

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
2:1-11

1. And the third day there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. 2. And both Jesus was called, and his disciples, to the marriage. 3. And when they ran out of wine, the mother of Jesus said to him, They have no wine. 4. Jesus said to her, Woman, what have I to do with you? My hour is not yet come. 5. His mother said to the servants, Whatsoever he says to you, do *it*. 6. And there were set there six waterpots of stone, after the manner of the purifying of the Jews, containing two or three firkins apiece. 7. And Jesus said to them, Fill the waterpots with water. And they filled them up to the brim. 8. And he said to them, Draw out now, and take to the governor of the feast. And they took it. 9. When the ruler of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the governor of the feast called the bridegroom. 10. And he said to him, Every man at the beginning does set forth good wine; and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse. But you have kept the good wine until now. 11. This beginning of miracles Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory; and his disciples believed on him.

1.--[*The third day.*] The question naturally arises, "What day was this? From what day was it the third?" The most probable answer is that it was the third day after the last event described in the preceding chapter; the third day after Nathanael was brought to Jesus and became a disciple. The meaning therefore is, "The third day after the conversation between Jesus and Nathanael."

[*A marriage in Cana.*] Let it be remembered that we are told elsewhere that Nathanael was an inhabitant of Cana. (John xxi.2.) This makes it far from improbable that Nathanael, after he became a disciple, invited our Lord to visit the place where he lived. Cana is a place not mentioned in the Old Testament. Robinson, in his *Biblical Researches*, says it was a village about three hours' journey from Nazareth.

[*The mother of Jesus was there.*] We must suppose that the Virgin Mary was in some way connected with the bride or bridegroom, and was therefore present at the marriage and assisting in the arrangements of the feast. Without some such supposition, it is difficult to understand her speaking to the servants, as she afterwards does.

The absence of Joseph's name, both here and in other places where the mother of our Lord is mentioned in the Gospels and Acts, has induced most commentators to think that Joseph was dead when our Lord began His public ministry. The point is one of which we know nothing except by conjecture. It deserves notice, however, that the Jews of Capernaum speak of Jesus as "the son of Joseph, whose *father* and mother we *know*." (John vi.42.) If it had been profitable to us to know more about Joseph, we should have been

told more. The Roman Catholic Church has already given him a superstitious reverence, upon the authority of tradition, and without the slightest warrant of Scripture. What would have not been said about Joseph by the Romish Church if he had been more prominently mentioned in God's Word?

Lightfoot points out that a comparison of Mark iii.18, Mark vi.3, and John xix.25, makes it exceedingly probable that the Virgin Mary's sister, called elsewhere Mary, the wife of Cleopas or Alphæus, and all her family, lived at Cana. He observes that in the list of our Lord's "brethren" or cousins, we find the following names--James, Joses, Juda, and Simon. Of these he thinks that James, Juda, and Simon were apostles. James the apostle is expressly called "the brother of our Lord" and the son of Alphæus, and Jude is expressly called brother of this James. (Gal. i.19; Jude 1.) The remaining brother, Simon, he thinks was the apostle who is called Simon the Canaanite. This, Lightfoot argues, is a proof that his father and mother lived at Cana, and hence he concludes that this marriage feast was in the house of Alphæus. That Alphæus and Cleopas were the same person is a general and well-founded opinion.

2.--[*Jesus was called...disciples.*] Our Lord was doubtless invited as the Virgin Mary's son. His disciples were invited as His friends and companions. We cannot, of course, suppose that at so early a period of our Lord's ministry He was recognized as a religious teacher, or those with Him as disciples of a new faith. The disciples here spoken of must be the five mentioned in the last chapter, viz., Andrew and his companion (probably John), Simon Peter, Philip, and Nathanael.

[*To the marriage.*] We know nothing about the names of the bride and bridegroom. There is a legend among Romish writers that the bridegroom was John the apostle, and that though married, John left wife and home at once in order to become Christ's disciple! The whole story is utterly destitute of Scriptural foundation and a tissue of improbabilities. Baronius conjectures that the bridegroom was Simon the Canaanite, but without any proof worth mentioning.

Let it be noted that the presence of Jesus, His disciples, and the Virgin Mary at a marriage, is a significant fact which stands out in strong contrast to the Patristic and Roman Catholic doctrine of the imperfection of the state of marriage compared to that of celibacy. "Forbidding to marry" is a doctrine of Antichrist, not of Christ. (1 Tim. iv.3.)

The Roman Catholic argument that Christ, by His presence, made marriage a sacrament, is utterly worthless. Dyke remarks that we might as well call feasts and burials sacraments, because Christ was present at them. He says, "There is required a word of institution to make a sacrament. Let the Papists show any such word here used. And if Christ did make marriage a sacrament, why do they call it a work of the flesh? Are sacraments works of the flesh?"

The suggestion of some modern writers, that our Lord's presence at a marriage feast condemns those Christians who decline to go to such amusements as balls, routs, and dancing parties, has no weight in it at all. The objects for which people meet together at a marriage feast and at

a ball are widely different. The one is a mere irreligious assembly for pleasure and recreation of a very questionable tendency, entailing late hours and ministering to worldliness, levity, and the love of display. The other is a gathering of friends to witness the most important step in life that two persons can take, and a gathering closely connected with a religious ceremony.

3.--[*When they ran out of wine.*] The Greek words so rendered mean literally, "Wine having failed." This circumstance probably shows the poor and humble condition of those to whose marriage Jesus was invited. His acquaintances and those of his mother were not wealthy persons.

It throws light on this expression, and indeed on the whole story, to remember that a marriage feast among the Jews was often an affair of several days' duration, and an occasion when many were invited. Consequently it entailed not only much expense, but a considerable consumption of food and wine. Thus Samson's marriage feast lasted seven days. (Jud. xiv.10-18.) Thus the marriage feast described in the parable of the King's Son was a feast which large numbers were invited to attend. (Matt. xxii.2, etc.) This being the case, we may well understand that in the feasts of those who were not wealthy, the wine might soon run short without there having been any excess of drinking. So it seems to have happened in the case before us.

[*The mother of Jesus said...no wine.*] This little sentence has given rise to various and strange interpretations.

Some have thought, as Bengel, that Mary suggested to our Lord that it was time for Him and His disciples to depart and leave the feast, in order to spare the feelings of the bride and bridegroom and to avoid exposing their poverty.

Some have thought, as Calvin, that she wished our Lord to occupy the minds of the guests by profitable discourse, and so to take off their attention from the deficiency of wine.

By far the most reasonable and probable idea is that Mary conjectured that our Lord might in some way supply the deficiency of wine. How it would be done, she could not tell. There is not the slightest ground for supposing that our Lord had ever worked a miracle up to this time. But it would be foolish to suppose that Mary did not remember well all the miraculous circumstances of our Lord's birth, and all the words spoken before by the angel Gabriel concerning Him. We cannot doubt that although our Lord had lived a quiet life at Nazareth for thirty years, and done no miracles, His mother must have observed in Him a perfection of word and deed utterly unlike the behavior of common men. We cannot doubt that she was aware of all the events of the last few weeks--our Lord's baptism by John, John's public proclamation of Him as the Messiah, and the gathering around Jesus of a small knot of disciples. Remembering all these things, we surely need not wonder that Mary's expectations were greatly raised. She looked for her Son speedily doing some great miracle. She was in daily expectation that He would prove Himself the Messiah by some mighty act. And it was under these feelings that she turned to Him, saying, "They have no wine."

It is as though she said, "Surely the time is come for declaring Thyself. Manifest Thy power, as I have long expected Thee to do, by providing a supply of wine."

The argument which the Roman Catholics draw from this expression in favor of the Virgin Mary's intercession in heaven for sinners, and the consequent lawfulness of praying to her, is utterly worthless and most unhappy. For one thing, it does not follow that because the petitions of living saints are heard upon earth, that the petitions of dead saints in heaven are effectual. For another thing, it is an unfortunate fact that this petition, the only one that we ever find addressed to our Lord by the Virgin Mary, brought from Him an immediate rebuke! Men must be in great straits for an argument when they can reason in this way in defense of the invocation of saints!

Melancthon, Chemnitius, and others think that this lack of wine at the marriage feast is purposely mentioned in order to remind married persons, or those who intend marriage, that matrimony brings with it cares as well as comforts, and specially cares from poverty. They that marry do well, and with Christ's blessing will have happiness. But they must not expect to escape "trouble in the flesh" from the very day of marriage. (1 Cor. vii.28.)

4.--[*Jesus said, Woman, what, etc.*] This remarkable verse has naturally attracted great attention. In interpreting it, it is very important to avoid the extremes into which some Protestants, and nearly all Roman Catholic writers have fallen in their interpretations.

On the one side, we must not lay too much stress on the expression "Woman." It is surely a mistake to suppose, as Calvin and others suggest, that it conveys any reproof or is anywise inconsistent with reverence and respect. The very same expression was used by our Lord when He addressed His mother for the last time on the cross and affectionately commended her to John's care. He said, "Woman, behold thy son." (John xix.26.) The Virgin Mary was an erring woman, like all other believing women, but we must not lay more blame on her than Scripture warrants.

On the other side, it is useless to deny that our Lord's words were intended, as Chrysostom, Theophylact, and Euthymius say, to be a rebuke to Mary. She erred here, perhaps from affectionate desire to bring honor to her Son, as she erred on other occasions. The words before us were meant to remind her that she must henceforth leave our Lord to choose His own times and modes of acting. The season of subjection to her and Joseph was over. The season of His public ministry had at length begun. In carrying on that ministry, she must not presume to suggest to Him. The utter contrariety of this verse to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church about the Virgin Mary is too palpable to be explained away. She was not without error and sin, as Romish writers have dared to assert, and was not meant to be prayed to and adored. If our Lord would not allow His mother even to suggest to Him the working of a miracle, we may well suppose that all Roman Catholic prayers to the Virgin Mary, and especially prayers entreating her to "command her Son" are most offensive and blasphemous in His eyes.

The Greek expression rendered "What have I to do with thee," would be translated literally, "What to Me and thee?" It is an elliptical expression of which the full meaning probably is, "What is there in common to Me and thee?" "My thoughts," as Bengel says, "are one thing, and thine another." It is the same phrase that is used in an interrogative form in Matt. viii.29; Mark i.24; v.7; Luke viii.28; and in an imperative form in Matt. xxvii.19.)

[*My hour is not yet come.*] The simplest and most reasonable view of these words is to refer them to Christ's "hour," or time for working a miracle. It is like the expression, "My time is not yet full come." (John vii.8.) Our Lord did not tell Mary that He would not work a miracle; but He would have her know that she must not expect Him to do mighty works to please His relatives after the flesh. He would only work a miracle, upon this or any other occasion, when the fitting season for it, the time appointed in God's counsel, had arrived.

There is a curious idea maintained by Augustine, Wordsworth, and others, that our Lord here referred to the hour of His crucifixion, and that He meant, "My hour is not yet come for recognizing thee and honoring thee publicly as my mother, but I shall do it one day on the cross." This, however, seems a very far-fetched and improbable application of the words.

5.--[*His mother said...do it.*] Two things are very noteworthy in this verse. One is the meekness with which the Virgin Mary submitted to the gentle rebuke which came from our Lord's mouth in the last verse. The other is the firm faith which she still exhibited in our Lord's power to work a miracle in order to supply the lack of wine, and in the probability of His working it.

Dyke observes, "The direction which Mary gives to the servants belongs to us all. We must perform simple obedience to Christ in all things; His sayings must be our doings. No reasoning of the matter must there be, no inquiry, as into men's commandments and speeches; but this must suffice, 'Christ has said it,' This is the blind obedience which Jesuits yield to their superiors, but it is the obedience that belongs to Christ. Many will do *something* that Christ says, but not *whatsoever* He says."

It is not, perhaps, going too far to say that after observing her Son's perfect life and perfect wisdom during thirty years at Nazareth, Mary spoke the words before us with special confidence, and with a greater depth of meaning than appears on the surface of the sentence. "Whatsoever He says deserves attention. Whatsoever He says, do it." At any rate, the verse contains a deep practical lesson for the whole Church of Christ. Whatsoever Christ says, let us obey and do.

6.--[*Six waterpots...after the manner...Jews.*] St. John mentions these details in describing the miracle, with a special reference to Gentile readers. He meant them to understand that there was nothing remarkable in the circumstance that there were six large waterpots of stone in the place where the feast was held. The peculiar customs of the Jews about ceremonial washings and purifyings made it necessary to have a large supply

of water at hand. The words of St. Mark throw light on the verse before us: "The Pharisees, and all the Jews, except they wash their hands oft, eat not, holding the tradition of the elders," etc. (Mark vii.3, etc.) The presence of the six waterpots, therefore, could not arise from collusion or pre-arrangement. It was a natural consequence of Jewish habits in our Lord's times.

[*Two or three firkins apiece.*] Many foolish and unprofitable remarks have been built on this expression, as to the very large quantity of wine which our Lord must have created when the miracle we are considering was wrought. It might suffice to reply that there is much uncertainty about the precise quantity of liquid which the ancient measure, which we here render "firkins," contained. But the best and safest answer is that we must not measure the demands of a Jewish marriage-feast, which perhaps lasted several days and included a large number of guests, by the feasts of our own times.

7.--[*Jesus said...Fill the waterpots, etc.*] The remark is frequently made by commentators on this verse, with much propriety, that these simple words describe the duty of all who work for Christ, and especially of ministers and teachers. They are to hear Christ's voice and do as He tells them, and then leave the result to Him. Duties are ours; events are God's. It is ours to fill the waterpots; it is Christ' to make the water wine.

[*Up to the brim.*] This circumstance is no doubt mentioned in order to show that there was no room left for trick, jugglery, or imposture. What was put into the waterpots was water, and only water, and they were so filled that nothing could be infused or mingled with their contents.

8.--[*And he said...Draw out now.*] It was at this moment, no doubt, that the miracle took place. By an act of will our Lord changed the contents of the waterpots. That which was poured in was water. That which was drawn out was wine. To Him who created the vine and made it bear grapes at the first, the change was perfectly easy. He who could create matter out of nothing could much more easily change one kind of matter into another.

[*The governor of the feast.*] This person appears to have been one who presided at large entertainments like that before us, and superintended all the proceedings. The Greek word so rendered is precisely the same as that translated "ruler of the feast," in the following verse. The presence of such a person at feasts was a well-known custom among the Greeks and Romans.

9.--[*Tasted...wine...where it came from.*] The testimony of the ruler of the feast is specially adduced in order to show the reality of the miracle. He knew nothing of what had been done to the waterpots. He had not seen the water poured in by our Lord's command. There was no collusion or conspiracy between him and the servants, much less between him and our Lord. Hence the value of his testimony. He not only testifies that the liquid which a few minutes before was water was now wine, but that it was also wine of more than common goodness and strength--not wine mixed with water, but pure, good wine.

Let the word "tasted" be carefully noticed in this place. It supplies a strong incidental argument against the Romish doctrine of transubstantiation. The occasion before us is the only known occasion on which our Lord changed one liquid into another. When He did so change it, the reality of the change was at once proved by the "taste." Why is it then that in the pretended change of the sacramental wine in the Lord's Supper into Christ's blood the change cannot be detected by the senses? Why does the wine after consecration taste like wine, just as it did before? These are questions which the Roman Catholics cannot satisfactorily answer. The pretended change of the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper is a complete delusion. It is contradicted by the senses of every communicant. The bread after consecration is still bread, and the wine is still wine. That which contradicts our senses we are nowhere required in God's Word to believe.

10.--[*Every man at the beginning, etc.*] The words in this sentence must not be pressed too closely in order to bring out of them a spiritual meaning. The ruler of the feast makes a general remark about the way in which banquets were usually managed. The ordinary custom was to bring the best wine first, and the inferior wine last. But the wine before him, drawn from the waterpots, was so singularly good, that the custom on this day seemed reversed. The verse is a strong incidental testimony to the reality and greatness of our Lord's miracle. Not only did He change water into wine, but into wine so singularly good as to excite remark and attention.

[*When men have well drunk.*] Foolish remarks have sometimes been made on this expression, as if our Lord had countenanced excessive drinking on this occasion. For one thing, it may be remarked that the Greek word rendered "have well drunk," does not necessarily imply intoxication. It may be justly interpreted, as Schleusner and Parkhurst observe, "have drunk sufficient, or drunk freely." Men who have had enough are indifferent as to the quality of the wine set before them. For another thing, we must remember that the ruler of the feast was only making a general remark about men's ordinary customs in supplying wine to their guests. There is nothing whatever to show that he was alluding to the guests actually before him.

[*You have kept the good wine until now.*] A good practical remark has often been raised from these words of the ruler of the feast. The world gives its best things, like the best wine, first, and its worst things last. The longer we serve the world, the more disappointing, unsatisfactory, and unsavory will its gifts prove. Christ, on the other hand, gives His servants their best things last. They have first the cross, the race, and the battle, and then the rest, the glory, and the crown. Specially will it be found true at His second advent. Then will believers say emphatically, "Thou hast kept the good wine until now." These are pious and useful thoughts. But it may be doubted whether they are more than accommodations.

This is perhaps the proper place to remark that it seems utterly impossible, on any fair and honest interpretation, to reconcile the passage before us with the leading principles of what is commonly called "Teetotalism." If our Lord Jesus Christ actually worked a miracle in order to supply wine at a marriage feast, it seems to be impossible, by any

ingenuity, to prove that drinking wine is sinful. Temperance in all things is one of the fruits of the Spirit. An intemperate man is an unconverted man. Total abstinence from fermented liquors is in many cases most useful and desirable. But to say, as many do say, that to drink any fermented liquor at all is "a sin," is taking up ground that cannot be maintained in the face of the passage before us, without wresting the plain meaning of Scripture and charging Christ with abetting sin.

11.--[*This beginning of miracles, etc.*] The plain meaning of this sentence seems to be that this was the first miracle which our Lord Jesus Christ ever worked. The miracles which some have reported that He worked in His infancy and childhood, are destitute of the slightest foundation in Scripture, and utterly unworthy of credit. Those who wish to see their absurdity will find specimens of them in the preliminary Essay to Trench's Notes on Miracles.

Lightfoot suggests the five following reasons why the miracle now before us was purposely the first that Christ worked. (1) As marriage was the first institution ordained by God, so at a marriage was Christ's first miracle. (2) As Christ had showed Himself miraculous a little while ago by a fast, so He does now by an extraordinary provision at a feast. When He would not make stones bread, it was not because He could not. (3) He would not make stones into bread to satisfy Satan, but He was willing to turn water into wine to show forth His own glory. (4) The first miracle wrought in the world by man was transformation (Exod. vii.9), and the first miracle wrought by the Son of man was of the same nature. (5) The first time you hear of John the Baptist, you hear of his strict diet, and so the first time you hear of Christ in His public ministry, you hear of Him at a marriage feast.

[*Manifested forth His glory.*] I am unable to see that these words refer to the expression used in the first chapter, "We beheld His glory." (John i.14.) I believe the meaning to be that "by this miracle Jesus now for the first time opened or revealed His glorious and divine power, and His commission to be the Messiah." After thirty years' seclusion at Nazareth, He now for the first time lifted up the veil which He had thrown over His divinity in becoming flesh, and revealed something of His almighty power and Godhead.

[*His disciples believed on Him.*] These words cannot of course mean that Andrew, and John, and Peter, and Philip, and Nathanael now believed on Jesus for the first time. The probable meaning is that from this time forth they believed more confidently, more implicitly, and more unhesitatingly. From this time they felt thoroughly convinced, in spite of much remaining ignorance, that He whom they were following was the Messiah.

I cannot close the note on this wonderful miracle without saying something about the allegorical and typical meanings assigned to it by the Fathers and many other commentators. Many see in the miracle an allegorical history of the introduction of the Gospel into the world. Like the marriage feast, the Gospel was an occasion of joy. As at the marriage feast, the personal presence of Jesus was the great feature of the Gospel. The times of the Jewish dispensation were times of deficiency and dim

light. The coming of Christ supplied all that was lacking. Revealed religion before Christ was like water. Christ coming into the world turned the water of the old dispensation into wine. The good wine was reserved until the time of Christ. The first miracle wrought by Moses was turning water into blood. The first wrought by Christ was turning water into wine.

These are undoubtedly pious thoughts and full of truth. I should be sorry to speak harshly of them, or to pronounce decidedly that they may not be legitimately deduced from the miracle. I only venture the remark that it is far wiser to abstain from allegorical interpretations as a general rule, and to be content with the plain meaning which appears on the surface of Scripture. Once begin allegorizing Scripture, and you never know where you are to stop. You may prove anything and find anything in the Bible upon the allegorical system, and at last throw open the floodgate to a torrent of wild fanaticism.

The allegorical lessons drawn from this miracle by Augustine, Bernard, and Alcuin, are striking examples of the extremes into which allegory may run. When such a man as Augustine, for instance, tells us that the two or three firkins mean the two races of men, Jews and Greeks, or the three sons of Noah,--or when he says that the six waterpots in the miracle before us denote six successive prophetic periods in the days between Adam and Christ, one cannot but feel that there is something wrong. These are his words: "The six waterpots, containing two or three firkins apiece, are six ages, containing the prophecy belonging to all nations, whether as referred to two kinds of men, Jews and Gentiles, as the apostle often says, or to three, on account of the three sons of Noah." The system of interpreting Scripture which can lead a good man into such assertions as this must surely be a dangerous two-edged weapon, and likely to do more harm than good.

That all our Lord's miracles were deeply significant, I do not deny. That all were intended to convey deep spiritual lessons, beside supplying proofs of His divinity, I make no question. All I maintain is that they require reverent and delicate handling, and that to rush hastily into allegorical interpretations of them and invest every minute portion of them with a figurative meaning, is an unwise mode of handling Scripture, and eminently calculated to bring the Bible into contempt.

Hardly any commentator has drawn more useful practical lessons from this miracle than Melancthon. Those who think lightly of Protestant divinity would do well to compare his commentary on the whole passage with that of Augustine.