

Old and New

Luke 5:33-39

The last time we were in Luke 5 we looked at the question raised by the scribes and Pharisees in verse 30 where the scribes and Pharisees asked, “Why do ye eat and drink with publicans and sinners?” Jesus answered in verse 32, “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

In Luke 5:33 we read another question that was brought to Jesus, “Why do the disciples of John fast often, and make prayers, and likewise the disciples of the Pharisees; but thine eat and drink?”

In verses 34 and 35 we see Jesus answered this question. And then in verses 36-39 Jesus gave 3 parables which show the break between the old and the new. From this text we learn that the gospel of Jesus Christ cannot be found or contained within man-made religion.

I. The Question

At the beginning of verse 33 we read, “And they said unto him (Jesus).” Who were “they?” If we just read Luke’s account, it seems that “they” refers to the scribes and Pharisees who had posed the question in verse 30. But in Matthew’s account, we are told that it was the disciples of John the Baptist who asked Jesus this question (Matt. 9:14). Now, it’s possible that the Pharisees were also involved

in this question. The Pharisees may have gone to the disciples of John with murmuring just like that had gone to the disciples of Jesus with murmuring. They may have said to John's disciples, "Have you noticed this discrepancy between John the Baptist and Jesus?" But it seems that it was the disciples of John the Baptist who actually asked Jesus this question.

John the Baptist was a prophet sent by God to prepare the way for the Messiah. In Luke 7:28 Jesus said, "Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist." And here are his disciples, his close and faithful followers. They believed that John the Baptist was the prophet sent to prepare the way for the Messiah. They knew that John had pointed to Jesus as the "Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). But they looked at the austere life of John and his disciples and the life of Jesus and his disciples and they had some questions.

Notice that the disciples of John brought their question to Jesus. This was not a question like the one posed by the scribes and Pharisees in verse 30. Their question wasn't genuine. They weren't actually interested in the answer. They were trying to cast a cloud over the ministry of Jesus. They didn't question Jesus directly but "murmured against his disciples" (Luke 5:30).

In contrast, the disciples of John directly questioned Jesus. And I believe their question was genuine. I believe they genuinely didn't understand the behavior they mention and they genuinely want clarification from Jesus.

No matter where you are in your walk with the Lord, it is a good thing to ask questions. Christ doesn't ask his followers to exercise blind and ignorant faith. If there is something that you wonder about or don't understand, ask questions. Bring it before the Lord in prayer. Seek an answer in the Word of God. Go to a faithful brother or sister in Christ and ask for help. Our church is blessed to have 4 elders. You are welcome to come to us with questions: Dicky, or Cloyd, or Bro. Bell, or myself. We might not have an immediate answer for you, but I know this, any one of us would be glad to sit and study with you.

But a Biblical word of warning about asking questions. James 1:5-7 says, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord."

If you are going to ask questions, ask in faith. Don't be like the Pharisees who asked their questions to cast doubt and stir up contentions. Ask questions out of a genuine desire to know and honor the Lord. And if you ask God for wisdom, be prepared to obey when you receive an answer. That's a request the Lord will honor.

Now look at the question itself as found in verse 33 of our text, "Why do the disciples of John fast often, and make prayers, and likewise the disciples of the Pharisees; but thine eat and drink?"

Notice how they began their question, “Why do the disciples of John fast often, and make prayers, and likewise the disciples of the Pharisees.” They are not looking for clarification about their prayers and fasting. They know why they pray and fast. The disciples of John followed in the ascetic life modeled by their master. The Pharisees observed various ceremonial fasts and times of prayer. They know why they fast and pray and there may even be an attitude of self-righteous assurance in them as they ask this question. If this line of reasoning was suggested by the Pharisees, it was not inquisitive but accusatory. Why don’t you fast like us?

To help us understand this question further, we need to understand what “fast” refers to here. There are no fasts explicitly required by God in the Law. The Law put no direct requirement for fasting upon the people of Israel. The language that is used to describe the Day of Atonement implies fasting, and that is how the Jews interpreted it, but fasting is not expressly commanded. And if that is indeed the correct interpretation, undoubtedly Jesus fasted on the Day of Atonement with the other Jews. From his birth we see example after example of Jesus fulfilling the law at every point, for us, those He came to redeem. Certainly He did not fail at this point, if fasting was required on the Day of Atonement.

This means that the question raised in this text is a question of human tradition and current practice at that time, and not a question about keeping the Law of God. Again, this is a question about human tradition and current religious practice and not about keeping the Law. This is very important for our

understanding of the rest of this passage. This was a question about human tradition and current religious practice and not about keeping the law.

The Pharisees had many traditions concerned about or involving fasting. They regularly fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12). They also made a practice of fasting on significant days throughout the year. And they would fast during times of national need, particularly when there was a need for rain.¹

We do not know what traditions or practices the disciples of John the Baptist may have had. All we know is what is said in this passage: They fasted often.

In contrast to the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees, the question in verse 33 says, “But thine (the disciples of Jesus) eat and drink.” There was a widely divergent pattern of behavior between the disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees on one side and the disciples of Jesus on the other. On one side there was strict observances of these traditions and practices, and on the other there seemed to be no regard for those same traditions and practices. One side looked somber, and religious, and serious and the other side looked like they had no regard for spiritual things of this nature. You can understand why the disciples of John the Baptist would have been troubled by this when they observed it or when the Pharisees brought it to their attention.

¹ See John Gill’s commentary on Matthew 9:14 for further details.

John was not the Messiah. He was just the forerunner. But his disciples appear to be more serious about religious observances. Why is this? Why the discrepancy?

The disciples of John the Baptist, either with the Pharisees or after being questioned by the Pharisees, brought this question about fasting to Jesus. Why do we fast, but your disciples do not? That is the question they brought to Jesus. Look at Jesus' answer beginning in v. 34.

II. Jesus' Answer

In verse 34 Jesus asked them, "Can ye make the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them?" In answering this question from John's disciples Jesus calls himself the "bridegroom." This was familiar language to them. John the Baptist had used similar language when speaking about Jesus.

In John 3 we are told that there arose a question between John's disciples and some other Jews and so they came to John the Baptist and said to him in verse 26, "Rabbi, he that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou barest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him."

John answered his disciples, "Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him. He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him,

rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:28-30). John the Baptist referred to Jesus as the “bridegroom.”

And in our text Jesus calls his disciples the “children of the bride chamber.” This was a term commonly used by the Jews to refer to the friends of the groom and bride who would attend the celebrations that surrounded a wedding. A wedding is not a time of mourning (at least we hope not), it is a time of rejoicing. A wedding is not a time to fast, but a time to feast.

It was the tradition of the Jews that during the celebrations that surrounded a wedding the “children of the bride chamber” would be exempt from certain religious traditions. For example, if the celebrations surrounding a wedding took place during the feast of tabernacles, they were exempt from celebrating in the makeshift booths that were to be constructed for that feast. They were also exempt from their traditional times set aside for prayer each day.²

Notice that Jesus does not appeal to the Law in this illustration. Rather, he appeals to the traditions of the Pharisees, the very ones who were behind this question. Jesus is pointing out to them that even their religious traditions acknowledge that a wedding is a time to rejoice and not mourn, to feast not fast.

² See John Gill on Matthew 9:15 for some excellent quotes from several Jewish sources which demonstrate this.

Interestingly, Jewish comments on the Messianic prophecy in Zechariah 8:19 say, “All fasts shall cease in the days of the Messiah; and there shall be no more but good days, and days of joy and rejoicing.”³

With this illustration Jesus answers the question that was brought to him in verse 33. Why didn't his disciples fast? Because they were with Jesus. Jesus was the bridegroom who had come for his bride. This was not a time to mourn and fast. That would not be appropriate. This was a time to feast, to rejoice and celebrate: the bridegroom, espoused from eternity past, had finally come for his bride, his people, the church. That's good news, and that's cause to rejoice.

But Jesus tempered that good news in verse 35: “But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days.” Had Jesus just given verse 34 we may have been tempted to envy the position of the disciples at that time who rejoiced in the bodily presence of the bridegroom. In their weakness Jesus didn't not lay too heavy a burden upon them. As we study the gospels we see that, by degrees, as they grew in their faith, Jesus began to lay heavier and heavier burdens upon his disciples. And as these burdens grew, the crowds of disciples thinned out until only a small core was left. And things would still get harder for those disciples as Jesus alludes to here, when the bridegroom would be taken away from them.

³ See above.

We can learn something here about God's dealings with his people. First, he knows the weakness of our frame. He knows what we can or will endure and He deals with us accordingly. There may be times when it seems to us that the Lord endures great weakness in our brothers and sisters in Christ and treats them with great gentleness while we feel like we are treated with great severity. Do not grumble against the Lord. Trust that his wisdom is greater than yours. His insight is greater than yours, and unbiased. Leave them with the Lord and go on faithfully in your walk.

Second, we can learn from this passage that in those times when God comforts and shields us (as he did his disciples on this occasion), we should not assume that this will always be the case. Beware of giving yourself over to sloth and ease because the Lord has made your present path smooth and easy. When you are going through a time when the Lord has made your path smooth and easy, use that time as the faithful disciples did, to draw nearer to the Lord, to learn more about him, to grow in your faith, so that when the way becomes hard you do not fall away. Hard times would certainly come for these disciples of Jesus.

Prophetically, Jesus says in verse 35, "The bridegroom shall be taken away from them." Jesus knew what was coming. The betrayal and crucifixion was not a surprise for Jesus. This wasn't a sudden turn of events. This was the purpose for which he came.

One of my favorite passages which illustrates this is found in Acts 4. All the people with power in Jerusalem got together and plotted the worst evil they could imagine against Jesus and all they managed to accomplish was the will of God. In Acts 4:26-28 the gathered Christians in Jerusalem prayed and said, "The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ. For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done." Jesus knew the day was coming when he would be taken away from his disciples, and he talks about it here in our text this morning.

When Jesus was taken away, then would his disciples fast. We can glean from this that there are appropriate times for us to fast. We can rejoice in our privileged position in redemptive history. The bridegroom came for his bride. We live in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He has ascended to heaven but will return for us his people and we have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us as the earnest of our inheritance. And this is cause for great and continual rejoicing.

Yet there are still times when it is appropriate and even needful for us to fast. Times of mourning and repentance. Times of prayer. Times of spiritual renewal. These are all examples of times when it may be appropriate for disciples of Jesus Christ to fast.

So far from this text we have looked at the question brought to Jesus: “Why don’t your disciples fast?”

And we have seen the reply of Jesus: His disciples didn’t fast because they were with the bridegroom. Jesus Christ, the Messiah, had come and that was cause for rejoicing. There would be times when it would be appropriate for them to fast later.

After Jesus gave this answer about fasting he went on to give three parables in verses 36-39.

III. Jesus’ Parables

First, Jesus said, “No one putteth a piece of a new garment upon an old.” Why not? Why would you not patch an old garment with a new piece of cloth? Jesus said in verse 36, “The new maketh a rent.” The new would rip the old. The old cloth has already shrunk. The new cloth, as it shrinks, would tear the old cloth it had been sewn into. In the end, the hole would be worse than it was in the beginning.

And further, Jesus added, “The new agreeth not with the old.” The new cloth would not match the old cloth. They may not match in color or style and they certainly wouldn’t match in value. The new is better than the old. Use other old cloth to patch old clothing and keep the new cloth new.

Second, Jesus said, “No man putteth new wine into old bottles.” Why not? Why not put new wine in old bottles? When we think of wine bottles we probably think of the long necked glass bottles that are ubiquitous with wine today. But in antiquity wine bottles were usually made from animal skin, leather. These bottles were somewhat elastic when they were new, but as they aged they hardened. Wine, as it ferments, lets off CO₂. So if you were to put new wine into old wineskins that don’t stretch, that pressure from the CO₂ will build up and eventually the wineskin would burst. And then both the wine and the bottle will be ruined. In verse 38 Jesus said, “New wine must be put into new bottles; and both are preserved.”

And finally, Jesus said, “No man . . . having drunk old wine straightway desireth new.” What is the difference between new wine and old wine? Keep in mind, this is before the days of Louis Pasteur. Modern grape juice doesn’t turn into wine because it has been pasteurized. The bacteria which would begin to ferment the juice has been removed and so it remains a shelf-stable juice. But in the ancient world the grape juice would begin to ferment almost immediately. Grape juice that has naturally fermented is bitter when it is “new wine.” But as it ages it becomes less bitter and more sweet. Those who were listening to Jesus would have immediately understood this illustration: that the old wine is better than the new. Someone who has been drinking old, sweet wine would not like to drink new, bitter wine.

We have these three parables, but what do they illustrate? What is the point that Jesus is trying to make? What spiritual truth is taught here? Very simply, that the old does not mix with the new. The old does not mix with the new.

Now, it's very important to recognize that Jesus is not talking about the old covenant, or what we might call the Old Testament, or the Law. The law was good. (Romans 7:12, "Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good.") The problem was not the law of God, but our inability to keep the law.

In Matthew 5:17 Jesus said, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill." The gospel, the doing, the dying, and the rising of Jesus Christ, did not destroy the law, but fulfilled the law. Jesus did not teach, "Cast out the Law of God, I've brought something better to replace it with." No. Jesus came to fulfill the Law.

We could not meet the Law's righteous demands. But Jesus, God incarnate, came and met the Law's demands for us. Our righteousness could not satisfy God's demands for righteousness, and thus we were under the wrath of God. But in Jesus Christ, God's own righteousness met God's demands for righteousness, and God was satisfied. Jesus made propitiation for us, he atoned for us, he satisfied God's wrath.

And so the gospel call goes out and calls upon men to abandon their own righteousness. It will never be good enough. Study the Law of God and it will teach you that you don't measure up. You fail. You sin. You can never keep the

Law of God. Don't rely on your righteousness. Cast it aside and lay hold of Christ's righteousness. He kept the Law at every point. He satisfied the just demands of the Law. And the incredible good news of the Gospel is that His righteousness, his perfect, unchanging, immutable righteousness is freely given to all who believe.

We bring our sin, and Jesus gives us his righteousness. Come to him in faith and repentance. Confess your sins to him. Turn *from* your sin and *to* the cross of Jesus Christ. He stands ready and able and willing to forgive your sins and give you His righteousness. All this is the result of the free and unmerited grace of God in His eternal plan to redeem His people for His glory. That's the gospel. And it is incredible and wonderful and beautiful truth.

But if you take the law away. If you suggest that Jesus ministry had nothing to do with the Law and that Jesus taught that the old Law and his new Gospel don't have anything to do with each other, then you have gutted the gospel. You have removed the very thing Jesus came to fulfill. That's why it is so important to not confuse what Jesus is saying here about the old and the new. He is not teaching that the Law has nothing to do with him and his ministry.

Rather, these parables are a direct answer to the question that was raised in verse 33: "Why don't your disciples fast and pray like the disciples of John or like the disciples of the Pharisees?" Remember, this is a question about human traditions and current religious practices.

Jesus is telling them, “You cannot take the gospel and drop it into your old forms of religion.” It won’t fit. It doesn’t match. It will rip apart. It will burst. You won’t like it.

So it was for the Jews of Jesus day. They had missed the point of the law. Instead of pointing them to their need for a savior, the Messiah, they believed the law could be fulfilled with their own righteousness. They had added their own rules and traditions to the law (such as the fasting which is brought up in this text). They believed God was pleased by their rigorous keeping of these rules and traditions. They had their own religion, and they wanted to know how or even if Jesus would fit into it. Jesus told them, “You cannot add the new to the old. The old cannot bear the new. The old will burst and the new will spill out.”

Times and forms and names have changed, but all over the world and maybe even in this room there are still people who are ask the same sort of question: “How does Jesus fit into my religion?” It may be any religion. It may be a religion of self. Or it may a religion of humanism. Or a religion of rules and traditions to earn righteousness. On and on we could go. Where does Jesus fit into my religious experience? How can I add Jesus to improve the milage I get out of my religion?

Our issues may be different than those raised in this text, but the biblical answer is the same: the gospel of Jesus Christ doesn’t fit in our religion. The old can’t hold the new. It won’t fit. It doesn’t match. It will rip apart. It will burst. You won’t like it.

You can't add Jesus to the old. He takes away the old and brings in the new. II Corinthians 5:15, "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." By the grace of God may we grasp this beautiful gospel truth and live in light of this revelation.

What are some practical applications from this teaching? There are two applications I want us to consider as we close.

First, we must apply this truth when preaching the gospel to others. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not something we add to the old to patch it up and make it work. The gospel isn't a bandaid we put on our lives to fix our problems. The gospel isn't springs we add to help smooth out the bumps of life. The gospel isn't a patch we use to cover our flaws.

The gospel of Jesus Christ calls upon us to abandon our old religion, anything we rested in for righteousness, to abandon our sin. We must cast aside the old and be made new in Christ. When we share the gospel we are not sharing a helpful tip. We are sharing life transforming, and even more than that, life giving truth. The gospel comes to men dead in trespasses and sins and gives them life, spiritual life. The gospel isn't a patch for the old, it is a whole new thing.

Second, we need to apply this truth in preaching the gospel to ourselves. We are prone to forget. And even we, as Christians, can forget the powerful and practical truths of the gospel and begin to live in the old instead of the new. The

power of the gospel of Jesus Christ is not contained in forms and practices and traditions but in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

When you find yourself faltering in your Christian walk, when you are struggling with sin, when you are discouraged and downtrodden don't go back to the old. Don't go to forms and practices and traditions and good works and anything else which compromises the external veneer of religion. They didn't help you when you were dead in trespasses and sins. They have no power. They have no ability. They can't hold what you need.

You must go to the new. Go back to the gospel: the doing, the dying, and the rising of Jesus Christ. We may falter, but he did not falter. We may fail and fall to temptation, but he did fail or fall. We may become discouraged and downtrodden, but he was raised in victory and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

Why is this good news? Because we are joint-heirs with Jesus. All that he has is given to us in salvation. Praise God for the new, for the revelation of Jesus Christ, and by his grace may we never try to return in any way to the old.