

“The Kingdom of God is a Party”

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By Tony Campolo

I remember telling my mother every time I get up to preach I get nervous. And she said every time you get up to preach, God gets nervous.

If you pick up the newspapers, you're going to read a lot of bad news. It seems that's what newspapers do. Tell us all the bad things that are going on in the world. But here's another thing – turn to the bible and all you'll read is good news. The bible is full of good news. It's the story of a God who is at work in the world, overcoming the darkness. Nothing can stop God from creating his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. This is the good news of the gospel. This is what we're about. This is what this church is about. A new day is coming. A new world is coming. That's what the bible tells us. A world is coming where tears will be no more. Where diseases will be vanquished. Where oppression will come to an end. Where wars will cease. This is the future of the world, people. If you're going through a hard time now, if there's pain and sickness and feelings of defeat, be of good cheer. Jesus says I have come

to overcome the world and what is is not what will be. We are people who are filled with hope. I'm not saying there's not suffering and pain and agony going on in the world. I'm just saying God is at work in the world through his people and one day, someday, the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our God, amen?

The bible tells us about all of this. In the 65th chapter of Isaiah, we read that this new world is coming is an age in which children will not die in infancy. Check it out; starts at the 20th verse. Children will not die in infancy. Old people will live out their lives in health and well being. At my age, that's thrilling. I like that. I mean I know I'm old. I go to a wedding and the bride's grandmother looks better to me than the bride, you know, you know you're over the hill and slipping down.

I got this to say. The good news is a new world is coming and it's not only a place where children will not die in infancy, and old people will live out their lives in health and well being, it says in the scriptures. Listen to this: everyone will have a decent house to live in, everybody will have a job in the vineyard, and everybody will get fair pay for their labor. It's in the bible, people. That's the world that's going to come when Jesus returns and the good work he begins in us and through us, he will complete on the day of his coming. And when they asked him what will it feel like when this kingdom comes? I mean what will we be experiencing? He said I'll tell you what my kingdom will be like. It's likened unto a wedding feast. Now Jesus was Jewish, which is the next best thing to

being Italian. People often say why didn't he come as an Italian? My answer is simple: the bible says he came to humble himself.

But Italians and Jews and Greeks and Turks, all of those that live around the Mediterranean, we know how to throw wedding feasts. Have you ever been to a Jewish wedding? Have you ever been to an Italian wedding? You know they have the orchestra, they have piles of food, it goes on till 1:00/2:00 in the morning. I mean it's a blow out of all blow outs. And Jesus says you want to know what my kingdom will feel like? Go to a Jewish wedding, go to an Italian wedding. My kingdom is likened unto a wedding feast. That's the great news of the gospel. It's going to feel real good when the kingdom becomes a reality in history and is happening; it's beginning to happen right now.

In Zachariah, the 8th chapter, it says when the kingdom comes old people will be able to go out of their houses at night. Isn't that descriptive of what we hope for? We live in an age where a lot of elderly people are afraid to leave their houses in the evening for fear of what would happen to them. When the kingdom comes, the old people will leave their houses at night, sit on the front steps. Read in the 8th chapter of Zachariah: and they will watch the children playing safely on the streets. Is that a picture of the kingdom of God that is to come when Christ returns. He is coming back, you know. He is going to return. And the good work he begins in us and through us, he will complete on the day of his coming. He calls this the kingdom of God.

And if you read Matthew, Mark, Luke, the first things out of Jesus' mouth is this: I have come to declare that the kingdom of God is at hand. Its beginning right here, right now. It's starting right here. The kingdom of God is among you. The kingdom of God is in you. That's what he said. It's not just in the sweet by and by and the ugly here and now, he's filling people with his spirit. And as many as receive him, to them he gives the power to become the sons and the daughters of God that will change the world from what it is into what God wants for it to be.

What's the kingdom of God like? It's like a wedding feast. It's like one gigantic party. So the next time they ask you what time is it, you're going to yell back its (AUDIENCE – party time). That's it, you're getting into it. It's party time. Jesus' stories were all about parties. The prodigal son wastes his father's wealth. Half of the father's income is blown as this kid is out there living a wild life. And he runs out of money and he takes a job feeding pigs. Can you imagine a Jewish kid feeding pigs? And he says to himself – what am I doing here? There are people who work on my father's farm. I know what I'm going to do. I'm going to go back and tell my father, father, I know I've messed up. I've sinned against heaven and against you. Would you make me one of your employees so I can eat and have a place to sleep? So he heads home. And all the way home he's practicing his speech. After you've blown half of the family's wealth, you had better rehearse your speech. And he's saying over and over again, it's in the bible. He's saying it over and over again: Father, I have sinned

against heaven and against thee, and I am no longer worthy to be called thy son. Make me one of your hired servants. He's saying it over and over again.

The bible says his father sees him while he's still a far way off, and he runs out and throws his arms around.. the kid starts the speech: father, I have sinned against heaven and against thee. Father's not listening. Hey Harry, get a robe, this kid's in rags. I am no longer worthy to be called thy son. Hey Bill, get a ring and put it on his finger. Make me one of your hired servants. Shut up, kid. Hey, hey, hey Jim, out behind the barn there's a fat calf. Kill that sucker. We're going to have a (AUDIENCE – party!) What time is it? It's.. (AUDIENCE – party time!) Yes, that's getting into it. That's getting into it. That's what we are. We're all party animals if we're children of God. We're into celebration even in the midst of suffering. Even in the face of death we know how to say joyful, joyful we adore thee. We are people. We are joyful people.

Jesus said I have come that my joy might be in you and that your joy might be full. You say but I have so many painful things going on in my life. Jesus will infuse you with joy in the midst of the difficult times. On the cross it says this: that Jesus as he's suffering there, you're talking about agony and pain. It says but because of the joy that lay before him, he was willing to undergo that suffering. Joy in the midst of suffering. So it's not only the people who have it easy, like I do. It's the people who are going through a hard time, who are infused with a Holy

Spirit that enables them to be joyful even in the midst of the difficult times. The joy of the Lord.

People say hey Campolo, you use notes. You never used to use notes before. I'm getting old. The guy that says to his friend I went to a great restaurant last night. The food was wonderful. The service impeccable. The ambiance was just delightful. His friend said what's the name of the restaurant? Flower, it has a stem with thorns on it, big red flower. Guy said rose. He said that's it. Rose, what's the name of the restaurant we went to last night? So, you get these times of.. so you have notes, you have notes. It's a wedding feast.

Note it's not only the prodigal son, but remember the story of Zacchaeus? This little guy, the tax collector, everybody in town hated his guts. Jesus comes down, he's walking down main street, the people line the sidewalk. Little Zacchaeus is a short guy, he can't see over the crowd. Do you remember this song from daily vacation bible school – he climbed up in the sycamore tree for he wanted his Lord to see. How many know this song? Oh yes. At last the Savior came walking by he looked up in the tree. Children would sing this. And he said what – Zacchaeus you're a dirty filthy sinner and you're going to burn in hell forever. That's not what he said, people. He said yo Zach, come on down. We're going to your house today. We're going to have a (AUDIENCE party!). So the next time they ask you at this church what time is it, you're going to yell back

its (AUDIENCE – party time!). You're getting into the spirit, man. We're going to be party animals by the time this morning is over.

And when they look for Jesus to perform the miracle, the first miracle he performs is what? At a wedding feast. They're running out of wine. Mary goes over and nudges Jesus, says they're running out of wine. Do something. Do something. You know, can't you just see that? He's never performed a miracle and she wants him to do something! You never have lived up to your potential. You think you're the only kid who had a mother like that? Jesus says what have I to do with thee, woman? You hear that line? What am I to do with thee, woman? Man. Man, it's another way of saying mom, get off my back. But he sees what's happening that the wedding feast, the party is falling apart, so he asks for some vases to be filled with water and he turns the water into wine because he doesn't want the party to end. That's the kind of Jesus we have. He wants to keep us in the spirit of rejoicing and celebration.

You're going to be sitting down at a table and you're going to celebrate your family, you're going to celebrate your togetherness. This is what God wills for us – celebration, joy. You say well I don't have much to celebrate, I'm not even sure the kids will be coming home this thanksgiving. That's okay. One day, some day, all things will be as they should be. So you do not labor as those.

Here's what the scripture says: without hope. You have hope. The things are going to change. Things are going to get better. That's the

future, people. That's the future. Please get that. Get that down pat. And so he's going to throw this party. And they criticized Jesus because he was always partying. Read the scriptures. This man's supposed to be a man of God. Every time we turn around, he's a wine bibber and a glutton. That's what they want. He's nothing but a wine glibber and a glutton. I love that. And Jesus says, you know what, John came, and he was serious, I mean he didn't party. John the Baptist was serious. I mean dressed in animal skins, got the picture? Eating locusts and wild honey, he was into those organic foods, you know. I mean he was serious, baby. He was serious. He said John came and he was dead serious, and you didn't like him. I come and I party and you don't like me. I don't think you like anybody. There are people in the church like that, aren't there. I don't like what's going on here. It's not like it was when his grandfather was here. I can just hear.. I mean there are always these complainers. And Jesus says I have come as a bridegroom, and as long as you've got a bridegroom at the wedding feast, you party, people!

So please, at the top of your lungs, when they ask you what time it is, shout back its (AUDIENCE – party time!) Indeed, that's the good news of the gospel. Do you got it? Have you got it down pat because that's what we're here to talk about. You know, everybody's included. Jesus said the orphan, the widow, make sure those people who are left out are brought in. The lame, the blind, the halt, the lepers, bring them in. All the people that the religious establishment says you can't come in here.

Can you name people that the religious establishment wants to shut out of the church? Can you name people that say I'm sorry God loves everybody but I don't want them in our church. Well I got news for you. The Jesus the scriptures says whosoever will may come.

At one of the Billy Graham meetings they sing *Just as I Am*, that's the good news. You don't have to become what you're not. You can come just as you are and Jesus will receive you. He will receive you. He says if you come unto me, listen to the scriptures. All people who feel excluded I will in no way turn you away. Oh, oh that's the good news, people. Whoever is excluded is included. And that's what Jesus did. And he drove the religious establishment angry. And they screamed against him, and eventually crucified him because he was ready to establish a kingdom that included people that transcended the limitations of the religious establishment. What a Jesus. What a glorious Savior. And he said this new kingdom starts with you. It starts within you. It starts right here, right now. When you pray the Lord's Prayer, you pray what? Thy kingdom come, thy will be done. When? Here. Now. Start it in me. In me. You say I'm supposed to celebrate? Start off by celebrating yourself. You say wait a minute, you don't know about me. I don't. And you don't know about me. The truth is God wants you to celebrate who you are.

I had a friend who's passed away now, Fred Craddock, one of the greatest preachers of our time. And he talks about being on a vacation in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. And he's having a lovely time at breakfast with

his wife, and this old guy in overalls walks by. And he says 'hey, I don't know who you are. You from around here?'

Fred said 'no, I'm not.'

'What's your name?'

'Fred.' He didn't want to be disturbed.

'What's your last name?'

'Craddock.' Wouldn't leave him go.

He said 'Fred Craddock. What do you do?'

Fred said 'I'm a professor of homiletics at a theological seminary.' That ought to turn the guy off, right? I mean I have to be on airplanes a lot, and I like to rest or read, and there's always some guy that wants to talk sitting next to me. 'Hey fella, what do you do?' I have a standard response. If I don't want to talk, when they say what do you do, I say 'I'm a Baptist evangelist.' That ends it. That ends it right there.

He said 'you're a preacher.' He said 'I got a preacher's story.' He said 'when I was a boy growing up, I felt down on myself. I felt I was worthless. My mother would never tell me who my father was. Never. A new preacher came to town and everybody was talking about how wonderful he is. So I went to hear him. One Sunday, for the first time, I went to church. That preacher was good. I went back the next Sunday and the next Sunday. I always got there late and left early so nobody would talk to me when I was coming or going. But one Sunday he was so good, I stopped thinking and I got caught up in things, and before I could

realize what had happened, the service was over. And people were in the aisle and I couldn't get out.

And as I struggled to get through the crowd, I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder and I turned and it was this preacher man. He was staring down at me. He said boy, what's your name, boy? He said the old man told me, I gave him my name. He said who's your father? He asked me the one question I didn't want anybody to ever ask me, who's your father. I felt the pain go to my toes and to the top of my head. Who's your father? He said you don't even know who your father is, do you? Do you, boy? He said well, no. He said well I'm going to tell you who your father is. Your father's name is God. Don't you ever forget this, boy. You are a child of God. He said I felt my chest go out. I just felt good about myself. Don't you ever forget that you're a child of God.'

When the old man finished telling his story, he said 'well that's my preacher story, I just thought I'd share it with you,' and he got up and left. The waitress came over and said 'do you know who that was? Do you know who that was? That's the Governor of Tennessee.' A man who felt he was nobody and nothing. Who rises to these great heights because he comes to a new identity. I don't know who you think you are, but I'm here to tell you the good news. You are a child of God and nothing can take precedence over that designation, people. You ought to be celebrating.

I taught for years at Eastern University. I used to like to pick to some kid on the front row and say stand up, Harry! The kid stand up. I said, Harry, I want to tell you something. I want the class to hear this. Harry, you were once a sperm. You were once one of five million sperm in a group. Do you remember? I said and you all lined up in a starting line and at the end of a long, long tunnel there was one egg. And there was a race. And Harry, you won! I mean don't ever tell me you're a loser, you were up against five million competitors and you came through, baby. You came through. You make the Olympics look like nothing! I mean stop to think of it, Harry. If your mother had had a headache, you wouldn't even be here today. You are here by divine appointment. You are here because God willed for you to be here. You're precious, you're special, you are a child of God. Celebrate that. And then take that celebration to the rest of the world for the rest of the world needs a party.

Right now, in the United States, with all this dismal reaction, pro and con to this election, we need a party in America, amen? We need Democrats and Republicans coming together and hugging each other and celebrate. You say it can't happen. Can't happen? Did you see what happened when the Cubs won the World Series? I mean all of Chicago was out there. Black and white and Latino and Asian and they forgot all their racial differentiations and were hugging each other and jumping up and down and clapping. Did you see anybody that wasn't happy? I didn't.

They knew how to party and Jesus says take a good look at that cause that's what my kingdom's about.

That's what happened on the day of Pentecost. They got together and they were having such a good time jumping up and down and hugging each other and dancing. And people said I think they're drunk. Did you ever read that passage in the book of Acts? What's Peter's defense? Look people, its only nine in the morning. Nobody could get this drunk that early. The truth is that the early Christians knew how to celebrate, knew how to be a party.

And I want that to be in you. I want you to not only believe in Jesus, not only believe in the Apostles Creed that was flashed up there for you to read, I mean believing is of crucial importance, but you can believe all the right stuff and never have surrendered your life to Jesus; never said Jesus you who died on the cross to take the punishment for my sins, you who was resurrected and ascended to heaven in order that you might send back the Holy Spirit to be with me and in me. He prayed. He prayed that for all of you. He prayed – I pray, Father, that I might be in them even as you are in me.

So the question isn't do you believe the theological doctrines of the church, the question is is Christ in you? Is this a moment when you should say Christ, come into my life. Transform me from within. Create within me the joy. The joy of the Lord. The joy of it all. In the midst of all that's going on that's wrong, help me to be able to sing joyful things.

I teach at Eastern University and they have to take the introduction to English, English literature. And they have to read T.S. Elliott who is enough to put anybody into a depression. His most famous poem, "The Wasteland Ends:" this is the way the world will end. This is the way the world will end. This is the way the world will end not with a bang but a whimper. Oh geesh. T.S. Elliott had a way with words he just didn't know what he was talking about cause I've read the bible and I know how it's going to end. Are you ready for this? It's going to end this way: that the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our God, and he shall reign forever and ever. Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

People, what time is it, its (AUDIENCE – party time!)