

The Wedding Garment



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matthew 21; 22:1–14; Rev. 21:2, 9; Eccles. 12:14; Dan. 7:10; Gen. 3:9–19.*

Memory Text: “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit” (*Romans 8:1*).

Christian history is full of dark pages. Horrible things have been done by professed followers of Christ, and, according to our understanding of prophecy, more evil will be done in His name before Jesus returns.

This week we'll look at a fascinating parable, a parable that reveals the painful truth that not all who profess to be followers of Christ really are. Of course, who are we to make the judgment between the faithful and the unfaithful? Who are we to behold the “mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?” (*Matt. 7:3*). We don't make that judgment. But God does.

“The guests at the gospel feast are those who profess to serve God, those whose names are written in the book of life. But not all who profess to be Christians are true disciples. Before the final reward is given, it must be decided who are fitted to share the inheritance of the righteous. This decision must be made prior to the second coming of Christ in the clouds of heaven; for when He comes, His reward is with Him, ‘to give every man according as his work shall be.’ *Rev. 22:12.*”—Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 310.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 11.*

Days of Fervor

Matthew 21, recounting some of the last days of Jesus' earthly ministry, is filled with drama, tension, and excitement. It also reveals, as the Bible often does, the fearful ability of our hearts to deceive us and the power of the evil one to blind our minds to the most obvious truths. It's easy for us, looking back, to think, *How could those leaders have been so hard, so blind, so indignant in the face of all the evidence given them by Jesus?*

Yet, we mustn't fool ourselves. Is there any reason to think—even as Seventh-day Adventists, living with so much light—that we are much different? Do we not, at times, show a hard and callous indifference to truth, particularly when it interferes with our pet sins and desires and worldliness? Sure, God loves us, Christ died for us, and forgiveness is available to all. But those same words could be said about the people in this chapter, as well, the ones who not only turned their backs on Jesus but worked against Him. How careful we need to be, for we deceive ourselves if we think that we can't be deceived as well.

Read through Matthew 21, which forms the background for the parable in the next chapter. While so much is happening there, what is the basic theme of the chapter? That is, if you had to write a summary of it in a few lines, what would it be? More important, what spiritual lessons can we take from it for ourselves?

Perhaps the most fascinating lines in the entire chapter are the last two. No matter how hard the people's hearts were to Jesus, something of His message must have gotten through because they knew He had been talking about them. It would have been one thing if they had they completely missed His point, but they hadn't. That was the problem; they seemed to have understood it, at least well enough to want to get Jesus out of the way. How fascinating, too, that it was the people themselves, the Jewish crowds drawn to Jesus, who restrained the leaders from arresting Him then. How sad—those who should have been teachers of others were the ones who had the most to learn and, in many cases, never learned it. When they finally do, it will be too late (*Rom. 14:10*).

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Matthew 22:1–14*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Analyze how and why the story of the king’s wedding banquet includes aspects of the investigative judgment.

Feel: Discern the attitudes and emotions that lead to the rejection of the king’s invitation to the wedding banquet and the attitude of the king in response to this rejection.

Do: Accept the invitation to God’s wedding party and faithfully wear the robe provided.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Judgment at the Wedding

A How does it happen that the story of God’s celebration of marriage also involves depictions of violence experienced by God’s messengers as well as by those who refuse to wear His garments?

B Who are the true celebrants at the wedding, and why?

II. Feel: Unwilling Guests

A The attitudes and emotions are strong and varied in this story, and we are going to experience a number of them, since we, too, are invited to this wedding banquet. With what attitude do we choose to approach the invitation God offers?

III. Do: Worthy to Be Chosen

A How should we react to the gift of the garment offered freely to us as guests at the wedding?

► **Summary:** All are invited to the king’s wedding banquet, but not all accept the invitation. Among those who actually choose to show up at the feast, some choose not to wear the robe provided by the king: Christ’s robe of righteousness. It is not enough to accept the invitation; we must have the proper attire.

The King's Invitation

It's one thing to have a wedding. It's another thing for a king to have a wedding. And to be invited to a wedding put on by a king for *his own son* would have been a very high honor indeed. The wedding imagery there, particularly of the son, is, of course, an obvious reference to the relationship between Jesus and His church (*Rev. 21:2, 9; Eph. 5:21–23*).

Read Matthew 22:1–8. How does this part of the parable fit in with what we saw in the preceding chapter? What same theme appears?

Notice, too, how the king made all the preparations: he arranged for the marriage, he prepared the dinner, and he had the animals slain. Indeed, the message was “all things are ready: come unto the marriage.” In the end, all that the people had to do was accept what the king offered them.

Notice, too, the things that caused the people to scorn the invitation. Some made light of it; that is, they just didn't take it seriously, didn't think it mattered, didn't think it important. That could symbolize those today who just don't take the claims of God seriously, who, for various reasons, never open themselves up to truth. Others “went their ways.” Jesus said that the path to salvation is narrow (*Matt. 7:14*); people can find all sorts of excuses to avoid and reject the invitation. For others, it was simply the lure of material things. And finally, while some just ignored the invitation, others actually persecuted those who gave it. Whatever the reason, they all were left out.

Think, too, about the words of the king, saying that those who had rejected the invitation “were not worthy.” How do we understand this, in light of the universality of all human sin and sinfulness? Are any of us really worthy to be invited to the king's feast? In the end, as we'll see, “worthiness” in the biblical sense comes from what Christ does for us; our worthiness is not in ourselves but in what we allow God to do for us—and in us.

Of the reasons given above for those who rejected the invitation, which one do you find the most difficult to deal with in your own life? What promises can you claim that will enable you to resist it?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Christ’s righteousness is the only “heaven-ready” garment offered to fallen humanity, and we must consciously put it on each day if we hope to dine with the King.

Just for Teachers: Share the following meditation on the idea of getting something for free, perhaps leading your class in a discussion of whether or not free giveaways affect their shopping habits. The objective of this opening piece is to get the class thinking about the power offered to us through God’s free gift of the garment of Christ’s righteousness.

Free. It’s the word that sends would-be shoppers into department stores where most of the merchandise is overpriced to start with. Give away one or two cheap items and charge a sheik’s ransom for the rest of your goods. “Free” delivers the visitors who then browse and buy other items at “sale” prices.

Consumers, to their credit, have gotten wise to the scheme, especially those who live their lives online. The online consumer wants everything—you guessed it—free. Business entities are beginning to cave to the pressure. If one company gives away its signature water bottle for free online, can competitors afford not to follow suit?

Consider This: God has offered fallen humanity a gift of epic proportions: Jesus’ death paid the price for our sins, while His sinless life covers our sinful lives. What is the attitude of most human beings to this extraordinary offer of grace? Why don’t more people accept this free offer?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. A Gift Given (Review Matthew 21, Genesis 12:1–3, and Exodus 19:1–5 with your class.)

In Matthew 21, we see Jesus in rare form. From beginning to end, the message of the entire chapter can be summed up in verse 43, Jesus’ explanation of the parable of the wicked vinedressers: “ ‘Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it’ ” (NKJV).

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Those Who Came to the Feast

With the rejection of two calls, the king now sent out another one, this time to “as many as ye shall find” (*Matt. 22:9*), and ordered his servants to invite them to the wedding. This time, however, the reception was different. According to the text, they went out and “gathered together all as many as they found” (*Matt. 22:10*).

Read the rest of the parable (*Matt. 22:9–14*). **Who came to the wedding feast? What does it mean that some who came were “both bad and good”?**

Have you ever noticed that some of the meanest, nastiest, and most hateful people are professed Christians? Or that some of the most judgmental, condemnatory, hypocritical, and downright evil people are those who go to church, who claim the promises of salvation, and who profess assurance of salvation?

This is nothing new. How do we understand, for instance, the faith of the Crusaders, so dedicated to the Lord Jesus that they pillaged and plundered their way to the Holy Land? One eyewitness reported that “our troops boiled pagan adults in cooking pots. They impaled children on spits and devoured them grilled.” How could those horrors have been done in the name of Jesus?

It’s easy (you may say): *these people weren’t real Christians*. But how do you know? How can you judge their hearts, what they were taught, what opportunities they had to know better? Might not some have later repented, claiming the same promises of forgiveness and grace that we do? What about the horrendous acts of those who turned out to be, it seems, pretty pious souls? Who are we to judge hearts?

We shouldn’t judge—but God does, should, and will (*Rom. 14:10; Heb. 10:30; Eccles. 12:14; Dan. 7:9, 10*). Seventh-day Adventists call it the “investigative judgment,” and it is revealed in this parable.

Think through some of the things that have been done by professed Christians through history, sometimes in the name of Jesus. How does this parable help us to understand how God will deal justly with them?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

It was God who first called Abraham, their progenitor, with promises of mind-boggling blessings (*Gen. 12:2, 3, NKJV*). God reaffirmed this covenant at the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai (*Exod. 19:1–5*).

The nation of Israel was to be God's special treasure, a nation of priests serving as God's example of righteousness and blessing in a sinful world. But like the original invitees to the marriage supper (*Matt. 22:3*), many lightly esteemed the invitation, choosing instead to go their own way. Of course, many were faithful to Jesus, and these are the ones who formed the nucleus of the early church.

Consider This: According to Matthew 21, why did Israel cease to be God's chosen people, His bride, garbed in the special wedding robe of His righteousness? Why did they reject this special garment from God? What parallels exist today in the behavior of ancient Israel and modern-day spiritual Israel?

II. Completely Covered (*Review Matthew 22:8–10 and Colossians 2:9, 10 with your class.*)


Tuesday's study makes the powerful point that many professed Christians will look askance at the highway and hedge dwellers who gain entry to the king's feast. But as the lesson notes, none of us are qualified to judge the entrants to the feast.

Furthermore, the king laid out the criteria for entry: come dressed in the garment provided. We should note here that nothing was left out of the garment. It was, in a word, complete: perfectly tailored to fit each guest. No matter their background or station in life, when the guests entered, they looked like they belonged, as though they were royal subjects. And, in truth, they were.

Colossians 2 states, "For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power" (*vss. 9, 10, NKJV*). This is the completeness that covers us when we put on the character of Christ. The covering offered by the king is no ordinary garment.

Consider This: The life of Jesus brings all God's blessings in its train. How can we access God's fullness each day?

III. A Righteousness of His Own (*Review Matthew 22:11–14, 25:1–13 with your class.*)

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What does the garment represent in the parable? Why should rejection of it be literally a matter of eternal life or death?

Unless one believes in once saved always saved, then what is the problem with the idea that God, at some point in history, ultimately and finally separates the wheat from the tares (*Matt. 13:24–30*), the wise from the foolish (*Matt. 25:1–13*), the faithful from the unfaithful (*Matt. 25:14–30*), and those who are truly covered in His righteousness and those who aren't (*Matt. 22:1–14*) from among those who have professed to follow Him, especially when some of them have done, and might still do, horrible things, maybe even in His name too?

Will there not be some kind of final reckoning among the true and the false who claim the same promises of salvation that we always do, especially in a religion whose basis is that you are saved by what Someone else has done for you?

Think it through: if salvation were purely by our works, it would be easy; just tally up our works. Either they add up or they don't. Period. But in a faith where salvation rests on the merits of what Someone else has done for us, a faith in which the righteousness needed for salvation exists in Someone other than ourselves, the issue gets more subtle, more nuanced. Hence, a judgment by One who never makes a mistake would seem more necessary here than in a religion where works are the standard, would it not?

And that is what this parable is all about—God separating the true and false from among those who have professed to follow Him. And what is the deciding factor? Whether or not they have been clothed in the wonderful garment of righteousness that Christ has freely offered to all.

This parable draws a significant distinction between being a member of a church and being a sinner saved by the righteousness of Christ. They clearly aren't the same things, are they? Look at your life, your deeds, your actions, your words, your thoughts, and your attitude toward friends and enemies. Do they reflect someone wearing Christ's robe of righteousness or someone who has just come to the feast?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

No matter how great God’s offer of grace, not everyone will choose to accept it. In fact, Jesus summed it up best when He declared, “ ‘Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it’ ” (*Matt. 7:13, 14, NKJV*). The “few” mentioned here, as noted in the lesson study, dovetail with the “few” who are chosen (*Matt. 22:14*).

One man came to the wedding feast without his garment. He failed to prepare for the event, although everything he needed was provided. This man represents professed Christians who choose to wear their own righteousness instead of Christ’s. But there’s more to Christ’s righteousness than just righteousness. Consider what the apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:30, “But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (*NKJV*).

Jesus is our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.

Consider This: Define righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. Discuss whether there is any phase of our salvation that God has left up to us. How does this understanding change what it means to be covered in Christ’s righteousness?

► **STEP 3—Apply**

Thought Questions:

- 1 Read Philippians 3:8, 9. According to these verses, what is the driving passion of Paul’s life? Are you passionate about being “in Christ”? What might be preventing you from abiding fully in Him?
- 2 In the parable of the wedding feast, the king examines—investigates—the man dressed in the wrong attire and pronounces judgment on him. Given that God is currently examining the record of all humanity in this great antitypical day of atonement, what should you be doing right now? How should you live?

Application Questions:

- 1 Read John 15:1–8. What counsel did Jesus give the disciples to help them stay spiritually vibrant and fruitful? What does it mean to abide in Christ?

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The Investigation

As expressed yesterday, unless you believe that once a person is “saved” that person can never fall away, it’s hard to imagine that God wouldn’t have a final separation between those clothed in His righteousness and those who just claim to be. That’s essentially what this parable is about. Again, for a religion based not on our own works but on Someone else’s works for us (which we claim by faith), how could there not be this final divine separation?

Read Ecclesiastes 12:14 and 1 Corinthians 4:5 in light of Matthew 22:11. What’s the one point that they have in common, and why is that important?

As Seventh-day Adventists, with our understanding of the great controversy (*Rev. 12:7–9, 1 Pet. 5:8, Job 1, 2*) and the interest of the entire universe in this great controversy (*Dan. 7:10, 1 Cor. 4:9, Eph. 3:10*), we easily can reject the argument—taken from 2 Timothy 2:19, “the Lord knoweth them that are his”—used against the idea that an investigation of works is biblical. The Lord *does know* those who are His, but the rest of the universe, ourselves included, don’t.

It’s so important that we keep the big picture in mind: the interest of the whole universe in what is going on here with sin, rebellion, salvation, and God’s plan to deal with everything in an open, just, and fair way.

The very idea of a judgment of any kind presupposes some kind of investigation, does it not? Look at Genesis 3:9–19; from the first moment after sin entered, God Himself got directly involved, asking questions to answers that He already knew. Just as this “investigation” wasn’t for Himself (it helped Adam and Eve understand the gravity of what they had done), the same can be said of the investigative judgment: it doesn’t reveal anything new to God; it’s for the benefit of others.

Just as in this Genesis judgment, where God’s grace overruled the death sentence (*see Gen. 3:15*), His grace does the same for all of God’s true followers, now and in the judgment—when they need it the most!

An investigation of your works? Is there any wonder that you need to have Christ’s righteousness covering you at all times, or that salvation has to be by grace and not by works? What hope would you have if—when all your works were investigated—you didn’t have Christ’s robe covering you?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

- 2 Examine your own spiritual walk with God. List three things that you can do in the coming week that would deepen your intimacy with Jesus Christ.

► **STEP 4—Create**

Just for Teachers: Below is a highly challenging quotation from Ellen G. White, written more than a hundred years ago. Share it and lead a discussion of the questions that follow. The objective of this exercise is to consider what motivated Ellen G. White to write the following critique of religious faith as practiced by some believers during the time of what is now known in history as the Great Awakening in the early to mid-nineteenth century:

“A profession of religion has become popular with the world. Rulers, politicians, lawyers, doctors, merchants, join the church as a means of securing the respect and confidence of society, and advancing their own worldly interests. Thus they seek to cover all their unrighteous transactions under a profession of Christianity. The various religious bodies, re-enforced by the wealth and influence of these baptized worldlings, make a still higher bid for popularity and patronage. Splendid churches, embellished in the most extravagant manner, are erected on popular avenues. The worshipers array themselves in costly and fashionable attire. A high salary is paid for a talented minister to entertain and attract the people. His sermons must not touch popular sins, but be made smooth and pleasing for fashionable ears. Thus fashionable sinners are enrolled on the church records, and fashionable sins are concealed under a pretense of godliness.”—*The Great Controversy*, p. 386.

Questions for Witnessing:

- 1 How relevant is this message today?
- 2 How should Christians respond to such practices? Are these issues best left for God to handle at the time of harvest (*Matt. 13:30*), or are Christians called to “cry aloud” and “spare not” (*Isa. 58:1*)? Give reasons for your answer.
- 3 How can you help those who are wearing the wrong garments to put on Christ’s righteousness?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Without a Wedding Garment,” pp. 307–319, in *Christ’s Object Lessons*.

“But the plan of redemption had a yet broader and deeper purpose than the salvation of man. It was not for this alone that Christ came to the earth; it was not merely that the inhabitants of this little world might regard the law of God as it should be regarded; but it was to vindicate the character of God before the universe.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 68.

“Yet Satan was not then destroyed. The angels did not even then understand all that was involved in the great controversy. The principles at stake were to be more fully revealed. And for the sake of man, Satan’s existence must be continued. Man as well as angels must see the contrast between the Prince of light and the prince of darkness. He must choose whom he will serve.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 761.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Think about Christian history. Think about all the horrible things done by professed Christians, and often in the name of Jesus. Think how people have used their faith as cover, a cloak, a justification for some horrific crimes. How does this unfortunate fact help us to better understand the need for the kind of separation among the professed followers of Jesus, as revealed in this parable and in other Bible texts?
- ❷ Ellen G. White makes it clear that Christ’s robe represents the righteousness of Jesus that not only covers, or justifies, us but also changes us into His image, and allows us to reflect His character in our lives. How are we to understand the differences between these two essential truths, and why is it important that we do?
- ❸ Reflect upon the reality of the great controversy and how much it impacts and influences our theology as Seventh-day Adventists. Go through the Bible and pull together all the texts you can find that illustrate just how biblical and important this theme is.
- ❹ Jesus ended the parable of the wedding garment with these words: “For many are called, but few are chosen” (*Matt. 22:14*). What do you think He meant by that statement, given the context of the parable?