

Pavlov's Disciples
Matthew 22:1-14
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“Then the king said to his attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ”

Well, there's an uplifting bit of prose from Jesus, now isn't it? Weeping and gnashing of teeth. Did you ever wonder what the gnashing of teeth really sounds like? What is gnashing anyway? Well, I've done some research into the matter and have found a very old recording that I think is exactly what Jesus had in mind. It comes from the Dead Sea MP3 collection. Have a listen: [Play preview of Track 14 found at this [link](#).] Well, I don't know about you, but if there is a better reason to repent and follow Christ than to avoid listening to that for all eternity, I'm not sure what it is!

That little foray into the biblical soundscape comes to us courtesy of a little-known thrash metal band called “For the Suffering,” although perhaps they should think about changing their name to “Causing the Suffering.” Thrash metal is a musical genre that certainly lends itself to a consideration of the phrase “weeping and gnashing of teeth,” since the principal subject matter of thrash metal songs revolves around such things as “isolation, alienation, corruption, injustice, addiction, suicide, murder, warfare, and other maladies that afflict the individual and society.” I don't know anything more about that little-known band called “For

the Suffering” except that those fifteen seconds of their music we played sounds like what I imagine hell to be. But for those of you who might be wondering if there is any such thing as a well-known thrash metal band, you have obviously never heard of Thrash metal’s “Big Four,” namely Metallica, Megadeth, Slayer, and Anthrax, names which will give you an idea of what the poorly dressed wedding guest in the parable was in for, once he was cast out into the “outer darkness.”

Tonight’s parable from Matthew is really two parables in one, the first part detailing the struggles a king has filling the banquet hall for his son’s wedding, and the second part dealing with the nature of the guests who finally show up. Not all of Jesus’ parables are meant to be interpreted allegorically, but this one probably is, just as the two before it, one of which we examined last week as we looked at the tenants who would not give the landowner what he was due, who killed his slaves and his son, and who were destined to be replaced by new tenants who would “produce the fruits of the Kingdom.” In both of these parables, the violent tenants or the wedding guests who decided they had better things to do are meant to represent the Jewish leadership of the time, those who had rejected those whom God, the landowner or the king, had sent to them to seek their righteousness and respect. In both of these parables, the followers of Jesus are represented by the new tenants and the new wedding guests invited from off the street, both groups being unexpectedly gathered in to receive a good fortune they could hardly have

imagined. The kingdom of God, Jesus is saying, is too valuable to be left in the hands of people who do not care for it properly, and so the change is made. On the surface, these parables seem to be a strong poke in the ribs to the Pharisees in the last week of Jesus' life, a condemnation of their way of life, and a prediction of what will happen to them. Out with the old, and in with the new. An old order dying away, replaced by a new order. Indeed, after both parables are told, we learn that the Pharisees plot to do Jesus in, feeling threatened by his denunciations, an indication of what they felt was at stake.

Digging a little deeper, however, we see that the key to understanding the story is not just that the old order has been replaced, but that the new order must be constantly vigilant if it is not to suffer the same fate. You see, Matthew's Gospel was not written to Pharisees, to prove to them the error of their ways, to try to convince them to come over to Jesus' side. In fact, the Pharisees had already suffered a terrible fate when the city of Jerusalem was left in ruins in the year 70, and they were sent scattered like sheep throughout the Roman Empire. By the time Matthew writes his Gospel, the Pharisees are not the powerhouse they once were, but rather one sect of Jews among other sects of Jews, including the ones who called themselves Christians. And Matthew's Gospel is written to that group of Jews who called themselves Christians, as an exhortation to continued faithfulness, and an explanation of sorts of what happened along the way, with a little bit of gloating over the Pharisees thrown in for good measure. They are the guests who

were gathered in for the wedding feast of the son. But they are also those from whom one came to the wedding in the wrong clothes, and who left it to the sound of the gnashing of teeth. [Play preview of Track 14 found at this [link](#).] Yes, it is the final part of tonight’s parable that really matters, all the way at the end of three parables that are setting up Matthew’s hearers for self-congratulatory rejoicing— “Yes, we are the champions! The Pharisees have been defeated! We are the new chosen ones!”— only to rein them in with the most sobering of warnings: that they too run the risk of the kind of careless treatment of the kingdom that led to the Pharisee’s dismissal from the kingdom, and the ruin of their city. Those of you who remember the ending of George Orwell’s book, *Animal Farm*, will remember the caution of its final words, as the pigs who had led the farmyard rebellion had slowly but surely recreated what they had overthrown in the first place: “No question now, what had happened to the faces of the pigs. The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which.” The new order had become the old order.

And so we see the purpose of the rather unpleasant conclusion of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” — to remind the church that although they were welcomed to the party, there are certain fundamental requirements for staying at the party. Please don’t get hung up on how a poor guy from the street, invited to the wedding feast of the King’s son at the last moment, is supposed to come up with a wedding

robe. This parable is an allegory, not an opportunity for an analysis of first century wedding customs. This parable, or rather the three parables combined, do to the early church what Jesus always did to his opponents; he drew them in to the point of no return, and then twisted the story to convict them of their own self-righteousness. He did that in the telling of the parable we looked at last week when he gets the Pharisees to admit that the punishment they will receive is the punishment they deserve. And he does it here to the disciples by hooking them on their new place at the party, before reminding them of the proper behavior of the guests. [Play preview of Track 14 found at this [link](#).]

Despite the non-violent teachings of the Sermon on the Mount, and a whole host of wonderful images of grace, there are eight stories or parables like tonight's, also in Matthew, that have rather violent and disturbing endings. The tenants are put to a horrible death, a city is burned and its inhabitants murdered, a man is bound and cast into the outer darkness, and God seems to be behind it all. Jesus was clearly not a believer in 100% positive reinforcement for behavior modification. He was not above instilling a little fear into people about things that really mattered. He carried a stick as well as a carrot. He trotted out language like "weeping and gnashing of teeth," as one among many of his means of conditioning responses to the Gospel message. [Play preview of Track 14 found at this [link](#).] Perhaps you remember Pavlov's famous dogs, participants in "The original and most famous example of classical conditioning...During his research on the

physiology of digestion in dogs, [the Russian scientist] Pavlov noticed that, rather than simply salivating in the presence of meat...the dogs began to salivate in the presence of the lab technician who normally fed them. Pavlov called these psychic secretions. From this observation he predicted that, if a particular stimulus in the dog's surroundings was present when the dog was presented with meat, then this stimulus would become associated with food and cause salivation on its own. In his initial experiment, Pavlov used a bell to call the dogs to their food and, after a few repetitions, the dogs started to salivate in response to the bell." [Play preview of Track 14 found at this [link](#).]

If that makes Jesus sound like a sadistic mad scientist, so be it, but don't forget, he had a little experience dealing with human beings throughout the millennia, and just being nice didn't work very often. This method is not, of course, his only, or even preferred, method for trying to keep us on the straight and narrow. There are far, far more examples of Jesus simply exhorting us positively to behave well toward one another than there are these implicit threats, but you simply can't ignore the threats that are there because you don't like the sound of them. It is true that most people, including myself, do not respond well to negative reinforcement or conditioning. Nevertheless, my mother is quite sure that I have never used drugs because she scared the living daylights out of me, and I never cross the street without looking both ways not because she taught me to be a self-confident risk-taker, but because she yanked me by the arm whenever I stepped out

into the street without taking her hand first. Yes, there are times when it is good to be reminded about such things as “weeping and gnashing of teeth,” lest we experience them for real instead of just through a threat, or fifteen seconds of thrash metal. [Play preview of Track 14 found at this [link](#).]

Please do not misunderstand me. The church is not called to evangelize with threats and thrash metal. But it is called to take seriously the reality that we believers often take for granted the love under which we have been invited to live and with which we are called to bring God’s message. Sometimes it takes both positive and negative messages, multiple ways of conditioning ourselves to never take those promises for granted. There is a time to remind people to invite others to church, and to be part of a wonderful fellowship of people who love and care for one another and who serve their community. But there is also a time to remind people that the church is always one generation from extinction, that we can never take the faith of our children for granted. There is a time to extol the virtues of daily Bible reading, of the riches of prayer, of the value of silence. But there is also a time to expect that leaders of the church know that the book of Ephesians is part of the New Testament, to call upon even the most timid among us to pray out loud, to insist that everyone has a chance to speak. There is a time for warm and fuzzy, and a time for thrash metal bands called Megadeath and Slayer.

Despite my Pavlovian attempts tonight to condition you with some really awful music to help you avoid “weeping and gnashing of teeth,” I don’t have any

bombshell to drop on you other than to remind you of the wondrous gift you have received in Jesus Christ, the one whose Father, our God, has prepared an amazing feast to which we have been invited. The parable tells us that, “the King’s slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.” May we be found in the dining hall among the good and well-dressed guests, because we have both embraced the opportunity of faith, and heeded the warnings of our frailty. Amen.