**The Earnest Gospel Call**

Text: Matthew 22:1-14

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Isaiah 55:1-11; Matthew 22:1-14

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 95, 176, 533, 432, 115

**Series:** Canons of Dort (#10) 3rd/4th Head of Doctrine – Articles 8&9

**Theme:** God calls many, but few are chosen

**Proposition:** The gospel invitation should be brought to all hearers of the Word – we should invite all people to come to Christ

**Introduction**

Imagine that our church building was positioned on a small island a few hundred meters from the mainland. Using a loudspeaker I could invited everyone on the shore to come and join us for worship, but in order to do so they would have to swim because there were no boats available and the channel between the island was too deep to wade across. Given that some people couldn’t swim across to the island either because they had never learnt or they didn’t have sufficient strength, the question could be asked – was the invitation for everyone to come to worship really sincere?

That’s the thorny issue tackled by the Canons of Dort in Article 3.8 – the earnest call by the Gospel. The first section of the Canons affirms God’s eternal decree of election to save some, but to leave many others to the just consequence of their sins – eternal death. This is the ‘U’ of TULIP – Unconditional Election. The next section teaches that Christ died specifically, and only, for those whom God has elected to salvation. This is the ‘L’ of TULIP ‘Limited Atonement’.

In the third and fourth sections of the Canons of Dort the doctrines of Total Depravity and Irresistible Grace are set forth. If mankind is totally depraved, naturally unable to respond to the call to come to God to receive His grace, and yet that grace cannot be resisted by God’s elect, then is the offer of the gospel really sincere? The writers of the Canons of Dort wisely did not attempt to resolve the mysteries that are not revealed in Scripture, but they do uphold God’s truth by affirming that when the gospel is offered freely there is a genuine, earnest, well-meant invitation to come and receive life in Christ. This ‘earnest gospel call’ is expressed in these words in Isaiah 55:1: "*Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price*”

We also see the earnest gospel call in the kingdom parable that Jesus taught on his way to Jerusalem as recorded by Matthew in his gospel (Matt 22:1-14). He has been welcomed by the crowds, entering into the city on a donkey: *"Hosanna to the Son of David; Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest!"* (Matt 21:9b) The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem had become more and more hostile to Jesus. He had overturned the tables of the money changers. He was speaking with an authority which no one could deny.

The Parable of the Wedding feast is the third in a series of teaching illustrations all dealing with same theme: Who are the true people of God? It’s a story full of shocking surprises through which Jesus makes clear who is in the kingdom of heaven and who is not. A Jewish wedding was a huge celebration – in Old Testament times usually involving a week of festivities. In the parable this is no ordinary wedding. It is a royal one for the King’s Son.

Verse 2 implies this monarch only had one son. It is clear from the parable that invitations had already been sent out. The invited guests were expected to be there because they had already been called. As we work our way through the parable, we will see three different groups of people and also connect each of these to the doctrines expressed in the Canons of Dort Articles 3:7 – 3:10. The three different groups are:

1. Those who are invited, but unwilling to come (3-8)
2. Those who are invited, both evil and good (8-10)
3. Those who are invited, but not dressed (11-13)
4. **Those who are Invited, but unwilling (3-8)**

The first group are the ones who had already been invited. They are called a second time to come to the wedding feast. This was not unusual in Bible times; the custom was to send a notice out that the meal was ready. What is shocking is that the invited quests were unwilling to come, so King sends out a third invitation; the meal is ready and prepared. Most people at that time had diet of bread/fish/lentils. Meat like oxen and fat calves was a great luxury for the general population. There was no refrigeration technology back then –this is an urgent call to come to wedding feast. The meat will go off if not eaten soon!

It is incredible now (in verse 5) that some of guests who had now been invited three times are completely indifferent to the call to come to the wedding feast. Why? - They must think little of the King. Perhaps they see him as unpopular or weak? Is he completely without willing subjects so that he needs to keep asking again and again for people to come? How is their disregard and distain for the King’s invite expressed? Some are too busy with work and business to paid attention to the call. Those who are not indifferent to the King, are openly hostile: they seize and mistreat the Kings servants and kill them.

This group of invited guests in vv3-8 stands for religious, but unbelieving Jews – God’s covenant people of old, having no genuine regard for their covenant God. The prophet Isaiah described them this way “*This people draw near with their words and honour Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote*” (Isaiah 29:13). They are treacherous abusers/murderers of God’s prophets. At the time when Jesus told this parable, John the Baptist had recently joined the ranks of the slain prophets of God. He was beheaded by Herod’s authority.

This was not the first time the covenant people of God had been invited. Jesus is making clear reference to the repeated Old Testament calling by God through prophets, priests, and God-fearing kings. God’s expressed desire was that all Israel come to Him and thereby escape eternal death: *‘Say to them, 'As I live!' declares the Lord God, 'I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?' (Eze 33:11).* Now Christ is issuing the same general call through this parable. Amongst His hearers are those who will murder Him in three days. He makes clear reference to this in the killing of those who bring the King’s Royal invitation.

The King may have seemed weak in repeatedly calling, but this false idea is shattered by the action which the monarch takes. He sends his armies to destroy the murderers and sets their city on fire. Here Jesus prophesies 40 years ahead, predicting the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70. Jewish historian Josephus wrote after this event of a 143-day siege, famine, the burning of the Temple and the killing of at least 600,000 men, women and children. Those who were invited, but did not respond were not worthy.

Jesus is teaching that those who were invited, but did not respond have no part in the Kingdom of Heaven.Their unworthiness is entirely due to their unwillingness to come. The fault is not in the invitation, that is the gospel; The fault is not in the King, who is God; The fault is not in the King’s Son, who is Christ. As Canons of Dort Article 3.9 reflects this Biblical truth and says of those who do not respond to the gospel invite: “*The fault lies in themselves*”.

Today, and in times past, people sit in churches, as the Jews sat in the Temple listening to Jesus speak that day in Jerusalem. People sit in churches thinking they are saved, but they themselves have never personally responded to the gospel People sit in churches thinking they are saved, but they ignore the gospel call. They may be too busy with making a living. Perhaps they delude themselves into thinking that their lack of holiness/godliness/piety is an expression of ‘Christian liberty’. People sit in churches, thinking that they are saved, but they are hostile to the King, hostile to Christ and to His people. They oppose the King’s servants who bring the gospel. The unbelieving Jews thought that they were automatically in the Kingdom because they were part of the covenant community. In fact they were outside the Kingdom because they did not respond to the gospel call. Make sure that you don’t make the same mistake!

1. **Those who are Invited, both evil and good (8-10)**

The feast is ready, but the invited guests have not come. So others are called to attend “*as many as you find*” v9. This is a serious, genuine, earnest call to as many as can be reached by the king’s servants, who bear his official invitation. When a Great King calls, He is commanding, not requesting. These others are found in the “street corners” literally the ways leading out. They are gathered together. Who are these people? – they are not those in covenant Israel. The group of invited guests in verses 8-10 stands for both: Jews, other than those previously called: e.g. tax-collectors and sinners, and Gentiles to whom the gospel would come as church fulfilled Great Commission following Christ’s resurrection (Matt 28:19-20).

We see these two parts of the group who receive the general call in the parallel passage in Luke (14:16-24). Jews in the “*streets and lanes of the city*” the poor/ crippled/ blind and lame, Gentiles on the “*highways and along the hedges*” – outside the ‘camp’. There is absolutely nothing special about this group. They comprise “both bad and good”. Both those who do evil things and those who do good.

This invitation is not to some, but to all.There is a universal invitation issued to all to come to the Wedding Banquet of Son of God in the New heavens and the New Earth. This is a feast of delight far more wonderful than three or four weeks of choice food in the company of one of the kings of this earth. This is an invitation to a sumptuous, extravagant, feast forever in the presence of the Lamb. Whether you are a moral, upright citizen or your life is a mess, you are invited; you are called to respond to the good news of the gospel of the kingdom. You are all invited to come to Christ today! You are all seriously, genuinely, earnestly invited/called to enter the Kingdom of God.

Not everyone would agree with what I have just said. There are some Reformed churches overseas would say: If Christ only died for the elect (the doctrine of limited/definite atonement) then how can the gospel genuinely (in a well-meant way) be offered to all people? Some have taught that God does not seriously desire the salvation of all those to whom the gospel comes. They apply the logic of “*hyper/more than*” Calvinism to argue that the gospel call is only genuinely made to the elect.

What does Scripture say? That God calls all people to repentance (Acts 17:30b). That Christ invites all people to come to Him (Matt 11:28). How then, if only the elect are able to respond to the gospel call, (their hearts having first been changed by God to make them alive), can God seriously, genuinely call all who hear the gospel promises of rest for the soul and eternal life in Christ to come? The short answer is that He can, and He does.

The writers of the Synod of Dort (in Article 3.8) upheld that the well-meant offer of the gospel could be and must be maintained alongside the doctrines of election limited/definite atonement “*All who are called through the gospel are earnestly called*”. We need to be careful about pushing human rational logic too far. We lean on our own understanding, and not on God’s revealed word when we drive logic in 1 of 2 ways:

**Either** God gives sufficient grace to all to believe the gospel if they want to meaning that Christ died for all, all people could therefore be saved if they were willing;

**Or** God desires only the salvation of the elect who hear the gospel.

We must in faith maintain the Scriptural paradox by being faithful to all the teachings of the Bible, as the Canons of Dort are. What does this mean in practice? In our evangelism/mission work a presentation of the gospel is incomplete without a genuine call to respond to the invitation to come. Good Christian living before an unbelieving world is not sufficient! As Christ’s ambassadors, as servants of the Great King, we are to implore, on behalf of Christ, that they be reconciled to God (ref. 2 Cor 5:20).

1. **Those who are** **Invited, but not dressed (11-13)**

Would you get into a royal wedding in shorts and a tee shirt? Not in England. Invites to royal weddings at Westminster Abbey state “*royal uniform, morning coat or lounge suit*”. Similarly there was a dress code at a Jewish wedding, especially a royal one. You couldn’t enter without changing into clean wedding attire.

In the parable, the wedding hall is filled up and the feast about to begin. But there’s a problem with one of the guests. In the parable, the King addresses someone not dressed for the occasion – a man who stands out from the others. His clothes are the same or similar to what he was wearing when he was called. This man who was not permitted to enter the wedding feast and he was speechless. He had no words to say. He thought that no change of garment was necessary. He didn’t take the privilege of being invited seriously. The consequence seems astonishingly harsh: the man is to be bound and thrown into “the outer darkness”. This is a clear allusion to Hell, state of eternal separation from God

The wedding clothes must represent something, but exactly what? Augustine suggested that in Jewish culture the wedding clothes were provided by the host which led to his view that the wedding garment is the righteousness of Christ, supplied by God the Father to the believer. Whilst this is true theology, it is not clear that this is what Jesus is teaching in this parable. It is also true that those who come to Christ become more and more like Him as they “put on the new self” – Col 3:10. Some have suggested that the wedding clothes are the good works which follow from genuine faith.

We do need to be careful about pushing the details of parables too far, yet Jesus is teaching something very important as He leads up to the “punchline” in v14. He is explaining what is required to enter into the Kingdom of God. Without defining exactly the wedding clothes, we can see that: it is possible to think that you are in the Kingdom of God, but not be. It is possible to live your whole life believing you are a Christian, only to find that the ‘gateway’ to eternity is barred to you.

Jesus is teaching something very important in this parable, but what? He is teaching that: it is possible to live your whole life thinking you are saved, only to end up forever in Hell – away from God. Although in the parable there is one man, he represents a group – those who are Christians by name only. Those who are relying upon their own goodness, their own “clothing”. Those who think that their religious observances and moral behaviour make them good enough for entry into Kingdom. They refuse put on garments fit for being in the presence of the King.

So what can we say about the entry requirements for the Kingdom of God? They are repentance, faith and justification through Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice and perfect righteousness. Jesus sums up the teaching of this parable with v14: "*For many are called, but few are chosen*." Those who were indifferent to the call were not chosen even though they thought they were God’s elect. Those who were hostile to the call were not chosen even though they thought they were God’s elect. Those who seemed to respond to the call, but thought they could come as they were, unchanged, were not chosen. But those who responded to the call, and understood that their own “clothing” was unfit for the King’s presence, were chosen. “*For Many are called, but few are chosen*” (Matt 22:14)

Can you see how the truths revealed in this masterful parable are reflected in the pattern of sound words in the Canons of Dort? I had no authority to invite you to a royal wedding in Westminster Abbey. If I did so it would not be a serious, genuine, well-meant offer. But the invitation to the marriage supper of the Lamb of God is a different matter. I can and I must, and I will issue that invitation. Come to Christ!

If you have responded and you are dressed for the King then you can, and you must, issue it too; as one of the King’s bond-servants. When you do this know:

1. That God Himself determines the distribution of the gospel according to His sovereign good pleasure (Art 3:7)
2. That this is an earnest gospel call (Art 3:8)
3. That those who are called and do not come resist because of fault in themselves (Art 3:9)
4. That those who are called and do come are saved because God has chosen His own in Christ from eternity and calls them effectually (Art 3:10).

AMEN.