

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, too, 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 that Jesus had given them?*

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. Though 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 had they completely missed His point, but they didn'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 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 all the preparations were done by the king: he arranged for the marriage, he prepared the dinner, and he had the animals slain. Indeed, “all things are ready: come unto the marriage” was the message. In the end, all that the people had to do was accept what was 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 that, 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?

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, because, 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 were the ones 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 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 too. How does this parable help us understand how God will deal justly with them?

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 thing, 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?

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 just claiming 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 that 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?

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:

- 1 Think about Christian history. Think about all the horrible things done by professed Christians, and often in the name of Jesus too. Think how people have used their faith as cover, a cloak, a justification for some horrific crimes. How does this unfortunate fact help us 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?
- 2 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?
- 3 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 show just how biblical and important this theme is.
- 4 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?

The Balite Tree

by BONY LAGUNDAY

The Manobo people of Togoapon village in the southern Philippines wanted to relocate their village. They found a site that had plenty of safe water and enough land for houses and gardens. The site was perfect except for one thing: a balite, or banyan, tree grew nearby, and some villagers believed that the tree was home to spirits. Some said that they heard a baby cry near the tree. Others smelled food cooking when they passed the tree. The witch doctor predicted that a disaster would wipe out the village if they moved to the area where this tree grew.

I am one of two student missionary teachers in this village. Some Seventh-day Adventist members told us about the problem and asked our advice. Should they move the village to the new site or find another location?

We prayed and then told the believers, “Satan is real; he is seeking to deceive people. But God has defeated Satan, who trembles when he hears the weakest child of God pray. We have nothing to fear as long as we trust God to cover us with His care.”

The villagers moved to the new site. Some villagers heard strange sounds coming from the balite tree; others noted that some children had gotten sick. Even I felt something strange.

One day I saw a new student in my classroom, a student I didn’t recognize. The other children didn’t seem to see this new student. After class this new student warned me not to stay in this village or something bad would happen to me. Then, in a blink, the mysterious student disappeared. Later I saw him near the balite tree.

That night I couldn’t sleep. I thought of my late father and my grandmother, both of whom had been witch doctors in the village of my birth. Could the devil’s curse still be on me? Then I reminded myself that I am now God’s child, and God won the victory over Satan before this world was created. I talked to my teammate, and we prayed that God would show the villagers that He truly is God and that they have nothing to fear.

The tree continued to disturb the villagers, so someone suggested that they cut it down. But the people feared that the person who cut the tree down would die. So I took the ax, prayed, then cut down the tree. No harm came to any of the villagers. “The God of the student missionary teachers is a powerful God!” the people declared.

Please pray that the people of Togoapon will grow in their faith. And thank you for your mission offerings that help train me and other young Adventists for service in difficult places around the world.

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