

How do you view the Kingdom of God and your entrance into it? That's the question that Jesus puts forth in our Gospel reading this morning. The Lord God seeks to bring you into His Kingdom, to the great feast He has prepared; what do you make of that?

The parable gives two ways you can look at it. Concerning one way, Jesus gives a severe warning. Concerning the other, Jesus gives great comfort and reassurance.

The first way you might see your entrance into the Kingdom is as an invitation. That's found in the first group of individuals Jesus speaks of in the parable. "A man once gave a great banquet and invited many."

It sounds nice, an invitation to a banquet. We (usually) like getting invited to events like this – banquets, parties, celebrations. Being invited makes us feel good. Someone thought well enough of us that they want us at their event. It's nice.

And if we want to be invited to birthday parties and company picnics and whatever else, why wouldn't we want to be invited into the Kingdom of God, into the great feast prepared by the Lord?

Yes, an invitation sounds very nice. But there's a bit of a problem with seeing it as just an invitation. When you are invited to something, whatever that event is, it's optional.

Birthday parties are great, but if you don't go, it's not the end of the world. Class reunions can be fun, but you're not going to be thrown into jail for missing one.

When someone extends an invitation, they might really want you there, but if you have other things going on, well then, there's nothing they can do to force you there. And if you think you've got other things that are more important, then you turn down the invitation.

That's what we see in those who are invited to this banquet. Many people are invited, and every single one turns down the invite. Or more correctly, every single one had accepted the initial invitation and then canceled when the time for the feast actually arrived.

We hear, "The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.' And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.' And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.'"

And on it goes, every single person would just love to make it, but don't you know, something's come up and they'll have to bow out at the last minute. Everybody's got an excuse.

And here's the thing: at first glance, perhaps these excuses might seem valid. If you've got a field, you should make sure it's being taken care of, it isn't being overrun by weeds, the workers in it are tending it correctly. Otherwise, you'd just be wasteful of what you'd been given, right?

Or the oxen – again, it's important to be a good steward of what you've been given. Better make sure these oxen are healthy and able to work, so you're not wasting feed on useless animals.

And as for the guy getting married, in those days the marriage celebration was a week-long event that wasn't to be interrupted lightly. Marriage is from God; surely that's a good reason to turn down an invitation, right?

In each case, those invited revealed what they truly thought was important. Yes, a feast would be wonderful, and any other day they'd be there, but other, more important things came up, and so they won't be able to make it.

It's their actions that reveal what they truly value. Feasts are nice, but income, possessions, relationships with others, these are what really matter.

These are the things that also tempt us away from the feast, are they not? The invite goes out from the Lord, "Come to my house, partake of the feast I have prepared," and how do we respond? If we've got nothing else going on, then great, we'll be there.

But then come those temptations, those other things. Sorry, I have this new great field, a great new job, it's going to make me a lot more money than the last one, but I have to work Sundays now. Please have me excused. Sorry, I arranged this vacation a while back and spent a lot of money on it, please have me excused. Sorry, I'm headed to see some family who don't go to church and I won't be able to make it.

On and on the temptations come. And if we see this as just an invite to something optional, something nice but not necessary, well then, we think we can turn it down.

These temptations are so crafty, so enticing, because they are using things which God gives to us, things that are good if kept in their proper place. The Lord is the one who gives fields and oxen and wives. The Lord is the one who gives jobs and worldly rest and family. They are blessings.

But when you put the gifts above the One who gives them, the things of creation above the Creator, you cross over into idolatry, which is always – always – sin. Look at how Jesus speaks of how the excuses are received in the parable. "So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry." The master gets mad. He doesn't just go, "Oh well, I understand, those are valid excuses. I'll just invite them to the next banquet." He's greatly upset. Jesus is saying that that is how God feels about our excuses.

Now why would the master be angry? A couple of reasons come to mind. First, when you look at the excuses given, though they might look good at first glance, they quickly break down.

You bought a field? Wonderful. It's probably not going anywhere anytime soon. Maybe go to the feast and then go see it.

You need some oxen inspected? If you can afford five yoke of oxen in Bible times, you've probably also got some servants or hired men who could inspect for you. And you've already bought the oxen, so again, there's not exactly a rush.

As to the wedding – yes, weddings are important, greatly so. Maybe bring your new spouse to the feast – pretty sure she'd enjoy that!

Aside from the holes in the excuses, the other reason why the master would get so mad would be that feasts were a lot of work. It took a lot of preparation, a lot of resources, to hold one. Hence why the invitations were sent out ahead of time.

To accept an invitation, and then turn it down at the last minute, was to insult to the one who made the feast. All his hard work, all the time and money he had spent, not as important as whatever you've got going on.

Take these thoughts and apply them to today. You're going on a trip and can't make it here? Well I have good news: this isn't the only Missouri Synod Church in the country. There are plenty of other faithful congregations out there. Might you have to go a little out of your way to get to one, wake up earlier than you would otherwise, maybe cut some of your sightseeing out on that Sunday morning? Yes, but it's worth it!

You're visiting family who don't go to church? True, you can't force them to go, but you can give an example for them to follow. Evangelism is both words and actions.

What about the whole job thing? What if you have to work on Sunday mornings? A couple of thoughts there.

First thing to keep in mind: who is it that gives you your daily bread, your employer, or Our Father in heaven? Who gave you the job, and will He, the Almighty One, be able to sustain you apart from that specific job?

Also, when looking at a job, or guiding your kids/grandkids/neighbor kids on their futures, do you make it a priority to search for something that would leave Sunday morning open? Or is that just a nice bonus, but not essential?

But let's say you, for one reason or another, absolutely must work on Sundays. This does happen. There the question becomes if that arrangement is permanent, or is it something that you are working toward changing? Are you praying that God would grant you favor with your employer to be allowed to attend church, or looking for a different position that would let you have Sundays off? Perhaps the Lord hasn't granted it yet, perhaps it will be a while until He opens that door, but Christians are never told to just accept being unable to receive their Lord's gifts.

After all, those gifts are the most precious thing we have in this life. Again, one of the reasons why the master gets angry is that those who turn down the invitation are saying the costs of the banquet weren't that great.

So ask yourselves, what is the cost for the banquet which the Lord calls you to week after week? His life.

What did He have to pay to bring the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation which He offers to you? The torments of hell which our sins deserve.

What did He overcome so that we may gather together around Him? The grave – death itself. He gives His body and blood to us – freely – because His body was broken on the cross, His blood poured out onto the ground of Golgotha. So whatever you have going on Sunday mornings, is it more important than the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for your salvation?

The more we dwell on this, the more we come to understand just what is offered in this banquet to which our Lord invites us, the more we see that this isn't just an invitation. Rather, it is the gift of deliverance from this sinful world, preservation from the powers of death, and a bestowal of eternal life.

It's an invitation in the same way that a fireman would come to your window and tell you to come with him as the high-rise building you're in is burning up. It's some sailors telling you to get into the lifeboat as the ship sinks into the ocean. It's an "invitation" that can be refused only at the cost of your life.

What's more, it's not only an invitation, an offer. Note how Jesus speaks of the command the master gives to the servants after they report the refusal of the first people. "Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame." "Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled."

He tells his servants to "bring in," even "compel" these people in. They don't have a choice. The servants may have been nice, and smiled as they delivered their master's "invitation" to these people, but they also weren't taking no for an answer. The master's house was going to be filled.

And who is compelled in? The poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame. Those out on the roads, those sleeping in hedges because they couldn't afford a room in an inn. Such people know they have nothing. They have no fields, no oxen. They aren't already in a wedding celebration. And so they will treasure the banquet to which they are being brought.

And they have confidence that they'll be brought to it, allowed in to partake of it, because the servants have made it clear that they don't really have an option.

This is the comfort that Jesus gives us in this parable. As His Spirit works in our hearts, He brings us to realize that we have nothing of eternal worth from this world. Whatever we might put our trust in in this world, it has no lasting value. Before Him, we're all poor, lame, blind, crippled, homeless. We have nothing to offer to buy or earn our way into His banquet.

And He knows that. So He sends His Spirit, working through His Word, to compel us into His Kingdom. Luther talks about this in the Small Catechism, where in teaching on the Lord's Prayer he asks the question "How does God's Kingdom come?", and then answers, "God's Kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity." His Holy Spirit. His grace. His holy Word.

He is the one who brings us into His Kingdom, totally apart from any merit or worthiness in us. Again, His Son is the One who purchased your ticket into the banquet. Christ gives Himself as the all-sufficient meal – you don't have to bring anything.

And again, this is all out of grace. Were some of the poor who were brought in poor because they'd made some really dumb choices in their lives? Maybe. Were some people sleeping in hedges

because they had been rightly thrown out of their home for crimes? Perhaps. But the master doesn't asks his servants to compel only the really good people into the feast.

Or to go back to some previous illustrations: the fireman doesn't ask if you've been good enough to be hauled out of the burning building, but grabs you and pulls you to him as the structure begins to collapse. If you tell the crewmen on the sinking ship that you don't know if you deserve to be on the lifeboat, they'll probably assume you fell and hit your head, and they'll toss you aboard to save your life.

Do you or I deserve to be in the banquet of God? No! Have we all sinned and fallen short of His glory, counting our worldly stuff as more valuable than His heavenly treasures? Yes! But the blood of Jesus Christ wipes all that away. He offers forgiveness freely, cleansing all those who do not resist His Spirit and the repentance He brings about.

Whatever sins your past holds, however far off you feel you might be in the highways and hedges, the Lord calls you in, that you might share in the great riches which He was won for you. As He tells you in His Word, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."

This parable is then both a call to repentance and a word of comfort and reassurance. Do not take the gifts of the Lord for granted, seeing His call as a mere invitation that can be ignored or answered on your own terms. As the master says, "For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet." None.

And yet, when you are led to repentance and realize that the things of this world are passing away, or wonder how you could ever deserve such a gift as a seat at the table of the Most High, then hear His words that He is the One who brings you in. He is the One who has paid for your place in His house. He is the One who sends His Spirit and by His grace brings you into His everlasting Kingdom.

In His holy name, amen.