

Semicontinuous
Exod. 32:1–14
Ps. 106:1–6, 19–23
Complementary
Isa. 25:1–9
Ps. 23
Phil. 4:1–9
Matt. 22:1–14

Dinner's Ready! Get Dressed!

**Goal for
the Session**

Adults will consider their response to the invitation to God's banquet.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Matthew 22:1–14

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Susan Grove Eastman

The parable of the Wedding Banquet is the last of three parables spoken in the temple to the Jewish religious leaders. This, says Jesus, is what the kingdom of heaven is like: the expected guests are absent, and the most unlikely ones are present. Comparison of God's messianic rule with a great banquet, although not particularly a wedding feast, was familiar in Jewish literature (Psalm 107:1–9; Isaiah 25:6–8). It draws on the practice of ancient kings, who gave banquets for their subjects, and on the image of God as the king who feeds God's people.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Andrew Purves

The parable carries us into the subtle relationship between the grace of election (all were invited) and the obligations of obedience (to be clothed with Christ, to live in Christ). Grace is freely given, situating us in God's company by an act of God's loving election. As a consequence, we are obliged to live as God's people, according to God's will for our lives. To do so is to give honor to the king, to God. The failure to do so is to scorn God's love, God's choice of us. It is to assert our autonomy, to live in pride, which means that we are found clothed with ourselves rather than with Christ.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Richard E. Spalding

The crux of the matter—the fault of tenants (Matthew 21:33–46) and the error of the unrobed wedding guest—involves fruitfulness. Gospel living only begins with the invitation. It cannot remain a mere idea; its one essential thing is a transformed life. Though many have been called, the ones who are to be chosen are those who are living in a new way, who have put on life in Christ. Jesus suggests that fruitfulness can indeed be “put on” like a wedding robe—or a baptismal garment—that the outward effects of gospel choices will finally settle in the heart.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Marvin A. McMickle

Within the Christian community there are those members like the ones in the parable who refuse the invitation from God in one way or another. They want the safe, soft side of discipleship, but they shy away from the more difficult work of outreach and social justice. They want blessings from God, but they cannot be found when it is time to share in the work of ministry. God has the authority to bench those who refuse to answer God's invitation for service. If some are unwilling to accept God's invitation, then there are others God can invite into divine service.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Matthew 22:1–14

YOU WILL NEED

- ☐ Bibles
- ☐ pens or pencils
- ☐ board or newsprint
- ☐ markers
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1
- ☐ copies of Resource sheet 2
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1 for the next session

For Responding:

- ☐ option 1: plain paper; pens or pencils
- ☐ option 2: colored paper; crayons, markers
- ☐ option 3: copies of Resource Sheet 1

If you frequently have newcomers, consider using a few of the “regulars” to alternate receiving and welcoming them. These greeters should be prepared to summarize quickly the past several lessons and tell how your group works.

Focus on Your Teaching

Many people no longer in the church accuse it of being too judgmental. And here we are, looking at Jesus’ parables that condemn the religious leaders of his day! Despite the bad news for bad leaders, help your group see that there is much good news in these parables, especially for those who wish to follow Jesus and are often outsiders.

The activity to compare the three parables from Matthew 21 and 22 will help the group bring together what they have learned as well as provide a way for others to catch up.

Holy One, my response to the invitation to follow you is sincere. Lead me as I try to share your teachings with others. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Welcome participants by name as they arrive. Introduce newcomers to another person and make them feel welcome.

When you are ready to begin, ask the participants to raise their hands when the statement you read rings true for them:

I went to church for the first time in my life because . . .

- ✠ I was invited by a friend.
- ✠ I was forced to go.
- ✠ I was curious about religion.
- ✠ I was too young to do anything else.

Ask if anyone has a reason that was not given. Invite those persons to tell how or why they came to church for the first time.

Express to the participants that no matter why or how they came to church initially, you hope they felt welcomed. One of Jesus’ main complaints of his own religious institution was that it excluded people. The focus scripture for this session is Matthew 22:1–14, another parable judging religious leaders of Jesus’ day. Welcome the group to God’s banquet, the subject of today’s parable.

To prepare for the opening prayer, stand or sit in a circle so each person has someone on the right and someone on the left. Make sure they know the names of those persons. Tell them to turn to the person on either side, call the person by name, and say, “God loves you and there is nothing you can do about it.” After this has been done, pray this prayer:

Loving God, you touch each one of us through the lives and words of others, your church, and your Scripture. Thank you for the invitation to learn your ways and be your people. Be with us as we attempt to do just that. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Some parables are in more than one Gospel. While the essential meaning may be the same, Gospel writers have different emphases. Matthew emphasizes both God's wide invitation and our faithful obedience when we accept it.

EXPLORING

Distribute Resource Sheet 2 (Three Parables about Judging) and pencils or pens. Explain that before looking at the third parable, it might be helpful to review the parable of the Two Sons and the parable of the Wicked Tenants. Invite participants to spend a few minutes reviewing them using Resource Sheet 2. Then ask for questions or comments. If these two parables were used in worship on those Sundays in your church, ask:

- ✂ How did the sermon connect with or supplement our group's discussion of these parables?
- ✂ If you discussed these parables at home or with friends outside the group, what was the content of your conversation?

Then have participants turn to Matthew 22:1–14 in their Bibles. If you have an open space and the group is willing, recruit volunteers to portray the characters in the parable and act it out as it is read. The parts are: the king, the king's son, servants, the first group invited, other servants, the troops, the second group of invitees, and the guest not wearing a wedding garment. If this is not possible, read or ask a volunteer to read the text aloud.

After hearing the parable, distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Matthew 22:1–14). Instruct everyone to read Resource Sheet 1 and the Matthew text. Suggest that they underline anything on the resource sheet that seems particularly significant or leaves them with a question. When everyone is ready, form groups of three or four people. In the small groups, they are to complete the information for the parable of the Banquet, the third parable on Resource Sheet 2.

After about five minutes, have everyone gather to hear each group's answers.

Tell participants that this same parable is found in the Gospel of Luke. Have them turn to Luke 14:16–24 and invite a volunteer to read it aloud. Ask:

- ✂ What is in Matthew's version that is not in Luke's?

After they notice that the improperly dressed wedding guest is missing, ask:

- ✂ What do you think this means?

Ask a volunteer to read aloud the "So What?" excerpt on Resource Sheet 1.

Point out that in both versions of this parable, it is important that God's invitation to the banquet is given to absolutely everyone, especially those living in the margins. However, in Matthew's version, it is also important that those who show up live lives of faithful obedience. Ask:

- ✂ Using this image of a wedding garment as a sign of fruitful Christian living, what would that garment look like today?

Spend a few minutes listing characteristics of faithful Christian living. Print them on newsprint or board. This list will prepare the group for the Responding options.

**EASY
PREP**

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Circles of Intimacy** Distribute plain paper and pens or pencils to the group. Have them draw a small circle in the middle of the paper and write their name in it. Then have them draw five concentric circles around the first circle, leaving space to write in each ring. Label them: Family, Close Friends, Neighbors, Colleagues, Random Acquaintances. The participants are to write names of people they know in each category. Then have them write signs of fruitful living they think each circle of people sees in them. If there is time, invite the participants to discuss their page with another person in the group.
- 2. Invitation to the Banquet** Invite participants to imagine that your congregation is the wedding party described in the parable of the Banquet. Your congregation wants to invite others to enjoy the church community too. Show the art supplies that you have gathered. Working alone or with a partner, participants can create invitations that call people to your church. Some things they may wish to include are: reasons why they attend this church, what people will find at this church, or how the gospel is found in your congregation. Plan how to deliver or personally extend these invitations.
- 3. Silent Meditation** Invite participants to read the “Now What?” excerpt of Resource Sheet 1. Encourage them to reflect on their own lives of discipleship. Questions to consider are:
 - ✧ Do you feel you have been invited to the wedding banquet?
 - ✧ Are you properly dressed for the wedding?
 - ✧ What are some things you might do to show signs of fruitful living?
 - ✧ What concrete thing will you do this week to show a sign of fruitful living?

CLOSING

As one group, briefly review Matthew's three parables (the two sons, the vineyard or the wicked tenants, and the banquet). Refer to Resource Sheet 2, if needed. Invite one-sentence statements of learnings or challenges from participants. Encourage them to look at Resource Sheet 2 during the week and spend some time in prayer about what these three parables are saying to them.

Close with this prayer or one of your choosing:

Gracious, merciful God, your invitation is indeed wider than we can ever imagine. It includes each of us. We accept your invitation and promise to continue to improve our wedding garments so that your word is known to the entire world. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for the next session, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

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Three Parables about Judging

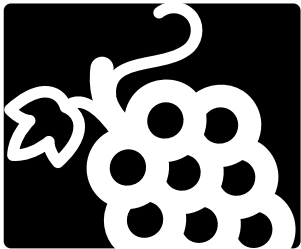
Jesus came to Jerusalem, where the Jewish religious authorities challenged his authority. He responded to them with three parables about judgment:



First Parable: Two Sons (Matthew 21:28–32)

What Happened: One son (religious leaders) said “Yes” but did not go. Other son (tax collectors, prostitutes, outsiders) said “No” but did go.

Message: The “in” religious leaders were hypocritical. Outsiders actually responded to Jesus.



Second Parable: The Wicked Tenants (Matthew 21:33–46)

What Happened: Tenants (religious leaders) killed the landowner’s (God’s) slaves (prophets) and son (Jesus).

Message: Jesus threatens that God will punish religious leaders and give control to others.



Third Parable: The Banquet (Matthew 22:1–14)

What Happened: