

Lesson 10

Proper 23

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 22:1–14

It was Monday or Tuesday of Holy Week. Jesus had forcefully cleansed the temple court of merchants and moneychangers and was teaching in the temple. Representatives of the religious leaders approached Him, demanding that He tell them by what authority He taught and did His miraculous signs and bold acts. Instead, Jesus confronted them with their own religious attitudes and actions through a series of parables, the last of which is today's Holy Gospel. With the parable of the two sons, He exposed the shallowness of the yes they were saying to God—no deeper than words and outward appearance. With the parable of the talents, He accused them of being unfaithful in their responsibilities as religious leaders, rejecting the Lord's call through prophets like John the Baptist and rejecting even the Son He had sent—all so they could perpetuate the religious system in which the "fruits of the vineyard" went to them. This parable of the wedding banquet then ended the confrontation and spurred the Pharisees on in their plotting to get rid of Him.

151. What was Jesus trying to make the people and the religious leaders aware of with the parable of the wedding banquet? What does it say about "the king" that he sent out repeated invitations to those originally invited to the feast? What shows the serious consequences of rejecting the king's invitation to the feast?

In God's gracious will and purpose, the "wedding feast" for His Son will indeed have its full complement of guests—and not always those we might expect to be there.

152. How is it that "both bad and good" were accepted and welcomed to the wedding hall? Since both "bad and good" will be at the feast, how must we understand the king's saying, "Those invited were not worthy"?

The part of the parable that deals with the wedding clothes is an epilogue that adds its own point. In that society it was not unusual for the wealthy to provide their guests with festive garments for such grand occasions. This relieved the guests of expenditure on their part and underscored the expansive generosity of the host. Our English "had no wedding garment" is not as expressive as the Greek, which is a passive form meaning "not having been garmented"—in other words, not wearing the garment the king supplied.

153. What is this wedding garment, and why is it essential that everyone at the banquet be clothed in it? (See Isaiah 61:10; Revelation 7:14; 19:7–8.) Why will all who appear without this festive garment be “speechless,” without excuse?

154. In the light of the parable, interpret Jesus’ closing *mashal*: “Many are called, but few are chosen.”

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 25:6–9

Chapter 24 ends with the promise that “on that day the LORD will punish the host of heaven, in heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth. . . . [F]or the LORD of hosts reigns on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem” (vv. 21, 23b). These surely were reassuring words. Assyria had conquered the Northern Kingdom, Israel, and had deported major elements of the population for settlement elsewhere. Her armies then pressed southward into Judah, overwhelming its northern villages. Jerusalem itself was threatened. Isaiah steadfastly prophesied that Jerusalem would be saved and encouraged its people and their leaders to trust in the Lord instead of political alliances.

In chapter 25, the prophet praises the Lord for this assured deliverance. Its first verses use terminology that called to mind the Lord’s strength in fighting for Israel in the destruction of Jericho and the conquest of Canaan and His mercy toward Israel in settling them in the Promised Land. Verses 6–9, the heart of the chapter, give to the praise an eschatological, universal thrust.

155. Which mountain was Isaiah referring to with “On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food”?

156. What is “the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations”? What is especially striking about the fact that Isaiah says that it is on this mountain that the Lord of hosts will “swallow up death forever”?

157. For whom will the sovereign Lord wipe away the tears from their faces and take away their reproach? (See Revelation 21:1–4.)

158. What impact is added by the prophet’s ending with “the LORD has spoken”?

The lesson ends with a short song of praise that displays the attitude of all who have been tested and have learned that the Lord's promises are sure and certain. Read the words aloud together: "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for Him, that He might save us. This is the LORD; we waited for Him; let us be glad and rejoice in His salvation."

159. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Philippians 4:4–13

This familiar pericope has been read on the Fourth Sunday in Advent from ancient times and is still part of the One-Year Lectionary on that Sunday. It contributes to Philippians being called Paul's "Letter of Joy."

The joyous fellowship of the congregation in Philippi evidently was being disturbed by a squabble between two of the women (vv. 2–3). Paul urged them to settle things and "agree in the Lord" and encouraged his "true companion," evidently the congregation's elder or pastor, to intervene pastorally to help them resolve the problem.

160. Paul's encouragement to peacekeeping led him to point to an important part of the dynamic of making peace. What does it mean to rejoice in the Lord? What impact was added for his friends in Philippi by the fact that Paul wrote this encouragement to rejoice while he was in custody awaiting trial in Caesar's court?

161. How does the fact that the Lord's return is near encourage us to gentleness in our dealings with others, yielding our "rights" rather than insisting on them?

Paul wrote, "Do not be anxious about anything." The Greek for "anxious" carried the idea of a mind being drawn in different directions, not focused or assured. We all know what that is.

162. What does Paul prescribe for anxiety? What is not to be forgotten as we bring prayer and petitions to God? How will our consciously giving thanks to God influence our whole outlook on life?

163. What blessed results will be gained from practicing such a conscientious spiritual exercise? Why will the peace of God surpass all understanding as it guards our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus?

Lesson 10

Proper 23

Almighty God, You invite us to trust in You for our salvation. Deal with us not in the severity of Your judgment but by the greatness of Your mercy; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 22:1–14

151. With this parable, Jesus wanted to make the people and their leaders aware that they were too content with the status quo, too preoccupied with personal affairs, and too stubborn in wanting to continue a system that exalted them to hear and respond to the Good News of the Kingdom that John proclaimed and Jesus personified. They were not ready to be involved in the inner, personal change that God’s invitation required. That “the king” sent out repeated invitations to his chosen people shows the love he had for them and his desire for their positive response to his love. Rejection of the invitation is always serious. In the parable, Jesus says the king “sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.” Jerusalem’s destruction by the Roman army in AD 70 was a striking fulfillment of this and brought the Old Testament’s temple ritual worship to an end.

152. The command to go out to the streets and “invite to the wedding feast as many as you find” and the servants’ bringing in “both bad and good” emphasize both the universality of the Gospel invitation and its gracious nature. We may distinguish between reputable and disreputable people, but before God, all are equally guilty and all are equally eligible for His grace in Christ. “Evident sinners,” when they turn to Christ in sincere repentance and faith, are welcomed to the banquet hall just as “solid citizens,” when they turn to Christ in repentance and faith. “Those invited were not worthy” has to be understood in terms of their rejection of the invitation, for none deserve to come. *Axios*, translated “worthy,” carried the idea of “equal value” or “equal weight.” Those who reject Christ are not worthy, not because of their sins, but because they have rejected the One who removes sins and graciously makes us “equal to” feasting with Him. The welcoming of the Gentiles into God’s kingdom surprised the Jewish Christians, who had a hard time getting over the feeling that they were special to God just because they were Abraham’s descendants. In our pride, we, too, may have problems with God’s love for “undesirable” people. The parable warns everyone, including us, not to miss the opportunity to celebrate with Christ at the wedding feast because of a self-exalting pride that negates the Gospel.

153. The wedding garment is the righteousness won for us by Jesus. When we have been so garmented by grace through faith, God sees us only through the filter of His forgiving love in Christ. (See Romans 3:21–28; 8:1–4; Philippians 3:7–11.) Those who reject this garment invite God to see them as they are and to judge them on the basis of their own performance. (See Isaiah 64:6; Romans 3:19–20; John 3:36.) Since this offer of grace in Christ is open and available to all, there is no excuse for those who prefer to “do it themselves.” When people hear and understand the Gospel’s

invitation but ignore it or reject it, all their excuses are gone, and their responsibility before God is increased. (See Luke 12:47–48.)

154. The Greek verbs in Jesus' *mashal* are weightier than our "called" and "chosen." *Kletoi* means "called ones," signifying all those who are confronted with God's gracious, effective call in Christ to eternal life, whether or not they accept it. *Eklektoi* means "elected ones," signifying those who have been in God's mind from eternity, have been elected in Christ, and do not reject the call as it comes through the Gospel. Many people choose not to be the elect through their disinterest, preoccupation with earthly affairs (vv. 3–5), or desire to wear their own works garments instead of the grace garment that God provides (v. 11).

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 25:6–9

155. "On this mountain" refers back to the concluding verses of chapter 24, where the Lord is described as reigning on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem. In eschatological terms, we see this as a reference to the new Jerusalem, the eternal kingdom of our Lord. It is especially striking and emphasizes the eschatological thrust of this pericope that the feast of rich food will be prepared for all peoples. The prophecy of hope is not just for the people of Judah, but will find its ultimate fulfillment when the Good News of salvation in Jesus is proclaimed to all nations.

156. The covering that is cast over all peoples and the veil that is spread over all nations are illustrative of death. None can escape its reach. Death was sometimes called "the Great Swallower." Here the Lord is described as the one who will swallow up death forever, and He will do it "on this mountain." This refers ultimately to eternal life in the new Jerusalem. (See 1 Corinthians 15:54–57.) But it is especially striking that it was also geographically true that the One who won the victory for all peoples and nations gave up His life and rose again "on this mountain" outside the gates of Jerusalem.

157. John repeated Isaiah's picture as he was given a view of its fulfillment in his vision in Revelation. The promise that tears and death, mourning and crying, and pain will be overcome and removed once for all belongs to all who will receive God's gift of eternal life through faith in Jesus, the promised Messiah.

158. "The LORD has spoken" is like a great "Amen" at the end of the statement. When we say "Amen," we are saying "Yes, that certainly is true!" As the prophet brought this great eschatological assurance, his "Amen" was "The LORD [not Isaiah] has spoken." Preachers need to be able to say "The LORD has spoken" when they have finished a sermon because they know they have proclaimed His Word.

159. The obvious tie to today's Holy Gospel is the picture of the feast provided by the Lord for all peoples. It corresponds to the wedding banquet in which those who by faith have received Christ's "robe of righteousness" covering their sin may attend (Galatians 3:27).

The Epistle for the Day: Philippians 4:4–13

160. Rejoicing in the Lord means letting His love and peace pervade and transform every circumstance of life. Uplook changes outlook! Paul exemplified such rejoicing in the Lord, a rejoicing that is not dependent on happy circumstances. Christ's love was sustaining and cheering Paul, bringing light into his dark circumstances.

161. In the eternal kingdom, we will experience fullness of joy in Jesus' presence. He is coming soon! Living in anticipation of His coming, we recognize that what we have or don't have here is rather inconsequential. Yielding our rights may be inconvenient and irritating here, but in view of what awaits us in heaven, it doesn't really matter.

162. Paul prescribes confident prayer as the remedy for anxiety. As we turn matters over to God, we are able to rejoice in the assurance that He has things well in hand for us. (See 1 Peter 5:5–7.) Joyful thanksgiving must always be an ingredient in our prayers—not just because we have enough things and everything is going well, but because we have Jesus and that makes everything right. Giving thanks is an exercise that influences our whole perspective: we focus on blessings received in Christ instead of on circumstances that trouble and threaten us.

163. The result of building our lives on thanksgiving is that we are continually focused on the fact that God is at work in everything for our good, so the result is that “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” The peace that God offers is the assurance that we have in Christ that nothing in all creation can separate us from His love. (See Romans 8:31–39.) It doesn’t seem that way at times when we take a logical view of things, but if we go beyond understanding to faith and trust that is based solely on the surprising Gospel of Christ, we find that the Spirit builds this surpassing peace of God in our hearts and lives.

164. An honest look at ourselves leads us to recognize that our sinful nature is still active and loves to respond to temptation. We may “put [it] to death” (Colossians 3:5), but it revives when we are not looking. Awareness of this drives us to the Gospel—happy that we are saved not because we have repented and become good people, but because in Christ we have full, free, and continuing forgiveness. This encourages us to live in the Spirit of Jesus, focus on positive values, and, through Word and prayer and worship in the fellowship of the Church, claim the victory over what the world communicates.

Fill-in Answers: Paul thanked the Philippians that they had found the opportunity to renew their concern for him.

165. The secret of contentment in whatever situation is to focus on what we have in the grace of God, a living relationship with Christ and assurance that also our material circumstances are under the purview of His loving providence.