An intriguing detail in this Sunday’s gospel is that the refusal of the invitation to the wedding feast and its acceptance both look like rather normal life. As to the refusal, it says that “some ignored the invitation and went away, one to his farm, another to his business. The rest laid hold of the servants, mistreated them, and killed them.” In other words, while it’s easy for us to see how a criminal has rejected the invitation of God, yet there are also some who are basically good people, going about their business in this world, who have also rejected the invitation.

As to those who accepted it, the parable says that the servants “gathered all they found, bad and good alike, and the hall was filled with guests”. “Bad and good alike” – yes, also rather like ordinary life. The population of the world is a mixture of wheat and weeds, to refer to another parable; yet there is hope that all can be among the wheat in the end. We ourselves have been among the bad, though we pray we can be good. And the Lord desires that for us all. The takeaway from this gospel is that he really does want all people to make it.

And the “wedding garment” spoken of is the key to how we can make it: we have to die in God’s grace, which certainly implies living in it. The man without the wedding garment appears to have snuck in: he did things his way, hoping for an exception, or at least that he would not be noticed. But even though the hall was filled with guests of all sorts, the Master saw him and was totally unwilling to make any exception. This passage, along with many others in the gospel, reiterates for us that there is only one way to heaven; God plays no favorites.

This challenges us to consider, then, whether, as we live our rather ordinary lives, going about our business in this world, we aren’t at the same time hoping for special consideration. It seems to me that there are four main ways people live our that very dangerous hope.

The first is by picking and choosing what tenets of faith and morals they will accept. The Lord invites us to a banquet, however; not a cafeteria. Cafeteria Catholicism is, for many, a path to social comfort and prosperity. In our American climate of rugged individualism, there is something redeeming about being a rebel and choosing your own way. But hear the words of St. Augustine: “If you believe what you like in the gospel and reject what you do not like, it is not the gospel you believe, but yourself.” Those who pick and choose hope for special consideration, since they effectively tell the Lord their way is better.

The second way we might live as if expecting an exception to the rules is by tolerating compromise: “I know this is wrong, but I’ll do it ‘just this one time’ – surely the Lord will understand.” That is one justification; another is: “This is all too hard; surely Jesus would change the rules if he were in this situation” – as if he, the omniscient God, didn’t foresee every situation we would ever encounter. Don’t be a “Shirley” (surely). Compromises tend to feed each other and multiply, and before long, he who regularly dispenses himself from the law finds himself in the cafeteria line also. Jesus invites us to the banquet!

The third is closely connected with the preceding two; that of presumption. When we presume upon God’s mercy we abuse his goodness. We slap him in the face, expecting that he will return a smile. Presumption typically happens in two ways: either we justify sin with the idea that we’ll go to confession and be absolved, or we excuse sin thinking the Lord will forgive it even without confession. Either way, we’re playing with fire. We know not the day or the hour. People die every day. Some die presuming they can go to the banquet dressed badly. May the Lord save us all from the terrible sin of presumption!

The final way some expect special consideration from Christ is that of concealment. The Lord does not issue “conceal carry permits” for sin – ever. He wants us to put everything on the table. If we deliberately conceal a mortal sin when we go to confession, the entire confession is
sacrilegious and, in fact, invalid. It’s as if we expected the Lord to surgically remove some sins while ignoring others. But the physician cannot heal us unless he treats all the known pathology. Shame and embarrassment are very real, but so is God’s grace. He knows it’s hard, but he will give us great peace if we do what is right.

The first reading also speaks about the banquet to which God calls us, assuring us that there, “the Lord God will wipe away the tears from every face”. Yes, there are many tears and much sadness in this world in the struggle with temptation, sin, and sin’s effects. But remember what I said at the beginning: the point of the gospel parable is that God really wants us all to make it to that banquet. As St. Paul said in the second reading, “My God will fully supply whatever you need, in accord with his glorious riches in Christ Jesus”.

We need to pray for a holy confidence and strive to depend more fully on the Lord Jesus. He is on our side. He will help us. And truly, he wants to help us! Though we live ordinary lives among the good and the bad, we need not fear, if our hearts are upright toward him and we are sincere in using the means he has left us. Let us leave aside any and all picking and choosing, moral compromise, presumption, and concealment, and aim resolutely for the banquet the Lord has prepared for those who love him.