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**October 11, 2020**

**Many are Called, but Few are Chosen**

*Matthew 22:14*

**Many are Called, but Few are Chosen: *The inspirational poster***

My hunch is this. If you've ever been in Christian bookstore, or maybe even a "Tuesday Morning," you've probably seen a placard with this biblical quote on it. It's a popular one – but I do wonder what vibe people imagine they are giving off by hanging up this quote for inspiration.

I think I understand the allure. It denotes "specialness." Many – may be called. But FEW, just a few, like me maybe, are chosen by God. It crosses my mind that there are snarkier ways to say the same thing, like the button worn by the organist from my seminary internship who had a wicked sense of humor. I particularly enjoyed when he wore it to staff meetings. It read, "God loves you, but I'm his favorite."

It's in human nature to want to feel special, set apart, CHOSEN. We want to know that we have not only answered the invitation, but fulfilled the role of beloved servant of the Almighty. We also are tempted to wield the power to say who ISN'T among the chosen – among those enemies that make our blood boil or just the nitwits who drive us crazy. It sounds a little bit petty on the surface in that it reminds me of the Toby Keith song where he sings to his girlfriend, "I wanna talk about me" and goes on to say that he's tired of listening to all the stories about her and wants to get his own relationship "me-time." Hopefully, Toby is taking the country music license of exaggeration to make his point, and yet, we really do have a deep human desire to feel worthy and beloved – whether that's with a significant other or the Creator of the Universe.

In the world of spiritual truth, I believe it to be vital for human beings to develop a healthy sense of belonging. It's not always easy though to get it right. We chase it when we don't feel like we have it, and when we have it, it doesn't seem to last. We want to feel invited to the eternal wedding banquet, called personally into a relationship with God, and we want, with all our hearts to believe that God is choosing us, over and over again.

I have observed this truth playing out in two somewhat different ways. One is in the universal. It is universally true that God does love us – just like the first phrase of Gordon's button said – God loves you. There is an understanding of God's steadfast love prayed throughout the psalms, and there is a reminder in 1 John, chapter 4, that God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God in them. The message of love in scripture and in our experiences of God is pervasive. To be fed a message that God is somehow more aligned with hate than love is a gross misrepresentation of who God is. God loves. God is love. God loves us. Now and for eternity. We can rely on that and it is universally a constant. That is what I believe.

But there's that second part to this inspirational quote that begs the questions: Am I special, part of the chosen few? Am I God's favorite? Do I get to talk about me as the apple of God's eye? After all, I gave my life to the ministry, and serving others, and trying to be a good Mom, etc. etc. Does this make me special? Yes, it does, but it is a qualified yes. What I have learned spiritually is a bit of a paradox – I am part of the grand calling that involves inviting everyone, rich or poor, good or bad, faithful or apathetic all to the huge wedding feast (which seems less special), AND I am chosen in God's eyes, known by name in God's heart (which seems more special). I can affirm my unique belovedness and believe it 100% to be true, but that doesn't mean that makes you, or the President, or the guy on the street panhandling any less or more

chosen than I am. It just means I can have a particular relationship with God as well as being part of that universal love. I am Called AND I am chosen.

In that interpretation, letting that verse stand on its own can make sense. I think it does make sense of a particular spiritual truth that God continues to love and love and love on God's creation – and yet – to experience a sense of chosenness is to allow that authentic truth and relationship to become manifest within us.

But now, I have to burst that bubble a bit and read the verse IN CONTEXT. What is Jesus' intended meaning behind: Many are called, but few are chosen?

*Matthew 22:1-14*

### **Many are Called, but Few are Chosen: *The Explicit Warning to Turn or Burn***

Let's recall that we are in Matthew's gospel, shall we? The one that is teaching us about how to start a rebellion against the Empire. It is a *Star Wars* gospel – going up against evil overlords and their extensive Empire with a scrappy group of small-town cowboys, and pissed off princesses. It's a classic story – and it comes awfully close to the Jesus story.

This week, we get to the third of three “warning” parables. There's the one about which “son” does the will of God, the one who says he's not going to work in the vineyard but does anyway or the one who says he'll go out and work but doesn't. Then there's the parable of the wicked tenants who kill anyone who comes inquiring about the vineyard owner's property, including his son, hoping to get the inheritance for themselves. Then, we read this one about a wedding

banquet – which again involves killing, burning, and eternal damnation to the outer darkness.

And then, the final line before the transition to the next part of the narrative where Jesus squares off with the religious leaders of his day: *Many are called, but few are chosen.*

Reading this might make you think twice about hanging up that inspirational poster.

As Matthew writes this story, Jesus is anticipating conflict, conflict between those who merely *say* they are doing God's will and those who actually do the will of God by loving their neighbors. Jesus is anticipating greed, the greed of those asked to watch over God's kingdom on earth, but who want the spoils of that caretaking all for themselves. Then Jesus anticipates that the invitation to be a part of God's great wedding banquet will be rejected, first by the elites, and then even by those on the margins who show up but disrespect God's honor by not being adequately dressed.

As Biblical scholar Warren Carter points out in his work on this gospel, these are increasingly dire warnings about the nature of how people are turning away from God and toward their own selfish wants and desires. To be the target audience for these parables is to want to be the center of it all, have an easy life, enjoy power and wealth, and be able to do it all without any obligation to God who is their covenant partner. These parables are pointedly about religious leaders and their failures. It is a scathing critique of hypocrisy directed at the religious community that Jesus loves with all his being. For, we have to presume that Jesus loved Israel just as much as God loved Israel. This is a message of LOVE, but it is also a message that sets out very clear boundaries – just as the prophets had done before. When we break our covenant with God – God will always demand a reckoning.

So, let's look at this particular parable and some of the features in it we may or may not notice at first. Jesus uses the setting of a wedding feast. That wasn't just a convenient example, it was meant to remind the hearers of their covenant with God – a covenant they had been breaking. They were breaking it by ignoring the invitation of intimacy. Come – be a part of the party. Celebrate life. And the elites simply said no – they weren't going to. The second invitation, a bit more demanding than the first, was issued. This time, they killed the messengers. The King retaliates – burning their city – which is exactly what happens to Jerusalem during the time of Matthew's writing of this gospel. Then the King invites those on the periphery – anyone and everyone who would answer the call. *It's a party. Y'all come.*

Jesus tells us, both good and bad are invited; thus, the wedding hall gets filled with guests. Many have been called, they say. We are all guests to the party of life. Now, here is where it gets weird for me. The King comes to check out the guests and finds that someone isn't wearing a wedding robe. Apparently, this is WAY more of a party “don't” than we would realize today. We might brush off a poorly dressed guest, invited at the last minute, as unable to change into his or her best attire for the event. It seems over the top to me that the King banishes that guest, but it's not just a “show him the door” kind of thing, this guest is tied up, with bound hands and feet, and thrown into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

(Nervous laughter) Few are chosen.

Now, what do you think this perplexing verse of scripture might mean? Our capacity to try to fool God with our lack of work, our propensity toward greed, our arrogance in making our own lives most important, and somehow our sheer disrespect of not having the right robe – makes the God who is generally slow to anger – finally get there. Few will make the cut. It isn't just about the high up officials in church and state, it may mean that you, a relative fool will also miss the

point. This is a verse about the slippery slope of sin in relationship to God's goodness and widespread invitation to intimacy. Everybody gets a chance – but a LOT of us are going to blow that chance.

I do have to watch in thinking myself a part of the “few” or as one of God's favorites. This is an extraordinarily humbling text. It's way too easy to cherry pick from this one and try to get a feel-good message out of it. It's also too easy to watch Jesus mentally eviscerate the Pharisees and Sadducees, the experts on law and righteousness, and feel a little bit smug about it. Jesus really “got them good.” But we wouldn't behave that way, would we? Would we?

Well, we know that we do. We know that the sin of religious arrogance is just as prevalent in contemporary Christianity as it was in 1<sup>st</sup> century Israelite religion. We know that – because religious arrogance is prevalent in every time and pervades and perverts every religion I know. There's no escaping it – other than to recognize it, name it, and keep working to create a better way. Jesus calls us on it even now. The chosen will continue to show up, robing themselves with humility, remembering always that they are the welcome guests at God's feast. Know that you are beloved. Know that you are special. And also remember that God won't leave anyone off the guest list. Amen.

Be confident because you are a child of God; be humble because everyone else is too. – Glennon Doyle.