

31 July 2016

**Unready and Unwilling**  
Matthew 25:1-13; Luke 14:25-34

Today we conclude our series on the parables of Jesus, so it's worth taking a moment to look back at some of the things we've seen. We tend to think of Jesus' parables as nice, inoffensive stories, but when you really look at them, they're kind of strange, aren't they? They set up a sort of alternate universe, where our usual priorities are turned on their heads, where common sense is rejected, and where different standards apply. This Looking-Glass world is sometimes called the "Kingdom of God," and in this kingdom, little things matter more than big things, invisible things are what make all the difference, and one tiny pearl is worth giving up everything to obtain. In this kingdom, good religious people from the right group are condemned because they didn't live their faith, and hated heretics (like Samaritans) are affirmed because they did live theirs. In this world, a remorseful prayer from a scoundrel is heard by God, and an eloquent prayer from a clergyman isn't even counted as a prayer. Most disconcerting of all, in the parables of the workers in the vineyard and the Prodigal Son, we discovered that God's grace isn't what we thought. Mainly, it's not *fair!* People who, by our standards, were completely undeserving of grace, were granted exactly the same love and forgiveness as *good* people . . . people like, well, you know, like *us!* In the end, though, we realized that that was the point. However virtuous and deserving we think we are, if we're actually honest with ourselves, we have to admit that we don't want justice any more than anyone else. At heart, we're as sinful as anyone, and true justice would not be kind to us. Like everyone else, what we need is grace. Fortunately, as the parables teach us, grace is what God gives. The Kingdom of God is a kingdom of grace.

As we end the series, though, I need to add one qualification. Yes, grace is free and freely given to all. But that doesn't mean grace is cheap. I know, that sounds contradictory. Let me try again. There is nothing that we can do to *earn* grace by our own efforts. It's a gift. That what makes it free. But it's a gift that is supposed to transform your entire self *now*. It's not a gift for later. It's not like a gift certificate for a restaurant that we can set aside for now and redeem when it's convenient. If we treat God's gift like that, it's the same as turning it down. Grace is a gift that we are to cherish, foster, and grow into starting immediately. Jesus illustrated that with a parable.

We read from Matthew 25:1-13:

*'Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.'*

Now here's a parable you just don't hear preached a lot. It's just that it's, um, a little harsh. Ten bridesmaids are invited to the wedding feast and told to wait until the wedding party arrives, but while they know where to wait, they don't know how long. Five of them keep themselves ready – they watch, keep oil in their lamps, expect the wedding party to arrive any minute. The other five tuck their invitations in their purses and take a nap, figuring they'll have time to get everything together at the last minute. And when the bride and groom arrive, these five aren't ready. For the first five, the invitation changed their lives at once. The other five took the invitation for granted and ended up missing the party entirely.

In this story, God's grace is presented as an invitation to a banquet, extended to all – and I don't know any better way to describe it. Nevertheless, not everyone who gets an invitation gets to go. As I said, it's a little unsettling. It's not a fluke, either. Jesus also told this parable:

We read from Luke 14:15-24:

*One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, 'Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!' Then Jesus said to him, 'Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, "Come; for everything is ready now." But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, "I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my apologies." Another said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my apologies." Another said, "I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come." So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." And the slave said, "Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room." Then the master said to the slave, "Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner." '*

Here again we see grace as a banquet, but this parable's a little different from the last one. The five foolish bridesmaids wanted to go to the banquet, but they had taken the invitation for granted and weren't ready. But these guests, they weren't even willing. They didn't necessarily have anything against going to the banquet, it just didn't fit in their schedules. They had their own things going on, their own projects. Sorry, maybe some other time.

Here's the qualification that Jesus makes in explaining grace. The gift of grace is offered freely, but not everyone wants it. Grace is the gift of God taking the burden of our souls off our shoulders. We no longer have to do anything; God will take care of us. But before we can receive this gift, we have to give up our own efforts, surrender control. And that's . . . well, that's hard.

In a way, this is the story of every person's faith: moments of surrender when we open ourselves to God's grace, followed by moments of panic when we try to take back control for ourselves. We don't want to trust God's grace for our salvation; we want to make it about being good – keeping the law or going to church faithfully or doing good things for others. That way, *we're* in control. We don't want to surrender control and trust God; we want to hang our salvation on observing the sacraments – getting baptized, taking Communion. That's something

that *we* control. We don't want to simply trust in God's goodness; we want to define salvation as belonging to the right group, whether that means Roman Catholic or Methodist or Baptist or Lutheran or Missouri-Synod Lutheran or Wisconsin Synod Lutheran. Our memberships are something *we* can take charge of. We don't want our salvation to rest in God's hands; we want it to be about having correct doctrine, because, again, that's up to us. Or we want it to depend on giving our hearts to Jesus and praying the Sinner's Prayer to accept him as our personal Lord and Savior. Because that's something *we* do. We have never been good at releasing control over our own destiny, not to anyone, not even to God. God wants to give us a gift; we want to buy it.

But we have accept the gift. God's grace takes out of our hands something that's too much for us to handle. But God can't take it from our hands until we let go. That's the hard part. That's the part that makes grace free but not cheap. It costs us a lot to surrender control.

But here's the good news. We've been invited to a banquet, a great feast that has no end, and all we have to do is put aside our own projects and plans and show up. So let me close both this sermon and the whole series with a poem, by the 17<sup>th</sup> century metaphysical poet George Herbert. The poem's sort of a parable itself, starting with Christ's own description of grace as a great banquet. It recounts a conversation between a guest and the host, who is simply named Love:

**Love (III)**  
George Herbert

*Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back  
Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
If I lacked any thing.*

*A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:  
Love said, You shall be he.  
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,  
I cannot look on thee.  
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
Who made the eyes but I?*

*Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame  
Go where it doth deserve.  
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?  
My dear, then I will serve.  
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:  
So I did sit and eat.*