



Finding Obedience in Paolo Veronese's *The Wedding at Cana*

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If you have visited the Louvre Museum in Paris, you have probably seen Paolo Veronese's impressive painting *The Wedding at Cana*. As one of the museum's largest pieces (approximately 21 feet by 32 feet), it is difficult to miss. Interestingly, it hangs on a large wall within a few feet of Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. The close proximity to arguably the most famous painting in the world assures that *The Wedding* is seen by the majority of the 8 million people who visit the Louvre each year.

The painting depicts Jesus' first miracle recorded in the Gospels (John 2:1–11), when at the request of His mother, He turned water into wine. As an artistic snapshot, the image reveals more than 130 individuals enjoying a wedding banquet while, along the bottom of the image, servants pour newly created wine out of ceremonial pots.

Those with formal art training undoubtedly contemplate the aesthetics and technical elements of Veronese's work. But for the average viewer, the initial visceral reaction evoked by *The Wedding* undoubtedly stems from its physical enormity, which might then transition to belief or skepticism as to whether Jesus did actually turn water into wine. Thus, for many, this painting elicits the question of Jesus's divinity.

On a deeper level, the message of *The Wedding* is about obedience. John's account tells us that after the wine ran out, Mary said to Him, "They have no more wine." Jesus's answer, "My time has not yet come," seems to imply that He was not going to get involved. Perhaps it was a mother's intuition, or maybe it was a look or the inflection in His voice, but we are told that Mary next went to the banquet servants and said, "Do whatever he tells you."¹ Jesus instructs them to fill the

vats with water, and the rest, as they say, is history.

When the master of the banquet tasted the new wine, he was amazed, because usually the cheaper wine was served to guests who had imbibed enough to lack a discerning palate. In this case, Jesus provided the best wine last, after the servants had obeyed Jesus's command.

The lesson we are not to miss from Veronese is that obedience to Christ and His commands produces the good wine in our lives. Quoting the poet Addison, in *A Preface to Paradise Lost* C.S. Lewis wrote, "That which reigns in Milton is the most universal and most useful that can be imagined, it is in short this, 'that obedience to the will of God makes men happy, and that disobedience makes them miserable.'" Realistically considered, the measure of our happiness is almost always in direct proportion to the level of our obedience to our Lord's commands.

Veronese adds visual force to his admonition for obedience through the positioning of all the characters on the canvas. Of the 130 figures in the painting, only Jesus, who is located almost directly in the center with His head surrounded by a pale glow, is looking directly at the viewer. Everyone else is busy, bustling and enjoying the party. Christ's penetrating stare at the viewer gives added force and emphasis to Mary's sententious command for how we are to live: be obedient and "do whatever he tells you."

The difficulty with obedience is that it is a doctrine assented to more often by the intellect than the will.



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After all, obedience is difficult; if it were easy, everyone would be doing it. Fortunately Christ is the model for our obedience. He reminds His disciples that “the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me” (John 14:31). Love is the key to obedience. The wondrous result was “through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:19). Like the attendees portrayed by Veronese, humanity received the benefit of the good wine. Conversely, Christ asks a hard question of the disobedient, “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46).

When we view art, we consider the concept of image. The Christian knows we are made in God's image. When we fail to obey Him, we do not fully reflect the eternal image in which we were made. We are only a portion of the finished painting He desires us to be. Even delayed obedience is disobedience. C.S. Lewis reminds us, “The first demand any work of art makes upon us is surrender. Get yourself out of the way.” It is not surprising that obedience requires us to do the same.

Note

1. Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

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