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Gospel of John #7  
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### Sermon Summary #7

#### Water, Wine, and Wonders! John 2:1-12

It comes as no surprise to me that there is a wide variety of opinion among Christians concerning the nature and frequency of miracles. Let me explain what I mean.

There are a few professing Christians who argue that miracles no longer occur. They once did, in biblical times, during the OT, during the life and ministry of Jesus, and during the early church as seen in the book of Acts. But God no longer works miracles. Anything that appears to be miraculous can be explained scientifically given enough time and analysis. These people believe that God always and only operates through normal cause and effect. They don't deny the reality of the supernatural realm, but they might as well, because anything that anyone might suggest is a miracle often evokes from them condescending scorn. Thus their response to claims for the miraculous is cynicism.

Then there are those who believe that miracles *might* still occur today, but they are extremely rare. Even if miracles might occur today, you should not seek them; you should not pray for them; and your response should be one of heightened skepticism. There is a difference between cynicism and skepticism. Cynics are snide and snarky and often treat with scorn anyone who believes in modern day miracles. Skeptics are simply, well, skeptical. They aren't necessarily mean or nasty and they don't typically mock those who believe in miracles.

The third perspective is one that affirms that miracles still happen, but when they do happen they occur independently of any human involvement. In other words, God sovereignly works miracles but without the agency of any human being. These are people who believe in miracles but deny that the spiritual gift of working miracles is still operative in our day. There are no miracle workers. These people aren't cynical, nor are they skeptical, but they are *doubtful*. It takes a great deal to convince them that a miracle has occurred. This is the view that I embraced for the first 35 years of my life.

The fourth option is the one I embrace today. I believe that miracles still happen. I believe that the spiritual gift of miracles is still operative in the church. I believe that this gift is what I call a circumstantial or occasional gift. That is to say, no Christian can work miracles at will, whenever they please, at any time. Any Christian might be given the power to work a miracle on a particular occasion, dependent on God's sovereign will and his purpose. Miracles are therefore to be prayed for. The spiritual gift of working miracles is one that we should all seek. Whether or not it is given is entirely up to God. And simply because you receive a gift of working a miracle on one occasion does not mean you will always operate or minister at that level of supernatural power. This view is not cynical, not skeptical, or doubtful, but *hopeful* (and prayerful).

The fifth and final option is at the far end of the spectrum from the first view. The first view is that miracles never occur. God *never* wills to perform supernatural displays of power. This final option argues that God *always* wills to perform miracles in our midst. Not only does God always will to perform them, he always *will* perform them, and if he doesn't, the fault is always ours. How do these people respond to the claim for the occurrence of a miracle? They are not cynical or skeptical or doubtful or even just hopeful. They are often *gullible*. They tend to be naïve and accept without question any and all claims to the miraculous.

I bring this up today because as we come to John 2 we encounter the very first miracle that Jesus ever performed. In John 2:11 we read that his turning the water into wine was "the first of his signs" that "manifested his glory."

Let me say a brief word up front about the terminology John uses here. The most common word in the NT for a miracle is simply the Greek word for "power" (*dunamis*). It is most often found in the plural, "powers", and points us to the overt and visible display of God's supernatural energy. Another word we often see is translated in English as "wonders" (*terata*). These miracles are called "wonders" because they arouse awe and amazement; they startle us and

stir up “wonder” because of the rare and extraordinary nature of the display of power. Finally, there is the word that we find here in John 2:11, translated “signs” (*sēmeion*). They are called “signs” because they signify something beyond themselves; they are designed to teach us or instruct us certain things about God or the person who performs the sign.

The fact that God may appear to have answered your prayer for a parking space at the mall on an extremely busy shopping day is a wonderful blessing of divine providence, but we shouldn’t call it a miracle. The entrance into life of a new-born baby is truly a wonderful and powerful event, but something that occurs thousands of times every single day around the world probably shouldn’t be labeled a miracle.

Perhaps, then, the best definition of a miracle is a rare, extraordinary, powerful display of God’s power that often signifies some truth or points to some spiritual principle beyond itself.

If you were with us last week you will remember that when Jesus first met Nathanael he told him that he had seen him sitting under a fig tree, even though Jesus had not yet laid his physical eyes on this disciple. Nathanael was amazed at how Jesus could know this about him, to which Jesus replied: “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe?’ You will see greater things than these” (John 1:50). Well, here is now the first example of one of the many “greater things” that Jesus told the disciples they would see.

### *Skepticism and Unbelief*

As I just pointed out, there are a few people who are extremely skeptical about any claims for the miraculous. For example, some argue that the water here in John 2 was poured into jars that were already filled with wine, and thus it only appeared as if Jesus turned the one into the other. Someone else argued that the mere presence of Jesus so entertained the guests that they later concluded: “It was almost as if we had been drinking fine wine.” Someone close by overheard the remark and started the rumor that a miracle had occurred. And then there is the theory that John borrowed the story from Greek mythology in which Dionysus, the god of wine, is alleged to have filled jars with wine. John simply adapted it and placed it in a Christian context.

If you are a skeptic, or the sort of person who doesn’t believe anything exists beyond mere nature or physical reality, you may find one of those theories persuasive. But to a person who believes in the reality of the spiritual realm, it makes perfectly good sense. If you are wondering why anyone would be a materialist or naturalist and deny the existence of a supernatural realm, there are a couple of possible reasons. It may be due to pride. This is the individual who is determined to protect their reputation as enlightened and intelligent and the last thing they want is to incur the ridicule of the academic or scholarly world. Others deny the supernatural because they are ambitious, and they know that someone who believes in a God who works miracles probably won’t be hired at any of our secular universities. Then there are those who love their sin. After all, to admit that the God of the Bible exists and performs miracles such as we read in John 2 would require that they repent of their sin and follow him.

### *The Wedding (vv. 1-2)*

The wedding is said to take place in Cana. There were two towns that went by the name Cana. One was about 4 miles northeast of Nazareth. The other was about 9 miles north of Nazareth in North Galilee. Both were close enough to explain why the family of Jesus would have known the hosts. It may even be the wedding of a close friend or relative of Jesus’ family. Perhaps Mary, the mother of Jesus, was herself responsible for the catering! The “disciples” present were probably those mentioned at the close of John 1 – Andrew, Simon Peter, Philip, Nathanael, and perhaps John the Apostle himself.

Some have tried to make much of the fact that it is said to have taken place on the “third day” (v. 1). They argue that this is a foreshadowing of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead on the third day. Of course, there’s really no way if we can know this was true. The “third day” does not mean the third day of the week, for virgins were married on the fourth day and widows on the fifth. Anything else is pure speculation.

Weddings in the first century were extremely important events, perhaps the one event celebrated with greater fanfare and at greater cost than any other in the ancient world. The entire village was often invited, even if not all the people were close friends of the family of the bride and groom. When Jewish people thought about heaven or what the arrival of the Messiah would be like, they compared it to a wedding banquet.

Our weddings today bear little resemblance to wedding celebrations in the days of Jesus. The wedding itself was always preceded by a *betrothal*, an extremely solemn affair that was much more binding and serious than our typical engagement. To break an engagement today may be personally painful, but it happens all the time and hardly anyone takes note of it. But in the first century when our Lord lived, it would require the same legal procedures as a formal divorce.

The wedding itself often took place in the evening, as there were processions involved which would have been quite grandiose when conducted under the bright light of torches. The first step involved the bridegroom who would walk with his friends to the home of the bride. It was inside her home where the actual ceremony took place. Afterwards, the bride and groom would again walk in something of a parade, together with their friends, back to the home of the bridegroom. It was here that the marriage feast was held.

The more I think about it the more I like the way they did it back then. In our day, it is the father of the bride who provides for everything that takes place at the wedding reception. It can end up costing a lot of money. Trust me on this: I've done it for both of my daughters. I did it happily and generously, but the idea of it being held in the home of the groom makes a whole lot of sense to me! One reason I say that is because in ancient times the reception could last as long as a week!

Scholars have also pointed out that there was an element of *reciprocity* in a wedding feast. In other words, if you hosted a feast or reception that provided extravagant food and drink, you were entitled to something equal to that when the son of your friend or neighbor got married. If for whatever reason the neighbor failed to throw a party equal to the one you hosted, you could take him to court and sue him! As one commentator put it, "a wedding feast was not simply a social occasion, but involved a legal obligation."

The reason this is important for our understanding of John 2 is that it is quite possible that the bridegroom and his family lacked sufficient funds to provide all that was necessary for their guests at the reception. This may explain why they ran out of wine. It would also suggest that in turning the water into wine Jesus was delivering this young couple from a financial liability that might otherwise have crippled them for years to come.

#### *A Shortage of Wine (vv. 3-5)*

Let's not project back into the first century the circumstances and resources of the day in which we live. The fact of the matter is that in the time of Jesus there were only two primary drinks available to the people: water and wine. No soft drinks, no Gatorade, no coffee or tea or any other such beverage.

And I can assure you that the wine here in John 2 was not Welch's grape juice! Let me be clear about one thing. You are altogether free as a Christian to abstain from all alcoholic beverages. Choosing to be a teetotaler and never to drink alcohol is entirely within your freedom as a Christian. What you are *not* free to do is condemn other Christians for their choice to enjoy wine or other alcoholic beverages in moderation. ***Drunkenness is always absolutely forbidden in Scripture.*** But drunkenness or total abstinence are not the only two options available to a Christian.

Of course, wine in the first century was almost always diluted to some degree with water. Most scholars believe that the wine in the days of Jesus would have been slightly less intoxicating than American beer. But it was intoxicating when drunk to excess. The phrase in v. 10, "and when people have drunk freely," actually means to become intoxicated. May I remind you of Paul's exhortation in Ephesians 5:18. There he says, "do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit." No one has ever gotten drunk on mere grape juice! In his list of qualifications for the office of Elder in the local church, Paul insisted that a man not be a "drunkard" (Titus 1:7). Again, in Titus 2:3 he writes: "Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine." These commands make no sense if what they were drinking was non-alcoholic.

You may also recall that in 1 Corinthians 11 Paul rebuked those in Corinth who were making use of the wine of the Lord's Supper to get "drunk" (1 Cor. 11:21). And Jesus himself was slandered by his enemies in this regard. We read this in Luke 7:33-35 – "For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend

of tax collectors and sinners!” Jesus, of course, would never have drunk to excess, but the accusation against him would never have been made if all he was imbibing was non-alcoholic grape juice.

We turn now to Mary’s reaction to the shortage of wine. Why did she bring this news to Jesus? Some say it is because she had grown accustomed over the years to relying on him. After all, most believe that by now her husband Joseph had died. He nowhere appears in the gospels after the incident in the Temple when Jesus was 12 years old. Others argue that she was trying to push him into ministry as the Messiah. Thinking that the time of his public work had arrived, especially given the events of John 1, combined with a mother’s pride in her son, she nudges him into acting out his role. Honestly, there’s no way for us to be sure.

In any case, she obviously was concerned for the family hosting the wedding feast. To run out of wine was worse than embarrassing. In the first century it would have been cause for dishonor and shame, incurring a stigma that could last for years. Since these festivals would often go on for seven days, it is hardly a surprise that someone would begin to run low on wine.

I can still remember over 20 years ago when our first-born daughter got married. We felt something of an obligation to invite the entire church to the wedding, but we were surprised when almost all of them showed up! About half way through the reception it became evident that we were fast running out of food. The good news was that it was being catered by a Chinese restaurant directly across the street from the church. We made a quick call to them and they rushed over to us a fresh supply of egg rolls and Moo Goo Gai Pan, or whatever it was we were eating. That’s another good reason why the family of the groom ought to share the burden of having to pay for it all. I’m liking the first-century custom more and more as time goes by!

Many are bothered by what they perceive to be the abrupt and seemingly rude way in which Jesus responded to his mother: “Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come” (v. 4). But as much as this sounds disrespectful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it was a common way of speaking to a female in the first century. Jesus uses the same form of address, “woman”, for the woman of Samaria at the well (John 4:21), the woman caught in adultery (John 8:10), his mother at the cross (“Woman, behold your son,” John 19:26), and Mary Magdalene at the tomb (“Woman, why are you weeping?”, John 20:15, and v. 13). See also Matthew 15:28; Luke 13:12; 22:57; 1 Corinthians 7:16.

Having said that, it is, admittedly, an unusual way of addressing one’s own mother. The key is in his question: “what does this have to do with me” By speaking in this manner, Jesus is establishing a degree of separation between himself and his mother, indicating that from now on he follows the lead of his heavenly Father. It is a signal that Jesus no longer acts under her authority but instead must follow the leading set for him by God the Father.

In other words, Jesus is here, at the beginning of his public ministry, making it clear that he is free from any kind of human advice or counsel. His agenda is to do the work that his heavenly Father has set before him. We see this in three places in John’s gospel:

“So Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise’” (John 5:19).

“I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me” (John 5:30).

“I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me” (John 8:29).

I don’t doubt for a moment that this must have been difficult for Mary to embrace. After all, she had given birth to Jesus, had nursed him, educated him, and had come to rely on him for the support of the entire family. But now his time for public ministry had come and family ties are subordinated to the spiritual and divine task to which God had called him. We see Jesus emphasizing spiritual relationships above physical or blood relationships at other times. For example:

While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And

stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matt. 12:46-50).

John Piper is surely correct to point out that “Jesus exalts his Sonship to the heavenly Father above his sonship to his earthly mother. No doubt he was obedient to his earthly mother, but that is not the point here. In fact, I think Jesus’ words are intentionally chosen to reveal a radical allegiance to God’s will above his mother’s will—and above all human attachments and affections.”

The phrase translated, “What does this have to do with me” is used five other times in the NT and in each case it is a demon speaking to Jesus. One example will suffice. When Jesus invades their domain to set free a man severely demonized, they declare, “What have you to do with us, O Son of God?” (Matt. 8:29). This is no reflection on Mary, but simply our Lord’s way of saying, “It isn’t your place to be calling me into public ministry. That is the prerogative of my heavenly Father.”

The amazing thing is that even though he says this to Mary, he proceeds to take care of the problem just as she asked! He provides the wine needed! Most likely Jesus believed it important to make clear to Mary and to everyone else that no earthly, physical, blood relationship had authority over him or would control him. Not even his mother has an advantage over anyone else. He performs miracles or chooses not to perform them only because of what God, his heavenly Father commands. No one else exerts control over his choices.

This is incredibly encouraging to us today. When you begin to think that the physical relatives of Jesus might have an inside track of influence with him, or perhaps that he loves them more than he might love you and me, we read a striking passage like that in Luke 11:27-28 –

“As he said these things, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!’ But he said, ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!’” (Luke 11:27-28).

I think the same principle is at work here in John 2. It doesn’t matter who your ancestors were. Your parents and grandparents may have been wonderful Christians or conversely, immoral pagans. But it is your faith, not your family, that makes you a child of God.

When Jesus tells Mary, “My hour has not yet come” (v. 4), he is referring to his death on the cross. We know this from numerous texts:

“So they were seeking to arrest him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come.” (John 7:30).

“But no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.” (John 8:20).

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12:23-24).

“Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour.” (John 12:27).

It’s as if Jesus is saying to Mary and everyone else: the timetable for what I do and when I do it is determined by my heavenly Father. He sets the calendar and it is his will that determines where I go and what I do.

#### *The “Sign” (vv. 6-12)*

These are not merely jars for holding water. The fact that they are described as made of stone indicates that they were used for Jewish purification washings (see Mark 7:1-4). Clay jars could easily become ritually contaminated and have to be destroyed (Lev. 11:33).

The reason the good wine is served first is that the palates of the guests were more sensitive and fresh at the beginning, before they had drunk or eaten much. Cheaper wine used after considerable drinking and eating would not be as easily tasted. It's as if the master of the feast had said, "It's always our custom to serve Pinot Noir or a nice Cabernet first, and only later to give them Mogen David when they probably can't tell the difference!"

One thing missing from the story is any indication of precisely when the miracle itself took place. Most likely it would have occurred sometime between the final sentence of v. 7 and the first sentence of v. 8. In other words, it would have happened in between the time they filled the jars with water and the moment when they drew some and took it to the master of the feast.

So what is this "sign" of turning water into wine supposed to "signify"? *Why did Jesus perform this miracle?* I think we can identify seven reasons or lessons that we are supposed to learn from this.

**First**, each jar had a capacity of over 20 gallons, hence upwards of 120 gallons of wine! This draws attention to *the magnitude and extravagant abundance of all that Jesus provides*. Jesus tells them to "fill" the jars "up to the brim" (v. 7). The theme of abundance and fullness appears elsewhere in John with regard to food, where twelve baskets of fragments were left over after feeding the 5,000 (6:12, 13, 26) and joy (3:29; 15:11; 16:24; 17:13) and grace and truth (1:14, 16). Jesus always blesses us over and above what we might expect. He never comes up short in any regard.

**Second**, the jars normally used for ritual purification are now filled with something new. What Jesus now does for us to purify our souls from sin cannot be contained or explained by the rituals and purification rites of the old covenant. Jesus clearly intends to point to his own death as the ultimate purification for sins that would nullify and replace the Jewish purification rituals.

This is reinforced by his reference to his "hour" (v. 4). When the "hour" for his atoning sacrifice has come, he will purify sinners by his blood offered once for all. Unlike the OT sacrifices that had to be offered over and over again, the once for all sacrifice of the Lamb of God would truly take away the sin of the world.

**Third**, the fact that Jesus goes ahead and does what his mother asks of him is his way of saying, "Although the hour of my death is not yet here, I will go on and give you in advance of that day a sign of my atoning sacrifice. I will give you an acted parable of my death that will bring true and final purification from sin." Let's not forget that Jesus would later ordain the celebration of his death in the Lord's Supper. It is then that he says this to his disciples:

"I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, "Take this, and divide it among yourselves. For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:15-20).

*Could it be that the miracle of the provision of wine in John 2 is prophetic or an anticipation of the wine of the new covenant which represents the blood of Jesus poured out abundantly to atone for the sins of his people? Yes, I think so!*

**Fourth**, it is also possible that this story is our Lord's way of saying that he is the true bridegroom who does not fail to provide everything his bride needs. We are the bride of Christ, and unlike the bridegroom in John 2, Jesus, our bridegroom, supplies us abundantly with all we need.

**Fifth**, all through Scripture wine is also a symbol of joy (see Psalm 104:15; Judges 9:13). It may well be that one reason Jesus was invited to this wedding feast is that he was consistently a joy to be around. He was truly the life of the party, and the abundance of wine points to the overflowing joy that he brings to us (John 15:11). Jesus brings joy into lives of sadness, boredom, and monotonous religious ritual.

**Sixth**, it may well be that by transforming water into wine Jesus is pointing all of us to the fulfillment of God's promised prophetic blessings. The provision of wine recalls the OT prophetic promises where the coming of the Day

of the Lord would be characterized by an abundance of wine in the land (see Isa. 25:6; Hosea 2:22; Joel 2:24). This is most vividly seen in the promise of Amos 9:13-14 –

“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit” (Amos 9:13-14).

**Seventh**, and finally, this “sign” Jesus performed (v. 11) so as to reveal his glory, and by doing so to prompt his disciples (and us) into confessing that he is precisely and fully who John says he is: Lord, God incarnate, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

### *Conclusion*

Let me close with an emphasis yet again on the way in which ***Jesus makes abundant, extravagant, effusive, overflowing provision for all our needs***. He doesn’t merely transform a single glass of water into wine. He takes 6 large jars that would have contained more than 120 gallons of water and miraculously transforms them into wine. That would amount to more than 600 bottles of wine! And note again that Jesus commands them to fill the jars “to the brim”.

Our Lord is more than able and willing to provide abundantly and above and beyond our wildest expectations every spiritual blessing that we need to flourish and thrive in joyful obedience to him. God is not stingy. ***He does not parcel out his blessings in ounces, but in gallons!*** He is the God “who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think” (Eph. 3:20). As Paul said yet again in Philippians 4:19, “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”