



CHRIST: THE WINE OF LIFE

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

Catalog No. 851

John 2:1-11

Third Message

Gary Vanderet

December 15, 1991

I love Christmas! I love everything about it. Even looking at the lights on the Christmas tree can make me sentimental. Last night, I almost cried during a Hallmark commercial on television! But I need to be careful. Because of my dysfunctional background, my tendency is to expect from Christmas more than it can produce. For many of us, if we are honest, Christmas is a blend of fantastic expectations and heartbreaking disappointments. We want a Currier and Ives Christmas, but we end up with one that has more in common with the soap opera, "As the World Turns."

Christmas is not a cure-all. It will not take care of the problems in our world, the problems in our family, or the problems within ourselves. It may inspire a truce between warring nations, but twenty-four hours without gunfire can hardly be termed "peace on earth." Although Christmas inspires our charitable impulses, which can genuinely help others, the problems of poverty, injustice and alienation continue through the holidays. In fact, they are often made worse by the season itself. We want our families to be close and loving at Christmas, if at no other time, but this season does not magically make this happen or, indeed, other things we might wish. Our teenagers are still uncouth; dad is still hopelessly neurotic; grandmother still hates living in a nursing home; the younger children still whine for toys and candy. Rather than solving any of these problems, Christmas becomes a harsh spotlight that exposes the brokenness and pain of our fractured families. In short, Christmas can't give life.

But, as we have been learning in our studies in the gospel of John, Jesus, the One behind the celebration, can. He, the Lifegiver, is the only One who can offer life. All physical life came into being through him, and all spiritual life will come into being through him as well. Last week, we saw that John 1:19-2:11 records the first week of Jesus' ministry. This is not an accidental occurrence, for John 1:1-2:11 resembles Genesis 1:1-2:3. Like Genesis, John's gospel opens with the words, "In the beginning," and proceeds to recount the first momentous week of a new creation. This time, the Word of God became flesh and entered his handiwork to recreate it, to "make all things new," in the apostle Paul's wonderful phrase. Today, in the miracle of the turning of water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana, we will see how Jesus turns the ritualism of religious life into the new wine of the kingdom of God. (Next week, we will learn about a new temple; then we will see that this new temple demands a new manner of worship.)

Let's look at our text. John 2:1-11:

And on the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; and Jesus also was invited, and His disciples, to the wedding. And when the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to Him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what do I have to do with you? My hour has

not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Whatever He says to you, do it."

Now there were six stone waterpots set there for the Jewish custom of purification, containing twenty or thirty gallons each. Jesus said to them, "Fill the waterpots with water." And they filled them up to the brim. And He said to them, "Draw [some] out now, and take it to the headwaiter." And they took it [to him.] And when the headwaiter tasted the water which had become wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the headwaiter called the bridegroom, and said to him, "Every man serves the good wine first, and when [men] have drunk freely, [then] that which is poorer; you have kept the good wine until now." This beginning of [His] signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him.

The Hebrew wedding celebration was a grand event. The bridegroom and his friends brought the bride to the groom's house in a torch-lit procession, taking the longest route so as to prolong the festivities. The wedding feast could last as long as a week. For families whose lives were marked by poverty and difficulty, weddings were important occasions indeed. Many families would never again have a celebration to equal their wedding. The financial responsibility lay with the groom, not with the bride as in our culture. (As the father of three boys, I find that unthinkable!) To run out of supplies, especially wine, would be a dreadful social embarrassment. There is some evidence that such a breakdown in hospitality could leave the groom open to a lawsuit by the offended relatives of the bride. The fact that Jesus, his mother and his disciples were all invited to this wedding suggests that the celebration was for a relative, or at least a close family friend. It is possible that Mary, the mother of Jesus, had some responsibility for organizing the catering. This would explain her concern over the shortage of wine.

A wedding feast, therefore, was Jesus' choice as the occasion of his first miracle. As we begin today to analyze the miracles of our Lord we should remember that to John these were not only acts of power, they were signs—acts of power that said something about who Jesus was. They were material witnesses to underlying spiritual truth, carefully selected so as to bring men and women to faith. John's emphasis, therefore, is not on the miracle itself, but in the sign behind the miracle. They are pointers to Jesus, the great Fulfiller, the great Cleanser, the Giver of joy, that show us what he can do.

I. The Setting of the Miracle: Examining the Details

As we look at the setting for the miracle we note the first appearance in John's gospel of Jesus' mother. It is interesting that the mother of Jesus is never named in this gospel,

just as the writer is never named. Perhaps this is to distinguish her from the other Marys in the book. Mary turns to Jesus, concerned over this embarrassing situation regarding the lack of adequate supplies of wine at the wedding. She is aware that her son is the Messiah—she shared in the exhilaration of chapter 1—and she has probably relied on his resourcefulness in the past. So she says to him: “They have no wine.” Jesus responds: “Woman, what do I have to do with you? My hour has not yet come.” Today, if a child addressed his mother in that way, a father would be expected to act quickly to put the child in his place. That is because our usage of that word conveys a sense of disrespect that is not found in the original.

The words, “woman dear,” is closer to the sense of what was implied. Jesus addressed his mother by this same term while he was hanging on the cross. It is a term of utmost courtesy, like “madam” or “lady.” What is significant is that he did not address her as his mother. If she is seeking his help now, it must not be on the basis of a mother-son relationship. Jesus’ courteous words to his mother declare right at the beginning of his ministry his freedom from any human agenda, advice or manipulation. His divine sovereignty is stressed throughout this gospel. He jumps to no one’s call except that of his heavenly Father. As we will see in this gospel, he often says “No!” to suggestions that are made, but he acts when his Father tells him to do things (4:46ff.; 7:33ff). He acts in sovereign dependence upon the Father, and him alone.

This must have been difficult for Mary. She bore him and nursed him. She watched him fall as he learned to walk. Apparently she had learned to rely on him as the family provider, as it appears that she was a widow. But now that he has entered into the purpose for which he had come, everything, even family ties, must be subordinate to that purpose. She can no longer view him as mothers view their sons; no longer is she allowed the prerogatives of motherhood. Whenever she comes on the scene during his ministry, he is at pains to establish distance between them. This isn’t callousness on Jesus’ part (on the cross he makes provision for her future), but henceforth, she, like every person, must come to him as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” How this must have pained her.

We can learn much from this exchange with regard to our own conversations with Jesus. We might not find immediate answers to our prayers, for instance. Like Mary, we must learn to trust and obey. And in Mary we have a wonderful model to follow. Notice how trusting she is even when she is given what might be construed as a brush-off. Like the servants, she must learn to trust and obey.

The rest of the phrase is difficult to translate. It literally reads: “What is it to you and me? What is it in common between your idea of how this is to operate and mine? Leave it to me,” says Jesus, in effect. His concern is very different from hers, so different that neither she nor any other human being can share it.

II. The Significance of the Miracle: Explaining the Symbolism

This particular miracle is not followed by a discourse expounding its spiritual significance. We are compelled therefore to deduce its significance from the narrative itself. There is a double emphasis here, as there is in the other miracles. On the one hand there is copious attention to detail, but there is profound symbolism too. The first emphasis is

that this really happened—Jesus actually turned the water into wine. The symbolism encourages us to view this story as a window that enables us to see through to the light of God’s radiance. It is a wonderful introduction to the ministry of Jesus because it shows his glory—God’s own presence manifested in radiant light. The light that shines out from Cana in Galilee is radiant indeed. It is the light of fulfillment, the light of joy. As we look through this window, then, there are two primary truths that stand out in these verses.

(a) Jesus is the One who gives complete cleansing

John makes a particular point of noting that there were six stone waterpots set there for the Jewish custom of purification. His explanation is more than a note for non-Jewish readers. This water was used for the ceremonial washing of hands and of drinking vessels. The routine of daily life, especially contact with Gentiles and the secular world, made Jews ceremonially unclean, according to the tradition of the elders (Mark 7:3-4). In order to be ceremonially clean, therefore, Jews poured water over their hands and drinking utensils before eating or before studying the law. These waterpots symbolized the whole purification system and paraphernalia of the Old Testament.

Of course, this system never really brought cleansing to anyone. The writer to the Hebrews makes this clear. The high priest every day offered sacrifices in the temple that could never take away sins, says the writer. The sacrifices merely reminded them of their sins and the awful, bloody consequence of sin. But this high priest, the writer continues, made one sacrifice for sin and he sat down at the right hand of the Father. The task was completed. The purification rites of the Jews did not achieve anything. Abraham and others in the Old Testament were not saved by any Jewish ceremonies. They were saved by the grace of God through faith—just like you and me. But these purification rites pointed forward to show that God himself, one day when the time was right, would provide the purification. And these water jars, which were used for the symbolic purification of Judaism, but which never brought real cleansing, were empty. It is significant that it was water from these pots that Jesus used in the miracle of turning water into wine. Thus the glory of this sign is that it is Jesus and him alone who fulfills all of the sacrificial ritual of the Old Testament. He is the only one who cleanses completely.

I am inclined to think that as Jesus performed the miracle, his thoughts were turned to the goal toward which his life was inexorably moving. The words, “they have no wine,” expressing his mother’s sensitive concern for the distress of the host, suggested to Jesus the much deeper need of humanity which he had come to earth to satisfy. It was because men had no wine, because they had no inherent strength to save themselves from their dire predicament as sinners, that Jesus was destined, in Isaiah’s words, “to tread the winepress alone” (43:3), and pour out the wine of his most precious blood. These Old Testament sacrifices never permanently took away sins. Never! People found momentary relief from their guilt—temporary forgiveness, in other words; they would soon be back with another sacrifice.

There are many religious people who still live their lives like this today. They have no more hope than those who brought animal after animal, sacrifice after sacrifice, to offer for their sin. When Jesus died on the cross, he cried, “It is finished!” It’s over, done with, completed. The sacrifice of

the Lamb of God was made once and for all. Remember John the Baptist's testimony: "Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." It is finished! What a powerful, liberating thought! The Father is completely satisfied. We don't have to live under the demanding enslavement of working, begging, pleading, fearing, bargaining or paying penance to find favor with God. In Christ, we are as safe and secure as the Son is before the Father. Jesus is the great Fulfiller of all of the ritualism of the sacrificial system. He is the one who gives complete cleansing. I pray that in this miracle of the changing of water into wine you will find relief for the deep sense of guilt which you bear.

There is a second truth in these verses.

(b) Jesus is the One who gives complete joy

The one who provides cleansing also provides radiant joy. The words, "They have no wine," go far deeper than a mere reference to the lack of refreshment at Cana: They define the human experience without Christ. Life without Christ is life without wine. In Scripture, wine is a symbol for joy. The psalmist wrote that wine "makes the heart glad." Isaiah wrote: "Come, all 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" (Is. 55:1.) The rabbis had a saying: "Without wine, there is no joy." The joy had run out at the wedding in Cana.

There comes a time in our lives too when the wine runs out, when the joy and the exhilaration of life disappear. I read a biography of Ernest Hemingway last week. From his early years, Hemingway went after everything life had to offer. He drove an ambulance during the First World War; he was involved in the Spanish Civil War; he was a reporter. Everyone, from bullfighters to authors, sought his friendship. Hemingway pursued the natural wines of life. But there came a day when the wine ran out. In his biography of the great writer, Carlos Baker records these tragic final words.

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 had noticed that the guns were locked up in the basement. But the keys, as he well knew, were on the window ledge above the kitchen sink. 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 had used it for years for pigeon shooting. 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 crossed the living room to the front foyer, a shrinelike entryway five feet by seven, with oak paneled walls and a floor of linoleum tile . . . He slipped in two shells, lowered the gun butt carefully to the floor, leaned forward, pressed the twin barrels against his forehead just above the eyebrows and tripped both triggers.

No matter who we are, no matter what we have tasted, there comes a time when the excitement peters out. Sometimes this happens when life seems at its best—when we have health and wealth and friends and pleasures. The wine loses its sparkle. It can happen to a teenager. It is rampant on the college campus. For others, it happens during the middle years of life. We cope with the disappointment in different ways. Many of us just settle for living with gray days; we clench our fists and determine to go on. Some fight. Others turn sour and bitter. Though it is not wrong to enjoy the natural joys of life, there comes a time when there is nothing left to bring us excitement. What is the solution to the dilemma? The miracle at Cana teaches that Jesus is the giver of joy—and he gives it in abundance! Notice that he produced between 120 and 180 gallons of wine—more than could ever be used.

Life has its sorrows. Christ himself was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." He knew all about sorrows, but the overall tenor of his life was joy—and that is what he wants for his followers. He told the disciples shortly before his death: "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." Paul wrote in Romans 14:17: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." And he reminds us in Galatians 5:22: "But the fruit of the Spirit is . . . joy . . ."

And notice that the joy that Jesus gives improves with age. He saves the best for last. When the head waiter tasted the wine that our Lord produced from water, he said, "Every man serves the good wine first, and when [men] have drunk freely, [then] that which is poorer; you have kept the good wine until now." Though the natural wines of life tend to lose their sparkle as we grow older, the wine that Christ gives, and the joy that we have in him, increases and improves with age. I have found this to be true in my own life. The wines that Jesus serves to me now are more than I can appreciate at times, but he is refining my palate so that I am beginning to understand the things that are really meaningful in my relationship with him.

This is what Jesus offers to you as well, and this is what we are celebrating this morning as we come to the Lord's Table. Not everyone who saw the miracle saw the glory of it. The head waiter didn't see it. But the disciples did. It is because all of these signs are seen only through the eyes of faith. My prayer today is that your eyes will be open to see through the window of this miracle to the glory of Christ, the cleanser, the joy-giver, the true wine of life. One day, we will celebrate another wedding feast. Jesus will not be a guest at this feast: He will be the Bridegroom and we will be his bride, the church. "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb," wrote John in the book of Revelation. The invitation to that supper, and the promise of cleansing and of joy, are for those who are in his family. It is to his bride that Jesus promises to give a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning. Isaiah's invitation is still open: "Come, you who thirst, come and drink wine and milk for free."

© 1991 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino

