

What Is The Proper Attire?

In 1991 I left the business world and entered Concordia seminary in St. Louis, Missouri to become a pastor. Toward the end of my time there, I received a call from a friend back in Cleveland who had just gotten engaged. The woman he was engaged to was from what we would call the "upper class." She was a blueblood from a long line of Cleveland bluebloods, a line that included the Mathers, the Irelands, the Vanderbilts and the Rockefellers. My friend had called to ask me if I would officiate at his wedding. I told him I would be happy to do so and he and his wife were married on the veranda of the bride's house in Bratenahl overlooking Lake Erie. Shortly after they were married, Karen and I were invited to dine at her mother's house--also in Bratenahl. The invitation said that dress would be casual, so I showed up in a sports shirt and khakis, only to find that in Bratenahl casual dress meant a sports jacket and tie. "informal attire" meant a suit. "formal attire" meant a tuxedo. I'll never forget the look on the hostess' face when we arrived: it was somewhere between surprise and amusement. Of course she did everything she could to make me feel comfortable, but since every other man there was in a sports jacket or a suit, and I was in a sports shirt and khakis, I felt like a pork chop at a Jewish wedding. I was embarrassed--and it takes a fair amount to embarrass me. Now all of this is just a sneaky way to get into my message this morning, which is about Jesus' parable of the wedding banquet and the man who showed up without proper attire. Some of Jesus' parables can be difficult to understand—and this one is no exception. A little background might help. Throughout the Old Testament it had been prophesied that one day a mysterious figure called "the messiah" would come and usher in a new kingdom called the kingdom of God. When Jesus appeared he announced that he was the promised messiah and that the kingdom of God had arrived. According to the evangelist Mark, the first words Jesus spoke when he began his ministry were, "the time has come...the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" Throughout his ministry, Jesus used parables to describe what this kingdom was like. The kingdom of God was like a treasure hidden in a field, a rare and beautiful pearl of great price, a farmer scattering seed, and so on. In the parable we're going to look at today, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a wedding banquet which a king hosted for his son and his son's bride. First the king sent out invitations, and then "he sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them that everything was prepared and it was time to come. But a surprising thing happens: "...they refuse to come." But the king is determined

that all those he has invited come so he sends out his servants once again to persuade them to come to the banquet. They make excuses, however: one had to see to his field, another had to attend to some animals he had just purchased, another had just gotten married. Then something shocking happens: some of those who were invited abuse and kill the servants who were sent to escort them to the banquet. The king is furious and sends his soldiers to kill the people who abused his servants and to destroy their city. Then he says to his servants, "go out to the streets and alleys and beyond the city to the hedgerows and fields and make them come so that my house will be full." And so finally, those who are invited begin to show up--the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame, the good and the bad and the ugly until the wedding hall is full. But one guest is not dressed appropriately for the banquet: he is not wearing the proper attire. The king asks him, "friend, how did you get in here without wedding clothes?" You see, in those times, guests at a wedding were required to wear what was called a wedding garment. We don't know what a wedding garment looked like but it was apparently distinctive in some way so that you could tell who was wearing one and who was not. If, however, someone arrived without a wedding garment the host always kept a few extra ones on hand so that he could furnish his guest with one to wear. Some of you may remember that in the "olden days," some upscale restaurants would require men to wear a jacket and tie. If a man arrived without one, however, they always kept a few sports jackets and ties on hand and would lend him one to wear. Now we've liberated ourselves from those stuffy old ways and any slob wearing anything can eat anywhere he likes. In any case, in Jesus' story this particular wedding guest had shown up without the proper garment and then refused to wear one that had been offered to him. The king's reaction is immediate and decisive: the guest is bound hand and foot and thrown into the outermost darkness where there is nothing but "weeping and the gnashing of teeth." Jesus concludes the parable with the mysterious words: "many are called but few are chosen." So what is this parable all about? Jesus' parables are always allegorical. Each part of the parable represents something else. In this parable the king represents god, his son represents Jesus Christ and the wedding banquet represents the celebration of the marriage between Jesus, the bridegroom, and his church, the bride of Christ. Isaiah prophetically described this banquet: "on this mountain the Lord almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine--the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations: he will swallow up death forever [and] wipe away the tears from all faces." The

servants who go out to invite people to the feast represent the missionaries and evangelists Jesus sent out to preach the gospel to all nations. It's called the great commission. But as it is with the wedding banquet, though many are called to faith in Jesus Christ, only a few come. The ones who attack and kill the missionaries and evangelists represent the Pharisees and Romans who imprisoned them, tortured them and killed them. The city the king destroys represents Jerusalem which in the Book of Revelation Jesus calls "Babylon" and which the Romans sacked and burned in 69 a.d. the big question, of course, is what does the wedding garment represent? In the New Testament, our salvation is likened to a robe of righteousness which God places on us to cover all of our sins. Then, when God gazes upon us, he doesn't see our sins, he sees only the righteousness of Christ. God alone can provide this garment of Christ's righteousness and he is willing to provide it right up to the last moment—at the very door of the church where the wedding feast is being held. But if we refuse the garment—as the wedding guest did—and trust in our own righteousness—our own "attire" to get us in—we will be cast out. We are only acceptable to God if our sins are covered by the righteousness of Jesus Christ. As we sing in one of our hymns: "Jesus, thy blood and righteousness; my beauty are, my glorious dress." Now in the parable, it is apparent who has a wedding garment on and who does not. So it is with the garment of Christ's righteousness—those who have freely received it are expected to "wear it"—to make it visible" to others through their words and actions. The parable of the wedding banquet is part of Jesus' answer to the Pharisees when they challenged his authority to curse the unfruitful fig tree. He said to them, "...the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people who will produce its fruits." Like all other forms of citizenship, citizenship in the kingdom of God includes responsibility. As Christians, we are expected to produce fruits of our faith—good works which will draw others to Christ. For as James wrote, "faith without works is dead." We need to make our garment of Christ's righteousness visible to others through our good works. In the Book of Ephesians Paul says, "...for we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." Our good works are gifts from God that will follow us into heaven—which is why Luther wrote, "walk among your good deeds as in a paradise of God." So the parable contains both Gospel and Law: freely we have received so freely we should give. Jesus commissioned his church--his bride--to serve as a light to the nations through the fruitful lives of its members. "Let your light shine before men so that when they see your good deeds they will glorify your Father in heaven." Did you happen to notice in the parable that

no one who is invited to the wedding banquet actually chooses to come? When they hear the invitation, they are compelled to come. They are the chosen. Those who choose to stay away, do so for their own reasons. Many are invited, but few are chosen. It's a sad fact that most people who are invited to enter the kingdom of God choose not to enter it. Many are too busy to take the invitation seriously; others are offended—even angered by the invitation. God invites all people into his kingdom, but he doesn't insist that they come. They retain the right of refusal and many of them choose to exercise it. "Enter through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad the road that leads to destruction and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life and only a few find it." But for those who do come, who enter through the narrow way of Jesus Christ, there is eternal celebration in the marriage feast of the lamb. "Everything is prepared: now come to the feast!" Says the Master. As those who have been both invited and chosen, come! Amen.