

Clothing, Wineskins, And Wine

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“But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved.” —Luke 5:38

In John 1:11, we read that the Word—the Creator God—came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. The gospel accounts provide ample evidence of this in Jesus’ frequent encounters with the Pharisees and other religious authorities of the day. In a well-worn pattern, the Pharisees question Him on every point possible, trying to find a fault.

One such exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees resulted in what is commonly called the Parable of the Cloth and the Wineskins. While found in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew 9:16-17; Mark 2:21-22; Luke 5:36-39), Luke’s version is the fullest:

Then He spoke a parable to them: “No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one; otherwise the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was taken out of the new does not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved. And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, ‘The old is better.’”

While these examples are valuable in their own right, they do not stand on their own. If we were to begin here, it would be like coming in on the last part of a conversation; without understanding what led up to this, our comprehension will be spotty at best. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all put this parable at the end of a fairly lengthy, yet identical, record of Christ’s actions and the Pharisees’ objections (Matthew 9:1-17; Mark 2:1-22; Luke 5:17-39). His words here, then, are the summation and capstone of a much longer interaction.

A Healing, a Feast, a Prophecy

The story begins in Luke 5:17, when a paralyzed man is brought to Christ. He recognizes the faith involved and tells him that his sins are forgiven (verses 18-20), a statement that the scribes and the Pharisees, of course, consider blasphemous (verse 21). They rightly understand that only God takes away sin, but they would not consider that the Man who was forgiving sin was God. In verses 22-25, Jesus gives proof that He had been given the power to forgive sins: The man had taken up his bed and was walking home.

After this incident, Jesus calls Levi, or Matthew, the tax collector (Luke 5:27), who becomes a disciple and subsequently prepares a feast in honor of Jesus (verses 28-29). In verse 30, the scribes and Pharisees object to His mingling with tax collectors and other sinners, but Jesus responds, “Those who are well don’t need a physician, but those who are sick do. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” [*New English Translation* (NET)].

At this point, many translations insert a subheading about fasting, but the story continues. The Pharisees point out that John the Baptist’s disciples made prayer and fasting a regular part of their lives, and they slip in the fact that their disciples did that as well (Luke 5:33). Then they contrast that

with Christ's disciples, observing that they have a great penchant for eating and drinking. They imply that His disciples cannot really be serious about a holy life when all they do is have a good time, and in their minds, this reflects poorly on the Teacher. We know this because in Luke 7:34, Jesus quotes the Pharisees as saying that He—the Son of God—is a glutton and winebibber.

Jesus counters that it would be just as inappropriate for His disciples to fast at that time as it would be for the wedding party to fast when the bridegroom is with them (Luke 5:34-35). In other words, Christ's presence should be a cause for joy. Psalm 16:11 (NET) says, "I experience absolute joy in Your presence; You always give Me sheer delight." Yes, Jesus was also a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief, but there was every reason for His disciples to be cheerful when they were in His presence. They had no need to draw closer to God through fasting because He was with them.

His example is clear enough on its own, except that a well-known Messianic prophecy speaks of Israel's God as her Bridegroom (Isaiah 62:5). He was already on the Pharisees' bad list for telling a man that his sins were forgiven, and now He follows that up by referring to Himself as the Bridegroom!

Luke 5:35 is pivotal when it comes to understanding the parable that follows: "But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them; then they will fast in those days." We know how that played out. He was "taken away" first through His crucifixion and then later through His ascension. Jesus being "taken away," however, resulted in a tremendous blessing, as we will see.

Old and New

The parable, then, is a series of contrasts between new and old. It contains new and old clothing, new and old wineskins, and new and old wine. Christ's being taken away makes the "newness" possible, and once that "newness" is available, it is wholly incompatible with the old.

Jesus begins with an example of old and new garments: "No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one; otherwise the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was taken out of the new does not match the old." In Scripture, going all the way back to the Garden of Eden, garments or clothing are common symbols of righteousness. After Adam and Eve sinned, they tried to cover themselves with something they made with their own hands (Genesis 3:7). Instead, God gave them tunics made of skin (verse 21), requiring the life of an animal, representing the Lamb of God giving His life to cover sin.

Matthew 22:1-13 contains the Parable of the Wedding Garment, whose lesson is that inappropriate clothing will keep a person out of a wedding feast. Isaiah 64:6 says that "all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags." The Pharisees had a righteousness, but Jesus asserts that our righteousness must exceed theirs (Matthew 5:20), meaning that we need to have His righteousness imputed to us, which becomes our new covering, our new garment. As we become one with Him and submit to taking on His image, we have a righteousness that does not come from our works but from God's work in us.

Thus, we have a contrast between man's righteousness and the righteousness of Christ. But, just as it makes no sense to tear off a piece from a new garment to patch an old one, so is it also a futile exercise to try to keep our own righteousness intact and use a little bit of Christ's righteousness to cover a flaw here and there. The two coverings are incompatible—we have to choose one or the other.

The conclusion is that, if a new garment is available, we would be foolish to use it to mend an old, defective one. Because Jesus was taken away, His righteousness is available to us, so we need to discard any thought that our own is suitable. Instead, we must put on His righteousness and be conformed to it so that it fits and covers us appropriately. Clearly, works are involved and required on our part, but without the covering and involvement of Christ, those works would continue to be as filthy rags.

To understand the new and the old, it is important to realize that the “old” could have many applications. It is not just the Old Covenant. In fact, the Pharisees in Jesus’ audience did not actually represent the Old Covenant. The system of beliefs and practices that developed into Judaism is *not* the same thing as the Old Covenant. Certainly, Judaism makes use of the writings of Moses and the prophets, but it also leans heavily on the traditions of Jewish scholars and is infused with Greek philosophy.

The Pharisees, then, were not actually living by the Old Covenant! God intended that covenant to prepare His people for the coming of the Messiah. Everything in the holiness code, the sacrifices, and so forth was intended to point to Christ. Since the Pharisees could not recognize the Object of the Covenant, what they were practicing was not what the pre-incarnate Christ delivered to Moses. They had gotten far off course.

Therefore, the “old” elements in this parable could be any system of belief aside from what became available through Christ. At the time, that could have been the Old Covenant or Judaism or a pagan belief system. For us, it could be Catholicism, Protestantism, secularism, or any other *-ism*.

Wine and Wineskins

Continuing in Luke 5:37-38, we see the example of putting new wine into old wineskins:

And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved.

The meaning here is not as cut-and-dried as with the garments, since the Bible uses wine in a wide variety of ways. It can represent a drug or a blessing. It can be a symbol of debauchery or of abundance. Wine was part of the drink offering, symbolizing being poured out in service. It was part of Melchizedek’s blessing on Abraham, and 2,000 years later, Jesus uses it in the Passover as the blood of the New Covenant. Psalm 75 shows a cup of wine of God’s wrath, and Revelation 18 depicts a cup in the hand of Mystery Babylon, representing its intoxicating culture and the spirit of the times.

Obviously, not all of those meanings will fit, but when we link the new wine with Jesus being taken away, it coincides with the Passover cup, representing Christ’s blood and the New Covenant. When we add the fact that the Holy Spirit could not be given until Jesus had gone away, then the new wine entails more than just forgiveness, but also suggests God’s Spirit—His love, power, and sound-mindedness (II Timothy 1:7).

In the example, the new wine is expansive. The fermentation process produces a great deal of pressure. An old and brittle wineskin will not be able to withstand the increasing stress, and it will burst.

The wineskin is a type of vessel. Throughout Scripture, vessels are symbols for people. For Christians, there is an “old man” and a “new man.” The old man represents the life we had before conversion, and the new man, the new vessel, is the life that comes because of conversion. But if we take the expansive and dynamic new wine, and we attempt to put that into the old life, we can be sure that we will have a disaster on our hands.

Our old lives, our old ways, are entirely incompatible with the new wine. The new wine requires change, expansion, and steady improvement, while in the old life, there was no real desire or ability to change. Remember, the new wine is tied to the blood of Passover, the New Covenant, the receipt of God’s Spirit, and the spiritual result that will be produced by those powerful factors. Trying to cram all that into a person who is unwilling to change will invariably result in his coming apart at the seams. The precious new wine is spilled on the ground and dreadfully wasted.

Verse 39 adds even more: “And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, ‘The old is better.’” On the physical level, a finely aged wine is obviously preferable to a new wine. One year at the Feast of Tabernacles, I had the opportunity to sample a Bordeaux bottled in the late 1970s or early 80s. Suffice it to say that the wine’s depth and complexity of flavors would put to profound shame anything bottled recently.

Curiously, though, in this parable, the *new* wine is the one that is to be preferred! This may seem incongruous at first, until we remember what these things represent. The new wine of Christ’s sacrifice, of the New Covenant, and of God’s Spirit being poured out on us is infinitely more valuable than anything before conversion. Whether the old wine represents physical abundance or the headiness of what Babylon entices us with constantly, nothing can be compared to the new wine—if we have God’s Spirit.

However, because we are still human, and the old man still remains in us to some degree, at times the old wine seems better. The old wine seems more gratifying to the senses. Before conversion, we certainly had no interest in this new wine because the old wine suited us just fine, even if it was making us miserable. Even after conversion, we sometimes reach for the old wine.

When we are under that influence, we do not find the new wine appealing because we are hooked on the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (I John 2:16). It requires spiritual sobriety to recognize the true blessing of the new wine, but we cannot do that easily—if at all—when the old wine is on our palate. It is only in abstaining from the old wine that we can truly appreciate the uniqueness and superiority of the new.

Finely Aged Wine

There is a final point regarding the new wine in Matthew 26:27-29:

Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom.”

Judges 9:13 informs us that wine cheers both God and man, but Matthew 26:29 goes far beyond that. Clearly, Jesus is awaiting a specific fruit of the vine. Part of that appears to be when this same New Covenant is made with Israel and Judah (see “Finishing the Week,” *Forerunner*, September-October 2011).

Think for a moment, however, about the sanctification process we are experiencing right now, a process akin to fermentation. We have been blessed with new wine, and we have been given new lives in which to hold it. As we grow in the grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ (II Peter 3:18), that wine is aging and maturing within us. He is not merely looking forward to a feast with “drinks all ‘round.” He is anticipating finely aged spiritual wine, wine that He put into new wineskins, wine that has fully matured. He is anticipating a perfected vintage of His people, poured out for Him over the course of our lives. He is looking forward to savoring *us* because of what *He* will have produced in our lives—if we allow Him.

All of Christ’s words and actions in the extended context are wrapped up in this. He forgives the sins of the paralytic, showing that the door was open for others to be forgiven. He then heals the paralytic. Tying that to the quotation in Luke 4:18—that He came to heal the broken-*hearted*—we can see that His healing goes beyond just broken bodies. He states that those who are sick are in need of a physician, demonstrating His desire and qualifications to take that on. He says that He came, not to condemn sinners, but to call them to repentance, and through their repentance, cleanse and give them life. Then He alludes to being taken away, an event that would open the door for all these things to happen on a larger scale.

While the Pharisees were blind to all this, Christians have been given eyes to see (Matthew 13:16; John 3:3). We would do well to consider what sort of wine *we* want to bring to the table in our Father’s Kingdom.