

Party time: Matthew 22:1-14

by [Susan Pendleton Jones](#) in the [September 22, 1999](#) issue

Tables spread with mouth-watering morsels, guests gathered in the perfect ambiance, lots of noise, laughter and fun. We know a party when we see one. But we also know that not all parties are the same. Like the towels in the guest bathroom that are there to be admired but never touched, some parties focus more on display than on people. Other parties are known more for who is not invited than who is. Some parties are held to celebrate, others to commiserate. As diverse as parties can be, they all have one thing in common: their purpose and tone are set by the host.

Exodus 32 and Matthew 22 describe two very different parties thrown by two very different hosts. For 40 days and nights Moses is on Mount Sinai in the presence of God. Along with the tablets containing the Ten Commandments, Moses receives instructions from God about the creation of the sacred spaces the people are to build. The ark of the covenant is to hold the two tablets bearing the commandments, and the tabernacle is to be built as a sanctuary to the Lord for worship while in the wilderness.

The children of Israel remain in the valley, far enough away that Moses disappears from them into the clouds covering the mountain. Because Moses is delayed in coming down from the mountain, the people feel abandoned and begin to murmur. They eventually turn to Aaron, the brother of their leader, to help revive their spirits, and renew their hope of being led into the Promised Land. Their response to the lack of a strong leader is to create one. "Come, make gods for us who shall go before us."

So Aaron happily obliges. After he gathers up all their gold, he manages to fashion a large calf that they acknowledge as an image of their savior. Their refrain, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt," is a phrase repeated centuries later in the story in 1 Kings 12:25, where Jeroboam I has set up two golden calves for the people to worship. This was a call to celebrate, to rejoice. Though Aaron proclaimed the following day as a "festival to the Lord," it is clear that the revelry was in honor of the graven image. The impatient children of Israel host a party that almost leads to their destruction.

When we compare the events of this brief story with the chapters preceding it, we see even more clearly why this is a self-destructive party. The sacred spaces are carefully detailed and designed in Exodus 25-31, offering a stark contrast to the rush job of the created image that stands in place of God. In effect, the people are seeking to create what God is already providing. They are blinded by their impatience and by their desire to take control. By creating an image to which they give credit for their deliverance from slavery, they violate one of the very commandments that Moses is delivering to them: their festival becomes an idolatrous orgy, eliciting an outraged response from the Lord. It is only when Moses reminds God of his covenantal promise to Abraham that God "changes his mind" and spares the people.

In the parables of Matthew 22, the king has gone to great trouble preparing a wedding feast for his son, slaughtering enough oxen and fatted calves to feed several hundred people. He sends out invitations and then twice reminds the guests to attend. Not only do the guests refuse, but some of them seize his messengers and kill them. In response, the king sends his troops to burn their city. Then he sends out another invitation requesting that all persons—the "good" and the "bad"—be invited to the banquet. The hall is filled and the party begins.

This is one of several parables of judgment spoken by Jesus against the chief priests and Pharisees during the last week of his life. Taking the parable as an allegory, we can see that the king is God, the wedding feast the messianic banquet. The messengers who are killed represent the prophets and early Christian missionaries, and the invitation to the "bad" and "good" is the church's outreach to both gentiles and Jews. Seen in this way, the parable becomes a radical invitation. The table is spread for all to come. Those gathered from the streets have no reason or right to be there—except that they are invited by a gracious king. Jesus is issuing the invitation for all to join him as God's guests in a banquet feast called the kingdom of heaven.

Life in the kingdom is a party where God is the host and all of us have received a royal invitation. Yet some of us come unprepared, as a second parable reminds us. One guest is improperly dressed, and is thrown out of the banquet—quite a contrast to the inclusive tone of the previous parable. To wear a wedding garment is to know the significance of the occasion, to allow God's gracious invitation to change our lives, and to live accordingly. The dinner guest has received a gift from the king—the invitation to a joyous, elaborate feast—to which he has not responded appropriately.

When we receive a gift such as salvation or forgiveness, we are called to lives of penitent joyfulness.

All are invited to feast at the table, but not every response is acceptable. We are called to repent in preparation for the party, not because we have to but because we know we are entering into the presence of a gracious, forgiving God. We will be left out if we think that God's love carries with it no desire for response from us. Though we are often tempted to play the host, these two parables together confirm that we need God to be the host—not only for the grace-filled invitation to the banquet, but also for the expectation of holy living that God presumes of those in attendance. Grace is amazing, but so is God's desire for our response.