

The Invitation

Sterling UMC
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Isaiah 55:1-9

I hold in my hand an invitation. It is a common and ordinary looking invitation, one like you have received hundreds of times. Maybe to a wedding, birthday party, a bridal shower, a graduation ceremony, or any number of other special events. This is a personal invitation. It is addressed to me personally. It has my name on it, my address.

As I open the envelope however I see that this is no ordinary invitation. My eyes scan the words beautifully printed on the page. As I read the words and allow them to sink in, something begins stirring deep within in my heart. Tears begin to well up in my eyes as I take in the message printed on the page. It's exactly what I need. It's an invitation like none other. Let me share it with you.

"Come, you who are thirsty,
come to the waters;
and you who have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without cost.

Why spend money on what is not bread,
and your labor on what does not satisfy?
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.

Give ear and come to me;
hear me, that your soul may live.
I will make an everlasting covenant with you,
my faithful love promised to David."

It's an invitation from the Lord. And it is almost too much to comprehend. It's an invitation for me personally. But as I read it again I see that this invitation is not for me alone. It is addressed to me personally and it is also addressed to you, personally. It has my name on it and it also has your name on it. The invitation is extended. And it is extended to all. How do I know that? Listen to what it says:

It says, "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters..." Is that you today? Are you thirsty?

There are very few of us who cannot say that at one time or another you have found yourself in a spiritual valley and feeling that you are nothing more than a pile of dry bones. Circumstances of this life relentlessly beat down upon you as the sun and the

winds of adversity blow through your life and you begin to feel spiritually void. It is as if you are walking through an endless desert. You feel isolated, cut off from God. It's parched. It's dusty. It's barren. You long for help and relief. You yearn for an oasis in the middle of the desert. You come to church, but you feel like your just going through the motions. Worship is hollow and meaningless. There is no power or joy in your life. You try to pray but your prayers don't seem to get any higher than the ceiling. It is a dry desolate desert from which there seems to be no joy, no hope of escape. It's a dead place because there is no fruit there. It is a dangerous place, and no Christian should stay there.

Maybe that's you today. If so the Lord offers you this invitation. "Come, you who are thirsty, come to the waters." He offers us the living water and only he can satisfy.

Jesus said, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." (John 7:37-38 NIV)

But this invitation is not only for the thirsty. Listen to who else it is meant for:

"You who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost."

Maybe that's you today. You feel you have nothing. You're at the end of your rope. You have nothing left to give. You have nowhere else to turn. You're resources are spent. You're bankrupt. You're spent physically, spiritually and emotionally.

If that is you today, the Lord is speaking to you – He says, "Come, come and find in Me all that you need to satisfy." You who have no money, you have no resources, your cupboard is bare, and you who have no spiritual resources on your own, that's ok. COME! I have more than enough and I gladly share it with you.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:3 NIV)

The good news is that you don't get to heaven because of what you've got, or what you've done in your own goodness and spiritual worth. You only find His true happiness and blessings when you come to understand that you are spiritually impoverished. It is only when you admit you are spiritually bankrupt that God gives to you all of the riches that are in Christ Jesus.

And finally this invitation is not only for those of you who have nothing, it is also for those of you who feel like you've got it all. That you have all that you want and need in abundance.

Maybe that's you today. You feel like you are self-sufficient. You feel like you don't need anyone or anything to do anything to make you complete. You don't need to depend on God or anything to give you anything you need.

To you the invitation reads like this, "Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare." (Isaiah 55:2)

There was once a man who thought he had it all. Wealth. Relationships. Pleasure. Knowledge. He had it all and he tried it all. He was a man who drank deeply from the well of human experience. His name was Solomon. When he was done, he looked back over his life and he summed it up in a single word: "Emptiness."

How long will it take before you come to the same conclusion? How many mirages will you chase? How many fantasies will you pursue? How many dreams will you chase only to find that having is an empty echo of wanting?

The invitation he makes to you this morning is to stop the striving, the dreaming, the chasing, the scheming after the things that do not satisfy. Listen to Him. Accept His invitation to enter into the peaceful resting place that only God can provide.

What will you do with the invitation? How will you respond?

I shook my head in disbelief. This couldn't be the right place. After all, I couldn't possibly be welcome here. I had been given an invitation several times, by several different people, and had finally decided to see what this place was all about. But, this just couldn't be the right place. Quickly, I glanced down at the invitation that I clutched in my hand. I scanned past the words, "Come as you are. No jacket required." and found the location. Yes, I was at the right place. I peered through the window again and saw a room of people whose faces seemed to glow with joy. All were neatly dressed, adorned in fine garments and appeared strangely clean as they dined at this exquisite restaurant.

Ashamed, I looked down at my own tattered and torn clothing, covered in stains. I was dirty, in fact, filthy. A foul smell seemed to consume me and I couldn't shake the grime that hung to my body. As I turned around to leave, the words from the invitation seemed to leap out at me..."Come as you are. No jacket required." I decided to give it a shot.

Mustering up every bit of courage I could find, I opened the door to this restaurant and walked up to a man standing behind a podium. "Your name, sir?" he asked me with a smile. "Jimmy D. Brown," I mumbled without looking up. I thrust my hands deep into my pockets, hoping to conceal their stains. He didn't seem to notice the filth that I was covered in and he continued, "Very good, sir. A table is reserved in your name. Would you like to be seated?" I couldn't believe what I heard! A grin broke out on my face and I said, "Yes, of course!"

He led me to a table and, sure enough, there was a place card with my name written on it in a deep, dark red. As I browsed over a menu, I saw many delightful items listed. There were things like, "peace," "joy," "blessings," "confidence," "assurance," "hope," "love," "faith," and "mercy." I realized that this was no ordinary restaurant! I flipped the menu back to the front in order to see where I was ... "God's Grace," was the name of this place!

The man returned and said, "I recommend the 'Special of the Day'. With it, you are entitled to heaping portions of everything on this menu." You've got to be kidding! I thought to myself. You mean, I can have ALL of this! "What is the 'Special of the Day' I asked with excitement ringing in my voice. "Salvation," was his reply.

"I'll take it," I practically cried out. A sick, painful ache jerked through my stomach and tears filled my eyes. Between my sobs I said "Mister, look at me. I'm dirty and nasty. I'm unclean and unworthy of such things. I'd love to have all of this, but, but, I just can't afford it. Undaunted, the man smiled again. "Sir, your check has already been taken care of by that Gentleman over there," he said pointing to the front of the room. "His Name is Jesus."

Turning, I saw a man whose very presence seemed to light the room. He was almost too much to look at. I found myself walking towards Him and in a shaking voice I whispered, "Sir, I'll wash the dishes or sweep the floors or take out the trash. I'll do anything I can do to repay you for all of this." He opened His arms and said with a smile, "Son, all of this is yours if you just come unto me. Ask me to clean you up and I will. Ask me to take away the stains and it is done. Ask me to allow you to feast at my table and you will eat. Remember, the table is reserved in your name. All you must do is accept this gift that I offer you."

Astonished, I fell at his feet and said, "Please, Jesus. Please clean up my life. Please change me and sit me at your table and give me this new life." Immediately, I heard the words, "It is finished." I looked down and white robes adorned my squeaky clean body. Something strange and wonderful had happened. I felt new, like a weight had been lifted and I found myself seated at His table. "The 'Special of the Day' has been served," the Lord said to me. "Salvation is yours."

We sat and talked for a great while and I so enjoyed the time that I spent with Him. He told me, me of all people, that He would like for me to come back as often as I liked for another helping from God's Grace. He made it clear that He wanted me to spend as much time with Him as possible.

As it drew near time for me to go back outside into the "real world," He whispered to me softly, "And Lo, I am with you always." And then, He said something to me that I will never forget. He said..."My child, do you see these empty tables throughout this room?" "Yes, Lord. I see them. What do they mean?" I replied. "These are reserved tables...but the individuals whose names are on each placard have not accepted their invitations to dine. Would you be so kind as to hand out these invitations to those who have not joined us yet?" Jesus asked.

"Of course," I said with excitement as I picked up the invitations." "Go ye therefore into all nations," He said as I turned to leave.

I walked into God's Grace dirty and hungry. Stained in sin. My righteousness as filthy rags. And Jesus cleaned me up. I walked out a brand new man...robed in white, His righteousness. And so, I'll keep my promise to my Lord. I'll go. I'll spread the Word. I'll share the Gospel... I'll hand out the invitations. And I'll start with you. Have you been to God's Grace? There's a table reserved in your name, and here's your invitation...
"Come as you are. No jacket required."