

WATER INTO WINE

John 2:1-12

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, Oct. 7, 2007

"Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now" (Jn. 2:10).

One of the best things about being a minister is conducting weddings. Weddings are cheerful affairs, and it is an awesome privilege to join a man and a woman together for life. But weddings also involve a fair amount of tension. Families often have delicate social dynamics and expectations that are hard to meet. For this reason, when a wedding has gone smoothly I always breathe a sigh of relief. Then comes the reception, with its own challenges and dynamics, but fortunately that is not the minister's responsibility.

There was a wedding about two thousand years ago in a small village in Galilee, which was much like our weddings today. Some of the customs were different, of course, but like our weddings it was a joyful event that involved the anxiety of big expectations. There was one thing special about this particular wedding, however: the presence of the Son of God. Working out the invitation list is one of the most delicate and difficult exercises of wedding planning. In deciding who will make the cut, prestige often plays a major role. It is unlikely that Jesus was invited for this reason, since his ministry would not yet be well-known, and the presence of his mother suggests a family connection. Jesus' presence at this wedding proves the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman. The help that he provided on this occasion not only shows the Lord's desire to promote marriage, but also served as the first public demonstration of his deity and the first sign of the salvation Jesus came into the world to bring.

MARY AND JESUS

Jesus was at the wedding banquet with his disciples when a problem occurred: “the wine ran out.” Learning of this, his mother said to him, “They have no wine.” “Jesus replied, ‘Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.’ His mother said to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you’” (Jn. 2:3-5).

This is a fascinating exchange that reveals much about Jesus and Mary. Those devoted to Mary, including many Roman Catholics, assert from this passage that her intercession is what motivates Jesus’ saving work. For this reason many people pray to her and even consider her Co-Redemptrix, on a par with Jesus himself. It is true that Mary asks Jesus to help, and this is the only time the Bible shows Mary seeking to influence her son. But far from acting under Mary’s control, Jesus rebukes her. “Woman” he said, using what in those days was a term of endearment (see also Jn. 19:26), “what does this have to do with me?” Jesus rejected Mary’s counsel, explaining, “My hour has not yet come” (Jn. 2:4). Jesus speaks of “my hour” seven times in John’s Gospel, always referring to his death on the cross (see 7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1). Knowing his own timetable, Jesus answered that this was not the time for a climactic public display.

The idea that Mary controls or motivates Jesus’ ministry, so that we ought to pray to her today, is utterly alien to the Bible. A second error is also exposed by this passage. Those who make Mary into a quasi-divine being often assert her perpetual virginity. But John 2:12 records Jesus spending time after this wedding with “his mother and his brothers.” There is no good reason to see this differently than what it plainly states, namely, that Mary, who as a virgin conceived the Son of God, our Savior, later went on to have natural children through wholesome relations with her husband, Joseph.

Mary is an outstanding person in the Bible, a model for all Christians and especially for women (see Lk. 1:42). We ought to admire her piety and faith. Her godliness is seen at this wedding, for she did not quarrel with Jesus’ reply. Instead, leaving the matter into his lordly hands, she addressed herself to the servants. “Do whatever he tells you,” she said (Jn. 2:5). Mary’s own testimony tells us not to venerate her but to trust Jesus: “Do whatever he tells you,” is her counsel to us.

LIFELESSNESS APART FROM CHRIST

At the heart of this passage is the first of Jesus' miracles recorded in John's Gospel: the transforming of water into wine. Jesus acted in response to need. Mary put it plainly: "They have no wine" (Jn. 2:3). This was a major problem. As is often the case now, a couple's wedding was likely to be the grandest occasion in their entire lives. The wedding feast was held in the newlywed couple's home, lasting as long as a week, and the groom was responsible for all the provisions. If you think your wedding was stressful and expensive, imagine what this was like! Leon Morris observes that running out of wine "was something of a slur on the hosts, for they had not fully discharged the duties of hospitality... [and] it rendered the bridegroom's family liable to a lawsuit. They were legally required to provide a feast of a certain standard."¹

In the Bible, wine is a symbol of joy. Wine is one of God's good gifts, to be enjoyed responsibly. Psalm 104:15 says that God gave "wine to gladden the heart of man." Some commentators are upset by the idea that Jesus would provide an alcoholic beverage and therefore teach that Jesus made unfermented grape juice. But the master of the feast's response makes it clear that Jesus made real wine, noting that most people serve such high quality wine first so that its alcoholic effects mask the inferior wine that follows (Jn. 2:10). Vast evils are caused by drunkenness, so we rightly stand against the abuse of alcohol. But, as J. C. Ryle points out, "If our Lord Jesus Christ actually worked a miracle in order to supply wine at a marriage feast, it seems to me impossible... to prove that drinking wine is sinful."²

When Mary said, "They have no wine," her concern was not to promote drinking. She might just as well have said, "They have no joy." John tells us that this miracle was a "sign" (Jn. 2:11), which means it depicts a spiritual reality. In this respect, this first miracle depicts our lifelessness apart from Christ.

John's Gospel frequently confronts the emptiness of Christ-less religion, especially that of the Jews. It surely is not incidental that the water that Jesus transformed was contained in jars "for the Jewish

¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Revised), (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 158.

² J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 1:101.

rites of purification” (Jn. 2:6). The Judaism of Christ’s day was obsessed with ceremonial cleanliness. Mark 7:3 explained, “The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands, holding to the tradition of the elders.” The problem was that their traditions involved no inward cleansing or transformation of the real person. The emphasis was only on an outward show of religion. It is possible, as well, that the number of water jars symbolizes the incompleteness of the Old Testament apart from the coming of Christ. Seven is the biblical number of completeness or fulfillment; there were six water jars here, perhaps showing that the Old Covenant faith was incomplete apart from Jesus. This is one of John’s themes in this Gospel: he said in John 1:17, “For the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” William Barclay explains: “The six stone waterpots stand for all the imperfections of the Jewish law. Jesus came to do away with the imperfections of the law and to put in their place the new wine of the gospel of his grace.”³

The Jews are not the only ones who suffer from Christ-less religion. This is true of liberal churches who keep the forms of Christianity but deny its truth and power. Many churches with Christian names bear little more than the lifeless water of secular humanism, having jettisoned the Bible’s teaching on matters like sin, God’s judgment, the atoning blood of Christ, the resurrection, and the empowering work of God’s Holy Spirit. What Mary said of this feast is true of them: “They have no wine.” Indeed, this explains the recent history of America’s religious life. Prior generations turned away from a living faith in Christ, adopting instead a lifeless religion, and the result is the increasing decay of our whole society.

But this is also true of many evangelical churches, with their fixation on pragmatic self-help. It is an axiom of Christian publishing today that if you want your book to sell, you must not mention the words “Jesus” or “Christ” in the title. Instead, you should use therapeutic jargon and promise worldly happiness through spiritual techniques. Therefore, popular sermons present five steps for personal growth, six principles for successful relationships, four characteristics of a healthy marriage and seven habits for success at work. What is wrong with

³ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), I:103

that? The answer is that there is no Christ. There is no cleansing of our guilt by his blood, no transforming of our nature by his Spirit, no change from sin into glory, no power to be made truly new: no water into wine. Christ-less religion may meet our needs in many respects, and it may help make us happier people, but it offers no escape from our true problem – God’s wrath and sin’s power – and no eternal life.

If Christ-less religion is bad, Christ-less irreligion is no better. Many people look upon the scene of a feast, with wine and merriment, and say, “Yes, that is what I want out of life! I don’t want to have to deal with God, I don’t want to change, I don’t want to live for something noble and true – I just want to have a great time!” This is the gospel of our contemporary world. The godless life does have wine to offer the sensual person. But how fleeting it is! The day comes when it will inevitably be said, “There is no more wine” – and what then? This is why the godless life requires a person to numb his mind – to stop thinking about the future, to refuse to contemplate the day of judgment to come, to turn the mind constantly away from death and an end to youthful vigor. But these always come, and the wages of sin is always death – a living death and then a dying death.

Not only does the wine of Christ-less irreligion always run out, it ceases to satisfy long before. Jonathan Edwards wrote, “The carnal soul imagines that earthly things are excellent; one thinks riches most excellent, another has the highest esteem of honor, and to another carnal pleasure appears most excellent; but the soul cannot find contentment in any of these things... They think that if they could but obtain them, they would be happy; and when they obtain them and cannot find happiness, they look for happiness in something else, and are still upon the pursuit.”⁴ This is why Isaiah wrote, “The wicked are like the tossing sea... There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked” (Isa. 57:20-21).

One example of this is Ernest Hemingway, a man who lived to the full. He was a reporter and then drove an ambulance in World War I. He lived in Europe and got involved in the Spanish Civil War. His close friends were other writers and bull-fighters and lovely women. Hemingway was the toast of his generation, and the novels based on

⁴ Jonathan Edwards: *Altogether Lovely: Jonathan Edwards on the Glory and Excellency of Christ* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), 96-97.

his experiences are masterpieces of English literature. In his novel *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, the wife says to her dying husband, “Why, you’re the most complete man I’ve ever met,” and Hemingway was writing of himself. Such heady wine he drank! But none of it satisfied his soul, and the day came when the wine ran out. How can we say that? His biography concludes with this scene:

Sunday morning dawned bright and cloudless. Ernest awoke early as always. He put on the red “Emperor’s robe” and padded softly down the carpeted stairway. The early sunlight lay in pools on the living room floor... He tiptoed down the basement stairs and unlocked the storage room. It smelled as dank as a grave. He chose a double-barreled shotgun with a tight choke... He took some shells from one of the boxes in the storage room, closed and locked the door, and climbed the basement stairs. If he saw the bright day outside, it did not deter him... He slipped in two shells, lowered the gun barrels against his forehead just above the eyebrows and tripped both triggers.⁵

Is that an exceptional case? We might think so, were it not for regular newspaper reports of similar cases. The statistics bear out a dramatic increase in suicide, especially among the affluent. Why would that be in a culture that enjoys unprecedented abundance in the wine of carnal life? What fleshly pleasure can one not enjoy today? So why this increasing depression and despair and suicide? Surely, just as Mary said of the wedding feast, so must we say of both Christ-less religion and Christ-less irreligion: “There is no wine.”

ABUNDANT LIFE IN CHRIST

What a difference Jesus made at this wedding. And what a difference he makes in our lives. Here we see, as a symbol of his saving work, this great miracle of transformation: Jesus turned water into wine. John remembers it as an eye-witness:

Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. And he said to them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast.” So they took it. When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, [he] did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew).” *John 2:7-9*

John says this was a sign, so it speaks of a greater spiritual reality. Surely the point is that Christian salvation involves a transformation of our lives. Just as he turned water into wine, Jesus tells us, “Unless

⁵ Carlos Baker, cited from *R. Kent Hughes, John: That You May Believe* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1999), 60.

one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:3). We are born again by the grace of Christ, changing us through God’s mighty Word. Peter explained: “You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Pet. 1:23). Jesus merely willed the water to change into wine, and, likewise, his call to us that makes us his disciples also causes us to be born again: to become spiritually alive and responsive to God.

Notice the *abundance* of life and joy that Jesus gives. These were large stone vats of water, each holding 20-30 gallons. Jesus had them filled to the brim and turned it all into wine – 120 to 180 gallons of it. Jesus was not promoting alcoholic excess – most likely, the newlyweds would have sold most of the wine and had a nice profit to start their family. Instead, Jesus was showing that the life he gives is not sparse but abundant to the full. As he later said, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10).

Moreover, notice the *quality* of life Jesus that gives. When the master of the feast had the wine brought to him, he expressed surprised, saying, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now” (Jn. 2:10). For this reason, while the Christ-less life becomes more bitter and dull, the Christian life gets better the more we walk with Jesus. Alexander Maclaren writes:

Jesus Christ keeps the best till the last. His gifts become sweeter every day. No time can cloy them. Advancing years make them more precious and more necessary. The end is better in this course than the beginning. And when life is over, and we pass into the heavens, the word will come to our lips, with surprise and with thankfulness, as we find how much better it all is than we had ever dreamed it should be: ‘Thou hast kept the good wine until now.’⁶

One lesson we from this miracle is that Christianity is a joyful religion. It is true that Christians are serious people, living with a purpose in service to God. But those who know us should wonder what makes us so lively. James Boice comments, “Some Christians go around with grim looks and long faces. If they find themselves in the company of someone else who is having a good time, they immediately suspect that the cause of the fun is either illegal,

⁶ Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, 17 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 10:127-128.

immoral, or fattening. Jesus was not like that. He did not condemn those who were enjoying themselves, and he was not jealous of them. As a result, he was welcome at their gatherings, and those who had invited him listened to his teachings. Are you like that? If you are, you may find that people are not only pleased with your company; they may also be willing to listen to your testimony.”⁷ In this world of forced and phony happiness, there is a craving for the kind of true joy that Jesus gives; it is our calling to share the wine of true life in Christ through our joyful witness.

A DISPLAY OF CHRIST’S GLORY

John concludes by saying, “This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him” (Jn. 2:11). It seems that only the disciples, along with Mary and the servants, were aware of what Jesus had done. It was not yet time for great public displays, but instead for Christ to reveal himself to his disciples.

This miracle “manifested Christ’s glory” in two ways: first, with respect to his *person*. To those in the know, this miracle displayed Jesus’ deity, especially his divine power. Jesus merely asserted his will and nature responded: the servants drew water but poured wine. The miracle also displayed the glory of Christ’s *ministry*. Notice how ready he was to preserve the newlyweds from embarrassment and to provide for their guests. “Jesus is more than willing to approach ordinary people with their everyday need... and lovingly meet that need by his grace and power.”⁸ Surely this indicates that Jesus is able and willing to meet our deepest spiritual needs. William Hendriksen notes, “One who supplies so abundantly in the physical realm will not be less generous in the spiritual... And all his gifts are of the very best.”⁹

This miracle also displayed the glorious future we can look forward to with Christ. This passage concludes John’s record of the first week of Jesus’ ministry, beginning at John 1:19. This is now “the third day” since Jesus’ calling of Philip and Nathaniel, making it the seventh day

⁷ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 1:164.

⁸ Mark Johnson, *Let’s Study John* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003), 33.

⁹ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 2:118.

of that first week. In this way, John seems to link this miracle with the Sabbath day, which itself is a picture of the coming age of consummate blessing when Christ returns in glory. The Bible ends by telling us of a great wedding yet to come, when the church will enter into marital union with her Lord forever. Revelation 21:1-4 says: “I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.”

This is the future that awaits all who trust in Christ: an eternal union of love with the saving Son of God. So we should respond the way the disciples did: “His disciples believed on him” (Jn. 2:11). We should believe because we see Jesus’ deity, because we realize how able and willing he is to save us, and also because believing in him will lead us to glory. Isaiah wrote, “The LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine” (Isa. 25:6). Revelation 19:9 therefore says, “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” Will you be there? The preaching of the gospel is your invitation, but your seat is reserved only by believing on Jesus Christ.

Lastly, this miracle encourages all of Christ’s servants about the power he works through our humble ministry. Do we want others to enter the joy of this feast? What can we do? Like these servants, we need only to pour the grace and truth that Jesus gives us. Many ask, “What do I have that could bless other people?” Do not worry about that. Reach out with Christ’s love and minister God’s truth by sharing his Word. Just like the waiters at this wedding feast in Cana, if we will just pour, in Christ’s name, then he will take our mere water and turn it into wine, and we will be astonished at the way he displays his glory through our humble ministry.