The Old and the New Wine

Fourth in the series: More Parables of Jesus

# Scripture: Luke 5:33-39

# Key Thought: Jesus’ way requires new thinking, new habits and new expressions.

# Intro:

Did you ever get stuck in a rut – a habit in your life that was hard to break? You knew there was a better way; but you just couldn’t change from the old way of doing things.

In today’s parables, Jesus talks about how hard it is to switch over to new ways of thinking and behaving.

# Two (or three) stories

Again, in today’s passage we note that Jesus has given us back-to-back stories with the same point, parables that reinforce one another. This technique of Jesus highlights the meaning of the parables. In Luke’s version of this incident, I note three separate parables.

## The mismatched patch

First there is the comment about patching an old garment with a piece of new cloth. Jesus is pointing out the experience of all his hearers. If they were to try to patch an old garment with a new piece of cloth, the implication is that the new piece would shrink, and that shrinkage would cause the tear in the old garment which the person was trying to patch to become worse. In addition, the mismatch between the old faded cloth of the garment and the fresher dyes of the new patch would be painfully obvious.

## New wine in old wineskins



Then Jesus gives the parable about pouring new wine into old wineskins. Commentator William Barclay explains the life situation to which Jesus is refering in this parable:

In the old days men stored their wine in skins, and not in bottles. When new wine was put into a skin, the wine was still fermenting. The gases it gave off exerted pressure on the skin. In a new skin there was a certain elasticity, and no harm was done because the skin gave with the pressure. But an old skin had grown hard, and had lost all its elasticity, and, if new and fermenting wine was put into it, it could not give to the pressure of the gases; it could only burst. (Barclay, p 338)

## We like the old familiar wine

Third, I note that Jesus simply makes a comment, based either on common knowledge or on his observations or both, that when people have been drinking old wine and are then served new wine, they prefer the old wine that they were used to. (This third comment is not included in the Matthew and Mark accounts.) This short saying again accents the point that Jesus is making in the first two parables. Remember that Jesus used three parables together for emphasis in Luke 15 as well.

So, what is Jesus saying in these parables? What is his point?

# We resist new ideas

## The context

It helps to understand Jesus message if we look at the context of this teaching in his ministry journey.

### The fasting question

The immediate context is a question that had been brought to Jesus concerning the contrast between the fasting practices of his disciples and those of both the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees. It is interesting to note that regarding the practice of fasting, the followers of John and the devotees of the Pharisees were on the same page with each other in contrast to the disciples of Jesus. This alignment situation gives us a clue in following Jesus’ train of thought. Even though John was the forerunner of Jesus, and many of John the Baptist’s disciples became followers of Jesus, John the Baptist was still clearly and firmly an Old Testament person. The things of the new covenant do not begin with John the Baptist; he was a prophet preparing the way. The things of the new covenant only begin with Jesus. We see that difference here in the fact that the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees are both following Old Testament style regulations about fasting. But the disciples of Jesus are taking their cue from Jesus.

### Other conflicts over the Old way

In addition, early in Jesus’ ministry, already conflicts were developing between the Jewish leaders and Jesus over the traditional interpretations of Old Testament rules. For example, the Pharisees had objected to Jesus going to the house of Levi, the tax collector (Luke 4:30). Pharisees did not eat at the houses of people like that lest they become ceremonially unclean according to Levitical rules. But Jesus did. The Pharisees had also questioned Jesus’ ability to forgive sins when he healed a person (Luke 4:21). This did not fit with their OT understanding. More such conflicts would soon develop between Jesus and the Pharisees particularly over the use of the Sabbath day.

So, the difficulty that the Pharisees and indeed many others had in transitioning their thinking from the OT laws of Moses to the thinking of Jesus is part of the reason for this parable set.

## The content

This background helps us to understand the meaning of Jesus’ parables in Luke 5. He is first simply pointing out the difficulty that people have accepting new ideas, especially new religious ideas. Of course, all of us like to believe that we are not so set in our ways that we cannot accept something new. But history has shown that Jesus is certainly right in his observations of human nature.

British Commentator William Barclay reminds us of past history.

To put this into contemporary terms: our minds must be elastic enough to receive and to contain new ideas. The history of progress is the history of overcoming the prejudices of the shut mind. Every new idea has had to battle for its existence against the instinctive opposition of the human mind. The motorcar, the railway train, the airplane were in the beginning regarded with suspicion. Simpson had to fight to introduce chloroform, and Lister had to struggle to introduce antiseptics. Copernicus was compelled to retract his statement that the Earth went around the sun, and not the sun around the earth. Even Jonas Hanway, who brought the umbrella to this country, had to suffer a barrage of missiles and insults when he first walked down the street with it. (Pages 338, 339)

Part of what Jesus is saying is simply an astute observation of human nature.

# Jesus’ way replaces the old religious thinking

But part of what Jesus was pointing out to his disciples and to the Pharisees is that in Jesus, God was doing something new. Now, God had predicted through the prophets that He was going to do something new. For example:

I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Ezek 36:24-27 NRSV

But the Pharisees were traditionalists in the worse way. Jesus is warning them and his disciples that if they only try to patch up the Old Testament way of thinking with a little bit of his new teaching, the mismatch will be obvious. If they try to pour the new wine of the gospel of Jesus Christ into the habits and legalism of the days of the law, neither one will be preserved. This is early in Jesus ministry and he is giving them an early hint that what he is introducing is a new covenant, a new way. Yet at the same time Jesus had already been saying that what he was doing would not destroy the old law so much as fulfill it and transcend it (Matt. 5:17ff).

This idea that Jesus’ way fulfills yet transcends the old, but at the same time is a new way that needs new wineskins generates a creative tension. The Christian church in the book of Acts needed to figure out in what ways it would be new, and in what ways it would be continuous with the OT. In reality, that is a continuing dimension of the church’s struggle for definition today as well.

# Application: Jesus’ way would require new thinking

I liked what contemporary blogger Renato Cardoso wrote about this passage. (The picture above is from his website too.)

In this analogy, Jesus taught that if we remain tied to old customs, traditions and ideas, we cannot perceive or receive anything new that will help us grow.

Stagnant minds will not receive new ideas. A renewing of the mind is required to receive new thoughts. The Thoughts of Jesus, despite having been in circulation for two thousand years, are in fact a new way of seeing all things. It is a new wine. For this reason, only those who have experienced the new birth can receive them. Renato Cardoso <https://blogs.universal.org/renatocardoso/en/2014/06/13/thought-4-closed-for-new-ideas/>

Jesus is in the business of transforming our minds so that we may be more like Jesus (Rom. 12:2). But if we are stuck in old habits and ways like the Pharisees whether those old ruts are religious or cultural or just plain self-serving customs, we will find it hard to truly follow Jesus.

## New thinking for NT church

Peter in Acts 10 allowed the Holy Spirit to instruct him and he followed Jesus’ example of eating in a place that was not according to Jewish rules – the home of a Gentile, the Roman centurion. In answer to Cornelius’ prayers and in response to Peter’s obedience, God unleashed another Pentecost among the Gentiles present who were just becoming believers, right there in the home of a Gentile centurion. It was a firsthand demonstration that God was pouring his New Wine of the New Covenant into new wineskins that Peter had not before imagined.

The Jerusalem Council in Acts15 is another great example. There the church collectively came to understand that they needed to shed some of the old thinking about what rules believers needed to keep and follow the Spirit’s leading. As a result, they allowed the New Wine of the New Covenant to be poured into new churches in the Gentile world without the constrictions of Jewish dietary and Sabbath laws. There were a few things they kept (Acts 15:20) as they discerned the best path. But the change was huge and the results history making.

Jesus gave one easy test that can repeatedly help us in our discernment when we too are faced with change in the church. Which are the commands of God and which are the traditions of men? Jesus usually split with the Pharisees because the rules they followed were not really the command of God, they were only the traditions of human teachers (Mark 7:6-8).

## Issues continue today

However, lest I make it sound too easy, this matter of discerning what to keep and what to let go in the Old covenant in still a very live issue for the church today.

The best illustration is in the 10 commandments itself. Sabbath keeping. Should we be keeping Sabbath from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday? Should we be avoiding all unessential work and pleasure as the Jews did? The Sabbath was a sign of the covenant with Abraham. It was uniquely Jewish. Yet God is recorded as resting in creation on the seventh day. So, the principle of a day of rest goes back to the dawn of history. Jesus kept OT Sabbath but the early Christians did not. Why? Jesus was Jewish, but the early Christians were not required to do so in the Acts 15 decision. Historically, we owe the 17th, 18th and 19th century American synthesis of Sunday and OT Sabbath ideas to the Puritans.

Now we live in the 21st century. What should Christians be doing today? What is a wise way to put the new wine in new wineskins, yet preserve what is essential? The wise decision is that the principle of Sabbath – a day for rest and worship and re-creation and relationships continues but it is not tied to a specific day nor are the details of the rules of the OT Sabbath expected. So, for example, for much of my working life, my Sabbath has been on Monday. In the morning, I have one of my longest devotional times of the whole week. Then I do other things that I don’t usually get to do other days.

## Does the principle continue to supersede NT Scripture as well?

Some people today are using the idea of this parable and extending it. They are pointing out that the Holy Spirit is still active in the church and He is still speaking to the church. The new wine is still being poured. This much is true. And in some senses, new wineskins continue to be needed. This is one reason why contemporary churches withy new worship styles are founded, for example.

But there is no indication in the NT that the NT itself will be superseded. In fact, there is a command at the end against adding or taking away from it. In contrast, the OT had hints that something new was coming. The only thing still coming in the NT is the second coming of Jesus. So, whatever developments we find in the NT era will not supersede the writings of the apostles. They may clarify places where there is an ambiguous message, or they may develop a principle. But they will not supersede.

## Our Personal lives

In our personal lives, the issue is not usually an academic one, but a practical one. The question is whether we will allow the Spirit of God to prod us out of our old ruts and into the freshness of life in the Spirit.

In the OT, God said through Isaiah, “I am about to do a new thing” (Isa 43:19). At the very end of the Bible, God said, “See, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:4). These two quotes reveal something that is true of God continually. God is always doing something new. The truth is that God’s Spirit is continually renewing our lives. He is helping us to meet new challenges. He is helping us to find new horizons. God’s Spirit is constantly renewing our minds. God is continually teaching us how to love.

Will we allow the new wine to be poured into new containers in our lives or will we restrict it? Will we try to hold onto old habits or will we allow God to create new ones?

That is the real discipleship challenge of this parable.

God wants to do new things in our lives by his Spirit. Will we let Him?