

Woman: The third reading is from the Gospel According to Saint Matthew, the 22nd chapter. Once more, Jesus spoke to them in parables saying the kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding and they did not want to come. Again, he sent other slaves saying tell those who have been invited look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen, and my fat calves have been slaughtered and everything is ready, come to the wedding feast. But those who made light of it went away. One to his farm, another to his business, while the rest, seizing his slaves, abused and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his soldiers and killed those murderers and burned their city. Then he says to his slaves, the wedding feast is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets and whoever you find, invite them to the wedding banquet. And those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both the evil and the good, and the wedding banquet was filled with people reclining at table. But when the king came in to see them, he saw there a man not wearing a wedding robe, and he says to him, friend, how did you come in here without a wedding robe? But he was silent, and the king said to the waiters, bind him feet and hands and throw him out into the outer darkness. There, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, for many are invited, but few are chosen. This is word of the Lord.

Congregation: Praise be to God.

Man: Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight oh God, our strength and our redeemer, amen. I'm going to preach on the gospel lesson this morning, my friends, and you will doubtless have gathered already that this is a difficult text to preach upon, which is doubtless one of the reasons why Dr. Willerman was so generous with his pulpit this morning. It was also a parable told at a difficult time. Jesus had had these people right up to here. I'm talking about those the Bible refers to as chief priests and elders of the people and scribes and Pharisees and doctors of the law, whatever their title these were the big deals of Israel. He and they are now in direct conflict. He knows that they can do him terrible harm, but the more or less polite debates in the countryside are over. Jesus has marched on Jerusalem, he was thrown their money changers out of the temple, he has virtually taken over the temple and made it his own pulpit, he has welcomed the blind and the crippled and the lame into its portals for the first time. This parable is all about trouble with the insiders of the day. Jesus has already hit them with two very stinging parables and here comes another. Just as there deciding what to do about him and how to quiet him down and whether they can risk arresting him or not, he says to them now tell me, do you want the good news or the bad news? Here it comes. The good news, at least for some people, is that the kingdom of Heaven is really just one big party. I always suspected Jesus was a party person. His first public act according to Sir John is to put his considerable powers at the disposal of a wedding feast. I get the impression that when Jesus and his followers came to any village and arrived there, it was like the circus coming to town. Everything brightened up. Life came with him and with his followers. Tony Campolo, in a book entitled *The Kingdom of Heaven is Like a Party*, tells thee the story of how he traveled to Honolulu in order to speak at a conference. He arrived there, of course, six hour time difference from the east coast of

the United States to Honolulu, he was jet lagged, he woke up in his hotel at about half past two in the morning, he got dressed, went out looking for somewhere where he could get a cup of coffee and he found a little diner. Stopped in there, just one man behind the counter. What would you like? I'd like coffee and donuts and he sits down and he's just about to start eating his donut and drinking his coffee when the doors are flung open and in walk about eight or nine prostitutes off the streets of Honolulu and they've come for their coffee, too, and they pile into the small diner and they're all around him, one his left, one on his right, they're garrulous, they're noisy, they're a bit crude. Just as he's trying to make his getaway, he hears the woman on his left say to the other one, yeah tomorrow's my birthday, 39 tomorrow. And the reply from the woman on his right is, and so what do you want me to do about it? Throw a party and give you a birthday cake? And the one with the birthday says, you don't have to be so rough. I don't need a party, I don't even know what a birthday party is, I've never had one. And Campolo decides there and then what he's going to do. And when these women have left, he goes to the person behind the counter and he says, listen, he says, why don't we throw a party for Agnes. That's her name, isn't it? Tomorrow's her birthday. I'll get the decorations and I'll get a cake. Well, this beefy man behind the counter, a little smile crosses his face, he says, no wait a minute, he says, I'll do the cake, I'll bake it myself. And so, sure enough, half past two the next morning, and Tony Campolo's out of bed again, gets dressed, goes down to the diner with all the decorations he's bought during the day and they begin to set up for a celebration. A number of women come in, and are told the secret, until Agnes and her friend walk in at exactly three AM, and everybody jumps up and screams happy birthday, and they sing to her, and her knees wobble, tears come into her eyes and then, Fred, the man who runs the diner, walks out of the kitchen with a beautiful cake flaming with candles, and Agnes just loses it and breaks down and sobs. Her first birthday party ever. And he says, well, now, Agnes, blow the candles, blow the candles, and she blows them, and then he says, now, cut the cake, cut the cake, and she says, hey do you mind if I don't cut the cake? Do you mind if I just have it for a while? Do you mind if I take it home and just keep it there for a while? Sure do that. She says, I'll be back, I live two blocks down, and off she went. The kingdom of Heaven is like a party, here is a Christian preacher, sociology professor, Tony Campolo, half past two in the morning, having a party with a group of prostitutes. Now Jesus says, is that good news or bad news to you? 'Cause that's the way it is. The kingdom of Heaven is about feasting and balloons and joy and welcome and hospitality. Is that good news or bad news to you? The next thing he says is this: he says I've got some news for you, and you've got to decide whether it's good news or bad news for you, some of you won't be there. It's not that you weren't invited. You haven't been snubbed. My father wants and truly longs for everybody to be there, but not even a king can make you say yes. You did the snubbing. You counted yourselves out of the feast. In this parable, the responses to the gospel invitation are very clear. One response is complete indifference. I couldn't care less. A second response is preoccupation. I've got more important things to do with my time than go to your party. And the third is outright hostility. I don't agree with God throwing parties. I'm against it. I won't be there. And the shock of course, is that these responses come not from a callous and careless and faithless world, these responses Jesus makes absolutely clear are the response from the insiders of the religious faith. So what else is new? You know these big deals, Pharisees, Sadducees, chief priests, the rest, they had followed Jesus almost as long as his disciples. They had had somebody there whenever he spoke. Except they being just like the security branch used to be back home in South Africa in the old days, whenever we spoke, you could always tell who the security policemen were. You could tell because they never laughed at the jokes. You could tell they couldn't enter into the spirit it would've been betraying what they believed and stood for.

And so they were always out of place at the party. These people had seen the joyful signs of deliverance and they had watched with studied indifference. These people, whenever Jesus began to talk about something that really mattered to ordinary people, began to raise their ridiculous religious priorities, preoccupied with them. These people had been openly hostile from time to time trying publicly and deliberately to undermine Jesus's special touch with the people. For them, you see, the problem was that the kingdom of God could never be a party. That wouldn't be right because they had taught everything, everyone that the kingdom of God was really an exam, an examination. They already had their A's, they knew the exam backwards, they already had a list of those with C's and D's and horrible F's, they knew who would fail, they determined who would pass, and therein lay the meaning of their lives. Little wonder they couldn't handle this transformation from an examination into a wedding feast. But there's more good news, Jesus said, or is it bad news? If you won't come, my father says go and get the rest. And the good and the bad alike will pack the wedding feast. Now Jesus is really laying it on, or certainly Matthew is, because in Luke's version of this parable, it is the lame and the blind and the crippled who are invited to replace the important guests. But here Matthew says uh uh it's more than that, it's the bad and the good. I do feel sorry for these Pharisees and Sadducees, and elders of the people and so should you. Can you imagine how their world, their whole frame of reference begins to fall apart? Because like most of us, a lot of life was all about who's in and who's out, what qualified and what disqualified people. That kind of thing is alive and well today, sadly, still in religious circles. We like to have out litmus tests. If you travel across this continent, you will discover a number of litmus tests by which people judge and determine whether you are going to be one of them or not. And they're all about who should be in and who should be out, who should come to the party and who should be kept away. Down the years, we have raised so many tests only to see God determined to break them down. The tests of race and income and education and language group and gender. We are so good at raising the barrier. And Jesus says to this group of people who make a life's work, they make a living out of that, the bad and the good will come together, and if you stopped obsessing about who should or who should not be at the party, perhaps you could begin to enjoy it. And by the way, says Jesus, if you do come, do come in the right frame of mind. 'Cause no party poopers are allowed. I don't pretend to understand the end of this parable. I've looked at what a number of other people think about the end of this parable, I am not all that persuaded about their conclusions, either. Where the person who's not wearing the party dress is flung out. But I do understand that while all may come to God's party, and while all are welcome, there is an appropriate spirit in which one attends a wedding feast, and if you're not willing to attend in that spirit, then perhaps it were wiser you didn't come. I come, surely, to the wedding feast of God in humble gratitude for the invitation. That's part of my wedding dress. I come amazed that I was invited. That's part of my wedding dress. I come wanting to celebrate in my life what matters most to my host. That's part of my wedding dress. And perhaps the things my host wants me to celebrate are the things that Paul talks about in that reading we heard from Philippians, all that is true and all that is noble and all that is just and pure, all that is lovable and gracious, all that is excellent and admirable, I come wanting, I come longing, to fill all my thoughts with all these things, with the help of my host, who is God, who throws this party for Jesus, God's son. You see, it's not so much about how good I must be to come or how bad, our understanding of good and bad becomes somewhat relative when we enter the presence of a holy God. It's all about knowing that just being there is the best news ever. It's all about wanting to be different enough to stay. It was said of John Wesley and Charles, his brother, that the word all was the most important word in their vocabulary. For all, for all my savior died. Come all to the gospel feast. But it was also said of Wesley and his movement

that they who made it so easy for all to come made it tough for them to stay because staying meant changing my life. Staying meant being converted. Now that's a word we are a little cheery about these days. I heard about a little church in England where a visiting preacher came and spoke for the first time about conversion. They hadn't heard it for a while, and he even made an invitation and he said now if anybody really wants the converting power of God in your life, just stand up and I'll pray for you. And a rather smartly dressed ex-colonel of the British army who had been sitting in that pew for so many years suddenly popped out of his seat, standing up stiff as a ram rod. And there's his wife tugging at his sleeve and saying sit down, George. People like us don't get saved. The good news, my friends, or the bad news? All are invited. Will you come and be chosen? Amen.