

Water to Wine

Scripture Text: John 2:1-11

Lesson Synopsis: Student will explore themes of glory, God's will, and the reign of God through the story of Jesus turning water into wine.

Digging In

A Note on Wine

As Baptists, many of us bring a teetotaling background to the story of Jesus turning water into wine. The passage can therefore prove confusing and even embarrassing to our sensibilities. "Could Jesus really have turned water into *wine*?" we ask. Even the most cursory reading of John 2 demands the simple answer, "Yes, he could and did." More than this, scripture nowhere calls for complete abstinence from alcohol. In fact, the reign of God is described in terms of "a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine" (Isaiah 25:6), and Paul was not afraid to advise Timothy to "use a little wine because of your stomach" (1 Timothy 5:23). Indeed, it seems that Jesus himself drank wine, for he is accused in Matthew 11:19 and Luke 7:34 of being a drunkard. While this accusation of drunkenness amounted to nothing more than slander (Jesus certainly was *not* a drunkard!), the basis in both of these passages for this accusation was that "the Son of man came eating and drinking." In all of this, we see that the Bible does not expressly condemn alcohol.

At the same time, though the scriptures do not condemn alcohol, they certainly *do* condemn drunkenness. Note the following passages on the subject:

- Proverbs 21:19-21: Listen, my son, and be wise, and set your heart on the right path: Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat, for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags.
- 1 Corinthians 5:11: But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a [Christian] but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a *drunkard* or swindler. Do not even eat with such people (emphasis mine).
- 1 Corinthians 6:9-10: Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor

drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God (emphasis mine).

- Ephesians 5:18: Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit...

In these passages we hear calls to abstain from both habitual drunkenness and drunkenness itself. Therefore, while the scriptures do not offer a blanket condemnation of alcohol, they do offer guidelines for its consumption! Moreover, while a teetotaling mentality is not supported by the scriptures, neither is it opposed to the scriptures, and in many cases it can be deemed as wise (I myself am a teetotaler). At the same time, we must be careful not to read into scripture things that are not there or build artificial barriers to Christian fellowship. While some Christian traditions celebrate complete abstinence from alcohol, others do not. The important thing is that we all hear the call to responsibility and follow it. Even more important is that we move past the specifics of wine to being filled with the Spirit.

With all this said, we can affirm that Jesus did indeed turn water into wine. In doing so, we need not desert our convictions on alcohol so long as we are being true to the call of scripture. And once we are able to view the miracle for what it was, we can begin to see beyond it to the meaning that it carries. After all, we are on the wrong track if we focus on alcohol to the extent that we fail to actually examine this first sign of Jesus at a deeper level!

Water into Wine

As the story of Jesus' first miracle/sign begins, we find that Jesus and his disciples are attending a wedding in a town called Cana that is located in the region of Galilee. In the span of three verses, John has neatly set up the dilemma: the hosts have run out of wine. In this context, a wedding feast was a major occasion, and festivities could last for as much as a week.ⁱ It is not surprising, then, that the host might run out of wine. After all, a party lasting several days would call for quite a bit. At the same time, while a shortage of wine might be understandable, it would also have been a great embarrassment for the host of the festivities. Thus, Mary, who apparently desires to spare her hosts embarrassment, poses the problem to Jesus. As 2:3 states, "When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, 'They have no more wine.'" We can suppose here that Mary was doing more than simply informing Jesus of the situation. Instead, she gave him information hoping that he would do something about it.

In response, Jesus offers his mother what sounds to us like a harsh reply in saying, "Woman, why do you involve me? My hour has not yet come" (2:4). In our culture, calling one's mother "woman" would be seen as disrespectful and even demeaning. In Jesus' culture, though, the title "woman" could be construed as a term of respect.ⁱⁱ Thus, Jesus again calls his mother "woman" in John 19:26-27, where he says, "When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her,

‘Woman, here is your son,’ and to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’” In this context, the term “woman” is used in a moment of compassionate concern; even as Jesus hangs on the cross, he makes arrangements for his mother’s care. That said, it is still important to note that Jesus in John 2 uses a formal title for Mary instead of calling her “mother.” This would be a bit like a grown son calling his mother “missus.” In addressing his mother thus, Jesus distances himself from Mary’s request and refuses to allow her to set his agenda. This is apparent in the second part of his reply: “...why do you involve me? My hour has not yet come.” The hour that Jesus looks forward to is the hour of his glorification (in John, his death, resurrection, and ascension), and it is a time that has been set by God. In addressing his mother as “woman,” Jesus creates a distance between them that allows him to be attentive to his divine calling rather than simply being driven by the concerns of the day.

Having heard Jesus’ reply, Mary looks to the servants and says, “Do whatever he tells you” (2:5). Perhaps she has heard something in Jesus’ voice that makes her think he will act, or perhaps she simply says these words in hope that Jesus will respond. Whatever the case, Mary leaves the ball in Jesus’ court.ⁱⁱⁱ Though she has instructed the servants to stand at the ready, she has given Jesus himself no instructions on the matter. It is now for Jesus to decide how to act.

As it turns out, Mary’s persistence was well-placed, for Jesus does indeed go on to respond to her request positively. Apparently, while his hour has not come, coming to the aid of the wedding hosts is not opposed to God’s plan for Jesus. More than this, the action that Jesus takes is understood as a sign that revealed Jesus’ glory (2:11). While Jesus will not come fully into his glory until the cross, the present scene nevertheless reveals the glory of the Son of God.

Now, as the servants stand at the ready, the telling of the story slows. As one commentator points out, everything to this point has been very brief. We know nothing of the bride and groom, nor do we know the relationship that Jesus has with them. Yet now we are given a great deal of information about jars. As 2:6 states, “Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.”^{iv} In one respect, this level of detail helps us comprehend the magnitude of Jesus’ miracle. The jars will be filled to the brim with water (2:7), and Jesus will turn *all* of the water into wine. This is between 120 and 180 gallons of water turned into wine! Still, for us to comprehend the magnitude of the miracle does not require that we know that the jars are made of stone or that they are used for ceremonial washing. These details point to an added layer of interpretation that will be pursued in the next section.

As the story moves on, Jesus tells the servants to fill the jars with water, and they do so, filling each jar to the brim (2:7). Then the servants follow Jesus’ instructions further by drawing some of the water and taking it to the master of the banquet (2:8). To this point, we are unaware that anything has happened. For all we know, the servants will soon be serving water to the master of ceremonies! But then we hear of a

miraculous occurrence. In 2:9-10 we are told, "...and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from ... Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, 'Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now.'" Not only has Jesus turned water into wine, but he has also turned the water into the *best* wine. Not only does he save the bridegroom embarrassment, but he makes him seem especially rich toward his guests!

The miracle now accomplished, the story comes to a close as John tells us, "What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him" (2:11). An ordinary wedding has been transformed into an occasion for revelation. Jesus has shown forth his glory, and his disciples believe.

A Wedding Feast and Six Stone Jars for Washing

As noted above, John goes into great detail when he describes the jars that will hold the water-turned-into-wine. There are six stone jars used for ceremonial washing, and it is in these details that some commentators see an added layer of significance to the passage. Because they are made of stone, the jars are immune from impurity, and they are used in Jewish religious observance (ceremonial washing). Thus, in the vessels of Judaism, Jesus brings about something new. This does not mean that Jesus is somehow negating Judaism. Instead, he is doing something new within it.^v As Christians, we would say that he is fulfilling it, and this may point to the use of the number six.^{vi} Seven is the number of completeness in Jewish thought, yet only six ceremonial jars are present in the passage. As Christians we believe that the work of God that began with Abraham reaches its climax in Christ. Moreover, we believe that God initiated this plan before the foundation in the world. Thus, everything has been looking forward to this moment, and Judaism was not yet complete. Importantly, this is not because Judaism was somehow sick at this moment in time, nor was it because it was a faulty system to begin with. Instead, it is incomplete because the story has not yet finished. It is almost as if at the time of this story, we are reading chapter six in a seven chapter tale. The detail of the jars may, then, point to the new (and fulfilling) thing that God is doing in Jesus.

A second point to keep in mind is the setting of the miracle. This newness is taking place at a wedding feast at which Jesus offers an abundance of wine. In the Old Testament, the reign of God is described in terms of a feast in passages like Isaiah 25:6-8, which reads:

On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples

A banquet of aged wine – the best of meats and the finest of wines.

On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples,

the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces;
he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth.
The Lord has spoken.

For the New Testament Christian community, this imagery of feasting had been transformed into the image of a wedding banquet in which the Messiah played the role of the bridegroom and the Church the role of the bride. Thus we hear in Revelation 19:6-9 (another work penned by John):

Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting:
"Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns.
Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!
For the wedding of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready.
Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear."

With all of this in mind, Jesus' provision of abundant wine at a wedding feast can be read on both a practical level (he provided for a real wedding feast) and on a symbolic level. As O'Day has said, "[The steward's] final words, 'you have kept the good wine until now,' have a double meaning. They work on the level of the story line, but the steward's words also inadvertently witness to the deeper truth. He attributes the good wine to the beneficence of the bridegroom whose wedding is being celebrated, when in fact the wine derives from the beneficence of Jesus, the true bridegroom."^{vii} In all of this, we are seeing an important symbolic statement. In Jesus, the reign of God has arrived, and Jesus the bridegroom is providing an extravagant feast!

Application

Glory in the Ordinary

As seen above, the story of Jesus turning water into wine has sweeping overtones. Because of the sweeping nature of the story, it is important to note a more ordinary point of application. Gary Burge captures this point well in saying, "There is a practical side to the story that we can easily miss ... Jesus stepped into a wedding of good friends and fixed a simple problem ... We can invite Christ into dilemmas that seem embarrassingly inconsequential – dilemmas that seem ridiculously practical – and ask him to help."^{viii} This is an important point for us to see, for we can sometimes fool ourselves into believing that Jesus is not interested in the nitty-gritty, practical aspects

of our lives. Yet this passage shows that not only is Christ interested, but our ordinary needs can become occasions for his glory!

Space for the Divine Agenda

In calling his mother “woman,” Jesus creates space that allows him to attend to God’s agenda for his ministry. In doing so, he ensures that he will move at God’s prompting rather than being driven by his mother’s want. Just as creating space for the divine agenda is important to Jesus in this passage, so will it also be important for our own lives. So often it is possible to be driven primarily by the demands of the day. While these demands are not bad in and of themselves, they run the risk of taking up the whole of our vision. When this happens, we lose sight of the divine agenda as we run from one task to the next. It will therefore be important for us at times to create space so that we can lift our eyes to God.

As this passage shows, sometimes creating space requires that we have difficult conversations with those closest to us. After all, we take stock in their lives and want to be helpful to them! Sometimes, though, we need to ask them to help us follow God. This does not mean that we ignore their needs or demote them in our affections. Far from it! It simply means that we create enough space in the relationship for the divine agenda. As the passage goes on to show, the divine agenda is not opposed to us being attentive to the needs of our loved ones. After, Jesus goes on to do what Mary asks, and we hear over and over in the gospels the call to service. Loving our loved ones well is part of loving God! The question here is not so much a question of activity as it is an issue of drive. What is driving us? Are we looking to God or only to the pressing needs of the day? If the latter, perhaps it is time to look up.

A Seat at the Table

On the symbolic level, the passage draws our attention to the new thing that God is doing in Jesus. The reign of God is inaugurated in Jesus’ ministry! The great wedding feast has begun! And we who have believed have been given a seat at the table. The passage reminds not just of the great new thing that Jesus brings but also that we have become recipients of God’s goodness in Jesus. We find here opportunity for thanksgiving. And we also are challenged to consider whether we have invited the fullness of God’s reign into our lives. The wonderful reign of God is present in Jesus! Are we living in it?

Teaching Helps

Icebreaker: To get people talking, begin with the following question, “If you vacation anywhere in the world, where would you go?” Go around the room, allowing everyone to answer who wishes to do so.

Time for Sharing: Ask class members if there is anything from last week’s readings in the gospel of John that they would like to share with the class. Did they have any important insights? How about questions? If a person asks a question, open it up for class discussion. If needed, write it down and make a note to do further research or ask the pastor about it during the coming week.

Lesson Introduction: Let students know that today’s lesson will come from Wednesday’s and invite them to turn in their Bibles to John 2:1-11.

A Note on Wine

- **Question:** What were you taught growing up about alcohol?
- **Question:** What do you think about it today?
- **Question:** What does scripture say about alcohol?
- **Explain:** Using the “A Note on Wine” section above, offer the class a scripturally-informed view of alcohol. Let them know that the following story does not give license for drunkenness or call teetotalers to forsake their values.

Water to Wine

- **Scripture Reading:** John 2:1-3
 - **Question:** Does anyone have a good story from their wedding reception that they would like to share?
 - **Question:** What would you feel like if you ran out of food at your wedding reception?
 - **Explain:** Using the “Water to Wine” section above, help the class understand how weddings worked in Jesus’ context and the embarrassment running out of wine would have caused.
 - **Question:** What does Jesus’ mother ask him to do?
- **Scripture Reading:** John 2:4
 - **Question:** Why do you think Jesus answers his mother in this way?
 - **Explain:** Using the “Water to Wine” section above, help the class understand the significance of Jesus using the title “woman” for his mother.
- **Scripture Reading:** John 2:5-11
 - **Question:** Why do you think Mary goes on to tell the servants to do as Jesus says?
 - **Question:** What does Jesus tell the servants to do?
 - **Question:** Why is the master of the banquet amazed?

- **Question:** How much water did Jesus turn into wine?
- **Question:** How does John summarize this miracle in verse 11?

A Wedding Feast and Six Stones Jars for Washing

- **Question:** Ask students to revisit verse 6. What does John tell us about the jars?
 - **Question:** Is all of this detail necessary to the story? Do we need to know that the jars are stone or what they were used for?
 - **Explain:** Using the “A Wedding Feast and...” section above, explain the significance of six stone jars which were used for ceremonial washing.
- **Scripture Reading:** Isaiah 25:6-8, Revelation 19:6-9
 - **Explain:** Using the “A Wedding Feast and...” section above, explain the importance of feasts and wine in Jewish and Christian thought.
 - **Question:** Why might it be significant that Jesus’ first miracle happens at a wedding feast where he provides an abundance of wine?

Glory in the Ordinary

- **Question:** Ask if anyone ever wonders if God cares about the nitty-gritty aspects of our lives?
- **Question:** What might this passage teach us about the ordinary aspects of our lives?

Space for the Divine Agenda

- **Question:** What was the significance of Jesus calling his mother “woman”?
- **Question:** Has anyone here today ever had to create boundaries with a loved one? Would you like to share?
- **Explain:** Using the “Space for the Divine Agenda” section above, lead a discussion on creating space in our lives to recognize and follow God’s agenda.

A Seat at the Table

- **Question:** What was the significance of the miracle happening at a wedding feast?
- **Explain:** Using the “A Seat at the Table” section above, help students understand that not only has the reign of God begun with Jesus ministry, but we also have been given a seat at the table of the wedding feast if we have believed in Jesus.
- **Question:** What should our response to this knowledge be?

ⁱ Information concerning weddings take from: Robert H. Mounce, “John,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Revised Edition*, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007), 386; Gary M. Burge, *John* (Zondervan, 2009), 91.

ⁱⁱ Information on this address for Mary taken from: Gail R. O’Day, “The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 536; Mounce, “John,” 387; Burge, *John*, 91.

ⁱⁱⁱ O'Day, "The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," 537.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 536, 537.

^v *Ibid.*, 538.

^{vi} Mounce, "John," 385. Mounce dismissively mentions commentators who take the number six to refer to "the inadequacy of the law." With these commentators, I understand the number six to be significant but not in the same terms. To point to incompleteness is not the same as pointing to inadequacy, as I try to make clear above. At the same time, it may simply be that John uses the number six to help us understand the grandness of the miracle.

^{vii} O'Day, "The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," 538.

^{viii} Burge, *John*, 102.