

New Wine in Old Skins: The Impossibility of Mixing Religious Traditions and Christ's Grace

Luke 5:33-39

Jesus has called Levi to be a disciple (5:27-28) and Levi (Matthew) responded by holding a banquet attended by all his tax collector buddies (5:29). The Pharisees object to Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners, and they couch their objection in religious language. "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). *The implication is that Jesus and His followers aren't as spiritual or holy as John the Baptist and the Pharisees.*

(A). We are self-righteous when we do something *external* and measure our spirituality by it.

We see fasting throughout the Old Testament as a minor theme. Moses, Elijah, Daniel, and Jesus all went through prolonged fasts as they sought God. The Law prescribed fasting only once a year on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29-31), but Jews traditionally also fasted on Rosh Hashanah as well. The Essenes, a desert group of scholars which included John the Baptist, fasted far more regularly. Pharisees *proudly* fasted twice a week (Matt. 6:16-18) and believed themselves spiritually superior.

(B). Jesus emphasis is on the *internal* and teaches the necessity of looking within and trusting Him.

"Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22).
Can the Ethiopian change the color of his skin or the leopard his spots? So too... (Jeremiah 13:23).
Jesus called the Pharisees "white-washed tombs; beautiful outside, but inside dead" (Matt. 23:27).

I. A real sense of Jesus' presence means real joy and less rules.

Jesus answers the question about His disciples not praying or fasting enough with a vivid word picture. *"You can't make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them"* (Luke 5:34). In Jesus' day, the groom (ie. the bridegroom) and was expected to host the celebration (John 2:9-10), The groom would go to the bride's home to fetch her and her attendants and friends, and the couple would lead them in a procession to the groom's house (see Matt. 25:1-13) where the celebration was to take place. The wedding party might go on for as long as a week. Jesus is saying, just as you don't fast while the bridegroom's hosts the wedding celebration, neither do my followers fast – **I'm here.**

(A). Jesus came to earth to take a new bride; anyone who is willing to become a Jesus follower.

In the Old Testament Israel was pictured as the wife of Yahweh (Is. 54:5; Jer. 2:2; Ez. 16:2), but Israel broke covenant, and God 'divorced' Israel, and promised a Messiah who would enter a New Covenant, *the ekklesia*, are called to follow Jesus from every nation, tribe and family in the world.

(B). Fasting is appropriate in times of mourning and when there's no sense of Jesus' presence.

Jesus said, "The time will come when I will be taken from them; then they will fast" (Luke 5:35). He is referring to His crucifixion; but we must not forget His resurrection, Pentecost, and 70 AD. It is very appropriate in times of loss, when God's goodness seems distant (His very presence) to fast and pray for direction. But these times are to be done in secret; knowing your Father is good.

(B). A Jesus follower who continually senses God's presence may never fast or be *seen* praying.

Why? Because you're praying "without ceasing," continually aware of His presence and goodness.

II. A religious structure where Jesus' presence is welcome (fresh wine) means wholesale changes.

Jesus gives two analogies to show why it was impossible for the Pharisees to enjoy God's presence.

(A). Patched garments - "No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one. Otherwise, they will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old" (5:36).

It is impossible to take an old structure (A Pharisaical structure of religious works) and try to put

a 'patch' on it – keeping the old garment, but adding something new – for it is impossible to do.
(B). New wine in old skins – “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” (Luke 5:37-38).

(1). The image of wineskins that Jesus uses in his parable is foreign to our culture. Wine was made by treading barefoot on the grapes in a wine press, a square or circular pit hewn out of the rock, or dug out and lined with rocks and sealed with plaster. (See Isaiah 63:2-3; Job 24:11b; Lamentations 1:15; Joel 3:13; Matthew 21:33; Revelation 14:19-20; 19:15, where treading the winepress was a symbol of judgment.) The juice then flowed through a channel into a lower vessel, a wine vat which functioned as a collecting and fermenting container.

(2). Wineskins were made of whole tanned goatskins and received wine from the vats. The legs and tail were cut off and sealed (see 1 Sam. 1:24; 10:3; 16:20; 25:18; 2 Sam. 16:1). In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *nebel* (*skin-bottle, skin*) is translated by the KJV as "bottle" which gives us images of glass wine bottles. But these were rather whole goatskins, with nubbins bulging out where the legs once were, the neck tied off where the wine has been poured in, the whole large skin bulging almost to bursting as the carbon dioxide gas generated by the fermentation process stretches it to its limit.

"For I am full of words,
and the spirit within me compels me;
inside I am like bottled-up wine,
like new wineskins ready to burst." (Job 32:18-19)

Fermentation in the wineskin might continue for another two to four months. By that time the skin has been stretched to its limit. The alcohol is probably about 12%, and the collagen protein that gives the leather its stretching ability has been stretched out, and probably denatured by the alcohol, destroying its natural resiliency. The skin's ability to contract and stretch again has been lost. Thus, an old wine skin is fine for old wine, but not fresh wine.

III. It was impossible for the Kingdom Jesus inaugurated to fit into the Pharisees' religious system.

The Apostle Paul was trained as a strict Pharisee; well-versed in the Bible and a very religious man. When he came to an understanding of the radical nature of living life by grace through faith, he goes preaching it boldly throughout the Mediterranean. Soon, there were those in Jerusalem who were calling him in to explain why he wasn't imposing Jewish regulations on his Gentile converts (Acts 15).

Jesus insists that the gospel of the Kingdom must not be hindered by our rules of comfortable religion. The new wine of the gospel of grace and the presence of Christ in our lives 24/7 may not be as old and easy as the old wine of comfortable religion and man-made traditions, but it has real power.

Now we must each figure out the personal application from the words of Jesus. What the structures in my life, my marriage, my church and my work place that can't coexist with wine of God's grace. What have I tried to sew the work of the Spirit and God's grace onto that only causes a greater tear in the religious system itself? Am I willing to make changes in my system to accommodate the Spirit?

"New wine must be poured into new wineskins." We are called not to protect those comfortable things in which are incompatible with the Spirit. The message for Jesus followers is to be serious about our faith and the work of the Spirit in our lives. If our honored customs, traditions, and religious habits take precedence over the work of the Spirit, we become like the Pharisees of old.