

James G. McCarthy
author of *John Calvin Goes to Berkeley*
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Matthew 22:14
Who are the Many Called and the Few Chosen?

But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw there a man not dressed in wedding clothes, and he said to him, “Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?” And he was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, “Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” For many are called, but few are chosen.

Matthew 22:11-14

Some Calvinists quote the final eight words of this passage as if they settle the controversy about predestination once and for all. Before the foundation of the world, they say, God in His sovereignty decided who would go to heaven and who would go to hell. Now He invites all to be saved, but only the elect *can* be saved. “For many are called, but few are chosen” (Matthew 22:14).

Other Christians read Matthew 22:11-14 and come to the exact opposite conclusion. They believe that God wants everyone to be saved and that He invites everyone to be saved. He will only save those, however, who are willing to repent and believe the gospel. “For many are called, but few are chosen” (Matthew 22:14).

Who’s right? Consider first the Calvinistic interpretation.

Two Calls, Two Destinies

John Calvin believed that most Christians had a poor understanding of Jesus’ words, “For many are called, but few are chosen” (Matthew 22:14). The key to understanding them and the parable of the wedding feast that precedes it, he wrote, is to recognize that “there are two kinds of calls. There is the general call, by which God invites all equally. . . . The other kind of call is special.”¹ The *ESV Study Bible*—endorsed by leading Calvinists John Piper, Mark Driscoll, and R. Albert Molher—explains.

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.24.8, Library of Christian Classics, edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) vol. II, p. 974.

“Many are called” means that many have been invited to the wedding feast. But not all those invited are actually the ones who are supposed to be there, because “few are chosen.” This has been described as the doctrine of a “general calling”: the gospel is proclaimed to all people everywhere, both those who will believe and those who will not. However, Paul also mentions another kind of calling, an effective calling from God that comes powerfully to individuals and brings a positive response. When the gospel is proclaimed, only some are effectively called—that is, those who are the elect, who respond with true faith (1 Corinthians 1:24, 26-28). This is consistent with Jesus’ statement that “few are chosen,” for the ones “chosen” are “the elect,” a term used by Jesus to refer to His true disciples (cf. Matthew 11:27; 24:22, 24, 31; on the theme of election, see note on Roman 9:11).²

Though many consider this interpretation of Matthew 22:14 to be correct, others question it. Would God offer salvation to lost sinners but not “actually” offer it? Would God invite those whom He knows are not “supposed” to come, extending a helping hand then withdrawing it before a needy sinner can grasp it? Is this the God of the Bible, or of a theological system gone awry?

Consider another approach to the passage, one that results in a very different interpretation.

Three Parables, One Context (Matthew 21:23-22:14)

Four days before His crucifixion, Jesus entered the temple and began to teach. The Jewish rulers listened for a time, then they demanded an explanation, asking Jesus, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave You this authority?” (Matthew 21:23). Aware that their intention was to entrap and kill Him, Jesus refused to give them a direct answer, responding instead with three parables. Each exposed the Pharisees’ hypocrisy and unwillingness to submit to God.

The Parable of the Father with Two Sons (Matthew 21:28-32)

In the first parable, Jesus tells of a father and his two sons. “He came to the first and said, ‘Son, go work today in the vineyard.’ And he answered and said, ‘I will, sir’; and he did not go” (Matthew 21:28-29).

The ruling Jews were like this disobedient son. Outwardly they portrayed piety and religious devotion. Inwardly, they were rebellious and unwilling to submit to God’s will.

Jesus continued the parable of the father with two sons, saying, “And he came to the second and said the same thing. But he answered and said, ‘I will not’; yet he afterward regretted it and went” (Matthew 21:30).

The tax-gatherers and prostitutes who followed Jesus were like this second son. Initially, they

² *The ESV Study Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Bibles, 2008), commenting on Matthew 22:14.

rejected the Jewish faith for the pleasures of the world. Later, they repented and trusted Christ.

Jesus asked the ruling Jews, “Which of the two did the will of his father?” (Matthew 21:31). The Pharisees answered correctly, saying, “The latter.” Jesus applied the parable to them, saying, “Truly I say to you that the tax-gatherers and harlots will get into the kingdom of God before you” (Matthew 21:31).

The Parable of the Landowner and Vine-Growers (Matthew 21:33-46)

Jesus told a second parable. It was about landowner who planted a vineyard and rented it to vine-growers. Later, when he sent his slaves to receive part of the harvest as payment, the vine-growers “beat one, and killed another, and stoned a third” (Matthew 21:35). The owner sent a second group of slaves. The vine-growers killed them also. Undeterred, the landowner sent his son to collect payment, thinking, “They will respect my son” (Matthew 21:37), but the vine-growers killed the son as well. Enraged, the landowner decided to “bring those wretches to a wretched end” (Matthew 21:41).

This second parable reinforced the message of the first. The landowner represents God; the vine-growers, the ruling Jews; the slaves, God’s prophets; the son, the Lord Jesus. The story illustrates the Jewish rulers’ misuse of authority, their mistreatment of God’s prophets, and their hatred for God’s Son. The parable also communicates God’s anger toward them and His intention to punish them severely.

Jesus drove the message of these first two parables home with a quotation from the Old Testament, saying, “The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner stone; / This came about from the Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes” (Matthew 21:42, quoting Psalm 118:22). Once again, Jesus is speaking of the ruling Jews’ rejection of Him as Messiah. They got the message. Matthew writes, “When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them” (Matthew 21:45).

The Parable of the Royal Wedding Feast (Matthew 22:1-14)

It is in this same context that Jesus told a third parable, a story which ends with the statement under consideration: “For many are called, but few are chosen” (Matthew 22:14). This third parable is about a king who planned a wedding feast for his son. When everything was ready, he sent his slaves to call the invited guests, but the guests “were unwilling to come” (Matthew 22:3).

The king sent other slaves. These pleaded with the invited guests, saying, “Everything is ready; come to the wedding feast” (Matthew 22:4). The guests steadfastly refused. “They paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them” (Matthew 22:5-6). How did the king respond? Jesus says, “The king was enraged and sent his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and set their city on fire” (Matthew 22:7).

The parable continues, but consider what we have so far. Given the context and the previous

two parables, it is clear that the parable of the wedding feast is also about the ruling Jews. God had invited them and the Jewish people, whom they represented, to enjoy a special relationship with Him through His Son, the Lord Jesus. God first issued this invitation when He called Abraham two millennium earlier, promising to give him and his descendents the land of Canaan, and through him to bless the whole world (Genesis 12:1-3). God confirmed and renewed His special relationship with Abraham through Isaac and Jacob and his descendants, the nation of Israel. When the Jewish people went astray, God sent prophets to plead with them and warn them, but they refused to listen.

The parable of the wedding feast does not end there. Determined to honor his son, the king sent a third group of slaves to invite other guests, this time into the streets, telling his slaves, “As many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast” (Matthew 22:9). So the slaves went out and “gathered together all they found, both evil and good” (Matthew 22:10). Many responded to the king’s invitation and they filled the wedding hall.

This second group of invited guest represents people from the Gentile nations to whom the apostles preached the gospel following Christ’s ascension. Hundreds and thousands responded and were saved. Churches sprung up throughout the Roman Empire and today circle the globe.

The Improperly Dressed Guest

Jesus concluded the parable of the wedding feast with an unpleasant scene in which the king confronts one of his guests.

But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw there a man not dressed in wedding clothes, and he said to him, “Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?” And he was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, “Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Matthew 22:11-14

Who does this expelled guest represent? He is part of the second group, those to whom the gospel came following the Lord’s rejection by the ruling Jews. What distinguished this guest from the others guests was his clothing. He was improperly dressed. We may consider this excusable, after all, the man had no prior notice of the wedding feast and was given little time to prepare. Additionally, he may not have had the money to purchase clothing appropriate for a royal feast. At the same time, the other guests were somehow able to arrive properly attired. From this we can infer that with the invitation the king provided wedding clothes to each guest. It may have been simply a festive outer garment. Supporting this is the fact that the king considered the man’s attire inexcusable. He demanded an explanation from the man, saying, “Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?” (Matthew 22:12). The man was “speechless” (Matthew 22:12). He had no excuse. Note also the king’s angry reaction: “Bind him hand and foot” (Matthew 22:13). The offense

was great, indefensible, inexcusable. The king ordered, “Cast him into the outer darkness” (Matthew 22:13).

So ends the parable, but as it concludes it reaches beyond the wedding feast to the spiritual and eternal. The king has the man cast not back into the street, but into “the outer darkness” (Matthew 22:13). Jesus uses a term here that occurs in two other places in the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 8:12; 25:30). Both are references to hell. The king has the man cast into a place where “there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 22:13), a description also connected in Scripture with hell (Matthew 13:42; 13:50; Luke 13:28). Clearly the man’s offense—daring to arrive improperly clothed—represents something of great significance.

Who then is this unusual guest? He represents the person who claims to be a Christian but in fact is not. He dares to think that he will sit down at the marriage supper of the lamb on his own terms. “I’m a good person,” he is quick to tell anyone who might ask him if he thinks he will go to heaven. “I go to church. I try to be nice to everyone. I keep the Ten Commandments.” Christendom is filled with such confused people. One day they will stand before God and He will ask them to give an account for their sins. They will stand before Him speechless with no legitimate claim to eternal life.

Who are the other guests present at the wedding feast? They represent sinners who have confessed their guilt before God, repented of their sins, and trusted in Christ to save them. These, the Scriptures say, have “clothed” themselves with Christ (Galatians 3:27). In Him they will find perfect acceptance before the Father.

Conclusion

What do we learn from the Calvinistic approach to the parable of the wedding feast? The *ESV Study Bible* provides this summary:

“‘Many are called’ means that many have been invited to the wedding feast. But not all those invited are actually the ones who are supposed to be there, because ‘few are chosen.’”³

What do we learn from the contextual approach to the parable of the wedding feast?

1. Delivered four days before Christ’s crucifixion, the parable portrays the Jewish nation’s rejection of Jesus as the Messiah and their refusal to come to Him for salvation.
2. The parable communicates God’s intention to proclaim the gospel to the Gentile nations and predicts their favorable response.
3. The parable tells us that God will call many to salvation, both Jew and Greek, but relatively few will respond.

³ *The ESV Study Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Bibles, 2008), commenting on Matthew 22:14.

4. The parable contains a warning to anyone who thinks that he can approach God on his own terms, identifying himself as a Christian, but not receiving God's provision for sin, "even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe" (Romans 3:22).
5. The parable teaches man's freedom to accept or reject God's offer of salvation. The king wanted guests to come, invited them to come, and notified them that it was time to come. Regardless, they did not come for they were "unwilling" (Matthew 22:3).
6. The parable teaches that God will have the final say as to who will enjoy the marriage supper of the Lamb. The Father will choose only those who have arrived clothed in the righteousness of God, which is received through faith in Christ.

One passage; two very different interpretations. Some interpret the parable of the wedding feast through lens of Calvinistic theology. Others believe the key to interpretation is the passage's context. The approach one takes, for the most part, determines the outcome.