

Know Your Wines

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As I see it, there are two types of people who go to restaurants. The **first kind** of people are those safe eaters. These are people like me who love to find something on the menu and, then, eat that entrée every time they go to that particular restaurant. There may be something better on the menu. There may be something greater on it. Yet, if there isn't, we'll be wasting a lot of meals trying to find it. So, we play it safe. We get that sure-thing meal every time. We're happy with that.

The **second kind** of people are those adventurous eaters. They'll try anything. They're always searching for that next great entrée. They don't think it's out there; they know it's out there. Maybe some of you are this way. Just know, you make me and my kind nervous since often times you don't simply risk your own satisfaction but everybody else's too. (I remember going out with a bunch of adventurous eaters when I was in college, and one of them suggested that we all order a different entrée and, then, share them. I was like, *Go ahead without me because I know what I want. I want my own meal. I want what I know I'm going to like.*)

Well, in today's passage, Jesus is going to address these two tendencies in us when it comes to the things of God and his gospel. And, what we're going to see is that there are dangers with both tendencies when it comes to spiritual things.

Let's read the text and find out how.

Luke 5:33-39

³³ They said to him, "John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking."

³⁴ Jesus answered, "Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? ³⁵ But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast."

³⁶ He told them this parable: "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. ³⁷ And no one pours new wine into old wineskins.

Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. ³⁸No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. ³⁹And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, ‘The old is better.’”

I think that most of us follow Jesus’s reasoning here until he says—“...no one after drinking [the] old wine wants the new, for they say, ‘The old is better’” (v. 39). That’s the difficult saying to understand; isn’t it? I mean, Jesus just said his ministry is like new wine but, then, seems to suggest that old wine (the old ministry) is better, the old covenant is better. What’s that all about?

Well, in order to see, we need to engage with what comes before his statement. (1st) We need to meditate on this question about fasting. Who’s asking it and what’s behind it? (2nd) We need to unpack Jesus’s teaching about the importance of context when it comes to how we behave. So, we’ll consider this little parable Jesus shares. Then, (3rd) we’ll get to the strange saying about old wine being better.

Let’s look at each of these three things in its turn.

1. A question about fasting

What kind of question is this? Was it a generous, inquisitive kind of question? Or, was it a skeptical, condemning kind of question? The answer makes a difference; doesn’t it? I think it does.

Well, considering that Luke places this question, about the absence of fasting among Jesus’s disciples, directly after the passage where the Pharisees criticize Jesus and his disciples for eating with tax collectors and sinners, it would seem very likely that this is an attack on Jesus and *not* a sincere question. This is simply another way for the religious authorities to demonstrate that Jesus is a shameless party animal—that Jesus is “a glutton and a drunkard” (Matthew 11:19).

And this is also a humble brag, I think. They throw John the Baptist’s disciples in the mix because it makes them look less boastful. *John’s disciples fast and pray; oh, and so do ours. But, yours don’t. Why is that, Jesus?* They’re not really looking for an answer. The answer is implied—*It’s because you’re not as righteous and holy as we are. It’s because you’re a sinner.*

Did you know, however, that fasting was prescribed on only a single occasion in the law? That was on the Day of Atonement.¹ This was the only “required” fast or legislated fast for Israelites. Anything more than that was established by tradition, by the traditions of the religious teachers. But not by God!

It had become the practice in Israel for the “zealous” to fast twice each week, on both Mondays and Thursdays. And, evidently Jesus wasn’t making this his habit or a habit for his disciples. He was violating the “old wine” traditions of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. He was violating their rules and their ways of doing church. So, they bring this attack. *If he doesn’t do church like we do church, then he’s wrong. He’s a bad rabbi and a sinner*, they complain.

Friends, I really wish that this was something I didn’t know anything about—something that I’d never experienced. I wish I could say that I’d never seen things like this in the church or, even, tendencies like these in me. But, I have many times and so have you.

We know that we often do the very same thing. We create our own traditions and, then, criticize and condemn others when they don’t observe them.

- This is how you should parent and discipline your children.
- This is how you should organize and decorate a church building.
- This is how you should dress, and this is how you shouldn’t dress.
- This is how you should vote, at least, if you’re a good Christian.

Brothers and sisters, this is not right. Some of these things would be so funny if they hadn’t been so divisively true in the history of the church. Human made laws (*perhaps above anything else*) have strained fellowship and hindered gospel ministry and bruised those whom God loves. The harshest words Jesus speaks in all Scripture are reserved for those who’ve used manmade laws to hurt others (Matthew 23:1-36). Woe to you Pharisees. And, woe to the pharisee in each of us as well.

So, that’s the situation surrounding this question about fasting and not fasting. But, how does Jesus answer this critical question?

¹ Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Luke*, 120.

2. A lesson about context

Look at what he says again.

...Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast (vv. 34-35).

It would be so easy for Jesus to get caught up in this question about fasting. Yet, this isn't really about that. Jesus isn't against fasting—as his answer indicates. Fasting is merely one tree. Jesus is interested here in the whole forest. So, he talks about the right context for fasting. The Lord Jesus points to the wedding celebration. He asks, *Is a wedding the right or the wrong time for fasting?*

When Natalie and I were married, we did the ceremony on a shoestring budget and in a limited time-window. Consequently, we ended-up scheduling the ceremony on a Sunday afternoon and only having hors d'oeuvres and punch at the reception. We really didn't think much about it at the time. However, as the years passed-by and we began to go to other weddings and talk about our wedding, we both regretted that we hadn't been able to have a fuller celebration. We wished we had had dancing and a feast with wine and beer. We both wished that we had thrown a bigger party—a more joyous celebration for our friends and family. So, on our tenth anniversary, that's what we did. We had the wedding reception we wanted.

It was awesome. It was a celebration. It was a time for everyone to truly party. It most certainly wasn't a time for fasting.

Friends, context should always drive our behavior. There are seasons for fasts and also seasons for feasts (Ecclesiastes 3:1). In this life, there are times for both. And, Christ Jesus makes it abundantly clear that his presence and his ministry are, without question, a time for celebrating—a time for feasting. To fast in his presence would be wrong. It would be totally out of place.

- It would be like tearing-up a nice new garment to fix an old worn-out one. The patch won't match, and you'll ruin a new garment in the process.
- It would be like pouring new wine into old wineskins. The old wineskins will burst when the new wine expands.

Jesus says, *I'm doing something new—something like a wedding celebration, not like a funeral service. So don't fast when it's a feast*, he says.

Context matters; doesn't it? It drives our expectations, emotions, and actions. And friends, Jesus is worth celebrating; isn't he? This is something we need to learn and live-out. We should be the most joyous and fun-loving people *because* of Jesus, not *in spite* of Jesus. Christians should throw the best parties—be the best of hosts—because Jesus has completely changed our context, our situation.

Yet, I'm afraid that's not the reputation we've earned. And, I wonder if it isn't because we've neglected to remember our new context in Christ. The apostle Peter reminds us of our new situation when he writes:

...you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Friends, we must be those who understand and act according to our context—rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep (Romans 12:15). But let me just say, our default position should be one of celebratory hope in Christ because he has unalterably changed our context from one of condemnation to glory. Praise God for Jesus! Live a life of joyous celebration in Christ!

3. A statement about what's better

So, up to this point, I think we've all followed what Jesus is saying fairly well. He pushes back against this critical question from the Pharisees. They have traditions and want Jesus and his followers to honor their way of doing things. *If you're holy, they say, then you'll fast like we do.* To this, Jesus responds with a lesson in context. *My ministry is something new*, Jesus says. *Like a wedding celebration, it's not made for fasting but feasting. Thus, we have to celebrate this new thing God's doing.*

So, the Pharisees' *old*, man-made traditions don't suite Jesus's *new* ministry. That's his point in a nutshell. Then, however, Jesus tells us something very different, and it confuses us. It seems like an about-face.

...no one after drinking old wine wants the new... "The old is better" (v. 39).

What is Jesus saying? What does he mean? Is he telling us that the Pharisees are right—that their way is better? That doesn't seem very likely or even possible. However, at first glance, that's what Jesus appears to be saying; isn't it? If you listen, you can almost hear the Pharisees celebrating their victory; can't you?

Yet, we have to read this in the context of Jesus's teaching here and the context of his ministry as a whole. And, when we do that, we begin to recognize a challenge, from Jesus to the Pharisees, in this mysterious little statement.

Remember the basis of these religious authorities' criticism. It's not that Jesus is breaking the laws of God but that he's breaking their human laws—their traditions. So, that's the old wine here. Jesus over and over again criticizes the religious leaders for abusing people with their traditions. He even pointed out that they break the laws of God with their traditions (Matthew 15:3). This is the old wine in Jesus's statement. He is most certainly not saying that it's better.

But, what is his tone? How is he saying this? In this case, we must hear scorn in Christ's voice. And, I think that that changes the meaning completely; doesn't it? Now, instead of a concession, we have a rebuke—*You won't even give me a listen! You won't even hear what I have to say! You are so stuck in your traditional ways that you can't see what God is doing!* That's what Jesus is saying.

And, we can be like this; can't we? We have untouchable traditions; don't we? We know how we order the worship services and sing the songs and pray the prayers. And, we've decided what constitutes good church behavior and bad church behavior; who's welcome and who's not; haven't we? The problem is that we rarely consider what Scripture says about our traditions. We rarely think about what the Lord says about our church practices. And, when this is the case, the old is certainly not better. Easier for us? Yes. But not better!

If you're one of those folks who orders the same thing each time you go out, I'm talking to you. Please be careful! Don't get too set in your ways. Don't be ruled by your traditions when it comes to the things of God.

Yet, there can also be an abuse on the other side. Marcion was an early leader in the church. And, he took this text and used it to suggest that Jesus was cutting ties with the Old Testament completely and, therefore, so should we.² He in effect said,

² Joseph B. Tyson, *Marcion and Luke-Acts: A defining struggle*, p. 32.

The new wine is always better. Jesus, however, would never have agreed with him. The Old Testament was and is the word of God. And it points to his person and work. In fact, Jesus came to fulfill it (Luke 4:21), not do away with it (Matthew 5:18).

So, if you're that person who is always looking for what's new on the menu, you also need to be careful. If the Lord isn't producing what's new, then it isn't good. Again, the Bible must be our guide and authority whenever we evaluate something whether it's old or new.

In fact, Jesus's rebuke of the Pharisees here hinges on their neglect of the law. They have chosen the lazy path. They have ignored all that Scripture says about him, about his coming. They haven't been a people of the Book—a people of the Bible. And, so they are missing out on this new thing God is doing in and thru Christ Jesus. This is truly, truly tragic. The traditions (which they originally created to honor God) have blinded them. And now, they find themselves against God—against his Savior. This, I think, should be a warning to us.

In the Free Church, there is an old mantra or saying—*Where stands it written?* If it's an old, old tradition, where stands it written? Where do you see it in Scripture? That's where its authority resides, in the Bible. And, if it's something brand-new, where stands it written? No fashionable ideas should sway us unless they're aligned with Scripture and what it teaches.

This is our challenge and calling—to bring what's old as well as what's new under the authority of God's word. Amen.