

# Inclusivity and Exclusivity of Biblical Christianity

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Preacher: Matty Blakeman

[ 0 : 00 ]     Lovely to be here with you this afternoon and to look at this parable with you. As has been said already, I send my greetings from Hillbank Evangelical Church in Dundee where I have served for the past seven and a half years and love nearly every minute of it.

It's thoroughly just a privilege to serve God's people and to serve our local community and to reach out with the good news of Jesus Christ. So Matthew 22 is where we are today and if you've got your Bibles open, that would be wonderful as you work through this parable.

We live in a culture of buzzwords. Buzzwords, if you don't know buzzwords, are words or phrases, often an item of jargon, that are fashionable at a particular time or in a particular context.

Every generation will have its buzzwords and there are many in our generation that come up quite a lot. I want to share one with you today and consider one with you today and that word is inclusive.

The word inclusive is not a new word, but I would imagine it has been used in common discourse more in the last decade than it has probably the previous 50 years or so. It is a very commonly used in a variety of circumstances in your workplace, perhaps on Twitter quite a lot and anybody pushing a particular agenda or conversation.

[ 1 : 27 ]     To be inclusive simply means to welcome all people into your organization or your group or your culture, your church or workplace or whatever, regardless of your race, religion, sexuality, political persuasion and so on.

And it is generally considered to be inclusive, to be an inclusive group or whatever, is generally considered to be a good thing, an absolutely good thing.

If you wanted to portray to people that you're on the right side of things and you're a thinking progressive person, you would use the word inclusive to convince people that you're doing well and that you are a person who can be trusted.

The opposite, of course, of inclusive is the word exclusive. To exclude certain people who aren't welcome for one reason or another or a set of criteria they can't seem to meet.

We want to be inclusive people surely nowadays. So with that in mind, let me throw a question for us to consider this morning before we get into this parable. Now, is biblical Christianity an inclusive faith or an exclusive faith?

[ 2 : 37 ]     The wise among you will not answer too quickly. Is biblical Christianity the faith that we celebrate, that we believe in this day, the gospel of Christ, is it an inclusive faith or is it an exclusive faith?

Simply put, is Christianity more like people standing at a door saying, everybody come in, door swung wide open, in you come, or is it more like a bouncer outside a nightclub? I can see you're all big nightclub goers in this church today.

It's like someone standing on the outside with like a clipboard, checking very specifically if you meet the criteria to come in. Which of those two pictures best fits biblical Christianity?

Is it an inclusive faith or is it an exclusive faith? And if you think about it and if you think of what the Bible says, you will realize very quickly this is a really complex question.

This is a really complex question, which is maybe a little bit frustrating for some of us today. Because for many of us, I'm sure when we hear that question, we want to scream out, inclusive.

[ 3 : 39 ] Because of course that scene is very much a positive thing. We want people to see our faith as inclusive. We want our friends, our loved ones, those who don't know Christ, we want them to look at the Christian faith and see that this is for them.

It's an inclusive. You don't want to portray it as an exclusive faith. That's just cold. No one's going to come to church if that's what we're putting across shortly. And the good news for us today is that there are many, many good reasons.

The Bible gives us many good reasons for us to say, yes, the Christian faith is inclusive. It is scandalously inclusive.

It is so inclusive, it perhaps even makes us a little bit uncomfortable. The gospel of Jesus Christ shows us that people can be welcomed in, into a relationship with God.

They can be welcomed in, even people that we might be tempted to say, them? You're going to welcome them in? Really? Them?

[ 4 : 40 ] It's scandalously inclusive. Consider the life of Jesus Christ for a second. And think of the people that he associates with.

The people he's comfortable hanging around with. Look at how he would stretch the boundaries, as it were, of who could receive the love of God. The people who would be looked down upon.

The people who would be rejected for one reason or another. The outcast. Look at your own life today, friends. If you are a Christian. If you are a Christian, let me tell you, it is absurd for us today to consider that despite how you and I have lived our lives, despite the sin within our hearts, the rebellion that we have carried out in our lives, the way that we have rejected this God, either by word or by deed in our lives, and yet still you have been shown the most extravagant love and have been given the most extravagant welcome by the King of Kings, by the God who loves to save sinners, who would even choose to suffer upon a cross to bear your wrath.

So on one hand, there is mountains of evidence to suggest that, yes, our faith is radically inclusive. Exclusive. But, what about the other side?

Is there any evidence on the other side of things? Anything that we could stack up on the other side from the Bible that would suggest that, well, actually, maybe the Christian faith is quite exclusive. It's not, clearly, maybe not for everybody, perhaps.

[ 6 : 16 ] Think of the words of Jesus when he says, I am the way, the truth, and the life, a verse I'd imagine we all know so well. No one, no one comes to the Father. No one comes to God.

No one receives the grace of God except through Jesus. That sounds kind of exclusive to me. To me, that seems like all other systems and paths and philosophies and religions are leading to a dead end, are leading to destruction.

What else does Jesus say? He says, It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. We're rich, by the way, so that's bad news for us.

Really, really, really hard for a rich person to enter heaven. That seems quite exclusive. What else do we have? Small is the gate, narrow is the road that leads to life. Only a few people will find it.

What about Paul? Does Paul help us with this at all? He says in 1 Corinthians 6, verses 9 and 10, Do not be deceived. Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers will enter the kingdom of God.

[ 7 : 30 ] Yikes is the word you're looking for. This seems really, really exclusive. That seems kind of strict. And let's be clear, we affirm these passages. Maybe we don't scream them from the rooftops.

We don't hand out tracts with these verses on them to our friends. Not the verses we maybe want everyone to know, but we do affirm these passages, and that may be tough for us today. Because I'd imagine that most of us know somebody for whom their perspective of Christianity, all that they can see is the exclusive part of it.

They cannot see the fuller picture of the gospel because they're so blindsided by how exclusive it may come across. And they're unable to comprehend this God that might actually love them and would send a son to die for them.

They just see a closed door. They don't see the fuller picture. So this question is quite complex, isn't it? It is both inclusive and it is exclusive.

Tim Keller, I know many of you will be familiar with, American pastor and author, he says the gospel is an exclusive truth, but it's the most inclusive, exclusive truth in the world.

[ 8 : 38 ] I hope that made some kind of sense to you this morning. You get the gist of what he's saying. The truth is that the gospel offers acceptance to all sinners, regardless of past or background, but the gospel also says no to your sin.

It's a closed door to our sin. It says you can come in and receive heaven, receive the gift of God, but you cannot take your sin with you. Salvation can be described as a free gift that will cost you everything.

It's a radical picture we have of this gospel. And perhaps maybe for some here this day, you maybe love the fact that God would show grace to you. You love what you hear about the cross. Some of the amazing hymns that the band brilliantly led us through this morning, but maybe you find it really, really difficult to turn away from your sin.

You find it hard to take hold of the full picture of the gospel of Jesus Christ. You love the forgiveness and the mercy, but you find it hard to let go, perhaps, of maybe an old life, that you find it hard to accept the new life that God has for you.

And so with that in mind, let's look at Matthew 22, and let's look at this parable that we're considering this day, and we'll see how this all comes together. And whenever we study the Bible, as I know you're aware, in a good Bible-preaching church like this, we know the context, of course, is important.

[ 9 : 54 ] We want to figure out how this fits in in the bigger scheme of what's going on, and that's really significant in this particular case. This parable is preached on the last week of Jesus' life. He is ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey, and here he is confronting people with what's about to happen to him, all that's going to unfold in the next week or so.

And you'll see in your Bibles just before chapter 22, at the end of 21, we have this other parable. And for the sake of time, we'll not go through the whole thing. But Jesus gives this parable to very much Jewish listeners, Jewish leaders, in fact, teachers of the law, God's chosen people, but people who had become complacent, who had become arrogant and pretentious.

They thought that because they were Jewish, because of the covenant, they were all good, they could relax, and God had them. But it had made them arrogant and pretentious, and they had taken their eyes off the compassion of their God and the mercy of their God, and they had become blind.

And so Jesus, simply put, goes after them and doesn't mess around. He goes after them. And he basically communicates this parable at the end of 21 that shares to them that they are guilty of refusing to listen to God's prophets who said to turn back to him, refusing to turn from their sinful ways, but most importantly, Jesus says to them, that they're about to do the worst thing of all.

They're about to kill God's only son. Now imagine that for a second. If you were part of this group that was plotting to have Jesus killed, and you're making your schemes, and Jesus very calmly tells you this story that basically says, I see exactly what you're doing.

[ 11 : 45 ] I'm on to you. You have been rumbled, and you will face God in judgment because of this. So he's told this parable just before it, but now he tells another parable to the same group.

But he changes the scene. He's not talking about his death anymore. He tries to speak about heaven, what the kingdom of heaven is like, which is how this parable begins. And he says heaven is like a wedding banquet, a wedding party.

Now if the middle-aged men in this room are similar to the middle-aged men in my church, you need to be convinced that a wedding celebration is an enjoyable thing. Okay? To think that heaven is like a wedding maybe puts you off the idea of heaven, but this is supposed to be a good thing.

There's supposed to be happy occasions. Okay? My dad very much needs this sermon. I'll make sure he hears the audio of this. But it's a wedding party, and the wedding party is one that a king throws for his son.

Now in any parable, of course, we understand we're looking at allegory and we have to try and translate and think what does each character or each place or whatever represent in reality. So in this one, this is a bit more straightforward than perhaps some other parables.

[ 12 : 55 ] The king that throws a wedding party for his son clearly represents the father throwing a feast for his son, Jesus. Not too difficult.

The Bible, of course, speaks of this great wedding feast to come that we look forward to being part of. The father throws a wedding feast for his son. And we can imagine that if it's the king that's throwing this celebration, it's going to be pretty good, right?

It's going to be pretty impressive. It's going to be this massive, phenomenal celebration, no expense spared. But what we learn about this wedding celebration is that there is a very strict and specific invite list.

Invite list. And what we know clearly is that those who would be on the invite list to God's kingdom would, of course, be God's beloved and chosen people, the nation of Israel, or the Jewish people.

The people that God persevered with, we read throughout the Old Testament, despite their failure, his faithfulness, as we've heard about with Abraham, his faithfulness to his covenant over generation after generation, how he redeems them time and time again.

[ 13 : 59 ] And so what we learn is that the servants in this wedding situation are sent out to find the invitees, the people who have got a little card, perhaps, to save the date or whatever it is, and to go and tell them to come in because we're ready to have the big celebration.

It's ready to start. But it's at this point that we have our first plot twist. The people on the invite list aren't interested in coming. They don't seem too interested in coming along.

But this king is persistent. So he goes on a little bit further and he sends some more servants out. The king is very generous. He could have just said, well, forget them. They're not getting a second chance.

But he's patient. He is long-suffering. He's gracious. So more servants go out and they give a little bit more details. In this second time they go out, they speak about a fattened calf being slaughtered and all the rest of it, and the oxen are ready and all the rest of it.

And if you know the parable of the prodigal son, you know that when the son comes home and this beautiful emotional scene, what the father says is, kill the fattened calf, which is first century language for let's get the party started.

[ 15 : 08 ] Everything is ready for this magnificent celebration. The invitees are told again, in you come, let's get ready to go. Now let's do that work again of thinking, what does this represent in reality?

We've got the parable, the picture here, but what does this represent in reality? Well, this maybe gives us an idea of the work of the prophets. Even of Jesus, who of course was a prophet.

He was more than a prophet, but he was still a prophet. Jesus going out to his people and saying, repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near. It looks a little bit like perhaps John the Baptist showing up and saying, declaring the way of the Lord.

The Messiah, Jesus, has come. Time to waken up, time to turn back to God, to trust in his son, the Messiah. He's the one you want to follow.

He's the lamb who takes away the sin of the world. Party's getting started. But again, we see in verse 5 that they say no.

[ 16 : 12 ] These people are not interested. And they have a multitude of excuses. One guy's washing his hair. One's watching, I don't know, The Apprentice or something, or I'm a celebrity. They've got whatever reason they could find, but they've got reason to say, we're not going to this celebration just now.

Sorry. But more than that, they take things further. They carry out actions on the messengers. And it says they get quite horrifically violent against them.

They ill-treat them, verse 6 says, and they kill them. This is brutal. This is horrific. They even attack God's own son. And just like the last parable, where we learn about the son who gets killed, there is a warning to go with it.

And the warning is that the king will respond in judgment to the atrocities that have been carried out. If you follow what goes on in the persecuted church, in many countries in our world, you'll hear horrific things.

I remember Barnabas, the Barnabas Trust came to our church a few years ago. Horrific stories. Children walking up with their church in Uganda after a service, and having acid thrown in their eyes.

[ 17 : 19 ] God sees that. It does not escape him. He sees these horrific acts of injustice, and he will carry out judgment.

This will not go on forever. Evil will be punished. In this case, what's happening in this parable here is consistent with what we see in Jesus' life and what we read throughout the Gospels, and that's that Jesus is the rejected Messiah.

He is the rejected Messiah. He is rejected by his own people. John's Gospel tells us, he came to his own, and his own received him not.

We read Christ's word himself in Mark's Gospel, three times in a short space. He says, I will be rejected, he tells his disciples. I will be rejected.

By who? The Romans? The Gentiles? The Samaritans? The other group? Those who are out there? No, no, no. He makes it clear. I'm going to be rejected by our guys.

[ 18 : 20 ] By the chief priests, teachers of the law. I'm going to be rejected by my own people. So we have a picture of this rejection in this parable.

No one wants to listen to the messengers, as it were. So what happens next? And to verses 8 and 9. He could have cancelled the feast at this point, the king. He could have cancelled the feast, but he doesn't cancel the feast.

The feast is still going to happen. All that lovely food is going to get consumed. The party is going to be enjoyed, but the invite list is going to spread out a little bit. The invite list is no longer for certain types of people.

The game is changing. And the good news of God's kingdom is spreading, and it's spreading to the most scandalous, and dare I say controversial, places. In reality, what this looks like is maybe something like Jesus speaking to this Samaritan woman.

Hated Samaritans, the Jews. The Samaritan woman at a well, and everybody stands in the background gasping. How could he be speaking to her? She's a Samaritan.

[ 19 : 23 ] She's one of them. Jesus, who shows the grace of God to the outcast. When he dines with sinners, it's like he's handing out an invitation to this party.

Receive the grace of God. When he touches the leper, when he breaks all the social rules, and he doesn't care, doesn't need the approval of men, this is Jesus handing out these invitations to anyone who would receive them, and would enter the kingdom of God.

And it tells us that when this party finally gets going, and it's filled with people, it tells us that the people who gathered into the feast included the bad as well as the good.

Try to imagine today, friends, the most diverse group of people imaginable at this party. You've got some people who are very religious and who never missed a week of church.

They come with a Bible under their arm, perhaps. Then you've got those who have spent time recently, perhaps, in prison. Those who are addicts, perhaps. Perhaps. Think of the widest range of people.

[ 20 : 28 ] Think of a blend of people who, if you look to them, you'd think, those two would never, ever hang out in any other sphere of life. No way would those two ever be friends in any other place.

And yet, here they are. Not just in the same room together, but actually celebrating together. They found themselves in this place.

Celebrating together. Friends, as you will be very well aware, I'd imagine this is giving us this gloriously, often messy, picture of the church of Jesus Christ.

A group of people who are very, very different in many, many ways, but have found this common purpose in that they have been united together by the one that they have been united to, the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

They have both found the same reason for rejoicing because they have tasted in his grace. This is Christian diversity. Diversity is another buzzword, by the way.

[ 21 : 39 ] This is Christian diversity, and it's a good, it's more than a good thing. It's a magnificent thing. The world speaks a lot about diversity, but the church should really be the ones who practice it better than anyone.

And often it does practice it better than anyone. I think of my own church right now. It's very similar in many ways to this. I think of the range of ages represented. I think of the range of nationalities represented.

I think of those who are minted and those who are not, shall we say. Really wild spread. People who would not hang out in any other place, and yet they call one another brother and sister.

That's magnificent, isn't it? Don't be embarrassed of your church. Don't be a little cringy about your church. The church of Jesus Christ is the greatest place on earth. Boast about your church. Not in an arrogant, pretentious way.

Boast about them because you love the people here. And you love the people because you love the Savior. Don't be embarrassed to do that. This commonality we have in the person of Jesus Christ, that's what trumps everything.

[ 22 : 39 ] Is there something that you cherish today, friends? Or is there something that perhaps you struggle with? Perhaps you, like myself, I confess, we can be guilty of maybe only liking people who are like us, who think the same way as us.

Perhaps we find it difficult to engage with different people. Maybe even have some underlying prejudices that we've never addressed. Maybe we find it hard to find the same love and appreciation for folk who think differently or who vote differently or of a different generation or a different background or whatever that may be.

Maybe we have to ask ourselves, am I someone who longs to see a church of people who are not like me, who are different from me? Because it just amplifies the glorious grace of God when we're willing to love those who are different from us and when they're willing to love us in return.

It's a difficult thing because we often have a certain way of thinking. I think of my own church, Hillbank. What about people who don't think the Hillbank way or operate the Hillbank way or do church differently? Am I willing to love them?

I praise God that his plan is bigger than mine. His plan is way bigger than mine and the doors of his grace are swung way, way wider than perhaps we would ever care to realize.

[ 24 : 02 ] Many of us, I'm sure, have been blessed by the hymns of Stuart Townend, who, of course, is the poster boy for conservative, middle-class, evangelical Christianity for the last generation.

I sounded cynical, but I am a big, big fan of Townend. He's a great, great hymn writer. I saw him live a year ago this weekend, actually. And he read this parable about 10 years ago or so.

And he was deeply convicted by it, deeply challenged by it, because he was aware that sometimes, in his opinion, Christianity had been known for its exclusiveness. And he wanted to write a song in relation to this parable that highlighted the radical inclusiveness that we see here in Matthew 22.

And he wrote this hymn that I'm, no doubt at all, many of you will probably be familiar with, called Vagabonds. And he wrote these words. Let me just share this briefly before we draw this to a close. He says, Come all you vagabonds.

Come all you don't belongs. Winners and losers. Come people like me. Come all you travellers tired from the journey. Come wait a while, stay a while. Welcomed you'll be.

[ 25 : 08 ] Come all you questioners looking for answers and searching for reasons and sense in it all. Come all you fallen. Come all you broken. Find strength for your body and food for your soul.

Come those who worry about houses and money. And all those who don't have a care in the world. From every station and orientation. The helpless, the hopeless, the young and the old.

Come all believers and dreamers and schemers. And come all you restless just searching for home. Movers and shakers and givers and takers. The happy, the sad, the lost and alone.

Come self-sufficient with wearied ambition. And come those who feel at the end of the road. Fiery debaters and religion haters. Accusers, abusers.

The hurt and ignored. And the chorus says, Come to the feast. There is room at the table. Come let us meet in this place with the king of all kindness who welcomes us in.

[ 26 : 09 ] With the wonder of love and the power of grace. And with this clear, explicit evidence of the gloriously inclusive nature of our gospel.

We can close our Bibles at peace with the fact that we've answered that question earlier. That Christianity is a radically inclusive faith. That we worship a gloriously inclusive God.

Except the parable's not finished. It would have made a great ending, wouldn't it? A nice happy celebration. Everyone cheering at a party. As we fade out in the screen it goes to black and then the end credits come up.

That would be a great ending. We would end the story that way. We'd definitely end the story that way. Jesus doesn't. And there's a twist in the tale that shows us that as radically inclusive as this gospel is and while the offer goes out to anyone there are conditions required for who would enter this wedding feast.

The king walks in the room. As the music I'm sure is playing and the food's being enjoyed and there's laughter and celebration but he sees one person not wearing wedding clothes.

[ 27 : 22 ] And the king confronts this man and says, how on earth did you get in? And the man was speechless and so he is kicked out. He is banished into darkness and destruction.

What on earth are we to do with this as an end of a parable? How do we tackle this? We ask perhaps the obvious question. If this of course is speaking about heaven and that anyone not wearing wedding clothes or a wedding garment as the old translation would say, then what exactly is Jesus referring to here when he speaks about wedding clothes?

And the truth is there's not an explicit answer given here in this parable. Many commentators have thrashed back and forth to try and be very specific about what it means but I really don't think we need to worry about it at all.

I think the answer would be pretty clear in light of what we know of the rest of the gospel. I don't think Jesus is saying something that contradicts our understanding of the gospel that we see throughout scripture. We see here that though this heavenly feast is greatly diverse and even though the church should be greatly diverse, there must be one commonality that unites us.

One clear commonality that unites us and that's that each one of us has come to this Jesus in faith and in humble repentance recognizing that we have sinned and that we receive from him our wedding garments, our wedding clothes which is him.

[ 28 : 51 ] Jesus is the game changer. The presence of Jesus in the life of the Christian is what makes us different and makes the people at this wedding different from those who don't have the wedding clothes.

We believe he is the only one who can save and the wedding clothes simply signify what makes a person right for heaven and what makes a person right for heaven is Jesus Christ.

Not merely a one-off experience with him or a one-off prayer as important as that may be but the presence of Christ dwelling within us day after day, walking with us through all life's struggles and ups and downs.

For some people they say they want heaven and they want the blessing of God but they don't want to submit to Jesus Christ. They don't want to say Jesus, I am yours. You are my king.

They don't want to say Jesus, you are better than my sin and they don't want to bow the knee to him as Lord and therefore they do not receive eternity with God. May this be a challenge perhaps of some of us this day.

[ 29 : 56 ] That we see that this gospel is both radically inclusive and radically exclusive. And if you are a Christian this day maybe the challenge for you perhaps is in terms of complacency.

I look at myself in that regard as well. The aspect of perhaps getting too relaxed that maybe the hearers just like some of the hearers of this parable would have been. Is there anything I need to repent of?

To walk in line with my saviour Jesus who gave his life for me. It is radically inclusive and it is radically exclusive. But in Christ we look forward to the day when this feast is not just a parable but it is a reality.



That for all those who have come to him who have received him and have dwelt with them will know the amazing, amazing promise of the gospel. That we will rejoice with him for all eternity.

That every tear will be wiped away. That the sufferings and longings and pains of this world will be eradicated and we will see Jesus Christ face to face. Friends, may this be a hope that you can cling to this day.

[ 31 : 01 ] And if you do not know him, please speak to someone. Speak to one of the leaders here in this church. If you're not sure where you stand, speak to someone and come to know the amazing promises of the gospel.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you this day for your word. And Father, we have dealt with a difficult passage yesterday.

A passage that confronts us, that challenges us, that very much challenges our culture. We praise you for the inclusive nature of the gospel that though we were far from you, though we have made a horrific mess of things throughout our lives with our sin, that we are welcomed in because of the blood of Jesus.

But we consider also the other side this day, Lord. The fact that the gospel is very exclusive at the same time and that we need to cling to the saviour Jesus. He is our only hope this day, but in him is life and life to the full.

Father, bless this church. Strengthen them in their confidence of their saviour. And for any who do not know you or who are uncertain of where they stand with you, Father, do a work within their hearts that they would speak to someone and come to know the amazing promises of what it is to know Christ.

[ 32 : 14 ] We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.