

The Wedding Is Not the Ranking: What Veblen Reveals About the Cost of Looking Appropriate

The most expensive choice at a wedding is often not the one anyone truly wants; it is the one no one feels permitted to decline.

A wedding can be beautiful, generous, and entirely sincere-and still become a competition no one remembers entering.

The pressure rarely arrives as a declaration of extravagance. Few families begin by saying that they want to outspend their peers. Instead, each decision is measured against an invisible audience: other weddings, family expectations, public images, and the fear that restraint will be mistaken for deficiency. A choice that once seemed lovely becomes merely adequate. Adequate becomes exposed. Exposed becomes unacceptable. The budget rises, not necessarily because desire has risen, but because the social meaning of falling behind has become intolerable.

Thorstein Veblen gives us a useful language for this peculiar form of escalation. His argument is not that wealthy people are foolish, nor that luxury is morally suspect. It is that consumption often performs social work beyond its practical use. Valuable goods become visible evidence of pecuniary strength and reputability. Wealth is accumulated not only for comfort or security, but for the honor and distinction it confers. Once we see that mechanism, the wedding budget looks less like a list of preferences and more like a public document written in the language of rank.

This is why the question "Do you like it?" is often insufficient. A family may genuinely like an option and still be responding primarily to what that option communicates. The relevant question is not whether the choice is beautiful. It is whether its beauty survives the removal of comparison.

Veblen calls the underlying process "invidious comparison": the valuation of people according to relative worth. The point is not simply that one person possesses more than another. It is that possessions become evidence in an ongoing judgment about who belongs where. Each higher level of wealth becomes the basis for a still higher comparison, so the desire for pecuniary superiority cannot be permanently satisfied. There is no final wedding at which the family can say, with complete relief, that the standard has been met forever. The next reference point is already forming.

This explains why affluent families can experience financial pressure without experiencing material deprivation. The pressure is positional. A wedding may already be generous, refined, and meaningful, yet feel insufficient when placed beside an imagined standard. The problem is not that the family lacks options. It is that every option is being asked to prove something about the family's standing.

Veblen's distinction between practical usefulness and conspicuous waste is especially clarifying here. Conspicuous waste does not mean that an expenditure gives the individual no satisfaction. It means that the expenditure does not enhance human life collectively, even though it may provide personal pleasure or status. That distinction matters because a status-driven choice can feel entirely real. The pleasure is not fake. The question is what kind of pleasure it is: delight in the experience itself, or relief from the fear of appearing lesser.

The difference can be subtle. A family may value an element because it creates warmth, ease, beauty, or generosity. Or it may value the same element because its cost is legible to observers. Veblen argues that pecuniary canons of taste can blend costliness with beauty, so that expensive objects are experienced as more beautiful even when their practical or intrinsic qualities do not justify the difference. His example of a costly hand-wrought spoon makes the point sharply: honorific price can outweigh mechanical usefulness and shape judgments of beauty.

A wedding offers many opportunities for this confusion because it is an unusually visible social event. Visibility strengthens the signaling function of consumption. In modern, mobile societies, Veblen argues, consumption becomes more effective than private leisure for displaying wealth because strangers can observe goods more readily than habits. What is seen can be judged. What can be judged can become part of reputation.

The danger is not luxury itself. Luxury can express taste, care, hospitality, or genuine pleasure. The danger is allowing reputation to become the hidden client. Once that happens, the event begins serving the observers more than the people who are meant to inhabit it.

There is also a temporal trap. Items initially adopted for display can become felt necessities once habit and convention incorporate them into respectable living. A standard of living is easier to raise than to lower because conspicuous expenditure becomes tied to self-respect and social decency. In wedding planning, this means that a family may no longer remember which expectations were chosen and which were inherited. What began as an optional signal can come to feel like the minimum definition of doing things properly.

The planner's task, then, is not to oppose abundance with austerity. It is to separate three things that prestige competition continually merges: preference,

experience, and proof. Preference asks what the family genuinely values. Experience asks what will improve the event for the people present. Proof asks what will demonstrate standing to people who may barely participate in it.

That separation restores agency. It allows a family to spend generously where generosity is meaningful, beautifully where beauty is felt, and selectively where an expense serves mainly as evidence. It also makes room for the non-invidious motives Veblen identifies-charity, sociability, sympathy, and aesthetic communion. These motives do not deny status; they redirect attention away from personal rivalry and toward shared experience.

The larger lesson is that taste is never entirely private when it is displayed in public. Institutions are inherited habits of thought, and they often lag behind changing circumstances because established arrangements persist after their original purpose has faded. A wedding can inherit the same kind of inertia. Its conventions may continue not because they create joy, but because abandoning them feels socially dangerous.

The most liberating question is therefore not, "What can we afford?" Nor is it, "What will impress?" It is: "Which parts of this celebration would still matter if no one were keeping score?"

That question does not diminish a wedding. It protects its meaning. Beauty remains. Generosity remains. So does sophistication. What disappears is the obligation to mistake public ranking for personal desire-and to spend more and more simply to prove that one has not fallen behind.