

God is both generous and serious. He is generous. This is why he sent his only begotten Son into the world to bear the sins of all people of every time and place. He was in Christ reconciling the whole world to himself. He proclaims this gospel for all sinners everywhere. He is also serious. He will not allow himself to be called a liar by those who don't believe what he says when he calls his Son the Savior of the world. He will expose every heart and judge every intention according to what he has spoken. Jesus tells a parable about a king who prepares a wedding feast for his son, and he invites all sorts of people to it. This illustrates how generous God is and how much God desires for all people to be saved and live with him forever. But the parable also illustrates God's judgment against those who refuse his invitation. God is generous, but he also will not be mocked. He is serious.

It will help us better to understand this parable if we consider the context in which Jesus gives it. Jesus just rode into Jerusalem, and within a week he will be betrayed, condemned, and crucified on a cross outside of the city. He tells this parable about the wedding feast right after a parable about a vineyard. A man owned a vineyard and rented it to people who were supposed to work in it. He sent servants into the vineyard to collect the fruit from those who rented it. But the workers mistreated and even killed the servants. Finally, the man sends his own son. But the workers are so deranged in their minds that they actually think that if they kill the son then they can get his inheritance. So they throw him out of his own vineyard and kill him. When Jesus asked the ruling priests and Pharisees what should happen to these wicked workers, they condemned themselves by their own answer. They admitted that the workers should be punished with a miserable death, and the vineyard should be rented out to others who will give the owner his fruit. The ruling priests and Pharisees were the workers in God's vineyard, and Jesus was predicting exactly what they were about to do to him. But this would not stop Jesus. As Psalm 118 says, "The Stone the builders rejected has become the chief Cornerstone." Even after they crucified him, he would rise from the dead and bring other people into his vineyard. In fact, God would work through their act of murder to accomplish his plan to sacrifice his Son for the life of all people.

God first called the physical descendants of Abraham to feast with him. He planted his vineyard first in them. He prepared the wedding of his Son first in them, promising that the Savior would be born from their line. But few of them believed when the Son of God finally showed up in the flesh. That's why God cut them off, and in their place he grafted into the vine people from the other nations. This is what he is getting at in the parable of the wedding feast. The king first sent his servants to those who had first been invited. Even the Son of God came first to the physical people of Israel. But they did not receive him. Either they didn't pay any attention to him or they participated in having him crucified. Then Jesus describes the king's anger. He sent his soldiers to kill those murderers and burn their city. This is exactly what God did to the Jews for their rejection of Christ. In 70 A.D. the Romans utterly destroyed Jerusalem and burned down the temple. This was God's judgment against them, against those whom he had known and loved for over fourteen hundred years. And it showed how serious God was about his invitation. He wasn't playing around when he called them to believe in his Son.

Now, did God's stern judgment stop his generosity? No. He still says, "The wedding is ready." The unbelief of those who were first invited did not make God's promise unfaithful. Rather, God remained faithful to his own Word of grace. Christ is still the crucified and risen Savior. He is still prepared to take his church to himself as his dear bride. In fact, he takes this very seriously. He continues to send out his servants to all nations, calling them to feed on the bread of life. So the servants go out and bring into the wedding hall all sorts of people, both bad and good.

Here Jesus is describing his church on earth. In her earthly existence, the church has both those who believe God's promise as well as those who despise God's promise. So Jesus describes further judgment. On the last day, the king himself will come. The Son, who shares the throne with his Father, will appear. And he will expose the hypocrites for who they are.

He comes to a man who is not wearing the wedding garment, and he asks him how he got into his wedding feast without a wedding garment. The man is speechless. This describes all the hypocrites on the last day. Those who once mouthed the Creed and the Lord's Prayer, sang the hymns, and enjoyed the outward fellowship of godly people, will be shown to be unbelievers who never cared for the promise of the gospel. They were attracted to the outward ceremonies. They appreciated the social life the church afforded them. They liked the honor, which Christians were taught by God to give them. But they looked down on these sincere Christians as unimportant. Perhaps they did believe for a while, but they lost interest in the gospel of God's free grace in Jesus. So when they meet the Son face to face they will no longer be able to enjoy these nice and beautiful things. The melody of the hymns and the beauty of the church's confession will no longer be able to echo in their mouths and ring in their ears. Christ will not let them take his name in vain anymore. Of course, with every tongue over and under the earth, they will confess that Jesus Christ is the Lord. But then they will be silenced. They will have no answer for themselves except to be tied up hand and foot and cast into hell.

This again shows that God and his Christ take the gospel seriously. God takes his grace seriously. He has prepared it in his Son from before the foundations of the world. And he will not allow anyone to mock it either with the mouth or with the unbelieving heart.

Jesus ends the parable by saying, "Many are invited, but few are chosen." It's certainly a sober ending. It sounds terrifying to our own human wisdom. Our carnal ears would rather hear something like, "Many are invited, but few choose to come." That way, it's more in our control, and you can imagine that you are one of the few who choose Jesus. Perhaps when you hear the story of Peter denying Jesus three times you might think something like, "I wouldn't have done that. I would have stood up for Jesus. I would have marched for him all the way." If Jesus would just leave it to our own choice, then at least we could imagine that we would make the right choice. We would put on the wedding garment and not take it off. But this isn't what Jesus says. He takes the choice away from us. It is all by God's choice. God calls many, but he chooses few. It sounds terrifying. And it is terrifying to our sinful, fallen flesh. But it is tremendously comforting to the broken heart who cannot find anything good in his own choices. To the one who takes seriously his own failure to love God, these sobering words of Jesus are strength to face the judgment with courage. Because here our Lord is describing the grace of God.

With such solemn and stern words, Jesus is describing how intensively generous God is. You see, God is extensively generous, but he is also intensely generous. In other words, God's generosity extends to all people everywhere. Jesus died for the sins of all. He forgave even those priests and Pharisees who mocked him at his crucifixion. But God's generosity intensifies. That is to say, it becomes personal. You personally should know that God has chosen you. How can you know this? You know this because God's promise isn't just a generic promise to anyone who happens to believe. No, it a promise to you. If Jesus died for all, then he died for you. If Jesus said, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved," then he means that your baptism has saved you. If Jesus says, "This is my blood of the new testament poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins," then it is his blood shed for you, for the forgiveness of your sins. His universal gospel of grace is an invitation to you who tremble at his Word. To you, who

look at your works, even the ones you admire the most, and conclude that there is nothing in them for you to boast, the grace and mercy of God in Christ abides.

You see, the grace of God is not a lottery. It isn't by chance that you believe. God's grace causes you to believe and embrace the one who clothes you with his own righteousness. As St. Paul says, those who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. He is your wedding garment. He is your certainty of God's grace. He is the very object and food of your faith.

Now, you might think, "But if God wanted all people to be saved, then why wouldn't he chose everyone?" Or you might think, "If people are condemned because of their own failure to believe, then those who are saved must be saved because of their choice to believe." But that isn't true. Those who are damned are damned because of their own fault. And those who are saved are saved only by God's grace. And it's still true that God desires all people to be saved. No matter how much we try to think and reason through this, we will never be able to figure it out. And it won't do us any good to rely on our own thoughts. God's thoughts are not our thoughts. Instead, he calls you simply to rely on his invitation, and God's Word gives you the faith to believe that he is telling you the truth.

The more you rely on God's generosity, the more you take it seriously. You will take seriously the fellowship you have with your fellow redeemed, not merely as a nice social gathering, but as a community of saints who share with you the living doctrine of Christ. God's grace causes you to take this seriously, so you will not stand by and allow yourself to hear sermons that don't preach this precious gospel of your Savior. You will run every chance you get to the bread of life in his Word and sacraments. And you will be content to be small, not discouraged by how few seem to believe, because you know that God is serious when he says that he invites you to dine with him. Amen.