

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – October 15, 2017

[Matthew 22:1-14](#) & [Philippians 4:1-9](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Read the provided commentaries below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Matthew 22:1-14 (From the *Homiletics* archive; “The Inviting God” – October 12, 2014)

The opening salvo in the latest rift between Jesus and the religious establishment occurs when the "chief priests and scribes" see Jesus "[drive] out all who were selling and buying in the temple" and cure "the blind and the lame" (21:12-17). Later, when "the chief priests and the Pharisees" recognize that Jesus' parables are "about them," the dispute intensifies (21:45). And even though the narrative in verses 1-14 appears to begin rather innocuously -- "Once more Jesus spoke to them in parable" -- the two preceding parables demonstrate that this anodyne clause actually references the escalating conflict.

In the first parable, Jesus describes the divergent conduct of two sons and posits, "Which of the two did the will of his father?" After "the chief priests and the elders of the people" answer correctly, Jesus rebukes them for rejecting both John's testimony and the witness of "the tax collectors and the prostitutes [who] believed him" (21:28-32). The second parable further warns that "the owner of the vineyard" will come and "put those wretches to a miserable death" because the "tenants" (i.e., the religious leaders) had beaten and killed the owner's servants and son (21:33-44).

However, the most troubling detail is found in the third parable, specifically, the king's treatment of the guest "who was not wearing a wedding robe" (v. 11). After addressing the man as "friend," the king orders his attendants to "bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (vv. 12-13). Furthermore, when the king's reaction to the ill-clad man is placed against his earlier directions (i.e., "Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet"), the king comes across as a petty, unmerciful despot. What perchance, then, is the lesson (or lessons) that Jesus sought to convey in this disturbing tale?

With all-too-rare succinctness Jesus sets the scene: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son" (v. 2). Naturally, the king wants to celebrate this joyful event, and so he "sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet" (v. 3a). Although the costly preparations were complete, "they would not come" (v. 3b).

It's odd that those invited to the wedding banquet decline the king's summons. Presumably, his subjects had initially accepted the invitation, but now they were reluctant. Their conduct parallels that of the second son who told his father that he would go, but then did not (Matthew 21:30). Beyond that, they were possibly some of the king's most prominent and privileged subjects. How could they, of all people, refuse the king's invitation? Their conduct is most unexpected and, given the power that kings customarily hold, seems entirely reckless.

Rather than respond rashly, however, the king is patient -- perhaps, too patient, which becomes apparent in light of his subject's ensuing conduct. Despite their rejection, the king sends a second contingent of slaves, directing them to say, "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 banquet'" (v. 4). Once again they snub the king's entreaty: "But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them" (vv. 5-6).

Whereas the behavior of those "who made light of [the king's appeal]" demonstrates poor judgment, the conduct of "the rest" is horrifying. These individuals went far beyond those who refused to believe John; they embody the despicable, malevolent tenants of the second parable who brutalize and kill the vineyard owner's slaves and son (21:32, 35-39). Their vicious defiance leaves the king no choice. For that reason, "he sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city ... [and] ... put those wretches to a miserable death" (v. 7; cf. 21:41).

The king's conduct reflects that ordinarily seen in monarchs. They bestow gifts on their subjects, and expect reciprocity from them. In this case, having received the king's invitation, the sensible response would have been to attend. Despite this reality, they spurn the king. Therefore, catastrophic consequences follow, because "those invited were not worthy" in the king's estimation (v. 8).

After dealing with the disloyal faction, the king issues another command to his slaves: "'Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests" (v. 9).

For many, the parable should end here. The intransigent subjects have been eliminated, and a gracious invitation goes forth to everyone else. With the wedding hall overflowing with guests, the celebration can finally begin. Despite the initial setback, good triumphs over evil and a happy ending is reached.

But such is not the case in this parable, for "when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless." (vv. 11-13). At once, the king orders the man to be bound and thrown "into outer darkness" (v. 14). The king's severity is shocking, disorienting. Rather than extend mercy to a man who may have lacked the resources to acquire a proper wedding robe -- ordering his attendants to bring a robe for this "friend" -- the king shows no pity.

What, then, is one possible meaning behind the man's inappropriate dress and the king's reaction? Although the man isn't wearing a suitable garment, he is neither as stubborn as the religious leaders who refuse John's message nor as despicable as the violent tenants who slaughter the king's servants. Nonetheless, the ill-clad guest's conduct indicates an unwillingness to follow proper protocol. Simply put, his lack of compliance demonstrates that he will be unable to produce "the fruits of the kingdom" (21:43).

Another possible meaning is that verses 11-14 are an oblique reference to Judas, perhaps a later addendum to Jesus' third parable by Matthew. While "many are called" -- the slaves went "into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad" -- "few are chosen" (v. 14). Like the religious authorities before him, this man, too, had been called. But whereas many were crushed by the stone because of their stubbornness, he tripped over the stone when he presumed that he could attend the banquet on his own terms. And even though Judas was addressed as "Friend," he acted otherwise (v. 12; cf. Matthew 26:14-16, 47-50, n.b., v. 50); therefore, he was bound and "broken to pieces" (Matthew 21:42-44, esp. v. 44; 27:3-10; Acts 1:16-19; cf. Isaiah 8:14).

Commentary on Phil. 4:1-9 (From the *Homiletics* archive; "Prayers, Pitfalls, and Practices" – 10/15/2017)

The earliest Christian community at Philippi was, according to Paul, a huge success. This church delighted him more than any other because of its faith, perseverance and financial support of his ministry. The church today would do well to investigate what went on at Philippi, to see what Paul was so pleased about. So we may ask: Who was a part of the Pauline Christian community at Philippi? What can we say about the demographic makeup of this church, which he considered to be his "joy and crown"? You might be surprised to find out.

As with all social history of early Christianity, the sources for this question are meager and open to much interpretation. Most of our knowledge about the early Christian movement at Philippi must be gleaned from Paul's letter and Acts 16. From these sources we learn the names of only four people affiliated with this city. The aspect of our sources that surprises most people is this: Three of the five people named in this community were women. If many modern Christians carry around an image of early Christian communities as exclusively or even mostly patriarchal, the Philippian church challenges this perception. We have reason to believe that women were prominent in the Philippian church, not only as members but also as leaders. And this is the church with which Paul was happiest.

We learn of two men in the community: Clement (4:3), who has "struggled" beside Paul, and Epaphroditus, a "coworker" and "fellow soldier" of Paul's -- he also seems to be the letter's courier (v. 18; 2:25). From the account in Acts 16, we learn that a woman named Lydia was regarded as a leader of the community at Philippi. She would have had a prominent role, as the person in whose house the church would meet (Acts 16:15, 40). And in today's lection, two other women are directly addressed by Paul. Their names are Euodia and Syntyche, which were common Greek names in the Greco-Roman world. Why does Paul address these two directly? We can say very little that is not speculative. The women have a dispute that is important enough for Paul to mention but not so important that he would impugn them. His rhetoric is thus subtle and encouraging. He repeats the verb of encouragement (*παρακαλω*) for each of the women, a linguistic device that would heighten the personal quality of the address as the courier read it aloud. "Euodia, I urge, and Syntyche, I urge, to be of the same mind in the Lord." We can imagine how the repeated verb would incite Epaphroditus to read this portion directly to the women in question. Paul also places their names *before* each verb, which would call their attention while the letter was being read aloud.

Then what are they encouraged to do? What does it mean "to be of the same mind in the Lord"? They are not necessarily supposed to come to an agreement or consensus about their dispute (beneficial though that might be), but more importantly they are to adopt a Christlike attitude. The imperative verb here (*φρονειν*) is used frequently in this letter (vv. 2, 10; cf. 1:7; 2:2, 5; 3:15, 19). It is also used similarly at the end of a letter in 2 Corinthians 13:11. The verb connotes an attitude -- a state of mind -- more than a logical or rational process. The most relevant usage for our purposes forms the centerpiece of 2:1-11, a passage that praises Christ's humble state of mind and would resonate in the mind of a listener who had just heard it. Then later in the letter, Paul urges Euodia and Syntyche to lead the Philippian community as examples of "being of the same mind," which means that they ought to share the self-emptying attitude of Jesus Christ.

In the following section, commentators have often noted the terse formulation of Paul's phrase, "The Lord is near" (ο κυριος εγγυς). In Greek the verb is even omitted, which accentuates the nearness of the Lord. The phrase ought to be read closely with what follows it: "Do not worry about anything! (μηδεν μεπιμνατε) but in everything ... let your requests be made known to God." We can fill in Paul's logic here -- the fact that the Lord is near is the reason why you should not worry about anything. At first glance, this argument seems to fit only in the original context of Paul's letter, a context of imminent eschatological expectation. Of course people should not worry about anything, since the Lord would soon come and draw all things to final consummation. But how would Christians hear Paul's words today, when most do not expect an eschaton imminently, and even fewer live as if they expect one at all?

Paul's command to "not worry about anything" can be applied best to modern lives if one considers the Lord's nearness not temporally but ontologically. The Greek word εγγυς can certainly bear an ontological interpretation. God is always as near as it takes to drop to your knees in prayer. The nearness of God is not temporal but eternal, and it is precisely through prayer that one recognizes God as near. The subsequent verse supports this reading, when Paul immediately exhorts the Philippians, "in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Paul leaves no exceptions to his command. Since the Lord is ever near ontologically, you must worry about *nothing* and pray about everything. Then "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding," will remove any anxiety or worry.

Finally, there are a few aspects of the Greek that are not rendered by the English translation. This passage has a preponderance of words carrying the "syn-" prefix in Greek (συν), which is best approximated by the English prefix "co-." The effect can be brought out by translating, for example, Philippians 4:3 differently: "Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, *co-operate* with these women, for they have *co-struggled* beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my *co-workers*." This formulation of syn- prefixes is not semantically necessary for Paul's arguments, but it highlights his theme that "we are all in this together." The theme can be traced throughout the letter to the Philippians, through his extended use of these prefixes and also the use of *koinonia* (communality) language (e.g, 1:5; 2:1; 3:10). For Paul, the maintenance and building up of communities in Christ transcends all other apostolic responsibilities.

The English also misses some clear parallelism in the Greek of 4:8-9. Paul emphasizes here the connection between thought and action, between doctrine and practice, in the Christian life. The sentences are structured thus: "whatever is a, b, c ..., think about these things; and whenever you have x, y, z ..., do these things." The command of action, ταυτα πρασσετε, completes the command of thought, ταυτα λογιζεσθε. Paul here neutralizes the grace vs. works debate that Christians are so fond of, just as he does earlier in 2:12-13. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" sounds like salvation by works, but the next sentence neutralizes it -- "for it is God who is at work in you." Thought and action are inseparable, and grace abounds.

Additional Resources

- [“The Text this Week”](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Matthew passage we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out the commentaries and additional resources available for this Sunday (and others!) at WorkingPreacher.org.

Reflection Questions on Matthew 22:1-14:

1. Compare the Matthew version of this parable with its parallel in the Gospel of Luke (14:15-24). What differences do you note? How might the literary contexts or presumed audiences of each version have influenced the gospel writers? Do you prefer one version to the other?
2. What is the deal with the wedding robe (vv. 11-12)? Is it meant to be symbolic? Why is it so important to the king that its lack elicits such a harsh response?
3. This is the third of a series of parables in Matthew 21-22, the first two of which we studied the past two weeks. What themes do they share? In what ways are they different? Are they best viewed together as a set, and interpreted accordingly? Or is it better to focus on each according to its own individual merits? Do you think they were originally told sequentially by Jesus, or do you think that Matthew has arranged this setting for narrative purposes?

Reflection Questions on Philippians 4:1-9:

1. What does it really mean to “be of the same mind in the Lord,” as Paul urges of Euodia and Syntyche in v. 2? Obviously, they were experiencing some disagreement or tension. Does being of the same mind suggest a resolution to these differences or tensions? A willingness to “agree to disagree”? Or something different? Would Paul urge the same for us all, or is this advice specific to these two women and their unique situation?
2. As noted in the commentary above, Paul is generally understood by biblical scholars to be expecting the literal imminent return of Christ very soon. How should we hear Paul's words today, reading this text nearly 2000 years later, when most do not expect Christ's return imminently, if at all? Does his encouragement to rejoice, not worry, be at peace, etc lose any of its luster or gravitas knowing that these expectations did not come to pass?
3. A superficial reading of this text, especially at the end, could suggest that followers of Jesus should “keep on the sunny side of life.” Does Paul implicitly endorse optimism as a preferred spiritual temperament? What would Paul (or the rest of the New Testament) have to say to those who struggle with depression, despair, anxiety, etc?

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?