

Luke 5:36-39

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Jesus shares two parables about the incompatibility between the old patterns of righteousness as taught by the Pharisees, and the new way of life that He has come to offer.

The parallel Gospel accounts for this event are Matthew 9:16-17 and Mark 2:21-22.

Jesus continues His response to the Pharisees' issue concerning the behavior of His disciples with a pair of parables.

Previously the Pharisees had challenged 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)

Jesus initially responded with a short *parable* explaining to them that the reason His disciples do not fast and offer prayers as the followers of the Pharisees and John the Baptizer do is because they are with the bridegroom—which calls for celebration and feasting (Luke 5:34-35).

That *parable* answered their question. But now Jesus elaborates with two more parables which describe the potency of His mission.

The first *parable* uses the metaphor of clothing. The second *parable* uses the metaphor of *wineskins*.

Jesus's first *parable* is, “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” (v 36).

Cloth was an expensive commodity in the ancient world. Clothing and garments were labor intensive and time-consuming to make. It was a far more efficient use of time and resources to repair an *old garment* that had a *tear* than it was to buy or make a *new* one. But in the process of patching *tears* in an *old garment*, one had to make sure they were using the proper patch of material.

Because *cloth* shrinks over time, especially after the first few times it gets washed, the garment-mender needed to use a patch of *cloth* that had already been shrunken to patch up a *tear*. If he or she used a *new* patch of *cloth* that was unshrunk, then the patch would shrink after being washed and pull away from the seams of the *garment* and a worse *tear* would result.

Jesus means by this *parable* that *He*, His teachings, and His kingdom are like a patch of unshrunk *cloth*. The traditions (like fasting) that the Pharisees have built up around the Law are

like an *old garment* that is tearing apart. Jesus did not come to repair this *old garment*. *He* is not interested in joining the *old* system of righteousness based on external rule-following that is riddled with *tears* of hypocrisy. *He* came to provide inner and external harmony between God and man.

Jesus did not come to mend here and there. *He* came to make all things *new* (Revelation 21:5). Taking His teaching as a patch to the *old* system would only make its *tears* worse. These *old* ways do not adequately reflect living the goodness of Christ. Therefore they need to be replaced.

Jesus said *He* came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 5:17). A *new* approach is required for that to take place. If one is to accept Jesus's teachings, and rule in His kingdom, he must set aside his *old* garments of righteousness measured by religious practice and put on the *new* robes of Christ's righteousness measured by loving others (Matthew 7:12, 22:11-14; Revelation 3:5). It will not work to use some of Jesus's teachings to patch up a person's righteousness. *He* must embrace the whole of who Christ is and what *He* commands.

Moreover, our hearts and minds are like *old* garments. Applying a *new* patch of unshrunk *cloth* of Jesus's teaching will not mend their *tears*. It will make them worse. We need to be given entirely *new* hearts (Psalm 51:10) and *new* minds (Romans 12:2) that Christ offers us every day.

Jesus's second parable is:

“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” (v 37-38).

The pattern of Jesus's second *parable* is similar to His first one. In the same way that no one puts a patch of unshrunk *cloth* on an *old garment*, neither do people put *new wine into old wineskins*. This is because *new*, unfermented *wine* will expand and burst the inflexible *old wineskins*. The result is that *the new wine* spills and is wasted and *the old* wineskin is *ruined*. *New wine* must be put into *fresh wineskins*, if both are to be preserved.

The meanings of the two parables are very similar. *The new wine* is Jesus and the kingdom life *He* offers. The *old wine* (though unmentioned) is the self-righteous hypocrisy based on legalism as promoted by the Pharisees. What Paul will call the “righteousness of faith” versus the “righteousness of the law” (Romans 9:30-33). The *fresh wineskins* are disciples whose hearts and minds are ready to follow Jesus and His teachings. The *old wineskins* are those seeking to manufacture righteousness by externally following the Law and the traditions built up around the Law.

One of the main points of both parables is that Jesus, His teachings of righteousness, and His kingdom are incompatible with the tired, worn-out, stale way of life that the Pharisees imposed. This incompatibility is seen in another contentious moment between Jesus and the religious establishment in Matthew:

“Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ‘Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.’ And He answered and said to them, ‘Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?’”
(Matthew 15:1-3)

Just as no one can serve two masters (Matthew 6:24), *the new wine* of Christ cannot be put *into* the *old wineskins* of religious practice. Either we continue to be *old wineskins* that hold the tasteless, legalistic, and hypocritical *wine* of self-seeking, or we become *new* and *fresh wineskins* in Christ that are filled with the vibrant *wine* of His righteousness as expressed in serving others. We will not experience the righteousness of Christ or His kingdom if we remain an *old* wineskin. We must be made *new*. To receive *the new wine* of Christ, we must become *fresh wineskins*.

Jesus concludes His second parable with a final observation and/or prediction,

“*And no one, after drinking old wine wishes for new; for he says, ‘The old is good enough’*” (v 39).

Jesus’s remark goes against conventional thinking. Traditionally, *old*, or aged, *wine* is regarded as better and more highly valued than *new wine*. But Jesus is saying that *the new wine* is better.

The new wine is Jesus’s teachings and the *new* way of kingdom life *He* offers. If this verse is to be understood in context, then it seems that a person holding on to the *old* ways of legalism and manufactured righteousness through the Law is not likely to readily accept *the new wine* Jesus is offering. If we believe we are in the right, it is very difficult to lower our pride and realize we might actually be in the wrong. Like the darkness that is unable to comprehend the light (John 1:5), so too are these old wine guzzlers who are unable to comprehend the fullness of grace, mercy, and abundant life which Jesus offers. They incorrectly and foolishly insist that what they have *is good enough*. So, they never even give *the new wine* of Jesus a try.

But anyone who stops drinking *the old wine* and sets their *old* cup of *wine* down and actually tries *the new wine* of Jesus would instantly “taste and see that the LORD is good” (Psalm 34:8). They would never again be satisfied with *the old wine* and think that it *is good enough*. Like the living water Jesus offered the Samaritan woman at the well, *no one* who has tasted *the new wine* of Jesus “will thirst again” (John 4:13).

The first miracle Jesus performed was literally turning water into *new wine* (John 2:1-11). It was a physical manifestation of this teaching. When *He* did this, the head waiter marveled how much better Jesus’s *new wine* was. He said:

“Every man serves the good wine first, and when the people have drunk freely, then he serves the poorer wine; but you have kept the good wine until now.”
(John 2:10)

Jesus’s teachings bore themselves out in the lives of the Pharisees. We are told of at least two Pharisees who tried *the new wine* Jesus came to offer. One was Nicodemus, who visited Jesus at

night (John 3:1-21). Because of his acceptance, Nicodemus was publicly admonished and ridiculed by his fellow Pharisees (John 7:50-52). The other was Joseph of Arimathea (who may have been a Sadducee). Joseph sat on the Sanhedrin Council and was waiting for the kingdom of God (Luke 23:50-51—see also John 19:38).

Jesus's offer of *new wine* is available and freely offered to us. But we cannot enjoy it if we are drinking the *wine* of our old ways. No matter what we think of our old (current) ways—whether it is *good enough* or sour—Jesus's ways are infinitely better.

“O taste and see that the LORD is good!”
(Psalm 34:8)

Biblical Text

³⁶ 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. ³⁷ 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. ³⁸ But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. ³⁹ And no one, after drinking old wine wishes for new; for he says, ‘The old is good enough.’”