

The Wedding Garment

OUR meeting this morning, and the meetings of all the brethren throughout the world, have a particularly interesting significance in the light of a certain parable spoken by Christ. The parable referred to the hostile attitude of the Jewish leaders, and the great body of Jewish people, towards himself. It was spoken to illustrate the real nature of that attitude from a divine point of view. A man's course may appear one thing to himself, and be quite another in fact, when wholly seen. Paul, destroying the disciples in zeal for the law, appeared, in his own eyes, a righteous man, approved unto God; in God's eyes he was "*kicking against the pricks*:" that is, he was hurting himself and not those against whom he was fighting. So the Scribes and Pharisees thought themselves defenders of the kingdom of God in opposing Christ, whereas, they were in reality excluding themselves from any part in it when it should be established in its final form. To set forth this was the object of the parable, and also to intimate certain consequences, highly unpalatable to them, which would result from their action. It is in those consequences that we are personally interested.

The parable is to be found in Matt. 22 and Luke 14. It is as follows: "*A certain king . . . made a marriage for his son, and sent forth his servants to call them which were bidden to the wedding, and they would not come . . . Then saith he to his servants, The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden were not worthy. Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage. So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all as many as they found, both bad and good, and the wedding was furnished with guests. And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment. And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither, not having on a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Then said the king unto his servants, Bind him hand and foot and take him away.*"

It is not difficult to discern the leading significances of this parable. In the king we recognise God, who spoke to the fathers and wrought with them for the execution of His purpose: that purpose is represented as a marriage feast for His Son. A marriage feast is the most joyous occasion in human experience, and fitly though feebly represents the character of God's great purpose with the sons of men. His purpose from the beginning has been to spread a banquet of love and every good thing in the earth. His Son is the central object of this banquet. It is a marriage feast for His Son; but before it could be a glory and joy to Him, there must be a partner and guests. The provision of these is from the human race by invitation. The invitation was first sent to Israel after the flesh, who were chosen as the national basis of the purpose. But the bulk of them did not accept the invitation, for lack of understanding. They accepted it in a certain way. They consented to be the Lord's people and rejoiced in the fact, but they used it for their own glory, and shut God out of the matter. They approached God with their lips but their hearts were far from Him. And therefore, after long patience, there came a time when the invitation was extended to another class.

It is here where our personal relation to the parable comes into view. Before Israel's rejection of the message, we were outside of its scope altogether—"strangers from the covenants of promise, and aliens from the Commonwealth of Israel." Till Paul's day, God suffered the Gentiles to walk in their own ways, and winked at the ignorance prevailing among them. This is testified. —(Acts 14:16; 17:30). Our ancestry is altogether undistinguished from this point of view: we are the descendants of barbarians, who were

without God and without hope in the world. —(Eph. 2:11). They had a hope and they had gods; but both were matters of imagination, and, therefore, are not scripturally recognised.

By the hand of Paul and his co-labourers, the invitation, which had been lightly regarded by Israel in their generations, was extended to the barbarians, and, therefore, to us. Here we are, this morning, a company of their descendants. We have not heard Paul's living voice, but we are none the less invited. The invitation, by Paul, has come to us. We have it here in our hands. We know from Paul's authority that that invitation was to survive his decease, and continue in force till the Lord's appearing. Consequently the fact of Paul's word having come to us in the understanding of it, is evidence of the invitation referred to in the parable having come to us. The servants of the parable are commanded to go out to the highways and hedges. We belong to the party of the highways and hedges, which is destined to furnish a considerable contingent of guests to the marriage feast.

Here comes an important practical question, to which the parable furnishes an answer. Shall we be accepted as the King's guests merely because we have answered the King's summons by the hand of the King's servants in the hedges and highways? Shall we enter the kingdom of God merely because we have believed the gospel and been baptised? Shall we be chosen merely because we have been called? The answer of the parable is in harmony with Peter's exhortation to make our calling and election sure, which implies possible uncertainty. What is that answer?

When the King came in to see the assembled guests, he found one without a wedding garment, and said unto him, "*Friend, how camest thou in hither, not having on a wedding garment?*" This shows that something was implied in the invitation that was not expressed in the first instance. The invitation was, "Come to the feast." The implication was, "Come in a fit state." The King's question shows that every guest, though freely invited from the highways and the hedges, was required to come in a fit dress for the occasion. The man might have said "I came because I was asked to come;" but the King's question shows that he regarded the acceptance of the invitation an acceptance also of the implied conditions. Now, let us come to the point. What are these implied conditions? What is this wedding garment? We ascertain from another figure of the same matter. The guests in their collective capacity are symbolized in the Apocalypse as a woman in white array—a bride in fine linen, clean and white. And concerning this white raiment it is added, "*the fine linen is the righteousness of the saints.*"—(Rev. 19:8). In the parable this principle is illustrated in its individual application. Each applicant for a place at the feast, must possess the individual righteousness, without which no man shall enter the kingdom of God. —(1 Cor. 6:9, Matt 5:20).

Some escape this conclusion, deceiving their own selves by saying Christ will be their righteousness. Why wasn't he righteousness for the rejected guest? Why won't he be righteousness for false brethren who sow to the flesh, and to whom he tells us he will say "*Depart from me, ye workers of iniquity?*" If a man have no righteous fruits of the Spirit to present before Christ in the account we must all give at his judgment seat, when he judges the living and dead at his appearing and his kingdom, the fate of the ejected guest will be his. "*Cast out the unprofitable servant*"—(Matt. 25:30). Those who have to say they have no righteousness of their own, will find that Jesus will be nothing to them.

The sentiment that Christ's righteousness alone is to be the basis of our acceptance, is one of the countless and pernicious corruptions of clerical theology. It doubtless originated in the misapplication of a certain element of apostolic truth, namely that which informs us that all

are under sin, and that our salvation is not of works; but through the righteousness of faith that is in Christ. Men have long ceased to perceive that this principle applies only to unjustified sinners, and not to those who have been placed in a justified or forgiven position, through the obedience of faith. Christ is righteousness for sinners in this sense, that God offers to forgive them for Christ's sake, and to grant them a co-heirship with Christ, of what Christ, as a manifestation of God, has achieved for himself. But when sinners become saints, they come into relation to a new principle. They are responsible to him as servants to a master, and he will judge them according to their works. —(Rev. 2:23; Matt. 16:27; 2 Cor. 5:10; Gal. 6:8). If they bring forth fruits to the Spirit—that is, do and be what the Spirit in the word requires) they will receive everlasting life; and if they bring forth fruits to the flesh—that is, be and do what the mere natural mind prompts a man to do) they will inherit corruption. So says the last testimony referred to. Hence it is that the Apostles dwell so incessantly and so emphatically, on the necessity for brethren to walk as saints, and to be on their guard against conformity to the world, lest any be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin—(Heb. 3:13). If we present ourselves to Christ as one of the guests unprovided with that raiment of personal righteousness which he requires, we shall assuredly be rejected, and no man can learn what that personal righteousness is, so as to have it in continual available remembrance, except by the continuous and preferential study of the word of Christ contained in the writings of the Apostles and Prophets. Apart from this, a man with even a complete theoretical knowledge of Christ may become so infected with the spirit of the world around him, which also exhales so freely from his own heart, that while professing the name of Christ he will walk in the flesh, having a name to live while utterly dead to the high things of God.

Most students of the word, in the early stage of their studies, fall into the mistake of supposing the “wedding garment” stands for baptism. If they pursue their studies to any practical effect, they, by-and-bye, get rid of this mistake. They remember that many baptised persons will be rejected at the judgment-seat, and that the most distinguished of the guests—*“Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and all the prophets”*—have never been baptised; in which case, if the “wedding garment” stood for baptism, we should have the anomaly of guests with wedding garments turned out and guests without them allowed to remain. Besides, to what a cheap affair it would reduce the garment in question, and how out of harmony with the whole spirit of the divine economy, which lays such stress on persevering well-doing as a qualification for acceptance, and keeps in a comparatively minor place mere ceremonial compliances. Baptism is only the first act of obedience on the part of a believing sinner, and is of a nature with the kind of righteousness which the Pharisees performed when they circumcised children, and kept the feasts—all very essential in their place, but not accepted at the hands of otherwise unrighteous men. The law of admission to the kingdom says: *“Except your righteousness exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall, in no case enter into the Kingdom of God.”*—(Matt. 5:12). This is the righteousness typified by the wedding garment—*“the righteousness of saints”* in its fullness and ripeness, the unreserved and patiently-continued submission of enlightened men and women, in whose hearts faith fully dwells with purifying effect, working by love to the keeping of the commandments of God.

With this in view, the lesson of the parable is sobering and wholesome. It shows us that our mere acceptance of the gospel will not suffice to save us. It shows us that there must be a clothing of the inner man, with all those principles, precepts and affections which the Spirit has so abundantly stored for us in the word, and which we must procure from thence by diligent daily reading. These constitute the wedding garment, without which we are poor and

miserable and wretched and blind and naked, even if we may be infatuated enough to suppose ourselves “*rich and increased in goods and in need of nothing.*” The fact helps us both to understand and rightly estimate the Spirit’s invitation, “*I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich, and **white raiment that thou mayest be clothed**, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear.*”—(Rev. 3:18).

This Divine merchant has erected a house for the sale of his wares. In the Bible, he has spread them out to view, and cries at the street corners: “*Unto you, O men, I call, and my voice is to the sons of men. O ye simple, understand wisdom, and, ye fools, be ye of an understanding heart. Hear; for I will speak of excellent things, and the opening of my lips shall be right things.*”—(Prov. 8:4, 6).

Those who respond to this call will experience the truth of the assurance that “*Happy is the man that findeth wisdom and the man that getteth understanding; for the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold. She is more precious than rubies, and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her. Length of days is in her right hand, and in her left hand, riches and honour. Her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace*”—(Prov. 3:13–17). The experience of the goodness of divine wisdom begins even now in the constant satisfaction which springs from the answer of a good conscience towards God and towards man, and in the joyful hope of ineffable good, when the weary journey of this life shall have come to an end, as come it will. But what shall we say of that final form of the experience which will be the lot of those who shall be declared by Christ to have overcome and kept his works unto the end? Language simply fails to define and imagination to conceive it. We can simply say with David “*Oh how great is the goodness which Thou hast laid up for them who trust in Thee before the sons of men.*” The rebuke of His people will be taken away from all the earth. It will no longer be the portion of the Sons of God to endure the quiet scorn of those whose portion is in this life, who dwell at ease, and are filled with substance, whose eyes stand out with fatness, and who have more than their hearts can wish. The Sons of God will be an honour when the children of the flesh in all ranks of society shall have passed away, and become a mere memory. The Sons of God are in heaviness for a season: but when their warfare is accomplished—when the fight is passed, they will exchange the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness, and in the vigour of an immortal nature, rejoice evermore in the great joy which is the appointed portion of the accepted guests at the marriage of the King’s Son. Well may it be said, “*Blessed are they who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb.*”

(Taken from “Seasons of Comfort” Volume 1, Pages 176-180 by Bro. R. Roberts)