

A Story of Grace

John 2:1–11

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The Gospel of John and the Language of Signs

If you have ever read all four gospels — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — you will have noticed how different they are from one another. Yes, they tell the same story, but each gospel has its own governing purpose around which the story of Jesus is told.

Matthew tends to focus on the fulfillment of prophecy. Mark is the Gospel — the Good News of Jesus in its most urgent, immediate form. Luke is the apologist, constructing a careful argument for the truth of Christianity. John, however, tells us plainly why he writes: *“these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name”* (John 20:31). He wants you to understand what it meant for God to dwell among us — and the grace we have because of the cross.

This is important, because there are things in John that are not found in the other gospels — like the wedding at Cana — and many of the things John does include appear in a different order than in the other gospels. This is not a mistake or an error. It is the deliberate telling of a story for a purpose: that you may believe in him.

One of the most distinctive features of John’s gospel is his vocabulary for miracles. John does not call them miracles. He calls them *signs*. He makes this explicit at the end of our passage today: *“This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee”* (John 2:11). There are seven such signs in John’s gospel, and every one of them points to Jesus. John is treating these events not merely as demonstrations of raw power, but — much like parables — as communications about who Jesus is and what he has come to do.

So the question we must bring to this passage is not simply, “What happened?” but “What does this sign signify? What is Jesus teaching us? What does the story of turning water into wine tell us about the Gospel?”

As you might imagine, the history of the church offers a wide spectrum of answers to that question. On one end, every nuance of the story is treated as rich with symbolism. Augustine, for instance, saw the six stone water jars as representing the six ages of history, each marked by a prophetic witness pointing toward Jesus — and the transformation of water into wine as the fulfillment of all that prophecy. On the other end of the spectrum, there are contemporary

teachers who argue there is no symbolism here at all — that this story simply shows Jesus wanting the party to go on. I personally think the passage carries a bigger meaning than that.

But here is what is remarkable: regardless of where you land on that spectrum, there is one theme that holds across every interpretation. And that theme is **grace**.

So when we ask — what is Jesus teaching, what are we to learn, what does this sign of turning water into wine illustrate? — the answer is the grace of God. And that answer is not incidental to John's gospel. It is woven into its very opening. John writes in chapter one: "*And we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*" (John 1:14).

With that in mind, let us walk through this story as a visualization of grace. There are five primary things this passage teaches us about the grace of God.

1. God's Grace Is a Gift

"On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.'" (John 2:1–3)

One of the things we lose in a written text is tone of voice, and Mary's tone here would tell us a great deal. Perhaps she was accusatory — *they have no wine* — implying that Jesus and his unexpected disciples had consumed more than their fair share. Perhaps she was gossipy, conveying the social embarrassment that would attach itself to the wedding party when word got out. In first-century Jewish culture, running out of wine at a wedding feast was not merely an inconvenience; it was a genuine source of shame for the host family, the kind of failure that people would talk about for years. Perhaps Mary's tone carried fear and a sense of personal responsibility for the success of the celebration. Or perhaps it was apologetic — she had pressured Jesus to attend, things had gone sideways, and she was sorry about it.

We do not know her tone. What we do know is this: the wedding feast running out of wine is not Jesus' problem. It is not his fault. It is not his responsibility. And Jesus says so himself.

"Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." (John 2:4)

That phrase — *what does this have to do with me?* — is a Hebrew idiom, and it is pointed. Jesus is drawing a clear line: this is not my fault, not my problem, not my obligation to fix. There will come an hour — and John's gospel will build toward that hour relentlessly — when

Jesus does take upon himself the failures, the fault, the sin, and the judgment that belong to others. But that hour has not yet come. At this moment, at the beginning of his ministry, the wedding feast running out of wine simply has nothing to do with him.

Think about what that means. When someone chooses to act on your behalf when they have no obligation to do so, when they have every right to walk away and they don't — that is a gift. A pure gift. There is no duty, no debt, no expectation. And whatever Jesus does next, he does as pure gift.

That is what God's grace is. Your sins are not his problem. Your failures, your mistakes, your moral wreckage — and the judgment those things deserve — are yours. God did not cause them, and he owes you nothing. But he chooses to act anyway. He takes your problem — the weight of sin, the judgment sin deserves, the consequences you cannot escape — and makes it his own. That act of God, given when there was no obligation to give it, is grace. And it is a pure gift.

2. God's Grace Is Extravagant

"His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim." (John 2:5–7)

Do the math. Six jars, each holding twenty to thirty gallons — somewhere between 120 and 180 gallons of water, transformed into wine. That is over a thousand bottles. Somewhere in the range of five thousand glasses — of the finest wine anyone at that feast had ever tasted. This is utter extravagance. One Bible commentary I read actually suggests the quantity is so excessive it must be purely symbolic and should not be taken at face value. I think that is missing the point entirely.

The extravagance is the point.

This is not an isolated moment in Jesus' ministry. When he feeds five thousand people, there are twelve baskets of fragments left over. When he directs the disciples to cast their nets, the catch is so large their nets begin to tear. The abundance is never accidental. Paul captures this in his letter to the Ephesians:

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight." (Ephesians 1:7–8)

Lavished. That is the word Paul chooses. Not measured out, not carefully rationed — lavished.

Philip Yancey, in his book on grace, reaches for an image that I find unforgettable:

“Plunge a sponge into Lake Erie. Did you absorb every drop? Take a deep breath. Did you suck the oxygen out of the atmosphere? Pluck a needle from a tree in Yosemite. Did you deplete the forest of foliage? Watch an ocean wave crash against the beach. Will there never be another one? Of course there will. No sooner will one wave crash into the sand than another appears. Then another, then another. This is a picture of God’s sufficient grace. Grace is simply another word for God’s tumbling, rumbling reservoir of strength and protection. It comes at us not occasionally or miserly but constantly and aggressively, wave upon wave. We’ve barely regained our balance from one breaker, and then, bam, here comes another. ‘Grace upon grace’ (John 1:16). We dare to hang our hat and stake our hope on the gladdest news of all: if God permits the challenge, He will provide the grace to meet it. We never exhaust His supply.”

God’s grace is extravagant.

3. God’s Grace Is Transformative

“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...” (John 2:8–9)

Charles Spurgeon, in his sermon on this passage, says: “It was wine, and I am sure it was very good wine, for he would produce nothing but the best.” I agree with Spurgeon. But the quality of the wine, remarkable as it is, is not the most important thing about this moment. The most important thing is the transformation itself. Water became wine. Something was changed into something it had never been before.

This dimension of grace is one that often gets left out of our conversations about it, and the omission is costly. God’s grace is not only the means of our forgiveness — our restored standing before God through the intercessory work of Jesus. His grace is also transformative. It works in conjunction with his own Spirit to actually free us from sin. We are not only forgiven; we are freed.

In 1937, as the Nazi regime was consolidating its power, a German theologian named Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a book called *The Cost of Discipleship*. In it, he coined a phrase that has stayed with the church ever since: *cheap grace*. He described it this way:

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance. Cheap grace is communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship. It is hearing the gospel proclaimed as follows: “Of course you have sinned, but now everything is forgiven, so you can stay as you are and enjoy the consolations of forgiveness.” The main defect of such a proclamation is that it contains no demand for discipleship. There is no transformation.

There are many people today who extol the wonders of grace but treat it as a “Get Out of Jail Free” card — a no-strings-attached package of amnesty and indulgence, divorced from any expectation of righteousness or godliness. But the New Testament simply will not support that reading. Paul writes to Titus:

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.” (Titus 2:11–12)

That is the transformation. God’s grace is not only the unmerited gift of salvation; it is also the unmerited operation of God himself in our hearts, effected through the agency of the Holy Spirit. He acts to set us free from sin — not just its consequences, but its very power and presence.

G.K. Chesterton put it beautifully: “You and I — what are we? Well, we are poor earthen vessels and a little cracked, I fear. There is little enough in us, and what there is weak as water — but the Lord can bring forth from us a wine which will cheer the heart of God and man.”

God’s grace is transformative.

4. God’s Grace Is Unmerited

“When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, ‘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.’” (John 2:9–10)

The master of the feast recognized that something was different. The normal logic of a feast had been reversed. You serve the best wine first, when the guests are most attentive and their palates are fresh. Once people have had their fill, you bring out the lesser wine — they won’t notice anyway. That is simply how things work.

But here, the best has been saved for last. This is just one more instance of Jesus turning the logic of the world upside down — and it is a picture of unmerited grace.

Our world operates on the principle of merit. To succeed, you must earn it. You build your résumé. You work your way up. You cultivate the right connections, improve your credit, seize your opportunities. The best goes to those who have proved themselves. That is the way of the world, and we all know it.

But that is not the way of God's grace. Paul writes to the church at Corinth and gives a sobering list of those who will not inherit the kingdom of God — the sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, swindlers. And then he says:

“And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” (1 Corinthians 6:11)

We are all somewhere on that list. Every one of us. And yet God brings out the best wine — not for those who have earned it, not for those who have proven themselves worthy, but for those who were, just a moment ago, exactly what they should not have been. That is unmerited grace.

And here is what I want you to see: if you have truly received this radical, counter-cultural grace from God, it will not only transform you inwardly — it will change how you treat other people. The same grace that was given to the sexually immoral, the materialistic, the addicted, the dishonest — that same grace is what we are called to extend to others. When you really understand what you have been given, you cannot help but become a vessel of it for someone else.

5. God's Grace Is Received by Faith

“This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.” (John 2:11)

Everyone at the wedding feast drank the wine. But only a few knew where it had come from. The disciples knew, and they believed — and in believing, they saw the glory of God made visible. It changed their lives.

We live in a world saturated by what theologians call God's common grace. His goodness overflows every morning — in the seasons, in the skies, in the very miracle of water becoming wine in a vineyard every year, slowly, the way God ordinarily works. But like most of the

guests at that wedding feast, most people today do not see God's presence and power and goodness in the world around them. They are blind to it.

And yet the Lord has given us everything we need to believe and trust in him. He has given us a world that testifies to his glory. He has given us the testimony of people who have seen that glory and been changed by it. He has given us his Word. He has given us his Holy Spirit.

The question is whether we will receive what he has given.

Grace is not received by effort or achievement. It is received by faith. It is received by saying, *Lord, I trust you. I receive the forgiveness you have provided. I need the transformation that only you can do.*

That is how you drink the wine.

Will you receive his grace?