

Matthew 9:14-17 – “New Wine and Old Wineskins”

1. Rejoicing With the Bridegroom – 9:14-15

9:14 - *Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?”*

Remember the context this question is being posed in. Jesus is in the home of Matthew and having a meal with tax collectors and sinners. The Pharisees are already unhappy with this scene. They think Jesus should be avoiding people of this nature.

But now they ask another question. Luke tells us that the Pharisees ask this question, Matthew says it's John's disciples. So perhaps both groups of people asked this question together. Either way, they're seeing Jesus enjoying a meal, and they see this as an opportune time to question Jesus about fasting.

- Mark's gospel (Mark 2:18) tells us that the disciples of John and the Pharisees were fasting. So, they're watching these people enjoying this great meal and they're a little bummed out that they're not able to participate.

Let me start out by saying fasting was not a bad or wrong thing. Jesus has already covered it in Matthew 6:16-18, and He said there, “*When you fast...*” as though it was an expected practice.

And though fasting was already a regular practice and was prescribed in the Old Testament to do on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29), the Jews began to add their own rules and traditions to these things. They made the commands of God far more burdensome than they should have been. The Jews proposed that a voluntary fast should be observed and practiced. So, they made Mondays and Thursdays a day to fast.

- This is why when Jesus told the parable regarding those who trusted in their own righteousness, He spoke of the Pharisee going up to pray who proclaimed that he *fasts twice a week...* (Luke 18:12).

Very likely this day that Jesus is eating with Matthew and the tax collectors was on one of these fast days and these disciples of John and the Pharisees were standing around watching this feast unfold with their stomachs growling and upset at how they were missing out. They're thinking, ‘*This isn't right! Why aren't the rest of you joining in our misery, I mean ministry of fasting?*’

So, Jesus sheds some light on the whole situation here. And it's as though He gives a few different responses that may be intentional for the different audiences posing this question regarding fasting.

- To John's disciples Jesus gives a fitting response in vs. 15, and to the Pharisees Jesus gives a fitting response in vv. 16-17.

9:15 - *And Jesus said to them, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.*

Jesus uses an analogy of a wedding in His response, a metaphor that may seem very odd to us, but it would have been something very familiar to hear for the disciple of John.

John himself used this terminology:

- **John 3:28–29**, *"You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him.'²⁹ He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled."*

John's joy was found in pointing people to Jesus, the Messiah. Many wondered if John was the Promised One, but he repeatedly downplayed this notion and revealed he was just the friend of the bridegroom.

Both John and Jesus use this analogy to speak of the joy that should be present.

Fasting was always linked to a time of mourning or reflection. Today it's a time to deny the physical to focus on the spiritual. But when you have Jesus in your midst, it should be a time to celebrate.

- Sadly, some Christians have not felt this freedom to live in joy. They feel the way to true holiness or righteousness is to be miserable! That's not what Jesus has for us. Aren't you glad for that?

Likewise, a wedding is not meant to be a downer. In fact, in this day the wedding feast lasted a week long (my daughter is getting married in a couple months and I'm so glad we no longer do that – \$\$\$). But the wedding was, and is, a time to celebrate!

Barclay writes:

- “For a week after the wedding, open house was kept; the bride and bridegroom were treated as, and even addressed as, king and queen. And during that week their closest friends shared all the joy and all the festivities with them; these closest friends were called *the children of the bridechamber*. On such an occasion, there came into the lives of poor and simple people a joy, a rejoicing, a festivity, a plenty that might come only once in a lifetime.”¹
- “There was actually a Rabbinic ruling which said, ‘All in attendance on the bridegroom are relieved of all religious observances which would lessen their joy.’ The wedding guests were actually exempt from all fasting.”²

So, if certain obligations came up in the law (and again, these were added traditions that the Jews applied), but if these obligations kept you from celebrating and having fun at the week long wedding feast, you were permitted to ignore it.

Jesus uses this picture to reveal that with Him being present (the bridegroom) it is not a time for solemn fasting and mourning. It’s time to celebrate!

- It reminds me of the story of a young monk who arrived at a monastery. He was assigned to help the other monks in copying the old canons and laws of the church by hand.

He noticed, however, that all the monks were copying from copies, not from the original manuscripts. So, the new monk went to the head abbot to question this, pointing out that if someone made even a small error in the first copy, it would never be picked up! In fact, that error would be continued in all the subsequent copies.

The head monk, said, 'We have been copying from the copies for centuries, but you make a good point, my son.'

So he went down into the dark caves underneath the monastery where the original manuscripts were held as archives in a locked vault that hadn't been opened for hundreds of years. Hours go by and nobody saw the old abbot. So, the young monk got worried and went down to look for him. As he went down he saw him banging his head against the wall and wailing, 'We missed the R! We missed the R! We missed the R!'

His forehead is all bloody and bruised and he is crying uncontrollably. The young monk asked the old abbot, 'What's wrong, father?'

¹ Barclay, W. (2001). *The Gospel of Matthew* (Third Ed., p. 388). Saint Andrew Press.

² Barclay, W. (2001). *The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Mark* (p. 68). Saint Andrew Press.

With A choking voice, the old abbot replied, 'The word was...
CELEBRATE!!!'

You see our own traditions and religious rules by which we try to live righteously in ourselves will often rob us of the joy we should be experiencing and celebrating. We are the bride of Christ, we've been committed to Christ. We're linked to a loving bridegroom who gave His life for us! If John's joy was fulfilled at being the friend of the bridegroom, how much more should ours be at being the bride!

Now, Jesus does say there will come a time where He will no longer be with them. This He spoke of His death, resurrection, then ascension to heaven. This will usher in the appropriate time for fasting. Again, this is not a command or duty, but it is a natural response for the church as we await our bridegroom and seek to live lives undefiled from the world.

- **2 Corinthians 11:2**, *"For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ."*

Fasting is not meant to bring us down, it's meant to lift us up with a renewed focus on Jesus as we await our reunion.

So, after Jesus shares a word fitting for John's disciples, He now shares a word fitting for the Pharisees and other religious leaders.

2.A New Work – 9:16-17

9:16 - No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and the tear is made worse.

This may be an old concept to many today, but when I was growing up, if you had a hole in your jeans, you wouldn't leave it like that. Nowadays you get away with it and you're commended for being stylish. But you had two options back then, throw them out, or patch them up. This is the analogy Jesus is using. But anyone knows, if you put a new cloth on the old garment, the first time you wash it or it gets wet, that new patch is going to shrink and pull away from the garment it's sewn to. And it's going to cause even greater damage. Both pieces of fabric are going to be damaged (***the tear is made worse***).

The second illustration is similar...

9:17 - *Nor do they put new wine into old wineskins, or else the wineskins break, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But they put new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.*”

In this day wine was put into animal skins that allowed the container to expand during the fermenting process. But if the wineskin was old, it lost its elasticity and flexibility and it was no longer useful for new wine. If you put new wine into that old wineskin, as the fermenting process took place and gases caused expansion, the old wineskin would burst and then you’ve lost your wine and the wineskin.

In the same way, the work that Jesus was coming to do was new and incompatible with the old work of Judaism.

- The law gave a list of rules. Starting with not eating of the tree of knowledge. Then it was the 10 commandments. Then those got broken down into hundreds of sub-commandments. You see the problem was that the law could only change our behaviour. It could impose a righteousness, but it could never make us righteous. The law changed our behaviour, but the new work of Jesus changes our heart! Making us truly new.

So the law was meant to lead us to Jesus. In Christ we’re not just reformed, we’re transformed. We receive His grace and forgiveness from sin. Law and grace were never meant to go together.

- “God never intended Christianity to patch up Judaism; it was a new departure. The sorrow of the Old Era, expressed in fasting, must give way to the joy of the New.”

The Jews needed to realize that the law of Moses and their added traditions of it needed to be laid aside like an old garment and be exchanged for the new garment of the Messianic age. Judaism had become rigid and inflexible through their traditions encrusting it. It had become like that old wineskin that had served it’s purpose, but now was unable to hold anything new. The new work of the new covenant could not be performed within the limitations of this old system. All that Jesus was going to do – His work of grace and mercy, a work of forgiveness and love – just couldn’t be contained within the confines of the old system of Judaism. It would have just hurt both.

When you try to blend the two or hold on to both, you will run into serious problems because the two are mutually exclusive.

“The result is a confusing mixture, which is neither Judaism nor Christianity, but a ritualistic substitution of dead works for a trust in the living God. The new wine of free salvation has been poured into the old wineskins of legalism, and with what result? Why, the skins are burst and ruined and the wine is spilled and most of the precious life-giving draught is lost. The law has lost its terror, because it is mixed with grace, and grace has lost its beauty and character as grace, for it is mixed with law-works.”^{15 3}

- Sadly, there have been many groups that have come onto the scene and tried to impose this sort of action, even in recent years. They will say that the path to true Christianity is in following the law. They will believe in Jesus, but true belief is evident through adherence to the law they say.
- The Hebrew Roots Movement is one such group that has sought to live this out. I’ve known people that have gotten wrapped up in this and it’s so unnecessary. Are there things we can learn and have a deeper understanding through a Hebrew background – sure! But nowhere are we commanded as followers of Jesus to bring ourselves back under the law. Those that do so do so at the expense of true freedom and joy in Jesus.
- **Galatians 5:1**, *“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.”*

Now let me reiterate, the law is not bad. The law had its purpose, there’s still value in it today. But its purpose was to guard Israel and direct them in righteousness. Yet it could never make you righteous. Once Jesus came, He is our righteousness. So, the purpose of the law regarding righteousness is now fulfilled. This is why Jesus would say, *“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill”* (Matthew 5:17).

That old wineskin of Judaism cannot hold what we have in Jesus. Jesus came to bring something new, not patch up the old.

- This word **old** is the Greek *palaios* and means not just old but worn out.
- There’s 2 different Greek words used for **new**. *Neos* = recent in time, and *kainos* = a new ‘kind’. In other words, the Gospel of the kingdom of God that Jesus was introducing was both new in time and in kind. It was so radically different from Judaism that to receive it meant a totally new and greater way of life. One of grace, not legalism. Joy rather than grief.

¹⁵ W. L. Pettingill, *Simple Studies in Matthew*, pp. 111, 112.

³ MacDonald, W. (1995). *Believer’s Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments* (A. Farstad, Ed.; p. 1236). Thomas Nelson.

Is it the life you have received today? Don't be like these onlookers and objectors of Jesus thinking you have a better way. There's only one way to true life, joy, and salvation. It's by faith in Jesus. Receive Him and His forgiveness of sins. It's the only way to be righteous and blessed.