless we imagine they’re in the same city, but I think that’s basically one of these things where in order to keep a parable short, [he] doesn’t chase through all of the cases. Just with the parable of the pounds, the story doesn’t go after examples 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, or 10 either.

In addition, with the king’s response we see that he won’t put up with nonchalants, and that’s, I think, rather clear in regard to the guy without the wedding garment.

So that’s a quick look at the parables, an analogy. It’s helpful to look at the background in this sense: what would the original hearers have understood about this particular parable? We will catch more things now coming centuries after the events and seeing how some things will unfold, but what else would they catch in the background? Well, some of it is symbolism. Jesus’ parables, like those of the rabbis, frequently make use of common metaphors often taken from the Old Testament. In this parable it’s very
safe to conclude that the king represents God, and that is obviously an Old Testament picture where God is a great king—says Malachi—and that, as I said, shows up quite standardly in Jesus’ parables and in rabbinic parables as well.

So why does God represent the king. It is a common New Testament metaphor, and it fits the flow of the parable, particularly in view of the interpretive hints at the end. Outer darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth show up in several of Jesus’s parables and are clearly euphemisms for eternal condemnation. Two other symbols here appear to be the marriage and banquet. So question: how are those used, particularly how are they used figuratively in the Old Testament?

Well, marriage first of all: marriage is often figurative of God and his people. Some examples: Isaiah 54: 5-7, New American Standard Version, “For your husband is your maker,” says Isaiah to Israel, “whose name is the Lord of Hosts, and your redeemer is the Holy one of Israel who’s called God of all the earth. For the Lord has called you like a wife forsaken, and grieved in spirit, even like a wife of one’s youth when she is rejected, says your God. For a brief moment I forsook, you but in great compassion I will gather you,” is said of God as husband.

Israel as the wife—and here a rejected wife—was called back. Hosea chapters 1-3, of course, are very striking active parables of marriage representing a relationship between God and Israel. There the prophet is instructed in Hosea 1:2 when the Lord first spoke through Hosea. The Lord said to Hosea, “Go take a wife of harlotry, and have children of harlotry; for the land commits flagrant harlotry, forsaking the Lord.” So then the whole thing about Hosea marrying Gomer and then Gomer and Hosea having children, or at least Gomer has children, and then eventually she runs off with her other lovers, etc. Then she’s going to be brought back and spend a time in an uncertain status, not having relations with anybody else, or with Hosea, to represent how God is going to deal with Israel before the events of the end begin to come together.
Ezekiel chapter 16 certainly picks up this idea of God married to his people—a traditional interpretation. Song of Solomon goes in that direction as well.

So that’s marriage and that’s often figurative of God and his people in the Bible.

So that would have been known to the heirs listening to this; and interestingly, the parables largely about a banquet, but happens to mention it’s a marriage banquet which, of course, would be a more important one then many others. Then it also happens to mentions off hand that it is a marriage banquet of the king’s son, and nothing more is done with that in the parable but its left there, I think, as an interpretive hint.

Banquet as a figure is not so obvious in the Old Testament but is more frequent in the New Testament and in rabbinic literature. There are a few Old Testament possibilities, however. Isaiah 25:6-8: “The Lord of Hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain.” Where this mountain is, we don’t know. We don’t know where Isaiah is standing when he makes this proclamation. “A banquet of aged wine, choiced pieces with marrow, and refined, aged wine. On this mountain he will swallow up the covering which is over all peoples, even the veil which is stretched over all nations. He will swallow up death for all time, and the Lord God will wipe tears away from all faces; and he will remove the reproach of his people from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.”

Well, I’d say that’s pretty clearly eschatological of some sort because it’s picturing God taking away death from the human race, apparently. So some kind of a banquet at the end of the age is pictured there.

In the 23rd Psalm, the Shepherd Psalm, some people have tried to read the whole psalm as God being a shepherd and we as sheep; but it looks to me like there is a transition in the middle of the psalm from God as the Shepand and we as the sheep, to God as the host and we as the guest at his palace, the king host.

That is very appropriate for David, of course, because he had been a shepherd when he was young and had sheep, [a] family flock. Then David becomes king, and he
has household guests as is fairly common with kings. We actually know the names of a couple of them. The fellow who is Jonathan’s son, Mephibosheth, is brought in to be kind of a lifelong guest and eat at the table of the king. Then after David has fled from Absalom and is coming back, one of the guys from across the river, who had provided hospitality for him, is Barzillai. He is an old man; we don’t know how old that would make him, but he says, “Too old to appreciate the taste of food, and too old to appreciate music and dancing,” etc. So he says, “Take Kimham.” We are not told who that is, but almost certainly that is his son or grandson or something like that. So Kimham goes to become a lifelong guest in the house of the king. So when Psalm 23 says, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you’ve anointed my head with oil, my cup overflows,” we’re probably getting a banquet scene in that kind of situation in which David views himself as the lifelong guest in the home of a king, and God is the king and he is the guest.

Just one psalm earlier than that, Psalm 22, the picture there is of the one who is surrounded by his enemies, and that sort of thing. That psalm starts out: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and the cry of this desolated person. Then it suddenly turns to a psalm of praise in the last, ten verses. The psalmist says, “From you comes my praise in the great assembly; I will pay my vows before them that fear him. The afflicted will eat and be satisfied. All those who seek him will praise the Lord. Let your heart live forever.” It sounds like a vow banquet.

One of the procedures which we don’t deal with a whole lot, but it is mentioned a bit here and there in the Old Testament, is that for a certain types of offerings—the vow offering—a fair bit of the animal comes back to the offerer, and that a person prepares the thing and has a meal for his friends. Apparently, it’s typically in the temple precincts somewhere. Basically, it is a celebratory offering for God answering the person’s prayer for which the vow is a part. If you do this for me, Lord, I’ll do this, etc. So here, apparently, we have a picture of a vow feast, and yet it is going to be news of the deliverance of this person who has been forsaken by God, whose hands and feet were
pierced, and who was lain in the dust of death, and whose tongue is sticking to the roof of his mouth, and all his bones, etc. He’s been delivered, and it is going to become world news for generations. It is interesting at the end of that.

So here again is a banquet scene, and it sounds to me like it is eschatological also, so that at least two of these three we are looking at are end-times banquets. That, I think, is what the rabbis would call the “Messianic Banquet.” That term is now being used in evangelical circles as well. So, it is the marriage relationship of God to mankind, or to his people particularly. The banquet, particularly if it has eschatological connotations, is the Messianic Banquet, etc.

Another possible symbolic element is the garment. So I ask my students in this handout sheet they’ve got for homework: “How are garments used figuratively in the Old Testament?” Obviously, garments are used non-figuratively in lots of ways, but figuratively in a few ways. For instance, if you look at maybe four or five passages: 2 Chronicles 6:41, Psalm 132:16; Isaiah 61:10 and 11, you see garments used to represent salvation. For instance, in the last of these, Isaiah 61:10-11: “I will rejoice greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and has wrapped me with a robe of righteous as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a gardener causes the seeds to grow up, so the Lord will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all nations.” So it is a picture here of garments representing salvation, [and] righteousness—that sort of thing.

That brings us to the next idea under garments: righteousness. We just saw that one—how’s it go? “He’s wrapped me with a robe of righteous,” and that also occurs in Psalm 132:9 and Isaiah 59:15-19.

Here’s what Psalm 132:9 looks like: “Let your priests be clothed with righteousness; let your godly ones sing for joy.” Contrast that with Zechariah 3:1-10, where the high priest is dressed in filthy garments, and Satan is accusing him before God; and then God has his garments replaced with good garments, etc. So righteousness or
unrighteousness is typically represented by the cleanliness of the garments which, perhaps, could be represented by the color as well.

There are some other uses of figurative uses of garments. Psalm 132:18: garment representing shame. Isaiah 63:1-6 is a garment representing vengeance. Isaiah 52:1-2 is a garment representing strength.

Another question I ask them [students] in their handout sheet besides regarding these symbolic elements: “Do you see any predictive hints in this parable which are now clearer as we look back hundreds of years later?” Can I suggest that I saw two of them, I think? One, the remark that the King sent his army to destroy their city is now much clearer because we know that Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. You say, “The Romans are God’s army: aren’t they nasty people?” But that is a biblical theme as well. God sends Assyria in Isaiah 10, and God sends the Babylonians in Habakkuk. But God uses whom he will to carry out those kinds of punishments, if you like.

The other picture of the original guests turning down the invitation and being replaced by a second set is now clearer in view of the official rejection of Jesus by the Jewish authorities over the past two thousand years and the Gospel spreading to other nations all over the world. At the original time when this was heard, people might have thought more in terms of the Pharisees turning down Jesus and poor people accepting Jesus, which was certainly going on then. In the rather parallel parable in Luke of the Great Supper, which is a private citizen rather than a king and such. I think you have that worked out a little more explicitly [of] going into the city to find people to fill up the guest list. Then, not finding them, going outside the city and such, which would perhaps give better that there are two sets of replacement guests there.

What sort of lessons might we find here? It is interesting to try it this way: What were the lessons for Jesus’ original hearers? Then what sort of lessons might we find for early Christians? What sort of lessons might we find for us today who have seen many centuries of church history which the early Christians have not seen?

Well, let’s go back and think about the original audience. You’ve got, obviously, in the ones who go off into their field, into their shop, and the fellow [who] comes in with
the improper garment, the danger of treating God’s invitation lightly, [which] would have shown up very much there. In regards to the ones who beat on the servants and kill some of them, the original audience would surely have seen the whole picture of foolishness, on the one hand, and rebellion, on the other hand, in rejecting the king’s offer.

Stop and think for a minute. How often have you ever been invited to a wedding banquet of a king? Well, we don’t live in a monarchical society, so probably never. Well, how often have you gotten invited to a presidential banquet of some sort? The answer again is probably: zero. Or how often have you been invited to a governor’s shindig of some sort for your state? Or even some kind of mayor’s reception for your city? I think most of us would have to say never. So it’s kind of a once in a lifetime sort of thing. Here that’s being offered, and these people go out into their field, and go to their shop, etc. It’s [a] very foolish sort of thing. I think the original audience would have also seen it, given they make the connection between king and God: that this is warning of the wrath to come. That certainly already is faithful to the Old Testament background, so that would not be mysterious in this particular parable.

Now, imagine we’re early Christians looking at this, and some of these might be before AD 70 and after 70, that sort of thing. Well, there’s this fellow who gets in but gets thrown out. Now what’s that all about? Well, I’m not sure what message that would have given to the original audience, but to early Christians they’re already seeing that the official Judaism of Jerusalem had rejected the Messiah and such, and that there are now a lot of Gentiles coming into the church; and yet who’s this guy that doesn’t have the garment? Well, the danger of professing Christians treating the invitation lightly.

A question has often come up: Would God have provided the garment? Would the king have provided the garment for this guest, or was the guest expected to have his own garment? I’ve heard people give very dogmatic answers on that, but the parable doesn’t tell us. You say, “Well do kings always provide garments,” and the answer, I think, is: no; but they sometimes do.
So you’ve got two possible candidates; you’ve got a “yes,” and a “no.” If the king provides the garment, then it’s easy to see it from Christian theology as this is God’s righteousness, which he has provided for those who trust in Jesus; and without that, you aren’t allowed into the banquet. How about if it is not looking at the garment as something provided by the king but, rather, something you provide? Well, that’s something else; and that is that a person who really is a believer will respond in a certain way in his lifestyle to what the king, what God, has done for him; and he will try to clean up his life, and that sort of thing.

We see biblical warrant for that kind of picture. Think, for instance, of the sheep and goat judgment and what Jesus has to say to those: “In as much as you did these things to these others, you did unto me,” and that’s not talking about God’s grace to the believer, although that’s obviously a huge thing; it’s talking about our response. So I would say that Jesus has apparently intentionally left that ambiguous in order to read both of those ways.

So, the danger for early Christians, the danger of professing Christians, is treating the invitation lightly either by thinking they don’t need God’s grace, or thinking they have gotten God’s grace and they don’t need to do anything. So you might think on the one hand of antinomians and, on the other hand, of people who feel they don’t need grace. So both those dangers exist.

There’s a hint about [the] Gospel for the Gentiles in this passage as well, and it’s quite likely the original audience would not have seen that at all; but Christians looking back a century, or something of that sort, would surely have seen that there’s this other set of guests, and who they are and who they might be, etc. And then once you’re after AD 70, you see the city has been destroyed, and that [to] the original audience would mostly have been a warning. Of course, if they would listen to all of what Jesus had to say in the discourse, they would have seen there was a warning explicitly in Jesus’ teachings. It was confirmed by the destruction of Jerusalem after 70 AD.
Certainly from AD 30-33, whenever, had Jesus’ ministry here on earth extended to AD 70, the Jews might have felt very justified that they had gotten rid of this fake messiah. We’ve clearly got all this prestige as Judaism, and you guys are the scum that as Paul speaks himself and the apostles being the all scouring of the earth, and that sort of thing. But after 70 AD the whole Temple was destroyed, and Jerusalem is all going down the drain; and things look a little different, although Christians are by no means triumphing even at that point.

Well, then suppose we go on then and think about how would this come across to us today? What sort of things might we see? The front part of this whole thing shows us God’s great mercy inviting sinners. Here this king has already invited these people, and apparently the servants know who the invitees are, and presumably the invitees know it as well. Now the servants are coming around to tell the people the feast is ready, is come. That’s a little different than our society with e-mails, and invites, and the sort of thing. Where do you get the invitation from, and then you’re expected to show up with perhaps some slight uncertainty on when exactly it’s going to start due to getting everything ready and such. They send servants around; you can see that in the book of Esther, for instance: the servants coming to get Haman to go to the banquet, etc. Well, so God’s great mercy is inviting sinners, and then you see man’s great foolishness in rejecting his gracious invitation.

You see something else too besides God’s great mercy: God’s great wrath and judgment; that he comes down on those who mistreated his people and destroys their city and such, but you see also God’s wrath and judgment on this other guy that’s there but without the right garment.

That leads us to the last point which we ought to be able to see today, and that is professing Christians must not presume upon God. We must not in our preparation for the Messianic Banquet, so to speak, act as though going to our field or our shop is more important, or the kind of lifestyle we’re leading and getting ready, and that sort of thing.

Well, that’s our discussion of parables. There is lots and lots that could be said.
But that’s an attempt to take a look at some of that. There’s even more that could be said about that particular parable: a very powerful parable of God’s mercy, and yet God’s judgment, warning of the wrath to come, and the need for humans to make the right kind of response.