

# SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE

## Being Holy in an Unholy World

### *“What Determines Your Future?”*

#### Matthew 22:1-14

I heard a story when I was a teenager that so powerfully captured my attention that it attached itself to the walls of my memory and here it is nearly 50 years later and I still remember this story.

I can't remember who told it. I can't remember anything else about the message that Sunday. But that story has remained forever locked in the corridors of my mind.

It's a story about a man who heard a knock on his door one evening. He went to the door, opened it, and there before him stood a man who he didn't know. The stranger asked, *“May I come in and visit with you for a while?”*

And although this man wasn't accustomed to allowing strangers to come into his home there was something compelling about this stranger. He looked familiar. It was like somehow and at some point and some place in life they must have met. And so this man invited the stranger in.

As the stranger sat down and the two began to converse, he noticed an old piano in the corner of the room. It was obvious it hadn't been played for a long, long time. The keys were dusty. There were cobwebs on the pedals. It was easy to see that this piano was there to look at, to add to the décor of the room, and not to play.

But this stranger went over to this old piano, sat down and played some of the most beautiful music this man had ever heard. It brought tears to his eyes. He remembered how had taken piano lessons when he was a child and then quit...and thought to himself, *“Wow, if I could only play like that!”*

After this stranger had played the piano for a while, he stopped and began to recite poetry—**Shakespeare, Shelley, Wordsworth,**

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**Tennyson.** The words just flowed out of the stranger's mouth like a fresh, light breeze on a hot and sticky day...and the man was moved. He remembered when he, too, had been captured by the beauty of descriptive words and poetry. He had dreamed once about composing his own little book of poems and verse...but that was years ago, another day, another life, when he was young and idealistic.

And then this stranger walked back to the chair where he had been sitting, got down on his knees and began to pray. Oh, he prayed with the tongue of men and of angels. He brought heaven to earth. The man's heart was stirred. He hadn't prayed for years. He remembered back to when he, too, knew how to pray; when he, too, was close to God; when he, too, was full of faith.

Suddenly he said to this stranger, *“Who are you? What are you doing here? What do you want?”*

The stranger stopped praying, opened his eyes, looked at the man face-to-face, and said, *“I'm the man you could have been!”*

I was just a teenager when I heard that story but I distinctly remember thinking to myself, *“Oh, God, don't let me miss all the things You have planned and prepared for my life.”*

**This morning I want to talk about the importance of not missing out on all that God has in store for you.** The Bible says in **Psalm 84:11**, *“For the Lord God is our light and protector. He gives us grace and glory. No good thing will the Lord withhold from those who do what is right”* (New Living Translation).

Please carefully digest that last sentence. *“No good thing will the Lord withhold from those who do what is right.”*

Here's another promise from God's Word – **Jeremiah 29:11**. This is a verse that really became an anchor for my wife Linda during a time of transition in our lives several years ago. *“‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’”* (New International Version).

A lot of years ago, **Campus Crusade for Christ** developed a little gospel presentation plan that summarizes the essentials of the Christian faith concerning salvation and called it **The Four Spiritual Laws**. If you were ever a part of **Campus Crusade for Christ** when you were in college then you probably know what these four spiritual laws are.

This little tract, *The Four Spiritual Laws*, is the most widely distributed religious booklet in history, apart from the Bible. *Do you remember what that first spiritual law is? “God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life.”*

**But how can you be sure you don’t miss out on what God has planned and prepared for your life?** We’re in the midst of a series of sermons entitled **“Swimming Against The Tide: Being Holy In An Holy World.”**

God has called us to be holy. In **1<sup>st</sup> Peter 1:16**, He says to us through His written Word, *“Be holy, because I am holy”* (New International Version). In another place, He says, *“For sin shall not be your master”* (Romans 8:14 New International Version).

God wants to fill you with His Holy Spirit. God wants you to live a spiritually victorious life. God wants you to be *“in”* this world but not *“of”* this world. The majority of people in this world, in this culture, are filled with doubt, fear and cynicism; but God wants you to be filled with faith, hope and love.

**SO how can you be sure to not miss out on what God has planned and prepared for your life?** I believe the answer is found in a story Jesus told to the people of His day. You’ll find this story in the book of **Matthew**, the **22<sup>nd</sup> chapter**, and beginning with the very **1<sup>st</sup> verse**.

It is commonly known as *“The Parable of the Wedding Banquet.”* If you want to get technical, some Bible scholars believe that this is not one parable but actually two parables. It doesn’t really matter because Matthew tells them together as if they are one story and that’s how

we’ll read it today.

**Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.**

**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.’**

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

**Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’ 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.**

**But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. ‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ The man was speechless.**

**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.’**

**For many are invited, but few are chosen.”** (Matthew 22:1-14 NIV)

Now there are some aspects of this story that might not make sense to the modern listener, but those who heard Jesus first tell it understood exactly what He was saying. This parable is a warning—**it is a warning about not missing out on all that God has for you.**

Jesus says that a relationship with God is like a banquet. It’s like a feast. It’s like a huge celebration—being invited to a party. Now that may come as a surprise to some people because over the years a lot of church people have communicated by the way they’ve talked and the way they’ve lived that the kingdom of God is more like a funeral.

*You've met people like that, haven't you? I'm afraid we all have, but*

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that's not the image Jesus presents. When Jesus talks about the kingdom of God, He talks about a banquet—because a relationship with God is something to celebrate. It is a cause for joy and happiness in our lives. **And it is certainly something that we don't want to miss out on!**

And so here's the basic message of this story. **God has invited all of us to a great banquet.** This banquet is not just a symbol of heaven—it is primarily a symbol of the Christian life here on earth.

Jesus doesn't begin this story by saying, *"Now heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son."* No, He says, *"The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son."* He is talking about our relationship with God, our life in the here and in the now...here on earth.

God has invited every one of us to a banquet—to having a personal relationship with Him and to having a holy, empowering relationship with one another. Jesus said one time, *"**I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full**"* (John 10:10 New International Version). Our lives are to be lives of celebration.

But a lot of people never experience that. A lot of religious people, church people, people like you and me, never experience that. **And so Jesus tells this parable as a warning to not miss out on all that God has for you.**

Let me highlight for you this morning three specific truths that flow out of this story.

**Truth Number One – There Is More Than One Way To Miss Out On God's Purpose For Your Life.** There is more than one way to reject Christ. There is more than one way to miss out on all that God has for you in life. There is more than one way to *"trample the Son of God under foot"* and *"to treat as an unholy thing the precious blood of the covenant."*

Look at the parable. The king prepares a wedding banquet for his son and invites his family and his friends, his people, to come. But most

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of them didn't come. *Why?* Well, look at the story. There are three reasons given as to why the people didn't come.

**Some were apathetic.** Look at **verse 5.** The message was given. *"Everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet."* But look at how some people responded. *"They paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business."*

They were just too busy, too consumed with the cares and affairs of life, too wrapped up in making money and advancing their careers, their business, to spend time celebrating with the king and his family.

They weren't doing bad things. They weren't doing evil things. They weren't hostile to the king and his family. They were just distracted. They were just preoccupied with a lot of stuff. They were just sidetracked, if you will.

That's how a lot of people miss out on God's purpose for their lives. They're just so loaded down with all kinds of "stuff" that they just never have time to "hang out" with the king. On Wednesday evenings during our **Prayer Gathering**, we're watching a video series by **Philip Yancey** about prayer. *Do you know how he defines prayer?* He defines it as *"hanging out with God."*

It's a time for us to really get to know Him—to know His heart, to really know what He's like, what He thinks, what's on His mind. But, you see, a lot of us are just too busy for that...too into work, too into accumulating possessions, too into our needs and our wants and our "stuff" to really spend much time "hanging out" with Him.

And we miss the feast, we miss the celebration, we miss all the good things God has in store for us because we're just too apathetic. We say, *"Some day! Some day! Some day I'm really going to have time for my church. Some day I'm really going to have time to get involved in a Community Group. Some day I'm really going to have time to spend time with my family. Some day I'm really going to get my life straightened out. Some day I'm really going to come to grips with this*

*awful habit that's destroying my relationship with God. Some day!"*

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But, you see, tomorrow never comes. The only day the Bible ever talks about is **today**. *"Now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation"* (2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 6:2 New International Version). *"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts"* (Hebrews 4:7 New International Version)...do not ignore His voice, do not say, *"No, another time, another day, another occasion."*

*"Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near"* (Isaiah 55:6 New International Version).

So, some missed out on God's purpose for their lives because they were **apathetic**.

**Some were hostile.** Look at **verse 6**. *"The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them."*

*Can you imagine that?* This king makes a tremendous offer. He says, *"You're invited to this big party. It's going to be a time of great celebration. You can eat all you want and I'm footing the bill."* And some people heard that and responded with anger and violence.

That's how some people respond to God's offer of forgiveness and grace—eternal life. When I was serving as the pastor of the **Gary, Indiana, Free Methodist Church**, we built a new church building in an area where there were no other churches.

It was outside of town in an area where there were several growing communities. There were new houses, new sub-divisions, going in everywhere. So we planted this church and the first service in this new building was going to be on Easter Sunday.

And so we printed up a lot of really nice-looking brochures that had all of this great information about our church and when we were going to open and I gathered a group of men and women and we hand-delivered these brochures to every home within a 5 mile radius and gave them a personal invitation that if they didn't have a church

home of their own to come and worship with us on Easter Sunday.

We met a lot of wonderful people and on that very first Sunday in our

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new church building there were 42 new family units who came and celebrated with us.

But I will never forget one home I visited. I drove up a country lane, got out of my car and before I could even get to the front door this guy came out of the house and said, *"What do you want?"* When I told him that I was the pastor of that new church that was being built down the road and started to tell him about this brochure, he got violently angry and said, *"Get off of my property. I don't want some preacher telling me what I ought to do. And if you don't get away right now, I'm going to shoot you."*

I think he would have, if I had given him the opportunity. *Do you know how fast a car can go in reverse?* Pretty fast! I found out that day just how fast a car can go in reverse.

But, you see, there are some people like that when it comes to God's offer of forgiveness and grace and the abundant life. They respond with hostility...with anger and resentment. I don't know why.

Maybe it's because they met a preacher some time that they didn't like. Maybe it's because they got their knuckles rapped with a ruler at a parochial school. Maybe it's because they went to church one time and the people weren't friendly. Maybe they were mistreated by someone who claimed to be a Christian. Maybe they prayed one time for something very important to them and God didn't answer that prayer.

Who knows why some people react the way they do? But it's tragic. God is offering a life of joy and peace, of forgiveness and grace, of freedom and victory...and they just respond with anger and hostility.

They are like the people in Jesus' day. Remember, He wept over the city. He cried, *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing"* (Luke 13:34 New International Version).

Some were **apathetic**. Some were **hostile**. **And some were simply uncooperative.** Look at the last part of this story – **verse 11**. The

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wedding feast has begun. People are laughing and eating and celebrating. *“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. ‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ The man was speechless. 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.’”*

This is a part of the parable that probably doesn’t make sense to a lot of us modern listeners. *A guy gets invited to a wedding feast and he gets thrown out because he didn’t dress nice enough?* That’s not fair! But, you see, that misses the point.

Bible scholars tell us that at most of these ancient wedding feasts wedding clothes were provided for all of the guests. It’s kind of like when you go to a nice restaurant that has a **“Jacket Required”** policy, and you’re not wearing a jacket, so they give you one to wear for that evening. It was similar to that.

So, this is not a case of a poor man who didn’t have nice clothes to wear. **It’s a case of a proud man who wouldn’t show proper respect.** He came to the banquet, but he wasn’t willing to cooperate. He came to the banquet, but he said, *“Listen, I’ll do what I want, when I want, the way I want.”* He came to the banquet, he wanted to enjoy the feast, but he wasn’t willing to fully participate in the process.

You know, I see this happen all of the time. It’s how a lot of people miss out on God’s fundamental purpose for their lives. They come to church—they are there week after week after week—but they never really engage themselves in God’s kingdom.

The surface of their life is quite respectable. They may join the church. They may give faithfully. They may serve on a board or on a committee or volunteer for some ministry—but their hearts are far from God and they’re never serious enough about it to become fully

committed to Him.

In the New Testament, our garments, our clothes, are often used to symbolize our habits, our life styles, our character. The apostle **Paul**

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writes in **Colossians 3**, *“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience”* (Colossians 3:12-13 New International Version).

Some people want to enjoy God’s buffet—but they just don’t want to wear the wedding clothes of a transformed life. You see, there is more than one way to miss out on God’s purpose for your life. You may not be hostile to God. You may not even be apathetic. You’re just not willing to fully engage yourself in God’s kingdom. You’re still wearing that old tattered garment called *“self.”*

Let the Holy Spirit of God truly search your heart this morning. *“God, what do you really find here? Apathy? Hostility? An Uncooperative Spirit? If so, fill me with a spirit of commitment and cooperation and reverence and respect. Fill me with Your Spirit, O God.”*

Now, before I close this morning, let me just mention very quickly two other great truths that flow out of this story.

**Truth Number Two – The Call Of God In Your Life Is Not Based On Your Past.**

When the people who were first invited to this great banquet didn’t respond, didn’t come, the king widened the invitation. Look at **verse 9**. He said, *“Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’ 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”* (Matthew 22:9-10 New International Version).

*“Both good and bad!” Did you notice that?* The church is not a museum for saints—it is a hospital for sinners. When we open our doors, we don’t say, *“All of you holy people, all of you righteous people, all of you good people are welcome here—and no one else.”*

No, when we open the doors of our church, we say, *“Everyone is welcome. It doesn’t matter who you are. It doesn’t matter where you have been. God welcomes you and so do we.”* God extends His

invitation to those in the highways and byways—to those whose clothes may not completely be clean. *Why?* Because once you come to the banquet, He'll give you new clothes, new garments, wedding clothes that are clean and spotless. He will clean you up.

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**Truth Number Three - Your Response To God's Call Determines Your Future.** That's the core message of this story. Someone has put it like this:

**To everyone there openeth  
A way, and ways, and the Way,  
And the high soul climbs the high way,  
And the low soul gropes the low;  
And in between, on the misty flats,  
The rest drift to and fro.**

**But to everyone there openeth  
A high way and a low,  
And everyone decideth  
The way his soul shall go.**

God has called you to a holy, Spirit-filled, victorious life. He has issued you an invitation to a feast, a banquet. *How will you respond?* With apathy or passion? With hostility or with joy? With an uncooperative attitude or with a whole-hearted commitment for the King?

Please don't miss out on all that God has in store for you!