

# Explore the Bible: Offered to All?

March 21, 2017

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for April 9 focuses on Matthew 22:1-14.*

A story recently broke about a little boy who had been born colorblind. He had no capacity for distinguishing between blue and black, red and brown and so on. At least not until he received a newly invented pair of glasses that gave him the capacity for seeing color for the first time in his life. The first time he was able to see in color, he hugged his father and started weeping for joy.

Up until then, if someone had tried to describe the color of the sky or a beautiful sunset, the child would have had no frame of reference. How do you describe the color blue to someone who has never known it as different from any other color?

Jesus was facing something of the same problem when he attempted to describe the kingdom of God, a spiritual kingdom, not an earthly one. There is nothing in human experience to which we can compare the kingdom of God, or heaven.

So, Jesus often used metaphors, or parables, in which he would use a common human experience and say the kingdom of God was kind of like that. In this text, Jesus says the kingdom of God “may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet” (NRSV). No one who is alive has seen heaven, but who among us cannot understand the magnificence, the beauty, the joy and celebration of a wedding feast?

Heaven will be much more, for certain. At least the banquet is a human point of reference for an eternal reality that, with our human senses, is

otherwise incomprehensible.

### **How to read a parable**

We must remember when attempting to understand parables that we should not interpret each detail literally. A metaphor, or parable, is something “like” what it is portraying but not the exact representation of it. A parable might be compared to impressionistic art. The picture gives an impression of something real, not an exact, detailed picture of it. To press each detail of any of Jesus’ parables for literal detail will lead to misinterpretation and likely miss the larger point altogether.

Parables often have mysterious elements that defy complete understanding. The best policy is to let them remain just that—mysterious. Instead of pressing each detail for absolute truth, we should step back and try to understand the larger meaning.

It’s also important to interpret the mysterious elements of Scripture in the context of the larger teaching of all the Bible.

### **The kingdom of God is like a party**

In that respect, this parable is a fascinating description of God’s kingdom. We sometimes have been asked to believe heaven will be a place where, transformed into angels with wings, we’ll sit atop clouds and strum harps. Instead, Jesus compares the experience to a party, a time of ultimate celebration, a joyful time when we share in the king’s unending bounty, even the king’s very presence.

The kingdom of God is like a huge party, Jesus said—a king’s banquet. No expense would have been spared and invitations were sent far and wide. The king’s slaves were sent out among the king’s people with invitations that even included a detailed description of the menu. “Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves

have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet” (vv. 4-5).

Anytime Jesus starts a teaching with the words, “the kingdom of God may be compared to,” or “the kingdom of God is like,” he is about to use a metaphor—a parable, perhaps—to describe something we cannot comprehend by comparing it to something with which we are familiar. In this particular case, Jesus is trying to describe what we might call “heaven,” a humanly incomprehensible reality, by comparing it to something earthly we can comprehend.

Jesus appears to be saying heaven will be a place of continual joy, of eternal provision and celebration. Yet, oddly enough, those the king first invites are preoccupied, distracted, by lesser affairs. Many believe Jesus was speaking directly to the Jewish people, reminding them they were the first invited to the kingdom but have lost sight of what matters most.

In the end, the king invites the most common people, “the good and the bad” (v. 10). Jesus is saying the only qualification for entrance into the kingdom will not be our goodness but the simple fact we were invited and responded by showing up for the party.

Again, there are mysterious elements of this parable. What seems to be certain are these facts:

- No one will miss the kingdom of God because they weren’t invited. That alone is something worth pondering, considering that fully half of the world as we know it now never has heard of Jesus. What God has in mind for inviting everyone we can only leave to faith and trust.
- Those who will miss the kingdom were not those who failed to be invited but those who were distracted by lesser things. We may have nothing to which we can compare the beauty of heaven in our

human experience.

What everyone reading this text can know is that they have been invited to the party. None of us qualifies to be at the party except that we have been invited by the King of all eternity.

The only question is whether we will show up.

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