

INTRODUCTION

I was shopping for some deodorant the other day. I'm an "Old Spice" guy, and I didn't find the scent I usually buy, instead I saw these two words on another Old Spice bar—it said, "New and Improved." So I bought it. So if you get a whiff of me today, let me know what you think! Do I smell better?

Advertisers have long known the two most magic words for marketing are "new and improved." They may only change the packaging or make a minor modification, but studies have shown that consumers are more likely to buy products that say, "New and Improved." In our passage today, Jesus shares three mini-parables that all have the same theme: He came to bring truth about God that is new and improved.

The context of this set of three parables is important. Push the rewind button for Matthew 9 and you see Jesus telling a paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven." That made the religious snobs angry. Then we see Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners at Matthew's house—that made the religious snobs even angrier. This passage reveals their third point of criticism of Jesus and His disciples.

Matthew 9:14-17. "Then John's disciples came and asked him, 'How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' Jesus answered, 'How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast. No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.'"

Whenever you study a parable of Jesus, it's much like peeling an onion, which has several layers. As we study these three short parables, I want us to peel the onion. First we will peel away the surface truth—which is the natural story of the parable. After we remove that layer, we'll examine the spiritual truth that lies just below the surface. This is the timeless spiritual meaning that applies to all Christians throughout history. The third layer is the personal truth—and it's the core of truth. It examines what God is saying to ME and YOU. It's the most uncomfortable level—that's why many teachers never venture into that level. It's dangerous preaching, because personal truth often offends people.

Have you ever peeled an onion? The surface layers don't necessarily make you cry, but when you get to core, it's hard to peel it without shedding tears. The same is true with God's Word. It doesn't really affect me until I dig down to the core that applies to me. So let's peel the onion for these three parables.

PARABLE 1: A WEDDING CELEBRATION

John the Baptist's disciples fasted regularly and so did the Pharisees. They were upset that Jesus' disciples were partying while they were suffering. The Pharisees fasted two days a week, but

they fasted simply as an outward display of their goodness. They weren't fasting for God's sake; they were fasting to be seen by others.

Fasting itself is a wonderful spiritual discipline. Jesus fasted and prayed often—but it wasn't a ritual designed for others to see. The Old Testament commanded Jews to fast only one day a year—Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement. But the Pharisees had taken a wonderful act of spiritual discipline and had changed it into a badge of super-self-righteousness. In answering their criticism, Jesus compared Himself to a bridegroom. Let's "peel the onion."

Surface Truth: People don't fast at a wedding party, they feast

I've been to some great weddings and wedding receptions in my 35 years of ministry. But from my study of Jewish weddings, the most elaborate American weddings seem dull compared to a Jewish wedding. The wedding feast is the climax of a year of betrothal. That time of expectation and planning was much more involved than our engagement period. Following the actual ceremony, there was a full week of eating, dancing, singing and celebrating that took place. In America, after the wedding, couples leave immediately for their honeymoon. But in Jewish weddings, the couple stayed and were treated like a king and queen—they were even given garland crowns to wear during the week-long celebration. There was food, drink, dancing, music, and plenty of fun. It was the best week of their lives and the friends of the bridegroom did some serious partying—it wasn't a time for fasting! It was time to feast! That's the surface truth, so let's peel off a layer and go deeper to the:

Spiritual Truth: You can't live under grace and law at the same time

The Bible says, "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." (John 1: 17) Living under the law is a burden, living under grace liberates you. Jesus identified Himself as a bridegroom and His disciples are like the guests at a wedding celebration. That's why they acted happy instead of somber. It was time to celebrate!

There is an important truth: The Christian life is more like a wedding celebration than a funeral procession. The real reason the Pharisees were upset was they thought, "It's not fair for you guys to enjoy life when we have to endure religion! If you were really holy you'd be miserable like us!"

The Pharisees were griping while Jesus' disciples were grinning. The Pharisees were somber, while Jesus' disciples were singing. The Pharisees were languishing while Jesus' disciples were laughing. The Pharisees were criticizing while Jesus' boys were celebrating. The Pharisees were jealous—Jesus' group was jubilant. Which group are you in? That leads us a level deeper into this metaphor. Notice:

Personal Truth: My life should be characterized by a joyous relationship with Jesus instead of legalistic rituals

I've been observing Christians closely for many years—and I have found there is a large herd of modern "Pharisees" in the church today. Like the Pharisees, they believe that the more miserable

you look in church, the more "holy" you are.

I've been up here looking into the faces of thousands of Christians and I must say some have perfected what I call the "holy look." It's a facial expression that looks somewhere between acid indigestion and a migraine headache! Some people look as if they were weaned on vinegar and have been drinking dill pickle juice. Where is the joy of the Lord?

The Bible says, "Though you have not seen him, you love him...you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy." (1 Peter 1:8) In commenting on this passage of scripture, Ray Stedman wrote: "Jesus is commenting about the joy that should characterize our lives when we discover the reality of a relationship with Jesus Christ. Church services, for far too many centuries, have been borrowed from an Old Testament concept of worship, and have presented a scene of solemnity and silence and ritual. Today, many people have the idea that a church service ought to be a time of silence, when everyone sits in supposed awestricken solemnity before God. But this is not the picture Jesus came to give." He says: "Instead of the fast, it is a feast; instead of the sackcloth, there is a robe; and instead of solemnity, there ought to be joy."

That doesn't mean we don't deal with suffering. Life is full of sadness, pain, and disappointment. If you compare the Christian life to a song, the melody line is always joy and praise. The harmony line is suffering and pain. Together, our lives are a beautiful song—but the melody of joy must prevail.

Jesus wasn't forbidding us to fast. In fact, He was predicting His death when He spoke of the time "when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast." The word "taken" means to be "ripped away violently." Jesus was saying after his brutal death, his followers WOULD fast—but never like the Pharisees fasted. When the Pharisees fasted, they would put ashes on their heads and moan so that everyone would know they were "spiritual." In Matthew 6:16-18 Jesus gave these instructions, "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting...when you fast, put oil on you head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father."

Are you more like the Pharisees or the disciples of Jesus? Is there real joy in your life? If someone closely observed your life for a month would they say, "I want what that person has?"

PARABLE 2: A NEW PATCH ON OLD CLOTH

When I was growing up I was always falling down and tearing holes in the knees of my jeans. Fortunately, my mother had some of those iron-on denim patches to cover up the holes in my jeans. Today, young people pay a lot of money for jeans that already have holes in them! Let's peel the onion on this parable:

Surface Truth: A new patch on old clothes will ruin the patch and the clothes

Today we have synthetic fabrics that don't shrink when washed. In Jesus' time, new cloth always shrank after the first few times it was washed. A person wearing a new garment had to

make sure it was couple of sizes too large so that over time, the garment would shrink down to the right size. Garments often got torn or moth eaten so they had to be constantly repaired. If you had an old robe with a hole in it, it would be foolish to sew a new patch of cloth on it. Obviously, when it was washed, the new patch would shrink, but the old cloth would stay the same. Rrrriiiiiipp. Both the patch and the clothes were ruined. Now let's peel off another layer:

Spiritual Truth: Jesus didn't fix the Old Covenant, He introduced a New Covenant

In this parable, the old garment was the Old Testament—the Old Covenant, what we would call "the law." Jesus was saying He didn't just come to improve the Old Covenant—He came to replace it with something totally new. There was no way His new covenant could be used to "patch up" the old one. The Pharisees were threatened by this because their religion was based upon keeping the law instead of living under grace. But let's peel off another layer:

Personal Truth: Jesus doesn't want to patch up my old life, He gives me a new one

Some people think they're pretty good and only need Jesus to just "patch up" some problem areas of their lives. Most men love duct tape. Someone said that all a man need to be happy is duct tape and WD-40. If it moves and shouldn't, use the duct tape. If it doesn't move and should, use the WD-40. There are all kinds of ways to use duct tape. You can even use it to tape an overactive child to the wall. Or if you have a fender-bender you can use it to hold up your bumper. Or if you have a worse accident, who needs a body shop? Duct tape can even fix that. But the truth is Jesus didn't come to put duct tape on your heart. He came to give you a new heart. He didn't come to reform your life; He came to transform your life. The Bible says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17)

It's like the story I heard about a hillbilly mother with nine children. One of her boys fell down on a new blacktop road and was covered in tar. He was a mess. His mother was trying to clean the sticky tar off of him. She said, "I declare, Tom, it would be easier just have another one than to clean you up!" That's like us. Jesus doesn't just clean our old heart up—He gives us a new heart. He makes our lives new and improved.

PARABLE 3: NEW WINE IN OLD WINESKINS

Let's peel the onion:

Surface Truth: New wine will crack and burst hardened wineskins

Bottles are used for wine today, but in the time of Jesus, wine was most often stored in goat skins. These skins were scraped clean and then tanned over a fire. Then the skin was stitched back together, with the neck becoming the spout of the wineskin. A fresh wineskin was soft and supple. When new wine was poured into it, gas was released from the process of fermentation. The new wineskin would stretch to accommodate this expansion, and then harden after the wine was fermented.

Jesus is using a little Hebrew humor here—they laughed at any ridiculous scenario (like someone who strained out a gnat and swallowed a camel.) His listeners probably laughed because they knew exactly what happened when new wine was poured into old wineskins. Over a period of only a few days there would be audible “pop” as the hardened wineskin began to crack and split and the stitches split open. The wine was expanding, but the old skin was too rigid to change its shape. The wineskin would finally burst open and the new wine would leak out. But Jesus had a deeper meaning than just split wineskins. Let’s peel another layer to the:

Spiritual Truth: The Christian life is a constant flow of new revelations of truth and new ways to share the Gospel

The religious snobs of Jesus’ day didn’t like His teaching because it was so revolutionary. He did things they had never seen before—he ate and drank with sinners. The religious leaders could not handle the new wine Jesus was offering. Like old, rigid wineskins, they had become inflexible. Every time Jesus said or did something new you could almost hear the sound of straining and stretching until “pop!” you heard the stitches breaking.

Jesus is the new wine—He came to bring something new and improved. We tend to prefer the old and routine, but God loves new things. We enter the Christian life through a new birth, we become a new creation, we walk in newness of life, we read a new testament, and one day God will create a new heaven and a new earth. One of the last things Jesus is recorded as saying in the last chapter of this book, “Behold, I make all things new.” (Revelation 21:5 KJV)

Personal Truth: If I allow my heart to harden, it will be difficult for me to accept new ideas

Jesus was addressing an attitude that resists anything new. We all have a tendency to reject a new idea, or a new revelation of truth—because we like the old too much. Like an old, stiff wineskin, our hearts and minds can calcify until we become so inflexible that we can’t accept change. When someone introduces “new wine” to us, we crack and split and make a mess.

The Bible issues a strong warning to us about the danger of hardened heart: Hebrews 3:15 says, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.” The children of Israel refused to go into the Promised Land. They had become lazy because God was feeding them manna and they didn’t have to fight any battles. When faced with the new idea of going into Canaan and taking the land—they said, “No.” And God said, “Okay, then you’re going to take another lap around Mt. Sinai—and another—and another.” For forty years they wandered in the old paths, eating the same old manna. Why? Because they refused to accept the new wine of God’s plan.

What kind of person are you? Are you like an old wineskin? Have you become molded into a certain mental state or emotional disposition—and you aren’t going to change for anything?

Throughout my thirty years of ministry I have encountered hundreds of Christians who were like old wineskins. Whenever any new idea or concept is introduced—they don’t like it. It may be a new building program, a new schedule, a new budget, a new program, a new method—you name it. You can almost hear them “straining, and cracking, until “pop!” they blow a stitch and

express their anger. Why? Because they have become inflexible—like an old wineskin. I like the extra beatitude that says, “Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not be bent out of shape!”

CONCLUSION

So what is God saying to you? Do you need to stop acting like the Christian life is a funeral—and start celebrating because we are espoused to a bridegroom who is coming back soon? Do you need to stop trying to patch up your old life, and allow Jesus to put the new robe of righteousness on you? There's plenty of new wine that Jesus is providing. Have you stopped growing? Have you stopped changing? Have you become like an old, crusty, wineskin?

I grew up in Alabama which has more bigoted rednecks per capita than any other state (except maybe Mississippi where Mike is from). Now Alabamians don't want outsiders saying that, but as a native Alabamian, I can say it. I was exposed to this in the first church I served out of seminary in Central Alabama. I had led our little church to purchase a 15-passenger van to pick up children in a trailer park to bring them to Sunday School.

One Sunday morning, they picked up two young black children who were waiting with their friends to ride the van. When I got to my office Vernon was standing there waiting for me. Vernon was one of our four deacons and was our Sunday School Director. He was an old man, probably in his 50s, and I was only 26 years old. Vernon's face was red, his skin was flushed, and he was actually sweating. He said, “We can't have those ('n' word deleted) coming to our church—either they go or I go!”

What was happening? His wineskin was popping—and when your wineskin pops, whatever is on the inside comes out...and it's not often pretty. I said, “Vernon, settle down. Let's pray about this.” I prayed with him and then the only thing the Lord gave me to say to him was, “Vernon, what do you think Jesus would do about these children?” He stomped out of my office and drove off. He was one mad old wineskin. He just couldn't accept the truth that red, and yellow, black, and white, they are precious in His sight.

I didn't hear from Vernon on Monday, but on Tuesday evening he came knocking on the door of our parsonage, looking terrible. He looked like he hadn't slept in days. A busted wineskin is not a pretty sight. He sat down and this big old man said with tears, “I've been thinking about what you said. I know that Jesus would accept those children whatever the color of their skin, so I just want you to know that I've decided that I'm going to accept them too. I'm sorry for what I said last Sunday.”

What happened with Vernon? Right before my very eyes I saw an old hard wineskin soften up and become like a fresh wineskin. That is a beautiful sight. You may not die from hardening of the arteries but you can sure suffer from hardening of the attitudes!

We all like the old, but Jesus came to bring something New and Improved. The great thing about knowing Jesus is that there is something new every day! The Bible says, “His compassions never fail. They are new every morning.” (Lamentations 3:22-23) And “We do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” (2 Corinthians

4:16)

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes