

Wedding dress? Check. Flowers? Check. Cake? Check. Preacher, D,J and photographer? Check, check, and check. Documentary film crew, ready to capture every second of your incredible day, edit it down to 22 minutes and air it on basic cable so that women everywhere can critique it and men with the remote can flip past it? Check.

That's right. Weddings aren't just private, family affairs that suck up Saturday afternoons anymore. They're now the hottest setting for entertainment on television, and getting some aspect of your big day featured on the small screen -- be it the buying of the dress, the making of the cake, or even the moment you chew out your Maid of Honor for forgetting that it's "your day" -- is arguably the ultimate accessory to the 21st-century wedding experience.

Don't believe me? Try surfing the hundreds of channels offered via your satellite or cable provider, and you're guaranteed to stumble upon any of a number of wedding-related reality shows. There's *I Propose*, which follows nervous boyfriends as they plan the perfect way to pop the question. What about, *Say Yes to the Dress* which features brides-to-be trying on expensive gowns, or *Cake Boss* on The Learning Channel which offers viewers the opportunity to admire the antics of an eccentric Italian family as they crank out extravagant wedding cakes.

Apparently, American culture seems obsessed with all things "wedding" and basic cable is cashing in. Why so much buzz around brides and grooms? It's hard to say. Perhaps it's because everybody likes to watch a good love story. Or Maybe it's because whoever has control of the tv remote, simply can't ignore a pretty dress and a well-planned party that often contains some form of drama.

Even Jesus was fond of weddings, too. At least, it appears that way. Not only did he help cater one in Cana by providing some last minute wine, but he employed wedding imagery throughout his teaching and preaching to illustrate important truths about life in God's kingdom. In fact, in Matthew 22, our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus gives us a wedding-themed parable in which the people involved have the opposite attitude toward weddings. If *we* are wedding-*obsessed* then those in his parable are wedding-*allergic*. Jesus informs the crowd, and the religious leaders listening to him, that a wealthy king has invited those special to him to a lavish feast, to celebrate the marriage of his son. Only, rather than jump at the chance to attend a royal wedding, *everyone* on the guest list RSVP'd with a big, fat "no."

The king goes on to reiterate the celebration's extravagance: "Tell those who are invited, See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and

everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast." In other words, "This party is going to be nuts! It's going to be off the hook, you don't want to miss it." But still, nothing. The king sends more servants only to have them ignored or mocked or flat-out killed.

Enraged at such apathy and violence, the disrespected king revokes their invites with an attack on their city, and sends out a call for the rest of the world to attend his son's awesome celebration instead! And with the wedding hall now full, the groom and father finally receive the respect they deserve. Sidenote: I'm sure you will agree with me that a show featuring this kind of craziness and intrigue would make for some entertaining television!

For most of Jesus' audience, however, and for those of us who paid attention in Sunday school, the meaning of the parable is painfully obvious. A wedding feast was a popular way of describing the coming consummation of God's kingdom; that day in the future when the long-awaited Messiah -- the bridegroom -- would receive the honor rightfully due him, and enjoy an extravagant feast of blessing and joy!

Yet, rather than be filled with honor and excitement for that day, rather than "save the date" and mark their calendars, God's people, like the guests in the story, simply couldn't care less. After all, the bridegroom had appeared in the person of Jesus, and rather than embrace him in anticipation of the party, God's people would eventually throw him on a cross. As a result, the feast, the kingdom, the new age of heaven on Earth, and the blessing from the bridegroom would be opened to everyone else. And that's where we come in.

We, beginning with the first disciples, are the "other ones," the "found ones," the "good and bad" ones Jesus talks about to whom the invitation to the wedding now belongs. The invitation has come to you, and to me in the form of the Gospel, preached to us in sermons, read and explored in Bible studies, and applied to us on the day of our baptism. Our sins are forgiven. Our status is secure. Our RSVP for the resurrection is in the mail. We *will be* a guest of the groom at the great feast, on the last day.

And God's goal for us, as His special guests, is to learn from those who were invited to the wedding but rejected the offer. God would love for some of that excitement, and interest we seem to have for crazy cakes and pricey dresses today, to be focused on what's in store for us; our heavenly future, with the lamb of God and the great eternal banquet that awaits us. We should make the most of this special invitation!

So, what does that look like? Well, when it comes down to it, there are three aspects of making the most of God's kingdom invitation. First -- and this may sound painfully simple -- *enjoy the fact that you've been chosen*. If the promises of God are true, and the gifts we enjoy *now* -- like forgiveness of our every sin, a mission-for our lives, and the power of the Holy Spirit, are just a glimpse, a snippet of what we will enjoy when the real party arrives, then we should be the happiest people on the planet.

Yet far too often, followers of Jesus Christ seem to have no joy, as though their eVite got lost in their inbox. We get mad about the same things. We're distracted by the same things. We gripe, complain and worry about the same things. We live like the Bridezillas we love to hate on reality television: *bent out of shape about small things, and letting them overshadow the big thing*. We know that, regardless of what happens, we're still gonna get to party. So let's lighten up

Have you ever been invited to a truly extravagant wedding? You know, the kind where you kill time waiting for the bridal party to show up by guessing how much every over-the-top element must have cost, and your spouse says repeatedly, "Ooh! I wish we could have had that at *our* wedding!" According to one website, the most expensive wedding ever produced took place in India in 2004. The wedding of Vanisha Mittal and Amit Bhatia is said to have cost around 66 million dollars. Invitations arrived in silver boxes containing round-trip airfare and accommodations at a five-star Paris hotel.

When invited to something so lavish, there's something in most of us that feels honored and excited, even joyful that we get to take part. The same should be true as we consider the invitation that has been sent to us from God. We should feel excited to be involved. And perhaps we need to get back in touch with the sense of awe we once had in knowing we are average people picked for an extravagant affair. Perhaps that's what David was attempting to do when he wrote in Psalm 51: "Restore to me the joy of your salvation."

A second way in which we make the most of God's kingdom invitation *is by inviting others to join us at the feast*. Jesus' parable could not have been clearer. No matter who you are, or where he can find you, God's desire is to see the guest hall packed to the gills on the last day with people enjoying the party that's been arranged for his Son. Jesus says that the king's servants "went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests."

A typical wedding invitation allows for what's called a "plus 1" that is, the invited and just one guest, but God's invitation is different. It's not you "plus 1." It's you "plus everybody else." I'm willing to bet many of us still remember when the entire world was invited to watch and help celebrate the marriage of Prince William to Kate Middleton. Hundreds of millions tuned in. God is planning a party for his Son that is a thousand times bigger and a million times less boring. So who have you invited to the party? Who have you introduced to the kingdom? Start at home. Do your children worship with you? Will your spouse be sitting next to you? If not, why? When was the last time you asked someone to join you at church and hear the invitation? Let's get cracking. This will be, after all, a "can't-miss" celebration.

Last, we make the most out of our invite to the wedding of all weddings *by letting God be the bouncer at the door*. We tend to spend too much time worrying about who's in, and who's out. There's a lot of buzz about this now. Author and Pastor Rob Bell found himself wondering if hell even exists, in his book, "Love Wins!." Others are saying that as a God of love, no one will be excluded. Still others say there are conditions before one gets into the ballroom. Christians have been jabbering about this wedding feast that's been on the Books for over 2,000 years. And we even make the whole debate more personal. We bicker over who worships the right way, who dresses appropriately, whose theology is tightest, and whose life is the cleanest. The end result is that such discussions end up either robbing us of the simple joy of being invited -- weighing us down with largely unimportant concerns -- or stopping us in our tracks from asking anyone else to join us.

Who's invited and who's not is a God thing. You'll recall at the end of the parable the king enters the party and boots one attendee out for not having the proper attire. This guest's disdain for the king's dress code, displayed a lack of appreciation for the party and a lack of love for the king. Many commentators believe it to be an allusion to the righteousness afforded by faith and gifted by God that allows us to enter and enjoy God's kingdom. That's likely. But the larger point is that only the king himself does the bouncing. He determines who is in and who is out. He'll determine who's wearing the righteousness of Christ. Our task is mostly to enjoy our invitation and to pass along the invite. Others have put it like this: Found people find people. Invited people invite people. God sorts out the rest.

It isn't too surprising that our world loves its weddings. One website estimates that in the United States alone some 70 billion dollars are spent on weddings annually, with the average

wedding costing roughly \$25,000 to \$30,000. Didn't spend that much on yours? Don't worry, you can turn on the television and see someone who did.

What would happen if those of us who claim to be followers of Christ became as excited about the divine party that awaits us, as we do the one-day affairs we watch on TV or get invited to in the spring? We'd be grateful guests. We'd be inviting others. We'd stay out of unfruitful arguments and unnecessary details. We'd let God throw the party, and we'd simply look forward to it! After all, it's going to be an incredible and unbelievable celebration. Amen.