

Guest Preacher Rev. Gordon Matheson

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Preacher: Rev. Gordon Matheson

[0 : 0 0] Would you please turn in your Bibles back to John's Gospel, that passage we've read in John chapter 2. On the third day, there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee. Let's just bow in prayer.

We'll ask God's blessing before we study the Word. Heavenly Father, as we turn this evening to your Word for a short time, we ask that you would bless us and direct us in what we read and help us to see Jesus more clearly and help us to understand ourselves more clearly as well. Help us to see our need tonight of what Christ alone can do for us. Help us tonight to see the Gospel, to see the good news in a fresh way and for our lives to be enriched and blessed and for our faith to deepen and for our praise to sweeten as we learn more of you and your ways. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

I'm sure we've probably all been at some point in our lives in a situation of intense shame. shame. There are many, many different circumstances and many, many different ways in which shame is used in all human cultures, all around the world. And it's often a means of control, sometimes a means of abuse. It can be a weapon in people's hands. I'm sure we've seen it with kids, or perhaps even experienced it as kids ourselves, in the playground. There is a way in which shame and humiliation can be very, very painful for young people. And it's a great mechanism today for peer pressure as well. If you don't conform, if you don't fit in to what the world around you is saying and expects and tells other people to expect of you, then your behavior, if it sticks out in any way, it can be a mechanism for people to shame you and humiliate you. It could be the same in your professional life. You might get something desperately, desperately wrong in your work, and it can come back to really humiliate you when people find out about it. And sometimes that can be used against you. There might be people who despise you. There might be people who have it in for you.

There might just be people who are nasty and who will use these shameful failings as a way of treating us poorly. That mechanism of shame, in fact, goes all the way back in the Bible to the very beginning.

It goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. And there, you remember when Adam and Eve had sinned, they tried to hide themselves from God. And not only did they try to hide themselves, but they tried to cover themselves from God. They saw for the first time their nakedness, and they felt ashamed. And so they went to cover themselves by sewing aprons from leaves to cover their indecency. And there is something profound about shame that I think connects into an understanding of what sin is. Because interestingly, Adam and Eve, in a sinless state before they had rebelled against God, did not feel shame in exactly the same circumstances. And so when sin entered, there was some sense of shame that became overwhelming for them. And shame is therefore a profound consequence of sin. When you read the Old Testament, the language that's used there about shame is really profound as well.

[4 : 1 5] Now, Daniel, when he has his vision of the resurrection, says, some will be raised to everlasting life and glory, and some to everlasting shame and contempt.

The judgment of God on sin is to leave people in a state of shame. And that's part of what makes hell so awful. There is no escaping the shame and the indignity that our sin deserves. And so hell is a shameful place.

It's a place consumed with shame. And it's shame that I want to think about a bit tonight, about the way Jesus deals with shame, particularly in the context here of the wedding at Canaan, more generally, though, in the work of Jesus in the gospel. Because we know that Jesus at the cross deals with our shame. And so when you start at the beginning of John's gospel, when you begin at the beginning, there are themes that are seeded for us, ideas that are planted that help us to see what the whole of the story of John's gospel is going to unfold. And the stuff that we read about at the beginning of John's gospel, the first couple of chapters, is mirrored at the end of John's gospel, at the climax of the work of Jesus. So Jesus at the cross reveals His glory.

But Jesus at the cross, the way He reveals His glory, the way He shows His glory, the way He, to use the language of chapter 2, He manifests His glory, is in dealing with shame. It's in dealing with the shame of sin. That's what Paul tells us as well. Paul says that for the glory that is before Him, He embraced the shame of the cross. The humiliation of our Savior at the cross is profound. He's stripped naked, beaten, scourged. The skin is torn from His body, and He's put up there naked for public display, for a public execution, with a sign above His head saying, this is the King of the Jews, designed to humiliate Him to show Rome's immense power over this alleged rebel, and to humiliate the Jewish religious authorities, to show them that the one who claimed to be their king is powerless in the face of Roman authority, to show that the Jews were powerless against Roman authority. This place of humiliation is somewhere that Christ goes to for us, that He takes our shame in order that we may not be shamed.

We tend to think of that work of Jesus at the cross in terms of our justification. He becomes the sin bearer. He takes the penalty of our sin upon Himself. There's what we call theologically a forensic identification going on, that He takes the consequences of our sin upon Himself, and we get His righteousness in return.

[7 : 36] But part of that bearing sin, part of that becoming sin for us, is that He became shamed for us, that He was shamed for His people. And so here at the beginning of John's Gospel, as we launch into the wedding at Canaan, there's a few things that we just need to very quickly note, just to prove the parallel between the beginning and the end of John's Gospel. It's interesting that John uses, it's like a throwaway phrase at the beginning of chapter 2, on the third day. John and the other Gospel writers, the story moves forward. So Mark's preferred word is immediately, or rather Luke uses immediately, that there's the next thing that happens, you know, the story moves forward. And John's phrase here to move the story forward from the baptism is, on the third day. And scholars dispute a little bit of what that means. But it's clearly a hint at the beginning of the Gospel that something else is going to happen on the third day.

That on the third day, the resurrection happens. The greatest miracle of all, death is overcome. Death is reversed. And so you have here, John uses this phrase on the third day to describe the first miracle of Jesus. And it's interesting that at the end of the Gospel, it's on the third day, the greatest miracle of Jesus takes place as well. There's also the language that's used. As we'll see, John tells us that when Jesus addresses His mother here, He uses a word, I mean, He'd have spoken Aramaic, it's recorded on Greek for us. The word in Greek that's used is *gune*. It's a very formal way of speaking to a woman at all. It's like the American sort of language with a young person in America, particularly the southern states, might address a woman and say, ma'am. It's a formal way of addressing somebody.

And that's the way Jesus addresses His mother here at the beginning of John's Gospel. It's interesting, at the end of John's Gospel, when Jesus is filled with concern for His mother, He says, woman, behold your son, speaking to John, the beloved disciple. It's the same word that He uses when He speaks to her. Woman, ma'am, behold your son. There's the use of the word behold running throughout John's Gospel.

John wants us to see things. That's there. Jesus, here in John chapter 2, at the wedding of Canaan, He's manifesting, He's showing His glory for people to see it. And that's, again, something that runs through John's Gospel, and we find at the end when He's put on public display as well. There's also the witnesses. It's interesting that here, the witnesses to the miracle of Jesus' turning water into wine are not the great and the good. They're not the mighty. They're not the powerful. They are the servants.

Nobody else except the servants know that this miracle has taken place. They are the marginalized, the insignificant ones. And it's interesting that at the end of John's Gospel, at the end of all the Gospels, the first witnesses to the resurrection are not the powerful, the mighty, the credible. They are the woman, woman whose testimony could be countermanded easily by the testimony of a man. They weren't, you know, if you wanted to concoct a story that was going to sound credible in the eyes of Jews and Gentiles alike 2,000 years ago, woman would not be your first witnesses. It makes no sense. And yet God, we know from Paul's writings, God uses the things that the world considers marginalized and foolish to bring to nothing what the world considers wise and powerful.

[11 : 21] We should be encouraged by that tonight. You know, we think as a church that things are very, very difficult for us in this day and age, that, you know, the world is really going mad in terms of its rejection of a Christian worldview. And there seems to be this phenomenal departure from the way of the Bible and the way of Christ. And we think, how on earth can things be turned around?

God uses marginalized, powerless people to achieve his end. And that should be an encouragement to us who feel marginalized, powerless, incapable, insignificant, when we think about the world we live in. So that's just by way of, a little bit by way of introduction, just to think about that theme of shame as it's unpacked for us here. The context here now is a wedding feast.

The wedding feast in Jewish first century culture is quite an important thing. Wedding feasts always are. You know, you've been to a wedding feast, a wedding party. It's quite a big event, even more so in Jewish culture in the first century. The job of the groom, the way a wedding would happen is the groom would go to the bride's family to fetch her and then to bring the bride back to his family home.

So there's that sense where she's leaving her father and mother and cleaving to her husband. She's going to become part of his family and they become the language of the New Testament and Bible, one flesh. So there's that sense of him taking ownership almost, responsibility for, not in a kind of crude sense of possession, but a sense of responsibility. And that's reflected in the feast that follows. The bridegroom has one main job and that is to make sure the feast goes on as long as it has to. And traditionally that would be almost a week. A six-day feast. And the whole point of that was to show to the bridegroom, to the bride's family, that you as the new husband of this woman, you can provide for her. So you throw the most lavish party you can. And if all goes well, you get to the end of the six days and everyone goes home very happy. But this bridegroom, things have gone disastrously wrong.

The wedding feast is nowhere near over on the third day. Halfway through the feast, the wine runs out.

[13 : 58] And what that means for that man is abject humiliation. The master of the feast could well be his future father-in-law. He's going to be humiliated in front of his bride's family.

His reputation from this day forward is going to be one of catastrophic shame. There's the guy who can't provide. There's the guy who can't furnish his family with what's needed on this very important occasion. He's supposed to be able to show everyone that he can look after this woman, but he can't even arrange a feast at the beginning of their married life together.

And so his reputation from this day forward is going to be in shreds. He might even have to move away from the village. So bad is it going to be. Go somewhere where no one knows him just to escape the shame.

And it's into this, this story of humiliation, that Mary comes to Jesus and says, they have no wine.

And what I want us to know is, first of all, the way Jesus deals with this. Firstly, in showing God's grace.

[15 : 26] I mean, Jesus deals with shame by showing grace. Now, we know that. John chapter 8, the woman who's caught in adultery. The way he treats that woman, it's really gracious.

He doesn't humiliate her. He doesn't bring her to a stool and sit her at the front of the church and lecture her for her sinful ways, as we might have done in the past in the free church. He's gracious to her. And he covers her. And it's the same here. God's grace is in operation.

And you see it in lots of different ways. The very formal way he addresses his mother is part of it. So Mary comes to him and she says, Jesus, my son, our friend here has run out of wine. Can we do something? And you might think on the face of it that Jesus is therefore obligated to act.

You might think, well, you know, if my mom came to me and said, one of our friends is in serious trouble, we would do what we could to help them. We would feel obligated. But what's interesting is Jesus responds to her with a very formal statement, ma'am. Then he says to her this very interesting phrase. He says, what does this have to do with me? And that phrase is really curious in John's gospel and the other gospels as well, because it's a phrase that's found in the gospels quite frequently, not on the lips of Jesus as it is here, but on the lips of demons. When demons meet Jesus and he's going to cast them out, they say, who are you? What do you have to do with me? And what they mean is, you can't possibly have any authority over me. They challenge the authority of Jesus.

Jesus. They're basically daring him not to cast them out, to say, you have no power here. I'm in control. And Jesus shows his divine power by humiliating demons, casting them out.

[17 : 19] When they're in the man called Legion, the demons are cast out into a herd of pigs, the worst possible fate, these unclean animals. And the pigs rattle off down the hill and dive into the sea. The demons are powerless in the face of Jesus. And Jesus, when he says that same expression to his mother, it's a subtle way of saying, you can't tell me what to do here. You don't have the authority here. You're not the one in control. Now, Mary, she doesn't take this badly.

I mean, if it was my kid saying that to me, I'd be like, you know, weaving the finger at them and saying, come on, do what you're told. But Mary responds very knowingly, says to the servants, do whatever he tells you. So I think she recognizes that she doesn't have the authority to tell him what to do. But she can share the problem with him and trust that he will graciously do something.

That he will act in some way to help. That's the overflow of grace that characterizes God.

See, that's what John was telling us at the beginning of his gospel. We have seen his glory, he says. And remember, that's what Jesus is doing here. He's manifesting, showing his glory. And the glory of Jesus is shown in the way he graciously acts. We have seen his glory, John says, full of grace. It's language from the Old Testament that John's using. That phrase, grace and truth, is an Old Testament phrase. The words in Hebrew are chesed and emeth, covenant love and faithfulness. What it means is God's love. That word chesed, it means God's love for the unlovable. And that's the love that God has for us. He comes to us, unlovable people, and he pours out that grace upon us. And that's what Jesus is doing here. There's nothing obligating him. There's nothing saying to him, you must act. But he acts anyway. He acts with grace.

And it's the same with our salvation. He doesn't cover our shame and guilt because he's under any obligation to do so. I mean, we can't go to God and say, you have to cover up for the bad things I've done. You have to save me from hell. And it's utter shameful and the consequences of my sin. God isn't under obligation to do any of that for us. It's all of his free grace that he comes and he says, I will cleanse you of your sin and of your guilt. And the way I'm going to do it is by taking that upon myself. He does it simply for, as the Catechism says to us, he does it simply for his own good pleasure. God has from all eternity for his own good pleasure elected some to everlasting life.

[20 : 34] It's the language of the Catechism. He does it because he pleases to do it. And that's why I think we're here tonight. Isn't it why we're here to worship? Because we want to recognize that God has taken pleasure in showing grace to us.

It's a lesson for us as well about how we treat other people, isn't it? And if God has been so gracious to us that he, without obligation, covers our shame, do we have any right ever to humiliate anyone else? Do we have any right to point out people's flaws to them publicly in such a way that will bring them shame and humiliation? Is that where we start?

Is that a reaction when we see somebody who's messed up? Do we want to bring them down? Maybe not our family and our friends, but what about our enemies?

It's very easy for us to repost the shameful story about Hamza Yusuf, or to repost something humiliating about Rishi Sunak. It's very easy for us to share the gossip about somebody else in the village who's got into trouble, isn't it? But actually, would Jesus do that?

And does he graciously cover shame, seek to remove it and speak well and honorably even of his enemies? Secondly, Jesus deals with shame in this passage in a very interesting way because he redefines purity. Part of the problem with shame is impurity. Our impurity is on display, and because of our impurity, we feel ashamed. That's what happens in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve have eaten of the forbidden fruit. They feel and they recognize in their nakedness their impurity. They have no covering before God, and so they have to try and cover themselves, and then they hide themselves from God entirely. It's a glorious way, though, that Jesus deals with this man's shame because, again, it points us towards the cross, and real shame is covered at the cross. And the reason we say it's pointed to the cross here is because of how Jesus covers this man's shame. He says to the servants, go to these 120-litre stone drums jars. We have the same sort of thing kicking around our crofts.

[23 : 14] These blue plastic drums about this high. You use them for storing food in or whatever for the sheep. It's the size of a keg. And there's these stone jars dotted around a Jewish village, and they're used for the Jewish rites of purification because the Jews were obsessed with ritual purity. And so you would find in a Jewish village, if you were going to the synagogue and you had been out working with animals, perhaps moving a dead animal, touched something that was dead, then you would have to ritually cleanse yourself. You would have to go through some kind of ritual display of purification in order to remove the stigma and the shame of being unclean.

If you were diagnosed with leprosy and it had healed up and it had cleared up, you would go and present yourself to the priest, and the priest would say, yeah, the leprosy's gone. Go and ritually cleanse yourself. Go and ritually bathe to show you're cleansed of this shameful thing.

And it's these stone jars for purification that Jesus says, take them, fill them with water. Now, filling these jars with water is nothing unusual to the servants because that's what the stone jars get filled with. And perhaps they're thinking, what is he doing? But they've listened to Mary.

Mary said, whatever he says to you, do it. So the servants fill the jars with water. And undoubtedly, to their surprise, and perhaps horror, when they put the ladle into the jar to take out some of the liquid that's in it, they discover that the jars are no longer filled with water. They're now filled with wine. And the fact that the jars have been filled with wine makes them unfit for purpose anymore. Because they're now used for a common use, a receptacle for wine, not for purifying water, but for wine, they can never be used for purification again.

The life of these jars as ritual purification jars is over. They are now common. They're not holy. They're not set apart for that special purpose anymore. They're now common. And I think it's really telling that that's what Jesus does here. When he covers the man's shame, he does it by saying the old way of dealing with shame, the ritual way of dealing with shame, the Old Testament way of ritual. I'm abolishing.

[25 : 43] And Jesus, when he does take away the sin of the world, as John the Baptist, remember John has said to his disciples, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. What he's going to do very gloriously is deal with impurity and shame in his own body.

That he, by shedding his own blood, by his own broken body at the cross, deals with our sin and shame by taking it away in his death. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

And the Lamb here is taking away the sin and the shame of this man. He's saying, I'm going to cover your shame.

And you're going to be able to purify yourself, not by washing with water, but because of what I have done. And that's what we need to learn. Tonight, you may be thinking to yourself, well I know, I get the Bible's teaching.

The Bible says people are sinners. I understand that. I know how messed up I am. I know how badly I've messed up. I know how much of a sinner I am. I know my own heart. But I'm going to try and make it right.

[27 : 00] I'm going to try and appease God. I'm going to try and atone for my own sin. I'm going to try and do things better. I'm going to try and build something in its place. I'm going to try and be a better person. I'm going to try and be a more obedient person.

I'm going to try and be a more kind person. I'm going to try and be more loving. That somehow I can cover up for what I've done. And the truth is, whatever jars you're going to for purity, whatever way you think you can putify yourself, it's useless.

Adam and Eve's way of trying to putify themselves was useless. The fig leaves that they sewed together could never cover them. The stone jars that we go to can never cleanse us.

That's why the Bible talks about going back to the same broken cisterns. We can never clean ourselves enough to atone for the wrong and the rebellion and the shame of what we've done against God.

But we can come to Jesus. We can come to the cross. We can come to where the Lamb of God laid down His life and there purified His people.

[28 : 12] And that's where our salvation tonight is really found. The old paths don't go anywhere helpful. The only path of life is in and through Jesus Himself.

And He delivers us from shame. And finally, Jesus deals with shame by putting something better in its place.

Jesus, you see, doesn't just take away the man's shame. The water, it gets drawn from these 120-litre drums. It gets taken to the master of the feast.

Maybe the man's father-in-law. And He exclaims something profound. He says, normally, people serve the best wine at the beginning.

And then, once everyone has drunk their fill, the poor wine comes out. But you have done it the other way round. You've done something different.

[29 : 24] And I'm trying to imagine, you know, the scene. Can you picture it? The bridegroom isn't aware of what's just happened. He may have been aware that they were running out of wine.

He may be aware of impending disaster. But all of a sudden, somehow, his fortunes have completely transformed. Now, imagine, what is this man going to be known for?

How is his reputation going to play out in the coming years? Many years from this, people are going to say, oh, remember that guy in Canaan? Remember the wedding feast that he laid on?

And everyone's going to be like, it was amazing, wasn't it? I mean, it started off pretty well anyway. But it just got better. And his enormous capacity for kindness and grace and giving and his generosity.

And his, I mean, he's such a great guy. And that reputation alone will open doors for him. And it will make opportunities for him. And his life is just different. Everything has changed because of this tiny unseen miracle that Jesus has performed.

[30 : 38] This thing in a corner. The man's reputation is completely transformed. And that's us.

That's us if we're Christians tonight. Our reputation is utterly transformed by Jesus. That quote I had from Daniel at the beginning.

Some risen to glory and light and life. And others to everlasting shame and contempt. Which are you?

Which are you tonight? Are you looking at an eternal destiny full of shame and contempt? Or have you been snatched from it? To be a joint heir with Christ of the riches of glory.

And one of the phrases in the New Testament really sticks with me. Is Paul's rebuke to a censorious church. And he says to them, don't you know you will judge angels?

[31 : 41] Don't you know that what being seated with Christ really means? It's not just going to heaven in inverted commas.

It's that we will be seated with Christ in the eternal judgment seat. Involved with him. We're part of the apparatus of his glorious kingdom being unveiled.

We are tonight sons and daughters of the living God. I was thinking about this in terms of our witness as Christians. We are ambassadors for Christ.

We forget that so often. We feel powerless. Can you imagine if the ambassador of a tiny mid-Pacific island nation comes to the great court of St. James, to the British establishment?

I mean, he's an ambassador of a nobody. There's not much that he says will be taken seriously.

[32 : 57] But when the ambassador of the United States comes in to speak to the prime minister, you can be pretty sure the prime minister pays attention. Tonight, we're ambassadors of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Our reputation is utterly transformed. Our status is utterly transformed because of Christ.

And so we should be bold in how we go out into the world because there is nothing that can shame us. There is nothing that can humiliate us because Christ has taken it all away.

Because Christ has lifted us up in his grace. That's our Savior. That's our Lord. That's the one we trust.

Let's just pray in conclusion. Heavenly Father, help us tonight to see Jesus, to see what he has done for us, to see what he has taken from us, to see what it cost, to marvel at the cross, because he took our shame, and for us to be emboldened, encouraged in how we therefore live, that we would see the glory of Jesus reflected and lived out in our lives and manifested to the world around us.

[34 : 33] Help us to show your glory in how we live, by being gracious, by being kind, by being full of mercy and faithfulness, and help us to bring others to know the same salvation.

We ask you in Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to sing in conclusion in the Scottish Psalter, the traditional version of Psalm 43.

Verse 3. This is page 264. Page 264. O send thy light forth and thy truth.

Let them be guides to me, and bring me to thine holy hill, even where thy dwellings be. Then will I to God's altar go, to God my chiefest joy. Ye God, my God, thy name to praise, my harp I will employ.

Why art thou then cast down, my soul? What should discourage thee? And why, with vexing thoughts, art thou disquieted in me? Still trust in God, for him to praise, good cause I yet shall have.

[35 : 49] He of my countenance is the health, my God that doth me save. Let's sing these verses to God's praise. O send thy light forth, thy truth.

Let them be guides to me. O bring me to thine holy hill, in where thy dwellings be.

Then will I to God's altar go, To God my chiefest joy.

yea, God my God, thy name to praise, my harp I will employ.

Why art thou then, dost thou my soul? Would thou discourage thee?

[37 : 27] And why, with vexing thought, art thou disquieted in me?

Still trust in God, for him to praise, good cause I yet shall have.

He of my countenance is the health, my God that doth me save.

Amen. Now the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of God the Holy Spirit, be with each one of us now and always.

Amen.