

Out of Order

In the name of him who manifested his glory at Cana of Galilee, dear friends in Christ: Ah, the Wedding of Cana: the site and setting of Jesus' very first miracle—and what has got to be one of the most misunderstood episodes in the earthly ministry of our Lord. The account usually serves as a departure point for a sermon on how the Lord loves and supports the institution of marriage, and how it's a good idea for couples to invite Jesus to be part of their wedding and their subsequent lives together. And those ideas are good; but they're really not what this story is about.

I've heard and read a lot of other teachings on the Wedding of Cana that are mostly desperate attempts to explain away why a guy like Jesus would make wine at a party for people who've already had enough to make them feel a bit buzzed – and a great deal of wine at that, something like 150 gallons. These dodges usually come from folks who believe that it's a sin to drink a beverage containing alcohol. And so they say things like, "The wine Jesus made was really unfermented grape juice", which is just silly – as if the master of the feast couldn't tell the difference between Welch's grape juice and a really fine wine; or they'll say, "Back then they heavily watered down the wine they served. They used it mostly to kill germs because their water sources were so contaminated." There are two glaring problems with that explanation: first, if their water sources were that badly contaminated, they'd all be dead. And second, the alcohol content in full strength wine is barely able to kill the germs in it. If you watered it down at all, it would lose its antiseptic properties. No. Jesus turned water into wine. Real wine. Good wine. The best. And that's the way the people drank it. And they enjoyed it. It's okay. The Scriptures denounce the sin of drunkenness, not the proper enjoyment of wine. Like any other good gift it can be abused; but in its place and with moderation, it's can be received and used with thanks to God.

But why? Why would Jesus begin his public ministry with *this* particular miracle? I mean, if he really wanted to manifest his glory – show people who he was and what he could do – why not do something really big that lots of people would see? You know, like the feeding of the 5000, or the raising of Lazarus, a guy who'd been dead for four days that Jesus raised in front of a whole crowd. As it is, on the order of his miracles, changing water to wine is not that spectacular. To be sure, no one actually witnessed the miracle take place – the moment when the water became wine is unclear. And only a handful of people even knew that he did it: his disciples, his mother, and the servants who filled the jars. So what's going on here?

In answer, we note that St. John, the only Gospel writer who records this event, always calls the miracles of Jesus *signs*. They are for him never just displays of Jesus' divine power; they always pack a message. And in this case, the message comes on several different levels.

The first has to do with a Jewish prayer called the *Kadesh*. It's a prayer most closely associated with the Passover meal – the annual feast the Jews observed to commemorate their deliverance from bondage in Egypt. During the course of this highly ritual meal the story of how the Lord worked mighty miracles to rescue his people is retold. And several times throughout, the wine glasses are refilled, and before drinking the *Kadesh* prayer recited: "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the universe, the Creator of the fruit of the vine." Every Jewish person knew this prayer. They would have prayed it hundreds of times. And it connects several important ideas: The Lord God, his kingship and rule, our deliverance from bondage, and the creation of wine. So now, at the beginning of his ministry, when Jesus is just starting to work

the miracles of our deliverance from the bondage of sin and death, he makes wine to say, "That's me. I am the Creator of the fruit of the vine, and therefore also your Deliverer, your King, and the Lord your God."

That's a profound opening statement; but taking it a bit deeper, we see that the miracle of changing water to wine is meant to convey a message about the *kind* of deliverance the Lord Jesus is going to work. Remember that when Moses began to deliver God's people from mere physical slavery, his first big miracle was changing water to blood – blood being a symbol of everything that's wrong with this world. Blood speaks of violence, sin, and death. The Nile flowing red is a picture of a world awash in blood and subject to the wrath of God. And the following miracles the Lord did through Moses to save his people were all judgments against sin. They were plagues and disasters, revelations of God's wrath, culminating with the death of the firstborn.

But now Jesus is going to work a different kind of deliverance. He's here to rescue us from God's wrath and everlasting damnation. And so his miracles will all be revelations of God's love and mercy. He'll be doing healings, freeing people from demons, stopping storms, feeding the hungry, raising the dead. The wrath of God, when it falls, will be directed against him, the Firstborn of God. That's how he'll save us. And so where Moses began by changing water to blood (think wrath and judgment), Jesus begins by changing water to wine, which the Jews understood to be a sign of God's love and mercy. Wine was associated with joy, with feasting, with celebrations, and with all the good things in life. So this initial miracle shows that Jesus is here to do something different and far greater for us than Moses did. Jesus is the better deliverer. Through Moses was revealed God's Law and wrath; but through Jesus we see and receive God's grace, mercy, and truth. The contrast couldn't be sharper.

Okay, those two levels of understanding the sign of Jesus' first miracle are fairly easy to grasp; but now we're going to take it to a deeper level still, and this one's a little more subtle. It has to do with what the master of the feast says to the groom. "Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the inferior wine. But you have kept the good wine until now."

Let me explain a few things. First, a wedding celebration back in Jesus' day might be a weeklong event. The couple was officially married on the first day, but there would follow several days of feasting and games and general merry-making – like a wedding reception that just keeps on going. And the whole affair was the responsibility of the groom and his family. They paid for everything. (And just as a side note here, as the father of two daughters of marriageable age, I'm all for reinstating this wise biblical custom.) So, anyway, it was the groom's party; but so that he could actually be part of it and enjoy it with his bride and guests, he'd typically appoint or hire someone to manage everything. That person was the master of the feast. It was his job to oversee all the details and ensure that the guests were taken care of.

At the Cana wedding, the master of the feast would have been in near panic mode. The groom didn't order enough wine. And because hospitality was so vitally important back then, it was a major blunder, one that would soon make the groom, his family, and the master of the feast all look like inconsiderate and incompetent fools. It was the master's job to prevent that from happening. And that's why Jesus directs the servants to take the wine he created to him.

When he tastes it, he's really surprised. He's expecting the worst, a bargain basement brand. What else would be available at such short notice? But he finds that it's far better than the wine they'd been serving and ran out of. Of course he's delighted that the disaster has been averted; but he rushes over to the groom to tell him that he's done things out of order.

Everybody knows that you serve the best wine first, when palates are clean and senses are sharpest. And then when folks have had a few and their powers of discernment are a bit muddled, you can serve the stuff of lesser quality. You've saved the best until last.

It's a rebuke. You did it wrong. You got it backwards. Good first, then bad. That's the way wine ought to be served, he says. *You should not have done things out of order.*

But that is the point: Jesus does things out of order – not according to the customs of men. And to take us to that deeper level, we need to understand that wine is theologically loaded. It's used in the Scriptures to illustrate certain spiritual concepts. Sometimes it stands for God's judgment. In the Psalms and in the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah in particular, we read about how there's a cup of wrath in the Lord's hand – foul tasting wine – that the Lord is going to force his enemies to drink down to its dregs. It will make them drunk. They'll stagger and fall. They'll lie on the ground in their own vomit, never to rise again. That's one picture, and it isn't pretty. But then other times we read about the cup of the Lord's blessing. This is the good wine, and it stands for the Lord's salvation and his gifts of grace. It gladdens the hearts of God's people, and it flows freely at the feast of his salvation.

How can wine represent both good and bad like this? It's because of the way wine develops naturally. When you first make it, that is, crush the grapes and allow the juice to ferment, it is terrible tasting stuff. It's full of tannic acid that gives it an astringent flavor and unpleasant mouth feel. This new wine has to be aged before it's fit to drink by anyone who actually wants to enjoy it. Ah, but there were people who did drink new wine. Because new wine was abundant and relatively inexpensive, it's what the alcoholics drank. They weren't drinking it for its flavor, but rather for its effect. They wanted to be drunk. And they couldn't get enough of it. I mean, what does an alcoholic think will solve his problems? Another drink, of course; which doesn't help. It only makes things worse. And it makes him want another drink. It's a deception and a vicious cycle.

The thing to see is that theologically wine is a representation of God's Word, which can be either good or bad for us depending on whether we're talking Law or Gospel. For sinners such as ourselves, the Law is bad news. This is the portion of God's Word that shows us what God requires, reveals our sins, and tells us of his coming judgment. That's the cup of wrath. It's new wine. And it's bitter indeed. But then there's the Gospel. These are those words of God that speak of his forgiveness for sinners in Christ Jesus and the work he did to fulfill the Law for us – how he lived a perfect life and suffered and died in our place as the sacrifice of atonement. This is the cup of the Lord's blessing. It's the aged, good wine. It's smooth and sweet, a real pleasure to drink.

The trouble is that by nature we want to serve them out of order: the best first and then the bad. That's the way of the world, the way everyone does it. And unfortunately, it's the way most churches serve it even today: first Gospel and then the Law. People are told that Jesus is their Savior from sin, that he died to set them free. Wonderful! And it is. But then they're told that in view of what Christ has done, they have to make him the Lord of their life and live according to his commands. Or to say it another way, they're set free by Christ and his Gospel only to come under the bondage of the Law once again. And the more they try to live under the Law, the more they fail. The result is that they become legalists. They become fixated on obeying rules and regulations. "Tell me what I'm supposed to do!" It's like an alcohol addiction. And just as an alcoholic thinks that another drink will solve his problem, so a legalist thinks another rule to obey will fix what ails him. But it doesn't. It's one more rule that will only get broken, and that will make things worse. And friends, let me tell you, there are Christian churches everywhere that are full of desperate people who are trying to live up to the Law.

They are told that Jesus and his Gospel got them in the kingdom, but now it's their job to prove themselves worthy of it. They look for the proof of their salvation not in what Jesus has done, but rather in their good works that supposedly show that they are true believers. And whether they realize it or not, it's killing them. It's spiritual bondage that leads to death. And don't think that we're not subject to the same kind of "out of order" thinking. It seems to be right: good first, then the bad. Become a believer in Jesus, and then prove your faith by living according to his commands.

But it's not right. And this is what Jesus is telling us by this sign of serving the best at the last. The right order is bad first and then the good. First we hear the Law of God: what his perfect standards demand, how we've failed in every way to meet them, and how we stand condemned. That's the bad news. And it ought to terrify us. It means that we're going to be revealed for the inconsiderate and incompetent fools that we are. But that's when Jesus steps in with the excellent wine of God's grace and mercy. He spares us from the shame and condemnation by taking our shame and condemnation on himself. He speaks to us his word of forgiveness – the forgiveness he earned by suffering and dying in our place. And thus Christ Jesus is the end of the Law for us. In him we have been set free. And to stay free, we must remain in him.

How do we do that? By maintaining the right order – the one Jesus uses: the bitter, hard to swallow wine of God's Law first. That will always show us our sins and God's wrath and make us thirst for the relief of the good wine of Christ's holy Gospel. Then, when we receive it, we will savor the forgiveness and freedom we have in Jesus all the more. And we will celebrate and rest in perfect confidence that Jesus has kept the Law of God for us.

So, Jesus' first miracle, the sign of changing water to very good wine: a declaration of who Jesus is and what he's come to do, a revelation that Jesus brings the people of God a far better deliverance than that of Moses, and a reminder to us that to enjoy the eternal pleasures Jesus brings, we dare not allow the Word of God, the Law and Gospel, to be used out of order. Thus Jesus manifested his glory in Cana of Galilee. And his disciples both then and today put their trust in him. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!