

Justification and Sanctification
Isaiah 25:6-9; Matthew 22:1-14
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Isaiah 25:6-9 (NRSV)

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;
he will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the LORD has spoken.

It will be said on that day,
Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.
This is the LORD for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Matthew 22:1-14 (NRSV) (read in two sections in this sermon)

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ²

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³ He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come.

⁴ Again he sent other slaves, saying, ‘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.’

⁵ But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶ while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them.

⁷ The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.

⁸ Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy.’ ⁹ Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ ¹⁰ Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

So the king’s son is getting married, and he wants every seat filled, so he sends his servants out to tell the guests that it’s time to come to the spread. But...the guests don’t come. Some make excuses and some commit an act of high treason by killing the servants. The king does what a king in those days would do, by killing the murderers. He’s determined, though, to have every seat filled, so he sends his servants out again to gather everyone they can find—and the hall is filled. He is like, “Yes yes yes I want you at the banquet!”

But then things seem to go from yes yes yes to no no no!

Matthew 22:11-14

¹¹ “But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹² and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’

And he was speechless.

¹³ Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen.”

...Sermon continues

“Yep, I realize I just brought you in off the street, but no no no you can’t be here because you’ve got on the wrong clothes.

This king is definitely the Confusion King. “Yes yes yes I want everyone in my banquet; no no no you need to get out of my banquet.” It sure looks like he can’t decide what he really wants... he sure seems to be sending out mixed signals. Before we pass any quick judgments on him, however, let’s see if he really is the confusion king, or if he just seems like it. Let’s see what he can tell us about God...and then what that tells us about us.

To help us get our minds around the parable, I want to tell you about a real-life royal wedding. I was in Madrid about fifteen years ago when the King of Spain got married. It was amazing all that the country did for the wedding—the whole thing cost about \$30 million for all the decorations, security, civic improvements, etc. I stayed with my Spanish friend Toni—and Toni wasn’t very excited about the wedding. He doesn’t like the monarchy and it drove him crazy that his tax dollars were getting spent on this wedding. So when the big day came, he was so psyched that it was raining...he was screaming things at the TV, at the King, the prince, the new princess, at me, at everything.

Turns out that a German prince was so drunk the night before that he didn’t make it to the ceremony. Now—what if the king said, “Okay—we’ve spent \$30 million on this wedding. The cathedral is beautiful. There cannot be one empty seat. We’ve got to fill it. The celebration just won’t be complete if the place isn’t full.” What if then Toni and I heard a knock on his door, and it was someone from the palace requesting Toni’s presence at the wedding? He had been badmouthing the whole thing—but now the limousine was ready to pick him up. The king wanted him there!

It’s pretty unlikely that the King would actually invite Toni to the wedding, since he’d been complaining so much about the whole thing. If the King of Spain knew how Antonio felt, he wouldn’t have been very welcome. I’m sure he would have picked me instead! That’s the King of Spain. The King of Heaven is different. The King of Heaven invites all of us to the banquet, no matter what our attitude is. God invites us not based on what we do, but out of his love for us. That’s grace. It’s all up to God. God doesn’t worry about our good works or lack thereof when he extends us grace. As Christ’s sacrifice shows us, God stands ready to forgive us, no matter what. We’re all invited to the banquet.

When we accept this invitation—when we claim God’s forgiveness, and put our faith in Christ and his sacrifice and become Christians—God welcomes us to the banquet. When we claim this relationship with Christ, we are made right with God. The technical word for this is justification—when God sees us, he sees Christ’s righteousness. No matter what we’ve done, we’re invited to the banquet—and when we accept the invitation, God sees us as if we’d never sinned. In fact, one way to remember what justification or justified means is that it’s “Just-if-I’d” never sinned. It’s amazing!

But here’s the deal: accepting the invitation doesn’t come without expectations. What if Toni had said, “Fine—I’m ready to go!” Well I can tell you, at that moment in the morning, Toni was not ready to go. He has his pajamas on, with a fleece on over them. He hasn’t showered. He hasn’t shaved. He’s looking pretty scruffy. There was plenty of time for him to get ready—after all, you don’t exactly go to a royal wedding wearing your pajamas. But Antonio figured if they wanted him there so bad, he didn’t need to put on a tux or shave. They’ll have to take what they can get. You can imagine how that’ll go over at the cathedral. Sure, the king wants him there—but that doesn’t mean Toni can accept the invitation on his own terms. If you’re going to go to a royal wedding, you have to live up to the king’s expectations.

It’s true that God has invited all of us to put our faith in Christ, no matter what we’ve done in the past. However, when we become a Christian, God expects that our faith will make a difference in the future. God expects that things will change when we accept the invitation...that our faith will make us more and more like Christ. This is called sanctification—the process of becoming more and more like Jesus. It’s not all up to us—the Holy Spirit nurtures and challenges and strengthens us—but it’s not all up to God either. We don’t get to just sit back and watch ourselves magically become more like Christ. God works; we work; and sanctification happens. You might remember it as “saint-i-fication.”

Justification and sanctification work together. When we accept Christ, we’re justified. God sees us as sinless. Let’s pretend this platform is a

continuum of how much we sin. Over on this side are the holiest people you can ever imagine—Mother Theresa, maybe your favorite Pope, Kristie Finley, people like that. On this other side are the vilest, most horrific people you can imagine. Hitler, serial killers, people like that. Most of us are somewhere in between. You all can decide for yourselves which side you're going to sit on next week. If we had to place Christ on this continuum, he'd be way over there, outside the sanctuary, down the street, blocks and blocks and blocks away...holier and more righteous than any of us can ever imagine being. But when we put our faith in Christ, we're justified and God sees us as if we were as righteous as Christ. Clearly we're not—but through grace God forgives all of our sins. That's justification—God sees us as sinless as Christ.

The thing is, though, that we're not as sinless as Christ. We're still wherever we are on this continuum. Sanctification is the process of moving more and more in Christ's direction. For some people it happens when they become a Christian—they take a big leap in Christ's direction. For the rest of us, it's a slow, deliberate process—one step forward, two steps back, two steps forward, one step back. We let the Holy Spirit craft us into someone who is more and more like Christ. As time passes, we find ourselves slowly but surely moving in this direction.

Justification and sanctification work together. The Christian mystic Thomas Merton said,

“In one sense we are always traveling....In another sense we have already arrived.”

Traveling toward becoming more like Christ, and arrived in that God already sees us as if we were as sinless as Christ.

I said at the beginning that we'd take a look at whether or not this king is a confusion king. Here's why he's not...and why God's not. Justification and sanctification work together. Our justification is based on faith, not on works. We can be anywhere on this continuum when we put our faith in Christ. But if sanctification doesn't happen—if our lives don't slowly but

surely look more like Christ's—then we don't have the kind of faith that God calls us to have.

This means a saving faith is more than just lip service. I can say something is important to me, but if my life doesn't show it, it's just lip service. I've signed up for a 10K in May in Lake Geneva. So maybe I say that getting in shape is really important to me. It's a huge priority. So let's create a different continuum. Maybe over there is Duane Johnson, or that amazing Olympic gymnast Simone Biles. Over there are a bunch of people who are even more out of shape than...say...me. Now, if I say getting in shape is really important, I better be doing things that move me in this direction. If I set my alarm every day to go for a run and then hit snooze fifteen times....if I go to the gym every day, but only to get in the sauna...if I walk into McDonalds and the guy behind the counter says, "Three Big Macs again today, Chip?" ...I may say that getting prepped for the 10K is really important to me, but my actions speak louder than words.

If we claim that we've put our faith in Christ, but our lives don't live up to it, then it's just lip service—we don't have the kind of faith that will save us. If we claim that we've been justified, but our lives don't show any sanctification, then maybe we're not so justified after all. If we accept the King's invitation to the banquet, but don't bother to change clothes, then we're likely to get cast out.

All too often, God's not the confusion king—we're the ones who are the Confusion Kings and Queens. We say we follow Christ, yet our faith doesn't change the way we live. Our mouths say "yes yes yes" but our lives say "no no no." The problem isn't that we find ourselves somewhere on this continuum, short of where Christ is. The problem is that we're not moving in that direction...and if our faith is the kind of faith which will save us, our lives have to change.

Jesus tells us that if we're going to get into the banquet, we need to be justified. We have to accept the king's invitation. We need to be sanctified. We have to live up to the expectations that come with accepting the invitation.

Justification and sanctification work together—God's not the confusion king—and when we have a saving faith, neither are we.