

There are a lot of different biblical translations and paraphrases. This week I invite you to turn in your bible to Matthew 22 for an actual translation, but I want to read the parable from a modern paraphrase that I found on the internet. Hear this re-telling of Matthew 22:1-14:

Wanna know about the kingdom of heaven?

Picture this: A *king* has a son

Son falls in love, gets engaged, gets married

King throws a party for his son's wedding

This is both a national matter and a personal matter

In other words, this is not a regular party.

No wonder only the 'who is who' is invited

Those with power, those with money, those *with*.

But with the appetizer is on the table

And no guest in sight

The king sends messengers to remind his guests

Perhaps thinking "busy people forgot."

With the second reheating of the soup

The king sends limousines and taxis for his guests

Perhaps thinking "gas prices makes them stuck"

Message to guests:

Serving steak and veal! I have spared nothing!

Those on the guest list laughed out loud

They stuck a feather on one messenger

And called him a turkey

They beat up another

Then they left ... one to go farming

And the other to wall street

Like it was another working day

And not the king's son's wedding day!
The king was livid!
 Jumping out of his wedding robes
 Into his commander-in-chief uniform
He sent his soldiers out to declare war on those who didn't come.
But
 With the party food still untouched
 The streamers waving in the wind
 And the DJ spinning oldies and newbies
The king was now desperate for only one thing:
 GUESTS
No never mind how they looked like
 “everyone invited!” said the billboard.
Hey, who dared say no
 With word on the street
 of how those who sent in a RSVP were treated
Dare not go!
 So everybody did.
 The bad and the good,
 the beautiful and the ugly
Filled the fellowship hall to the max.
But the king still had standards!
Just because the standards of his guest list was
 lower than a snakes belly
This was still his son's wedding party
So the man who was not wearing a wedding jacket
 Stood out like a sore thumb
Like man in a suit sticks out at the gym
 Or the size 4 girl sticks out at the Weight Watchers
 Or like a Bear Fan sticks out in Packerland
I guess his looks looked to the king

Like an affront
Like some passive-aggressive stance
Like not-being-at-a-party-attitude while at a party
And with his troops still on their way back from their war work
The king told the ushers to grab this guest-not-dressed-correctly
Duct tape him
Throw him out.

Moral of the story (*according to the guy your wrote this paraphrase*):

If THIS king invites you to his party
You are advised not to RSVP a no
And when you do show up
Be there 100%.
He is not just interested in your physical presence
He wants you *looking* the part and *being* part of the party.

This is a hard passage in certain ways
No matter what translation or paraphrase you read.
Some people question if the king in this parable is meant to represent God
(*Often* the king or the father in Jesus' parables *are* meant to represent God
To the best of our understanding
But sometimes there are other valid interpretations.)
So, what about today's passage...
The king is throwing a party and invites a special chosen guest list
But when they don't come to the party
The king throws open the doors to people on the street
That sounds familiar enough, seems like the king in the story
might represent God as we understand God.

And yet the king in this story behaves in some ways that are not at all
like I have experienced God.

It makes me question if I really understand the story or not.

Let's look more closely.

There are certainly things about the king in this parable that I really like

Details that fit closely with *my* experience of God

I really like, near the end, the way the king welcomes the people

You wouldn't expect to be invited to the prince's wedding party.

Who knows...street vendors and beggars and seamstresses creeping in timidly

To be a part of such a grand affair

It's beautiful

It fits my ideas of social justice and equality

I like this side of God

I like how it challenges me to stop looking at types of people or groups of people

And thinking pontifically to myself

That "those people are in"

And "those people are out"

I believe in a God who will invite everyone into his grace and his kingdom

With no measure of social status or financial success.

Doesn't matter if you and I think a person is fit or not

We'd better get over ourselves or we might find ourselves

Duct-taped and tossed out.

It's the kind of message that keeps us humble

Keeps us living in the real world

Keeps us faithful.

But... there is a certain violence to this parable that I have a hard time with,

Those who were invited

Said they were coming but didn't
The king sends his troops to kill them and burn their city
That detail isn't only in the modern paraphrase
It's in my NRSV study bible too.

Granted they were murderous liars
But still,
Aren't we promised forgiveness for these sins and more.
Why not in the story?

And then there is another troubling incident near the end...
Where the king comes into see the guests
You know, the ones who weren't invited at first but got to come in later
The poor and the outcast and the off kilter and off color ones
Well, the king sees one guy not dressed in a wedding robe
And the king confronts him
"How did you get in here without a wedding robe?!"
The man is speechless and the king commands,
"Bind him hand and foot and throw him into the outer darkness
where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Whoa...!
I thought this was a parable of grace and social justice
About letting the outsiders know that they are invited to be insiders
That God has no prejudice
That God stands with open arms
(and apparently a big muscled bouncer by the back door)

What in the world do we make of this?
How do we have peace when we are invited in
But stand afraid that we might be tossed out
If we aren't clothed properly.

“Clothe yourself in Jesus Christ,” Paul tells us.

Well yes, that is my goal and my intention

But I am not yet perfected in this goal

And I fall terribly short at times

And I want to know that I stand before a God to whom I can fall on my knees

And confess and pray and find new life and new hope when I’ve failed

Not a God from whom I need to hide lest I be caught and tossed out.

How do *you* make sense of these details?

Thank goodness for historians.

I was nearly ready to give up and find a new scripture

That I could make more sense out of

When I came across this tidbit:

The host provides the wedding garment.

In the New Testament days of the Roman Empire,

The host provides the wedding garment.

The one giving the party provides the robes or whatever

For each guest to wear

(there was no tuxedo rental shop at the mall in Jesus’ day)

This detail changes everything!

This is not the story of a king angry that some poor joe

Came to the prince’s wedding in his torn work pants and boots

This is the king angry that someone came in the door

Knew what was appropriate to wear in the king’s presence

Or to wear in celebration of a wedding

And had the proper garment offered to him

And yet this guest chose not to accept the garment provided for him
Offered freely to him.

He thumbed his nose at the generosity of the king
“I don’t need nothin’ from you, you old king,
All I need is me... but I am going to come in and enjoy
The all-I-can-eat-buffet at yo’ party.”

I can understand why the king would be angry at this guest
Why this kind of attitude and behavior just isn’t acceptable.

OK, it doesn’t answer *every* question, but my goodness this historical insight
Sheds so much light on what Jesus was trying to say to us:

The moral is that if we mess up and don’t dress right

God is going to kick us to the curb

Rather, when God offers us what we need

We are expected to open our hands

Open our hearts

Open our very souls

To receive it

And, the message is delivered in the style of Matthew’s gospel,

Saying that if we don’t receive what God offers us

There are dire consequences for us

“Weeping and gnashing of teeth,” Matthew likes to say.

Eternal torture is the message

I am actually just as motivated by sober realizations

That what I receive or choose not to receive from God *in this lifetime*

Will have ultimate effects on the quality of my life

On the freedom and peace I know

On the joy I might experience

On the relationships that I value

On the sense of meaning that I carry with me as I lie down at night
And rise in the morning.

In the parable, it's a wedding garment.

In our real, everyday lives...

God offers _____ to us

Grace

Peace

Hope

Joy

Forgiveness

And we can receive it or we can say "Thanks but no thanks"

A lot of people chose not to attend the wedding

The king's son was getting married

Seems crazy that people wouldn't want to attend...?

God offers us an invitation to forgiveness...

But sometimes we don't want to forgive our enemies
so we don't receive God's gift

God offers us peace

We prefer to fight to get our way

We can take care of ourselves... right (???)

God offers us deep joy

We are willing to settle for entertainment

Or cheap thrills

Or the latest craze

Jesus' parables always seem so clear

What idiot wouldn't put on the special robe the king gave to him

Of course he should be banished!

The application to our life is much harder

We have to open our eyes to all the things (physical and spiritual)

That God is offering to us each day

We have to be honest about whether we are truly receiving from God

What God wants to give to us.

We have to see ourselves honestly, know ourselves fully

In order to know if we are walking into the wedding banquet

Only half dressed

I thought I'd close by repeating the ending of the modern paraphrase that I began with:

If THIS king invites you to his party

You are advised not to RSVP a no

And when you do show up

Be there 100%.

He is not just interested in your physical presence

He wants you *looking* the part and *being* the part

Of the party.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.