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The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 120

On The Wedding Garment

"How camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment Matt. 22:12.

1. In the verses preceding the text we read, "After these things, Jesus spake to them again in parables, and said, A certain king made a supper for his son. And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw one who had not on a wedding garment. And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment And he was speechless. Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

2. Upon this parable one of our most celebrated expositors comments in the following manner: -- "The design of this parable is to set forth that gracious supply made by God to men in and by the preaching of the gospel. To invite them to this, God sent forth his servants, the Prophets and Apostles." -- And on these words, -- "Why camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment" he proceeds thus: "The punishment of whom ought not to discourage us, or make us turn our backs upon the holy ordinances." Certainly it ought not; but nothing of this kind can be inferred from this parable, which has no reference to the ordinances, any more than to baptism and marriage. And probably we should never have imagined it, but that the word supper occurred therein.

3. However, most of the English annotators have fallen into the same mistake with Mr. Burkitt. And so have thousands of their readers. Yet a mistake it certainly is; and such a mistake as has not any shadow of foundation in the text. It is true, indeed, that none ought to approach the Lord's table without habitual, at least, if not actual, preparation; that is, a firm purpose to keep all the commandments of God, and a sincere desire to receive all his promises. But that obligation cannot be inferred from this text, though it may from many other passages of Scripture. But there is no need of multiplying texts; one is as good as a thousand: There needs no more to induce any man of a tender conscience to communicate at all opportunities, than that single commandment of our Lord, "Do this in remembrance of me."

4. But whatever preparation is necessary in order to our being worthy partakers of the Lord's Supper, it has no relation at all to the "wedding garment" mentioned in this parable. It cannot: For that commemoration of his death was not then ordained. It relates wholly to the proceedings of our Lord, when he comes in the clouds of heaven to judge the quick and the dead; and to the qualifications which will then be necessary to their inheriting "the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world."

5. Many excellent men, who are thoroughly apprized of this -- who are convinced, the wedding garment here mentioned is not to be understood of any qualification for the Lord's Supper, but of the qualification for glory, -- interpret it of the righteousness of Christ; "which," say they, is the sole qualification for heaven; this being the only righteousness wherein any man can stand in the day of the Lord. For who," they ask, "will then dare to appear before the great God, save in the righteousness of his well-beloved Son Shall we not then at least, if not before, find the need of having a better righteousness than our own And what other can that be than the righteousness of God our Saviour" The late pious and ingenious Mr. Hervey descants largely upon this; particularly in his elaborate "Dialogues between Theron and Aspasio."

6. Another elegant writer, now I trust with God, speaks strongly to the same effect in the preface to his

comment on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans: "We certainly," says he, "shall need a better righteousness than our own, wherein to stand at the bar of God in the day of judgment." I do not understand the expression. Is it scriptural Do we read it in the Bible, either in the Old Testament or the New I doubt it is an unscriptural, awkward phrase, which has no determinate meaning. If you mean by that odd, uncouth question, "In whose righteousness are you to stand at the last day" -- for whose sake, or by whose merit, do you expect to enter into the glory of God I answer, without the least hesitation, For the sake of Jesus Christ the Righteous. It is through his merits alone that all believers are saved; that is, justified -- saved from the guilt, -- sanctified -- saved from the nature, of sin; and glorified -- taken into heaven.

7. It may be worth our while to spend a few more words on this important point. Is it possible to devise a more unintelligible expression than this, -- "In what righteousness are we to stand before God at the last day" Why do you not speak plainly, and say, "For whose sake do you look to be saved" Any plain peasant would then readily answer, "For the sake of Jesus Christ." But all those dark, ambiguous phrases tend only to puzzle the cause, and open a way for unwary hearers to slide into Antinomianism.

8. Is there any expression similar to this of the "wedding garment" to be found in Holy Scripture In the Revelation we find mention made of "linen, white and clean, which is the righteousness of the saints." And this, too, many vehemently contend, means the righteousness of Christ. But how then are we to reconcile this with that passage in the seventh chapter, "They have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" Will they say, "The righteousness of Christ was washed and made white in the blood of Christ" Away with such Antinomian jargon! Is not the plain meaning this: -- It was from the atoning blood that the very righteousness of the saints derived its value and acceptableness with God

9. In the nineteenth chapter of the Revelation, at the ninth verse, there is an expression which comes much nearer to this: -- "The wedding supper of the Lamb." [Rev. 19] There is a near resemblance between this and the marriage supper mentioned in the parable. Yet they are not altogether the same: there is a clear difference between them. The supper mentioned in the parable belongs to the Church Militant; that mentioned in the Revelation, to the Church Triumphant: The one, to the kingdom of God on earth; the other, to the kingdom of God in heaven. Accordingly, in the former, there may be found those who have not a "wedding garment." But there will be none such to be found in the latter: No, not "in that great multitude which no man can number, out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation." They will all be "kings and priests unto God, and shall reign with him for ever and ever."

10. Does not that expression, "the righteousness of the saints," point out what is the "wedding garment" in the parable It is the "holiness without which no man shall see the Lord." The righteousness of Christ is doubtless necessary for any soul that enters into glory: But so is personal holiness too, for every child of man. But it is highly needful to be observed, that they are necessary in different respects. The former is necessary to entitle us to heaven; the latter to qualify us for it. Without the righteousness of Christ we could have no claim to glory; without holiness we could have no fitness for it. By the former we become members of Christ, children of God, and heirs of the kingdom of heaven. By the latter "we are made meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light."

11. From the very time that the Son of God delivered this weighty truth to the children of men, -- that all who had not the "wedding garment" would be "cast into outward darkness, where are weeping and gnashing of teeth," -- the enemy of souls has been labouring to obscure it, that they might still seek

death in the error of their life; and many ways has he tried to disguise the holiness without which we cannot be saved. How many things have been palmed, even upon the Christian world, in the place of this! Some of these are utterly contrary thereto, and subversive of it. Some were noways connected with or related to it; but useless and insignificant trifles. Others might be deemed to be some part of it, but by no means the whole. It may be of use to enumerate some of them, lest ye should be ignorant of Satan's devices.

12. Of the first sort, things prescribed as Christian holiness although flatly contrary thereto, is idolatry. How has this, in various shapes, been taught, and is to this day, as essential to holiness! How diligently is it now circulated in a great part of the Christian Church! Some of their idols are silver and gold, or wood and stone, "graven by art, and man's device;" some, men of like passions with themselves, particularly the Apostles of our Lord, and the Virgin Mary. To these they add numberless saints of their own creation, with no small company of angels.

13. Another thing as directly contrary to the whole tenor of true religion, is, what is diligently taught in many parts of the Christian Church; I mean the spirit of persecution; of persecuting their brethren even unto death; so that the earth has been often covered with blood by those who were called Christians, in order to "make their calling and election sure." It is true, many, even in the Church of Rome, who were taught this horrid doctrine, now seem to be ashamed of it. But have the heads of that community as openly and explicitly renounced that capital doctrine of devils, as they avowed it in the Council of Constance, and practised it for many ages Till they have done this, they will be chargeable with the blood of Jerome of Prague, basely murdered, and of many thousands, both in the sight of God and man.

14. Let it not be said, "This does not concern us Protestants: We think and let think. We abhor the spirit of persecution; and maintain, as an indisputable truth, that every rational creature has a right to worship God as he is persuaded in his own mind." But are we true to our own principles So far, that we do not use fire and faggot. We do not persecute unto blood those that do not subscribe to our opinions. Blessed be God, the laws of our country do not allow of this; but is there no such thing to be found in England as domestic persecution The saying or doing anything unkind to another for following his own conscience is a species of persecution. Now, are we all clear of this Is there no husband who, in this sense, persecutes his wife Who uses her unkindly, in word or deed, for worshipping God after her own conscience Do no parents thus persecute their children no masters or mistresses, their servants If they do this, and think they do God service therein, they must not cast the First stone at the Roman Catholics.

15. When things of an indifferent nature are represented as necessary to salvation, it is a folly of the same kind, though not of the same magnitude. Indeed, it is not a little sin to represent trifles as necessary to salvation; such as going of pilgrimages, or anything that is not expressly enjoined in the Holy Scripture. Among these we may undoubtedly rank orthodoxy, or right opinions. We know, indeed, that wrong opinions in religion naturally lead to wrong tempers, or wrong practices; and that, consequently, it is our bounden duty to pray that we may have a right judgment in all things. But still a man may judge as accurately as the devil, and yet be as wicked as he.

16. Something more excusable are they who imagine holiness to consist in things that are only a part of it; (that is, when they are connected with the rest; otherwise they are no part of it at all;) suppose in doing no harm. And how exceeding common is this! How many take holiness and harmlessness to

mean one and the same thing! whereas were a man as harmless as a post, he might be as far from holiness as heaven from earth. Suppose a man, therefore, to be exactly honest, to pay every one his own, to cheat no man, to wrong no man, to hurt no man, to be just in all his dealings; suppose a woman to be uniformly modest and virtuous in all her words and actions; suppose the one and the other to be steady practisers of morality, that is, of justice, mercy, and truth; yet all this, though it is good as far as it goes, is but a part of Christian holiness. Yea, suppose a person of this amiable character to do much good wherever he is; to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, relieve the stranger, the sick, the prisoner; yea, and to save many souls from death: it is possible he may still fall far short of that holiness without which he cannot see the Lord.

17. What, then, is that holiness which is the true "wedding garment," the only qualification for glory "In Christ Jesus," (that is, according to the Christian institution, whatever be the case of the heathen world,) "neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but a new creation, -- the renewal of the soul "in the image of God wherein it was created." In "Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love." [Gal. 5:6] It first, through the energy of God, worketh love to God and all mankind; and, by this love, every holy and heavenly temper, -- in particular, lowliness, meekness, gentleness, temperance, and longsuffering. "It is neither circumcision," -- the attending on all the Christian ordinances, -- "nor uncircumcision," -- the fulfilling of all heathen morality, -- but "the keeping the commandments of God; particularly those, -- "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and thy neighbour as thyself." In a word, holiness is the having "the mind that was in Christ," and the "walking as Christ walked."

18. Such has been my judgment for these threescore years, without any material alteration. Only, about fifty years ago I had a clearer view than before of justification by faith: and in this, from that very hour, I never varied, no, not an hair's breadth. Nevertheless, an ingenious man has publicly accused me of a thousand variations. I pray God, not to lay this to his charge! I am now on the borders of the grave; but, by the grace of God, I still witness the same confession. Indeed, some have supposed, that when I began to declare, "By grace ye are saved through faith," I retracted what I had before maintained: "Without holiness no man shall see the Lord." But it is an entire mistake: These scriptures well consist with each other; the meaning of the former being plainly this, -- By faith we are saved from sin, and made holy. The imagination that faith supersedes holiness, is the marrow of Antinomianism.

19. The sum of all is this: The God of love is willing to save all the souls that he has made. This he has proclaimed to them in his word, together with the terms of salvation, revealed by the Son of his love, who gave his own life that they that believe in him might have everlasting life. And for these he has prepared a kingdom, from the foundation of the world. But he will not force them to accept of it; he leaves them in the hands of their own counsel; he saith, "Behold, I set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: Choose life, that ye may live." Choose holiness, by my grace; which is the way, the only way, to everlasting life. He cries aloud, "Be holy, and be happy; happy in this world, and happy in the world to come." "Holiness becometh his house for ever!" This is the wedding garment of all that are called to "the marriage of the Lamb." Clothed in this, they will not be found naked: "They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." But as to all those who appear in the last day without the wedding garment, the Judge will say, "Cast them into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Madeley, March 26, 1790

Edited by James H. Walker II with corrections by Ryan Danker and George Lyons for the Wesley

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