

When I was in college a song came out, performed by Kenney Chesney, entitled, “Everybody Wants to Go to Heaven.” The message of the song was very simple. Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to go now. Even though the song has a fun and lighthearted mood, it expresses a profoundly sad truth about the state of human nature. Jesus was gathered at the house of a Pharisee on the Sabbath Day. He healed a man with dropsy, and the people were sitting in judgment of him for breaking the rules on the Sabbath. He then went on to teach them humility, not to seek honor from this world, but to wait for God to exalt them at his own time. In the middle of our Lord’s instruction, one guy blurted out, “Blessed is he who will eat bread in the kingdom of heaven.” The man was only half-listening to Jesus’ teaching. He just wanted to express how great it was going to be when he finally got to heaven. That’s all fine and good to talk about the future joys and blessings of heaven. But it doesn’t do you any good if you lose sight of what is in front of you right now. The Lord God himself was in their presence. The kingdom of heaven was in their very midst. Wisdom incarnate was teaching them right where they were gathered. Everybody wants to go to heaven eventually, but who wants to listen to the Lord of heaven right now?

Jesus therefore responded to this pious sounding outburst by telling a parable of a man who prepared a banquet and invited many. He sent his servant out to declare that the dinner is now ready. The servant didn’t say that dinner will be ready soon. No, it’s ready now. When Jesus preached, he didn’t say, “The kingdom of heaven is coming.” No, he is the king, and wherever he is there is his reign with all its blessings. So he declared, “The kingdom of heaven is here.” The Lord has come. He is right there in the midst of them, calling all who labor and are burdened to find rest and peace in him. He has arrived in the Jordan River, taking on himself all sins, which he would bear on the cross. And as he said on the cross, “It is finished,” so he continues to declare to us, “All things are ready. Come and eat. Come and gain wisdom and knowledge of salvation.” Where two or three gather in his name, where his church assembles around the preaching of his gospel and the administration of his sacraments, there he is in their midst.

It’s all good and pious to talk about how blessed and wonderful it will be when we go to heaven. But what about right now? Do you want rest for your soul and release from guilt and sin right now? Do you want to die to your sin and live to God right now? Do you want the body and blood of your crucified and risen Savior right now? Or do you just like the idea of going to heaven someday but not until after you have done all the things you imagine will give you peace and fulfillment in this world?

Jesus’ parable warns us against missing what is right in front of us. The people who were invited made excuses, no different than the excuses people make today. I bought a field, so I need to see it. I bought some oxen, and I need to test them out. I just got married.

The excuses pile up. Anything and everything takes priority over meeting Jesus where he promises to meet you. Work and entertainment, ambition and leisure are deemed more precious and pressing than hearing the gospel, receiving instruction in the Word of God, encouraging your fellow Christians with song and conversation, and eating the body and blood of your Savior for the nurturing of your soul. We all know this. Many of us are concerned for our fellow Christians who can’t prioritize the gathering in the name of Jesus above their everyday affairs. If you skip work then you’ll get fired. If you skip school then you’ll fail out. If you skip practice then you can’t play. But God is much more patient than your boss, teachers, and coaches. Even though you are weak, he is patient to call you and urge you to come

into the light while it is still shining before the darkness comes. And people so easily count God's patience as indifference. It's concerning and discouraging.

But we should keep in mind what this gathering is all about. Who has built this church? Who has prepared this Supper and the food of his Word? Solomon writes in Proverbs 9 that Wisdom has built her house. Wisdom has carved out her seven pillars. Wisdom has butchered her meat, mixed her wine, and spread her table. Wisdom, who is portrayed as a wise lady of the house, has been revealed as the Son of God himself. He comes like a mother hen longing to gather her chicks under her wings. He comes with tenderness and meekness, calling us to receive his words of life with humility. He is the Lord your Shepherd who has prepared a table for you with his body and blood and has anointed your head with the oil of his Spirit in your baptism. And why does he prepare this meal for you? What does Wisdom say? "If you're untaught, turn in here . . . Leave ignorant people and begin to live; walk the road that leads to understanding."

You see, Christ does not invite us to gather with him just so we would make an appearance, mouth the words of the hymns we are used to singing, and then get out in time to rush off to our field, oxen, or other festivities. No, Christ calls the ignorant to receive knowledge and insight, to receive life from his Word, to begin to understand what he says. If you have made it a habit to come to church, then that's good. There's really no better habit. But Christ doesn't just call us to a habit. He calls us to faith. And faith is much greater than a habit. Faith is the cup, which Jesus fills and causes to overflow with his mercy and salvation. Faith exists in a broken and humble heart that can't find anything good within itself but looks to the Lord Jesus as the only bread that endures to eternal life. Faith hungers and thirsts for the righteousness that avails before God in the wounds of him who was sacrificed for our sins.

This past week I met a very nice girl named Sophia. We got to talking about what her name means. Sophia is the Greek word for Wisdom. I then explained to her that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. To fear God is to care about what God's Word says and to trust that Christ has saved us by his atoning death. She then said something very wise. She said that she didn't feel wise. Now that's a sign of great wisdom! To know that you have a lot to learn is the beginning of wisdom. Those who think they already know enough are not wise. The Bible calls them scoffers. If you correct a scoffer then you get insulted. But if you correct a wise person then he will love you. If you give advice to a wise man then he will be even wiser. If you teach a righteous man then he will learn even more.

Because those who are wise know that they can't find wisdom in themselves. Those who are righteous know that they can't find righteousness in themselves. Their salvation doesn't come from them accepting Jesus, figuring out Jesus, or inviting Jesus into their hearts. No, it comes from Jesus accepting them and inviting them. He calls them to his supper, which he purchased and prepared with his own blood. By his Holy Spirit, he gives them faith and gathers them to be strengthened in the knowledge of salvation. Those who are wise hunger and thirst for this wisdom that comes down from above, the wisdom revealed in the words of Scripture. Those who are wise don't just mouth the words of the hymns and liturgy. Instead, they feast on the words. They read the words, think about them, ponder them, and learn from them. The scoffer turns church into a mere tradition of men. He doesn't have anything to learn. He's in a rush to accomplish what seems more important to this world. But the wise man loves the habitation of God's house, because this is where he inquires and seeks understanding from God's Word.

If you don't want wisdom now, then you won't get wisdom later. If you don't want heaven now, then you won't go to heaven when you die. If you don't see how dead your sinful flesh is right now then you won't see the life that Christ has prepared for you. If you don't want Christ and the salvation he offers right now, then you won't get it in the end. That is the warning our Lord gives in his parable. "I tell you," he says, "none of those men who were invited will taste my dinner."

Wisdom is not about how much you know. Wisdom is about fearing the Lord and knowing the Holy One, Jesus Christ. It isn't about how much you understand. It's about receiving understanding from Christ himself. Some people are smarter than others. Some aren't able to comprehend much. But the first shall be last and the last first. A little child who receives instruction, learns to listen to his parents, bow his head to pray, and knows that Christ has defeated the devil and taken away our sins, is wiser than the most celebrated scholars who write dissertations explaining away the truth of the Scriptures. There is nothing you have that you did not receive from God. To know this is to know wisdom. And to trust in Christ, his kingdom, and his righteousness is to have everything you need both for today and for the day to come. As David sings in Psalm 34,

Taste and see that the LORD is good, blessed is the man who trusts in him. Fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him will lack nothing. Young lions may be in need and go hungry, but those who fear the LORD shall not lack anything good.

Amen.