

1 Epiphany 2 – John 2

Jesus turned several gallons of water into wine. It was his first miracle. His miracles are signs. They signify what God sent Jesus to do. The fact that he performed this sign at a wedding feast demonstrates that he is the Bridegroom who has come to claim his bride the church. The wine signifies that he has come to tread down the winepress. He has come to shed his own blood.

Wine is good. In Psalm 104, David says that God gives wine to gladden the heart of man. There is no coincidence that Jesus uses wine in his Supper, giving it to us as his true blood to drink, even as he nurtures us with his own body in the bread. Jesus calls wine the fruit of the vine. He himself is the Vine, and he promises that if we abide in him then we will bear fruit. When you trust in Jesus you can know that God declares you righteous and forgives all your sins freely for Christ's sake. He gives you his Holy Spirit, and he produces in you the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. As a glass of wine sets your heart at ease while you enjoy the company of your companions, the gospel gives you peace with God, causing you to rejoice, bound by love to your fellow companions of faith.

Wine is good. King Lemuel writes at the end of Solomon's Proverbs, "Give wine to those who feel bitter. When such a person drinks, he forgets his poverty and doesn't think of his misery anymore. (Prov 31:6-7)" St. Paul advises Timothy who was feeling sick, "Don't drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach. (1 Tim 5:23)" You might not personally prefer wine. Maybe you don't drink at all. That's just fine. Wine is still good, because God gives it. He gives it to make you happy. But we aren't talking here about some fleeting, worldly happiness, which is here today and transforms into a headache by the morning. No, God gives wine so that you would rejoice in his goodness. He wants you to enjoy what he gives with thanksgiving in your heart. God gives you wine especially so you would talk about his Son with your companions.

Wine is like the gospel. In fact, in his Supper, Jesus has joined wine to his gospel. Both are given by God to give you joy. Both are powerful. And both can be abused. There is no shortage of warnings in the Bible against abusing wine. But how do you abuse the gospel? You abuse wine by drinking it too much and too often. But can you really have too much gospel? Can you have the Lord's Supper too often? Can you receive the word of absolution too much? St. Paul teaches us not to be drunk with wine but to be filled with the Spirit (Eph 5). He says, "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly. (Col 3)" You can't have too much of the gospel. The good news of God's free salvation is something we can never hear too much about. That the Son of God became flesh, died for you, was raised from the dead, and pleads for you at the right hand of the Father is never old. It's never cheap. It's always making you new day by day.

Wine is obviously abused when you have too much of it. But this doesn't quite get to the heart of the matter. Drunkenness is evil, not merely because you passed your limit of drinks. Drunkenness is evil, because it makes your heart and mind a slave to your own passions. It is unchaste to get drunk. You see, chastity is much more than not engaging in sexual intimacy until you are married. Chastity is to love what God loves and take refuge in his promises. A man and a woman who are engaged to be married remain chaste when they don't sleep with one another, live with one another, or give themselves to each other until their marriage night. But what truly makes them chaste before God is faith in his gospel. It is trust in the mercy and compassion of the Son who loved them and gave himself up for them. You are chaste, not merely by avoiding these outward sins, but when you consider what God's Word says, meditate on it, and rely on it.

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A husband and wife remain chaste when they recognize that marriage has been established by God as a picture of Christ and his church. They recognize that God desires to bless their marriage with godly offspring. As Psalm 128 says of the man who fears the Lord, his wife will be like a fruitful vine in the heart of his house, and his children like olive plants around his table. They also know that, even if they don't see the fruit in this life – if God doesn't bless them with any children – Christ promises that they will bear abundant fruit in him. The wife is chaste when she remembers that Christ is the faithful Bridegroom who will never leave her or forsake her. The husband is chaste when he fears the Lord who gives every good thing to him in Christ.

Drunkenness is a sin against the sixth commandment, because the sixth commandment requires that we live a chaste and decent life. It requires us to control our passions, not just toward other bodies, but in our own bodies as well. It requires us to have a sound mind. Abusing wine is therefore deeper than just having one or two too many drinks. It is much more destructive than simply a bad habit. Abusing alcohol comes down to an attitude of the heart. It is a contempt for God's gift, not recognizing why he gives it. And the same is true for marriage and all good things God uses to give us joy. We abuse these things when we lose sight of the one who gives them to us. When you constantly think of yourself, neglecting to pray to God, to confess your sins, to receive the absolution, and to hear his life-giving Word with his saints, then your heart begins to harden, your mind loses hope, and your love grows cold.

This helps us understand what it means to abuse the gospel. The abuse comes from the heart. Abusing the gospel is to treat it as if it didn't come from God. God sent his only begotten Son to die for you, to save you from the wrath to come, and to live with you forever as your Lord. Those who abuse the gospel treat it simply as a get-out-of-jail-free card. They look at it as a license to sin. Or they simply see it as a feel-good message, not concerned about what it reveals about God, who his Son is, and what his Holy Spirit does. People often think that the gospel is simply anything that comforts you, even if it contradicts the gospel message.

But Jesus turned water into wine to teach what his gospel is. It is that he would tread the winepress alone. Drinking wine is a joyful occasion, but it requires work and toil to prepare the wine. Listen to what Jesus says through the prophet Isaiah nearly seven hundred years before this:

“I have trodden the winepress alone,
And from the peoples no one was with Me.
For I have trodden them in My anger,
And trampled them in My fury;
Their blood is sprinkled upon My garments,
And I have stained all My robes.
For the day of vengeance is in My heart,
And the year of My redeemed has come.
I looked, but there was no one to help,
And I wondered
That there was no one to uphold;
Therefore My own arm brought salvation for Me;
And My own fury, it sustained Me. (Isaiah 63:3-5)

Here Isaiah is describing the judgment of God. But in this judgment is the redemption of poor sinners. Because Jesus bore this divine judgment in himself. Earlier in this book of Isaiah, the

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Father describes the vineyard his beloved Son planted. Our Lord planted the people of Israel to be his people, but they gave into the temptations of the world and their own sinful passions. They treated his gracious promise like cheap booze. So when he looked for grapes all he found was sour grapes. He looked for righteousness, and all he found was violence. Yet our Lord did not forsake his people. He had his eyes set on all people to redeem poor sinners with his own blood. He didn't give up on his vineyard. He went out and got dirty, stomping on the grapes himself. The blood, which was required for the guilt of all nations, was stained on his own clothing.

When Mary told Jesus that they had run out of wine, he told her that his hour had not yet come. He was alluding to the hour of darkness when he would shed his own blood, bearing God's judgment against the sins of the world. His garments would be stained with the blood of the nations. This is what he kept in mind at all times. He remained sober to this goal set by his Father. This was how he would be glorified, by shedding his blood for all sinners.

Jesus drank the bitter cup of God's wrath on the cross to give us the sweet cup of God's favor and salvation. So he turned water in to wine to signify the sweet joy he would win for poor sinners. He made more wine than anyone could handle. It was easily abused by those who had already had enough to drink. The master of the feast seems rather annoyed by this. And yet, this is how it is with the gospel. People abuse the gospel, just like they abuse wine, marriage, and all good things attached to them. But we cannot allow the gospel to be tamed and shackled just because people abuse it. Their abuse doesn't take away from the generosity of God. God justifies the ungodly. He gives us what we don't deserve.

Christ calls all people to repentance. To those who show their contempt for God's Word, we declare that they are bound in their sins. And we know that the Lord will judge. He will finally reveal the hearts of all people. He will expose those who abused the gospel and every good gift of God by their unbelief. In the meantime, the gospel remains free. Our cup continues to overflow with the assurance of our salvation. He has shown his glory in the compassion he has on poor sinners. And you glorify him when you believe what he has done. Amen.