

Parable of New Wine in Old Wineskins

Luke 5: 36-39

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Matthew by a student of Rembrandt

When Levi the tax collector, better known by his name Matthew, first became a disciple of our Lord Jesus Christ, the joy of the experience occasioned in him the desire to hold a big banquet for his friends—and the Lord. Some of those in attendance, including some of the Pharisees, were offended that Jesus ate with sinners. But in addition to this offense, they also had another question to ask our Lord:

And they said to Him, “The disciples of John often fast and offer prayers, the disciples of the Pharisees also do the same, but Yours eat and drink.” Luke 5:33.¹

Jesus responded with an analogy and a parable. The analogy compares the attendants of the bridegroom to the disciples of Jesus. How can the attendants of the bridegroom fast? How can the disciples of Jesus fast while He is on earth with them? Later on they will fast when He is taken away. The parable He told following this analogy was the Parable of New Wine in Old Wineskins. It gives us powerful insight as to why it is inappropriate to force the new covenant faith into the forms and strictures of the old covenant.

First let’s look at the analogy: Jesus responds to the question about His disciples’ lack of fasting with this reply:

And Jesus said to them, “You cannot make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you? But the days will come; and when the bridegroom is taken away from them, then they will fast in those days.” Luke 5:34-35.

Here indeed is a very remarkable reply, especially considering that Jesus may have been preparing His own disciples for His death on the cross. The first century church would certainly have been acutely aware of the import of Jesus’ words, just as we are today. In so many ways Jesus was preparing His disciples for His death. They were not able to take it in and understand, but later on they would remember what He said.

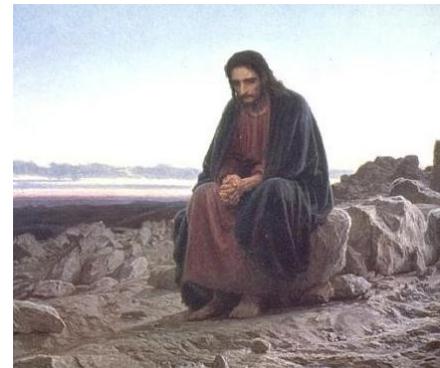
But without doubt this answer and analogy did not satisfy the petulant Pharisees. They were criticizing Jesus, but dared not do so directly. Instead, they contrived to attack His disciples, cleverly comparing them to the disciples of John, with whom Jesus would have been sympathetic.

¹ Except where noted, all reference to Scripture come from the New American Standard Updated version published by the Lockman Foundation.

Although there was but one day of fasting per year prescribed in the Law, many Pharisees fasted twice a week, making a big show of their piety in the process. Jesus, well acquainted with the discipline of fasting since He Himself fasted for 40 days and nights in the wilderness, condemned all forms of hypocrisy in fasting, prayer and giving as forms of practicing righteousness before men to be noticed by them. Consider, as evidence, this passage:

Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. Matthew 6:16-18

But in the passage that leads to the Parable of New Wine in Old Wineskins we find the Pharisees criticizing Jesus and His disciples for neglecting fasting and even prayer. Their larger issue was simply this: The disciples of Jesus, and especially Jesus Himself, did not fit their concept of how a truly pious and religious person should be acting. They violated many of their own man-made rules and in general appeared to the self-righteous Pharisees as being indecorous and ceremonially sloppy.



Jesus fasted 40 days and 40 nights

As was usually the case, Jesus' reply goes far deeper than the immediate occasion of the question and addresses the general issue of religious forms.

Here then is His generalized answer to their objections in the form of the Parable of New Wine in Old Wineskins:

And He was also telling them a parable: "No one tears a piece of cloth from a new garment and puts it on an old garment; otherwise he will both tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled out, and the skins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one, after drinking old wine wishes for new; for he says, 'The old is good enough.'" Luke 5:36-39

The overall meaning of the parable is this: Jesus' mission on earth involves a radical break with the traditions of man, but not the law of God. The old forms (and in this case even fasting) could not be expected to comprehend or contain the good news of the Gospel message.

Jesus does not invalidate fasting as a form of prayer or devotional piety before the Lord. (He does not mention prayer.) This parable goes beyond the specific forms brought up by the Pharisees and gives us this general principle: The old rituals of Judaism (again, not the Word of God itself or the law of God) cannot be expected to comprehend or contain the light of the Gospel message now being purveyed.



Obviously, when the flood of Gentile conversions began to shake the church, the issue would become one of great import. And on this matter, the Council of Jerusalem, reported in Acts 15, would find that even circumcision need not be imposed on believers as a matter of salvation by grace through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

The parable poses two figures to help us understand how the old forms, though useful enough in their own time and place, cannot contain the new vigor of the Gospel of grace and the startling revelation that Jesus Himself is the Messiah. The first is the new garment and a patch. The second is the figure of wine and wineskins.

“No one tears a piece of cloth from a new garment and puts it on an old garment.” It would be ridiculous to try to mend an old garment by destroying a new one. If any piece is to be torn off from a garment it would be the other way around. People seek an older, discarded garment as a source of material for patching newer ones.



So in this case, we cannot take a piece of the New Covenant and patch it on to the Old Covenant and hope for the best. Both will be ruined. A devotional routine from the Way could not be inserted back into Judaism and expect everything to work smoothly. Thus, the uncircumcised believers will not find ready acceptance in the synagogues of the Jews. No, they will need all new meetings of their own from house to house. The joy of the Good News cannot somehow be patched on to Judaism. Something much more radical than a patch or alteration is going on here. The building block has now become the cornerstone of a whole new world. As we read in 1 Peter 2:7-8:

The stone which the builders rejected
Has become the chief cornerstone ,
and
A stone of stumbling
And a rock of offense²

The second figure, that of new wine in old wineskins, carries exactly the same idea but with an emphasis not found in the figure of the patch from a new garment placed on an old garment. The new wine, still in the process of fermentation, will produce a turbidity that will distend and eventually break an old wineskin. Just so with the Gospel message of salvation by grace through

² New King James Version.

faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. New forms will be needed to accommodate the vigor and rapid expansion of the word being preached.

The brittle nature of the old forms of Judaism can clearly be seen in Acts 13 and Acts 2. When Peter preached his first sermon after the day of Pentecost, the conclusion of the leaders of the old system is that these “ignorant and unlearned men” must be prevented from speaking any longer in the name of Jesus. The old wineskin could not stand the strain.

Similarly in Acts 13, during the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas, Paul’s clear Gospel message earned them the “honor” of being expelled from Perga. The old system was too jealous of the fermentation going on among the new believers. After all, lives were changed, people healed, set free, and delivered. Even the dead were being raised. No wonder even the keepers of the old ways concluded that a convenient accommodation could not be managed. Some even left their positions as Synagogue rulers and became believers, fully following the Lord and having nothing further to do with their old positions in Judaism. Jairus (Mark 5:22) and Crispus (Acts 18:8) are notable examples.

So the message of Luke 5 is clear enough: The Pharisees are asking (in effect,) “Why aren’t you guys fitting in with the old way of doing things? Look, even John’s disciples fast and pray. Why don’t Your disciples fast?” Jesus’ answer is clear and it is liberating. He tells us that we will fast after He is gone, but this is banquet time. Fasting will come later. But as to the larger question His message is this: Don’t try to patch the old system with principles from the new and don’t put the New Covenant into a brittle bottle. What is happening now will require a new way of thinking, a new way of relating to the past and new forms for the future.

Glory to God. With this bit of guidance the early church was launched in Acts 2. And as verses 46 and 47 relate: “Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

