

## Earthly Stories, Heavenly Meanings: Fasting and Wineskins

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany, February 8, 2009

We're continuing in our survey of some of the parables of Jesus by taking a look at a parable He told when some were complaining and questioning Him about what He and His disciples were doing. We're looking at Mark chapter 2, verses 18-22 today. Would you please turn with me in your Bibles to these verses?

Mark is the second book in the New Testament, so the order goes Matthew, **Mark**, Luke and then John. We've talked a little before about Mark: he was a young man who first spent time with the Apostles Paul and Barnabus, until he deserted them during a missionary journey. When Paul and Barnabus were going on another journey at a later time, Barnabus wanted to take Mark again, but Paul did not want to. They had such a disagreement about it, the team of Paul and Barnabus split up, and Barnabus went one way with Mark, and Paul went another with Silas. Later on, Paul and Mark (and so we assume Paul and Barnabus, too) reconciled, and Paul called Mark 'a true son' and even asked that Mark come and visit him. Mark also spent much time with the Disciple-turned-Apostle Peter, and many think that the book of Mark is his recording of Peter's life with Jesus.

Again, we are going to Mark chapter two, verses 18-22:

*Now John's disciples {that is, John the Baptist's disciples} and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?" Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast. No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins."*

Let's follow our pattern and begin by looking at the 'Earthly story' part of the parable. To do that, though, we actually have to back up a few verses to get the context. What happened just prior to the telling of this parable was the calling of Matthew, and a feast that the now-disciple Matthew was in the middle of throwing for Jesus. We just read verses 18-22; we actually need to back up and read verses 13-17 to fully understand the context:

*Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed Him. While Jesus was having dinner*

*at Levi's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" were eating with Him and His disciples, for there were many who followed Him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw Him eating with the "sinners" and tax collectors, they asked His disciples: "Why does He eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

In most of our Bibles, these two sections of scripture – verses 13-17 and verses 18-22 are probably separated by a heading that says something like “Jesus questioned about fasting” or “The parable of the wineskin.” The original language, though, suggests that these are not two separate events, but one that follows right on top of another.

So, Jesus called Matthew to be a disciple. We've talked about Matthew many times before and have mentioned his wealth and the job he had as a tax collector that made him the enemy of his fellow countrymen. That's why they asked the question, “Why does Jesus eat with tax collectors and sinners like that Matthew guy over there?” Jesus answers that it's the sinners who need Him, and then there's another question – the question about fasting.

Again, it helps to know the context of the question and understanding of the day to really appreciate what's going on here. According to Mosaic Law – the Law that was actually written down and given by God to Moses – Jews were only required to fast one time a year on the Day of Atonement. This is still celebrated among many Jews today, and is listed on most calendars by its Hebrew name, Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur has movable dates, but usually occurs mid to late September.

The Pharisees, however, also strongly prescribed fasting twice a week on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> days of the week – Mondays and Thursdays. These extra days of fasting were not required by the Law, but by the Pharisees and their infamous oral law – that which they said was just as binding as the written Law God gave Moses. Now, let's go back and set the scene again.

Jesus called Matthew, and in a joyful response to being chosen by Jesus (and in the choosing, being forgiven), Matthew threw a huge party for Jesus and invited the only 'friends' he had – the 'sinners', the outcasts of society, perhaps even other tax collectors. In the original Greek, the question asked of Jesus, “*How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?*” means that these two groups were in the middle of fasting right then and there on the same day Matthew – this horrible 'sinner' – put on this feast: on a Monday or Thursday.

One more thing to put all this in context: John the Baptist and his disciples were no friends of the Pharisees, so why were his disciples fasting? Were they fasting because they agreed with the Pharisees' oral law? No, they were fasting because of their sorrow of John the Baptist being thrown into prison. You see, fasting took place for two reasons: one was in repentance and the other was during a time of sorrow.

So, you got all that?! OK! If Jesus was a really good Jew, if Jesus was really the Messiah, why would He not also fast as the Pharisees required? If Jesus was really John's cousin, and if He really thought as much of John the Baptist as He said in the past, why wouldn't He also fast out of sorrow for John's predicament?

And all of that is just the context!

Now, let's get to the 'Earthly Story' part of the parable. *How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.*

Remember when we talked about the wedding parable last week? The arrival of the Bridegroom was cause for great celebration. When the bridegroom came was when the party started! When the Bridegroom left was when the party ended and the joy and celebration was over. So the people would have understood exactly what Jesus was saying here, and so do we: when the guest of honor arrives, that's when the joy begins. When the guest of honor calls it a night and goes home, that's when the joy dies down, and the celebration comes to an end.

*No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins."*

I'm not a tailor, so I called someone who I knew would understand the reference to the cloth and had them explain it to me: I called Stacey's mother and told her I needed her help to write this sermon! When you wash clothing it shrinks, right? Especially if it is 100% cotton. If you have a piece of clothing that has been washed and re-washed and has shrunk, and then try to patch a hole on it with a piece of cloth that has not been through the wash a few times, there's going to be a problem the next time you wash it: the old cloth isn't going to shrink any more, but the patch will, and when it shrinks it's going to pull away from the older cloth, and the tear is going to be even worse.

We understand this today, but it would have been even more-so for people in Jesus day. There was no polyester or cotton-poly blends for clothing back then, and you couldn't just run to the local Wal-mart to pick up a new robe if you tore a hole the one you had. Clothing then was primarily made out of wool, and if nothing else, wool is notorious for shrinking. If any of you ever had a wool sweater that you put in the washing machine and/or dryer by accident, you know what I'm talking about! Not only that, but for the people in Jesus day, they could only get new wool at certain times of the year, which means they could only get the materials to make new clothes at certain times. If you had a piece of clothing with a tear in it, you wanted to patch it right! To not patch it with pre-shrunk wool would mean the garment is only going to tear worse, and you'd be out of luck until either the next sheep-shearing time and the processes after that to

get fabric from the shorn wool to make a new garment, or until you could find an extra piece of cloth laying around that wasn't in use and had already been washed and shrunk.

That's the cloth, what about the wineskin? As it related to the wineskin, it's sort of along the same lines. When people back then made wine, they would pour it into a fresh goatskin. As the wine fermented, it would expand in the goatskin – it was elastic enough to take the stretching. Once the goatskin had been stretched like this in the fermenting process, you couldn't use it again for new wine. If you did, when the gasses were released during the fermenting process, the goatskin didn't have any more elasticity, and it would burst, ruining both the wineskin and the wine.

Again, this is something the people of the day would have understood and resonated with. Wine was a precious commodity, and you needed to know how the fermenting process worked so you wouldn't lose what you'd worked so hard for.

So, that's the 'Earthly Story' part. What's the heavenly meaning part?

Let's go back to verses 19-20 for a moment: *How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.* As with last week's parable, you can make a note in your Bibles that the Bridegroom is Jesus, and His presence is a cause for celebration. You can also make a note in the margins of your Bible: the word that is translated as 'taken away' is *aparthē*, and it means a violent removal.

Jesus is telling them that the time will come when He will be violently removed from those who have received Him. He is pointing to His crucifixion, and the mourning that will follow. Even more than just the mourning that will immediately follow the crucifixion, there will be cause for sorrow and mourning later on as the Christian church is persecuted.

What about the cloth and the wine? The Kingdom of God in the person of Jesus with the people was a new way of God relating to His children, of coming to them and meeting them right where they were. It is the same with us. In Jesus we see God in the flesh: we see the eyes of God the Father, hear the heart of God the Father, see how far He will go to protect and save His children. It's a new way of Him coming to us, and the old ways just aren't going to work anymore – you can't bind together the old and the new and expect it to work. The old ways, in this case, the old Judaic system can't be combined with the newness of the Gospel. In that same way, just like how you can't pour new wine into old wineskins, salvation through Jesus can't be mixed with, or be made to try and 'fit' into an old system, an old way of doing things. It goes right back to 2 Corinthians 5:17 – *"If anyone is in Christ they are a new creation, the old has gone and the new has come."*

So what does all this have to do with us today? I think there are three questions we can ask ourselves:

1. Are we joyful or are we mourning? Remember, being joyful doesn't mean always having a smile on your face or a song in your heart, but rather, being joyful means that no matter what happens, we know there is something better that awaits us, and we cling to that hope.

We all experience times of mourning – times of sadness or feeling disconnected from others and from God Himself. During those times the question to ask is ‘Why are we feeling this way?’ Is there something in the physical realm that we need to do, like seek counsel or talk to someone, or is there something in the spiritual realm we need to do, like confess and repent of our sins that have formed a barrier between us and God?

Right along the same lines, do we take joy in the Lord's presence with us and do we express sorrow and contrition (i.e.: mourning) for our sins? In a few moments we're going to gather around this altar for Communion. Are we coming with sorrow for our sins, and joy in knowing the forgiveness that waits here for us as we get to meet Jesus again in a very real and tangible way?

2. Do we fully ‘get’ the verses we mentioned last week, Ephesians 2:8-9? *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.* Salvation is a gift from God, and not something we need to add to through our own works, or our own piety. There is nothing we can or should add to try to incorporate into the Gospel. I know we've used this analogy before, but it's a really, really good one: do you have to get cleaned up to take a bath? No! Getting clean is what the bath is for!

Salvation is a result of us getting cleaned up by Jesus' sacrifice. We don't have to do anything to earn or purchase salvation. At the same time, once you've had a bath, you don't go out and jump right back into the mud again. We don't take the salvation message, and the salvation we have and try to make it fit with things that run contrary to God's clear message in His Word – we don't do a patch-up job on God's word with things that just don't fit.

3. Are we ready and willing to be used by the Holy Spirit, even if that means being stretched in ways that we think might make us burst? Now I know this question doesn't exactly fit in with this parable perfectly, but please bear with me for a moment.

Jesus would have our hearts and minds to be like new wine skins – open and ready to receive the ‘new wine’ of the Holy Spirit. Are we eager to grow in the knowledge and understanding of God's word and plan for our lives, for the life and future of our family, of our church? Even if it means that for a time we might be stretched in a way that temporarily might make us uncomfortable because it's new or different? Even if it means that the stretching is a little scary? It's a scary thing to be touched and changed and used

by God! Just ask the Old Testament prophets, or the New Testament Disciples and Apostles!

It's an earthly story about mending tears and making wine, with a heavenly meaning about our relationship and growth in Jesus, fueled by the power of the Holy Spirit. Will you please pray with me?

Holy Spirit, You came to us in our baptisms and filled us with Your presence. Fill us again with the knowledge of the great love You have for us and truth of Your Words that You caused to be written in the Bible. Create in us a deep desire to seek You, and turn away from sin. Stretch us, mold us, change us, and take us where you want us to go. In Jesus' name, Amen.