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DO WHATEVER HE TELLS YOU

John 2:1-11

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[1] On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. [2] Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. [3] When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." [4] And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." [5] His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." [6] Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. [7] Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. [8] And he said to them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast." So they took it. [9] 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 [10] 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." [11] This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him. (John 2:1-11, ESV)

We can all relate to the humiliation of the bridegroom in this story, coming up short, running dry, at just the worst moment. I still shudder when I remember an important job interview that I botched years ago. The initial meetings of the day went well, but when I finally met the CEO, I ran out of gas. After five minutes, I knew I wouldn't get the job. I can also remember times when I worked and worked on a project or a paper only to come up short. It didn't matter that I had given it my best effort, because my best effort wasn't enough. There are also old relationships locked away in my Hall of Shame, relationships that ended when I came up short. One way or another, I wasn't enough—not smart enough or funny enough or cool enough to keep them around. Many of my most painful memories have to do with coming up short.

In *The Soul of Shame*, Curt Thompson describes shame as a state of mind that, if we were to put words to it, would declare some version of *I am not enough; There is something wrong with me; I am bad; or I don't matter.*¹ But in most instances, we don't put words to it. We simply know that, despite our best intentions, we still came up short. And it's really humiliating.

At the wedding in Cana, when the bridegroom came up short, Jesus saved the day. Not only did he change water into wine, but he also changed the bridegroom's shame into a foretaste of the kingdom come. He'll do the same for us. As we meditate on this passage, I hope you'll see that *Jesus is more than enough* to turn our mourning into dancing and make all things new.

¹ Curt Thompson, *The Soul of Shame* (IVP, 2015) p. 24.

Nazareth, where Jesus grew up, sits atop a mountain about one day's journey west of the Sea of Galilee. Kfar Kanna ("Cana") was the nearest neighboring village to Nazareth, about 6 miles downhill on the way to the Sea of Galilee. There was a lot of overlap between people in these villages, and so it makes perfect sense that both Mary and Jesus were invited to attend a wedding in Cana that day.

John begins in 2:1 by noting that it was three days later, after the four days John recounted in chapter 1. Put them together and you have a full week, and a Sabbath day of rest from work. Saturday is of course the perfect time for a wedding. Keep that in mind, because it will become important later on in the story.

"When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine'" (John 2:3). Mary wasn't a boozier. In that culture, running out of wine was a hospitality crisis, akin to forgetting the wedding cake today. It was ultimately the bridegroom's responsibility, and on this most important day he had come up short. He would have been deeply ashamed, with everyone else feeling the awkwardness. Mary did the right thing. She called on Jesus to rescue the bridegroom in his time of need, to supply what was lacking and cover over his shame.

Sometimes Jesus' responses can be pretty confusing. In this case, he said, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come" (2:4). Why in the world did Jesus push back like this, only to get involved immediately afterwards?

Well, on the one hand, it's true that Jesus' "hour" truly hadn't yet come. All through the first half of John's Gospel there are references to Jesus' "hour." These references foreshadow the climax of the story, when Jesus is crucified, dies, and is buried, and on the third day rises from the dead. That's the "hour" when Jesus' death will rip open the temple and make it possible for everyone to be forgiven their sins, healed of their shame, and reconciled with God. But in John chapter 2, at the wedding in Cana, there's still a lot of story yet to unfold. So, yes, in that sense, Jesus' hour hadn't yet come.

On the other hand, it was time for Jesus to begin his public ministry, and nothing says "Messiah" quite like a wedding reception.

LOOKING FORWARD TO A BETTER BANQUET

The Bible begins in Genesis with a real wedding—between Adam and Eve—that's also an important symbol of the relationship between God and humanity. There's no better word to describe the perfection of that relationship than love. And a wedding is first and foremost a symbol of God's love for his people.

In the New Testament letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul quoted from the story of the first wedding in Genesis 2:24, where it says, "For this reason a man will leave his father and

mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” And then Paul added, “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” In other words, human weddings are symbols of God’s love for his people.

When sin entered the world, the perfect union between God and humanity was shattered. From that point on, the Bible tells the epic story of God’s campaign to restore what was broken. The Bible is a huge book, of course, and there are a lot of ups and downs to the story, but every single time there’s a step towards healing and reconciliation, there’s always a feast with bread and wine. Whenever work comes to an end and people rest in God’s provision, there’s a feast. Whenever sacrifices are made and sins are forgiven, there’s a feast. Whenever there’s a battle that is fought and won, there’s a feast. All the great feasts of Israel—like Passover, and Pentecost, and Purim—all memorialize key moments in the history of God’s redemption of the world.

Yet all these feasts came up short. After every Sabbath the work week would begin again. Even the great feast of Passover wasn’t enough. Sin and sorrow would always return. So the feasts served as foretaste of something better yet to come. They pointed forward to a salvation that would last forever, an unending sabbath rest and a feast that would encompass the entire world. That’s why, here and there, the Old Testament prophets began looking forward to a day when Messiah would come, and all nations would gather for a great and unending feast signifying the restoration of all things.²

The last chapters of the Bible reveal that this great feast in the Kingdom Come will be a wedding banquet. Revelation 19 paints a beautiful picture of the marriage supper of the lamb. Having finished his work once and for all, Jesus, the Lamb of God, will be the bridegroom, and his bride will consist of people from every tribe and tongue who have put their faith in him.

² e.g. Isaiah 25:6–9

[6] On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.

[7] And he will swallow up on this mountain
the covering that is cast over all peoples,
the veil that is spread over all nations.

[8] He will swallow up death forever;
and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces,
and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the LORD has spoken.

[9] It will be said on that day,
“Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.
This is the LORD; we have waited for him;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.” (ESV)

For this reason, Christians have traditionally brought weddings into the church on Saturdays and have turned them into a kind of pageant for the Kingdom Come. The bridegroom stands at the foot of the mountain, waiting for the spotless bride to come to him. Then together they ascend into God's presence, where God ties the knot between them by his powerful word. Then, after they're bound together, everyone is invited to feast on cake and champagne—bread and wine. It's not merely a ceremony for the bride and groom; for all who gather, it's a foretaste of the Kingdom Come.

Now do you understand why Jesus responded to Mary the way that he did? It was not yet the "hour" for his great sacrificial act as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. But it was a wedding banquet, the quintessential emblem of the Messiah king.

LOOKING FORWARD TO BETTER CLEANSING

According to 2:6, "there were six stone water jars there." John adds that they were intended for "the Jewish rites of purification," as a reminder of yet another way we come up short apart from Jesus. John the Baptist acknowledged this when he said, "I baptize with water, but he baptizes with the Holy Spirit." Bathing on the outside simply isn't enough to wash away the sin and shame within us. The Jewish rites of purification weren't enough. Our own self-help solutions aren't enough. Only the blood of Christ, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, can purify our hearts.

At the Last Supper, when Jesus instituted holy communion for his disciples, he lifted the cup of red wine, saying, "Drink this, all of you: this is my blood of the New Covenant, which is poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." From that day forward, for the rest of time, the cup of wine would be a symbol of Jesus' precious, purifying blood. So there was even more reason for Jesus to seize the day at a wedding banquet gone wrong, and provide the guests with fine, red wine.

Mary said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Then at Jesus' command, the servants filled the jars with water, and Jesus transformed it into wine. Not cheap wine, mind you, but vintage, imported, expensive stuff. Six jars holding ~25 gallons each equals 150 gallons. At about five bottles to a gallon, that made roughly ~750 bottles of wine. It wasn't yet Jesus' hour, but it was a beautiful foretaste of the Kingdom Come. Jesus literally became the life of the party and Galilee hasn't seen anything like it ever since. The wedding guests who feasted with Jesus that day were privileged to a special preview of the marriage supper of the lamb.

FAITH THAT MATTERS WHENEVER WE COME UP SHORT

John writes in 2:11 that “this, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.” But in John’s Gospel, believing in Jesus isn’t the ultimate goal. John wants us to believe in Jesus in a way that transforms our lives. At the end of the book, John writes, “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but 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 20:30-31).

Do you believe in Jesus this way? Does your belief in Jesus result in what John called, “life in his name?” There are lots of believers in Jesus. St. James says even the demons believe, but they don’t find life in his name. I have believed in Jesus all my life, but often times I haven’t found life in his name.

Do you believe in Jesus and find life in his name? What difference does your faith make when shame starts whispering in your ear, telling you that you’re not enough? Or, to put it more in keeping with the wedding at Cana, whenever you come up short, do you trust in Jesus, with a heart willing to do whatever he tells you?

Because of sin, we instinctively do *not* turn to Jesus. Instead, we want to run and hide from God, to cover ourselves with fig leaves and hope that he doesn’t see us. To some extent, we all have our own unique and different coping mechanisms for dealing with sin and insecurity and shame apart from the Lord. But they tend to follow similar patterns, so in the time that remains I’ll focus on two ways people like us try to cope apart from Jesus, and show how Jesus is the better way.

WORKING WITH JESUS

For many of us here in the “Type A” capital of the world, when shame strikes, we simply try harder. “I’ll sleep less, work more, late into the evenings and all weekend long, and I’ll never, ever come up short again.” Yet even the grittiest among us remain limited in capacity, unable to deliver perfectly every time. Sooner or later, even hard chargers run out of gas.

We were made for work, but we were also made for rest. At the end of every day, Jesus invites us to lift up our hands, not only to show him what we’ve done, but also to entrust it to him.

I lift my eyes up to the mountains. Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. (Ps 121:1-4)

Those who believe in Jesus, and have life in his name, trust in him to fill the empty vessels in our work. At the end of every day, we can entrust our work to the one who neither slumbers nor

sleeps, believing that he will complete it with something even better than what we could have done ourselves.

In the Bible, feasting is something you do after working hard.³ But again, we believe that Jesus completes our work. Whenever we gather for Holy Communion, we have a special way of symbolizing how we entrust our work to Jesus, in faith that he will take what is good and make it even better. The elements for communion are bread and wine. Not grain and grapes (fresh, unfinished produce) but the fruit of the earth that humans have made better using our own skill and art.⁴ And we hold these elements within the congregation during the first half of the service, only to bring them to the Lord at the offering, as symbols of the fruits of our labors. Bread and wine signify the work that we have done, and now in Sabbath rest we lift them to him. At the Lord's table, Jesus takes over. He takes bread, gives thanks, breaks it, and declares, "Take, eat, this is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

Whenever you feel like running for cover into workaholism, remember Mary's advice: "Do whatever he tells you." Lift your work up to Jesus, and then come feast at his table.

Every time we gather, Jesus takes something good that we have made in our work and he makes it even better. *By believing we may have life in his name.* When the sun goes down on our labors, what we offer to him will be enough, because he is more than enough. And we can rest in the one who neither slumbers nor sleeps.

DRINKING WITH JESUS

What happens to your faith when you run dry, when you're exposed for not being enough, and shame begins to shut you down? Some of us try to work harder. Others drink more.

When I was a kid, most of the Bible-believing Christians I knew were teetotalers. But attitudes regarding alcohol have changed a lot since then, and today I see a lot more believers in Jesus who don't find life in his name, but who turn to alcohol to cope with insecurity and shame.

³ [6] Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. [7] For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, [8] nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. [9] It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. [10] For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. [11] For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. [12] Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. (2 Thessalonians 3:6–12, ESV)

⁴ Good bread and good wine do not just happen. They require skill and art.

Abstinence from alcohol is a relatively new practice in the history of the church. Since wine was part of Jewish culture and worship, the early church retained the same customs and attitudes. Drunkenness remained a serious sin, but drinking in moderation was not. It wasn't until the rise of the temperance movement in the nineteenth century that some Christian groups began promoting complete abstinence.

We should be slow to pass judgment on our brothers and sisters from that era. During the age of industrialization, technological improvements made alcohol production and storage vastly easier. With easier access to commercially produced beer, wine and hard liquor, alcoholism increased, especially in the cities. With alcoholism came increased violence, abuse and poverty, particularly affecting the wives and children of alcoholics. Consequently, many Christian leaders took an unpopular stand against the mainstream, promoting abstinence from alcohol in order to protect the vulnerable. To this day, there are Christian groups here in the United States and around the world who continue to abstain for the sake of the vulnerable.

However, by the early twentieth century, in many instances this compassionate, practical rationale for abstinence became denominational dogma. What was considered a wise, loving choice turned into church law against "the devil's drink." Church leaders began twisting Scripture to support their prohibitions.⁵ For a couple of generations, loyal adherents followed right along, and abstinence was the norm across some of the largest Protestant denominations around the world. But over the past 50 years, many Christians have come to discover that what they were taught about alcohol as kids simply doesn't square with God's Word. So nowadays there are a lot of Bible-believing Christians drinking alcoholic beverages for the first time in many generations. They will agree that drunkenness remains a serious sin, but they believe that moderation is what the Bible teaches.

With this newfound freedom, however, comes great responsibility. And because many Bible-believing Christians have come to moderation on their own—to some extent breaking with the beliefs of their parents or church leaders—they haven't been taught *by the church* how to drink. That's a serious problem at many levels.

In those Christian traditions that never embraced total abstinence but always practiced moderation, the next generation has learned from their elders not only the importance of moderation, but also a healthy fear of alcoholism. On the other hand, the children of teetotalers haven't received any such instruction. Within this new generation of Christian

⁵ The most common argument from legalists in abstentionist circles is that the positive references to wine in the Bible (e.g. Jesus at the Last Supper, Paul's injunction to Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach, etc.) are all to be understood as non-fermented grape juice. The overwhelming weight of historical and archaeological evidence disprove this grape juice hypothesis.

drinkers, there is an alarming lack of restraint. I fear that many will end up learning about alcoholism the hard way.⁶

In any case, it seems that most of us have forgotten what drinking is for, and instead of learning how to drink outside the church, we need to be taught by the church. And though there's so much that could be said on this topic, what is most important and most relevant to Jesus' first miracle at the wedding in Cana is this: Some drink to forget, but Christians drink to remember.

Apart from God, alcohol easily becomes a quick way out, a means of escape, particularly from those things that bring us shame. Think of that moment when you step into a gathering, and the little voice in your head starts saying, "You're not enough"—not good looking enough, not popular enough, not successful enough, not witty enough. Alcohol offers a quick way to drown out that little voice, or to prove it wrong, by showing that you can indeed be the life of the party. Or what about when you're alone, and those feelings of loneliness or inadequacy or shame begin to well up inside you, and a few drinks would feel really good. Why? Because they numb the pain. The bottle offers a quick way to forget whatever is weighing down your heart.

Whenever you feel this way, think of Mary. Even though it was a small thing, and it wasn't really her problem, she nevertheless turned to Jesus knowing that he was able to help. What Jesus provided was more than enough to make up for what was lacking.

The problem with drinking in a time of need is that alcohol makes us forget the one who is able to help us. If you're drinking to escape from your problems, or to overcome your inhibitions, you're turning to the wrong source for help. You're not enough, and the booze isn't enough either. Only Jesus is enough, and you won't find rest in him if you're drowning your sorrows.

In fact, if you're a Christian, it's impossible for you to drink alone. The Lord is there with you while you give him the silent treatment. Every drink says, "I'm not enough, but I don't think you're enough either. So instead of casting my cares upon you, I'll drink my fill and forget you for awhile." If that's what you're doing, then even though you believe in Jesus, you're not finding life in his name.

In the Bible, wine is a symbol of the marriage supper of the Lamb, when God makes all things new, and we enter into unending rest with the Lord. The curse on the ground will be overcome, the vine will flourish instead of thorns and thistles, our work will be finished, and we will relax in the presence of God.⁷ So the Lord invites us to work hard, and then to come and rest together in his presence, and to lift up a glass in his honor, as the one who completes us. Christians

⁶ If you struggle with drinking too much, and if you want to talk with someone who understands, let's find a time to meet privately together.

⁷ James Jordan, *Judges: A Practical and Theological Commentary* (Wipf & Stock, 1999) p. 222.

ought to drink at rest, in community, and always in the presence of the Lord. Again, some drink to forget, but Christians drink to remember.

In the last supper, Jesus said that he would not drink again from the fruit of the vine until he did so in his kingdom (Matt 26:29). Why did he say this? Because he was looking forward to completing his work, sitting down at the right hand of the Father, and feasting with us. Mary told the servants, "do whatever he tells you," and that's good advice. Jesus said: "Whenever you drink it, do this in remembrance of me."

We all come up short from time to time, and it never feels good. But there's nothing better than turning to Jesus and finding him to be enough. That's the kind of faith I believe that John is trying to provoke in us. A faith that, whenever we fall short, we're able to turn to Jesus and find in him all that we lack. A faith that is itself a foretaste of the Kingdom Come. A *relationship* with Jesus that's deeper and more satisfying than anything else in our lives—even the best wine.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Did Jesus rebuke Mary for asking him to help the bridegroom?
2. What is the significance of Jesus' first miracle (in John's Gospel) being at a wedding banquet on a Saturday?
3. During Holy Communion, why do we carry bread and wine forward during the offering?
4. What is your bread and wine that you lift up to Jesus in hopes that he will complete it and make it even better?
5. In what ways do you try to cope with sin, insecurity and shame apart from Jesus? How might you begin to "find life in his name" instead?