

## Out with the Old; In with the New

Luke 5:33-39

Sunday, March 16, 2025

Let's start with a test. I'm going to read you a set of song lyrics. You finish the last line. I'll compare how well you do with the other service. Ready?

*Come gather 'round people  
Wherever you roam  
And admit that the waters  
Around you have grown  
And accept it that soon  
You'll be drenched to the bone  
If your time to you is worth savin'  
Then you better start swimmin' or you'll sink like a stone...*

*[For the times they are a-changin']*

That is the first verse of Bob Dylan's 1964 hit, *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. Some of you who weren't born in the 1900s like the rest of us may have recognized these words if you watched the recent film about Bob Dylan, *A Complete Unknown*. The song became an anthem for the culture-shifting events of the 1960s.

Change is inevitable. In 1985 I wrote hand-written letters, I had no real use for a computer, I always carried a quarter in case I needed to make a call, and cable TV was a luxury. In 2025 text messaging is preferred to email, Facebook is for old people, the iPhone is in its 16 generation, and most retail stores no longer take personal checks.

Our passage today in Luke is all about change. If there were a soundtrack to go along with this text, Bob Dylan's *The Times They Are A-Changin'* would be on it.

If you've not already turned to Luke 5:33-39, I invite you to do that now.

Our passage follows two incidents where Jesus was opposed by a group of religious leaders known as the Pharisees. The Pharisees were a group whose primary focus was on careful obedience to God's law. Over the years, the Pharisees developed numerous traditions to teach God's people how the law applied to everyday situations. The problem was, in time their traditions became as binding as the law itself.

Earlier in this chapter, Jesus came into conflict with this group when he healed a paralyzed man and at the same time declared the man's sins to be forgiven. To the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, Jesus's claim to have the authority to forgive sins was blasphemous.

The Pharisees were also deeply troubled by Jesus's willingness to associate with tax collectors and other known sinners. Pastor Jerry walked us through the story of Levi the tax collector and his dinner party last Sunday.

Notice now in verse 33 Luke begins by saying,

“They said to [Jesus], “John’s disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking”” (Luke 5:33, NIV).

Because this passage follows these confrontations between Jesus and the Pharisees, we might assume the concern raised in verse 33 also came from Jesus’s opponents. And yet, it seems odd that the Pharisees would speak about “the disciples of the Pharisees.” Perhaps the “they” in verse 33 isn’t a reference to the Pharisees, but to the guests reclining at Levi’s table with Jesus.

As the evening progressed and the conversation moved from small talk to more serious matters, perhaps one of the so-called “sinners” at the table made this observation.

*Jesus, I’ve noticed something different about you and your disciples. You all aren’t like other people. The disciples of John the Baptizer, we know that they fast and pray, and do so quite often. And the Pharisees, the ones who are so skeptical of your work and your words, they also fast and pray and they instruct their followers to do likewise. In fact, we know that they make it a point to fast twice a week (and they make a big deal of it).*

*But Jesus, you and your disciples don’t do as they do. You all go on eating and drinking as if fasting doesn’t matter anymore. You’re not like John, and you’re certainly not like the Pharisees. Frankly, Jesus, we don’t know which bucket to put you in.*

Jesus has that effect on people, doesn’t he?

When people encounter Jesus, whether religious or non-religious, they just don’t know which bucket to put Jesus in. It doesn’t seem right to put him in the same bucket as the philosophers, people like Plato, Rene Decartes, or Immanuel Kant. You probably wouldn’t place him in the same bucket as other religious teachers such as Muhammad, the Buddha, Confucius, or Ghandi.

Even the godly men and women of the Bible seem to be in a completely different bucket. Abraham, Moses, Ruth, Esther, David, the Apostle Paul, and Mary the mother of Jesus, are all important people, but Jesus seems to be in a category all his own.

As we read through Luke’s Gospel, we’ll see that every single person who encountered Jesus had to wrestle with this same question—his disciples, the crowds, his enemies, his family, even the demonic powers.

Whoever “they” were, “they” had a **problem: What makes Jesus different?** Who is he?

Maybe you can think of a time in your life when you didn’t know which bucket to put Jesus in. If you’re a Christian, this might have been in your B.C. days—before Christ. Who was Jesus to you before you called him Lord?

For those of you who are not presently followers of Jesus, this might describe where you are today. If you’re not a Christian, but you’re listening to this sermon, I assume you are curious about or are seeking an answer to the question “Who is Jesus?”.

For all of us, it is critically important that we figure this out. It is no exaggeration to say that the question “Who is Jesus?” is the most important question a person can ask.

Let’s get back to the text. In verse 33 “they” (whoever *they* are) raise the question: “Why don’t Jesus’s disciples fast and pray like the disciples of John and the Pharisees?” In verses 34–39, Jesus provides a two-part answer. In verses 34–35, Jesus offers them *a new perspective*. Then in verses 36–39 he illustrates the new perspective with *a parable and a proverb*. We’ll start with what Jesus says in verses 34–35.

“Jesus answered, “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”” (Luke 5:34–35, NIV).

To be clear, Jesus didn’t have an issue with fasting. God’s people fasted and prayed for a variety of reasons. In Luke’s Gospel, fasting is primarily depicted in a positive light. In Luke 2, we saw that a widow named Anna regularly fasted and prayed as an act of devotion to God. In Luke 4, we saw that Jesus fasted for forty days in the wilderness.

In Luke’s companion volume, the Book of Acts, the early church regularly fasted and prayed as they sought wisdom and direction from the Lord. And in Matthew’s Gospel, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that fasting and prayer were proper acts of devotion to God, as long as they were not a hypocritical act of religious performance.

I doubt that Jesus and his disciples *never* fasted, but those who raised the concern saw that Jesus’s attitude toward fasting did not mirror that of John the Baptist or the Pharisees. Did Jesus have a flippant attitude about proper acts of worship and devotion?

In verses 34–35, Jesus offers them **a new perspective: There is a proper time for fasting, but now is not the time.**

As a pastor, it is my privilege to officiate weddings and funerals. Over the years, I’ve cried tears of joy and smiled until my cheeks hurt at weddings, and I’ve wept tears of grief and felt the pain of loss with families at funerals. Weddings are celebrations of joy. Even if a

funeral is a celebration of life, the day has its share of sadness. You don't need to be a pastor to know that the atmosphere at weddings is very different from funerals.

That is Jesus's point. How could anyone expect Jesus's disciples to fast while they are celebrating with the groom at a wedding? Weddings aren't times for fasting; they're times for feasting! In this scenario Jesus was referring to himself as the bridegroom.

Notice what Jesus says in verse 35. A time is coming when fasting will be appropriate again. Why? Because a time is coming when the groom will be gone. He wasn't merely saying that all good things must come to an end. Notice how he says that the bridegroom will be *taken* from the wedding guest. That's a reference to Jesus's death.

Interpretations vary, but I think Jesus was speaking about the three-day period when he would remain in the tomb, the time between his crucifixion and his resurrection.

Between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, Jesus's followers would grieve. This would be a proper time to fast. But when the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples, their grief was turned to joy. Luke tells us at the end of this Gospel,

“[Jesus] showed [the disciples] his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence” (Luke 24:40-43, NIV).

The time for fasting had ended! It was time to feast again!

The key to understanding what Jesus says in our passage is that it's about fasting and it's not about fasting. It is about fasting because that was the real concern behind the initial question. Why didn't Jesus's disciples fast like everyone else?

But this passage is also *not* about fasting, at least that's not the main point. What these verses teach us is that **the method, message, and ministry of Jesus pointed people to something new.**

When you're making small-talk with someone, do you ever find it difficult to answer the question, “What's new”? If every week you attend the same school, go to work at the same job, eat the same breakfast every morning, drive the same route on your daily commute, and do it all over again the next week, the question “What's new?” can be hard to answer. What's worse, too often “what's new” can often mean “what went wrong this week?” Maybe I'm being too negative.

This passage is the answer to the question “What's new?” and it's a really good answer. **The method, message, and ministry of Jesus pointed people to something new.**

But here's the thing about *new*. New can be disruptive. New can be different. New can be divisive or even destructive. So how can *new* be a good thing?

In verses 34–35 Jesus offered his listeners *a new perspective*. The groom has come! Something new is happening. This isn't a time for fasting. This is a time for feasting! The times they are a-changin'.

That brings us to verses 36–39 where Jesus illustrates this new perspective first with a parable and then with a proverb. First, the parable.

“[Jesus] 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. 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. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins”” (Luke 5:36–38, NIV).

Not many of us repair old clothing anymore by patching the fabric (that is, unless you were at Women's Overflow last month and you learned about Sashiko!). If you're a wine connoisseur, my guess is you store your wine in bottles, not animal skins.

Here's how Jesus's original audience would have understood this parable. In the first century, when your tunic wore out to the point that it got a hole, to keep it from tearing further, you patched the rip. You couldn't shop for a new one online and get it delivered with two-day shipping. That tunic had to last. So you patched it. But you wouldn't cut a piece from a new garment to cover the hole in the old one. **A new patch on an old shirt won't match.** This wasn't about fashion; it was about function.

Similarly, in the first century wine was stored in wineskins. They were called wineskins because, literally, they were made from animal skins. Over time and with use, those wineskins would wear and the leather would become weak and brittle. Therefore, no one who understood the fermenting process would put new wine, not yet fully fermented into an old, brittle wineskin. **New wine in an old container can't be contained.**

Often, Jesus didn't explain the meaning of his parables for his listeners. This was one of those “let those who have ears to hear hear what I'm saying” moments. Today we might say, “If you know, you know.” If we were to modernize this parable, we might say Jesus was talking about containers, or better yet, buckets.

The method, message, and ministry of Jesus was pointing people to something new. The gospel of Jesus Christ was something entirely new. It doesn't fit into old containers. The gospel belongs in its own bucket. With the coming of Jesus, God was doing a new thing.

Jesus's two parables about garments and wineskins were meant to show that the method, message, and ministry of Jesus—the gospel—was pointing people to something new, and the new did not fit in old containers.

The word “new” appears in the New Testament some 50–60 times, depending on how it's translated into English. Not all of those occurrences refer to the new thing God has done through Jesus Christ in the gospel, but many of them do. In Scripture we read about *new* life in Christ (Rom. 6:4), becoming a *new* creation (2 Cor. 5:17), putting on the *new* self (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10), the *new* and living way opened for us (Heb. 10:20), the gift of *new* birth into a living hope (1 Pet. 1:3), and the promised of a *new* heaven and a *new* earth at Christ's return (Rev. 21:1).

Some of the most significant instances of the word “new” found in the New Testament are in reference to the new covenant. At the last supper, before Jesus was crucified, he celebrated the Passover with his disciples and said to them,

“This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20, NIV; cf. 1 Cor. 11:25).

This term, “new covenant” actually has its origins in the Old Testament. It only appears once in the Hebrew Bible, but where it does appear there is much to be learned about what makes the new covenant *new*.

Let me read for you Jeremiah 31:31–34.

“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (Jer. 31:31–34, NIV).

In the context of where this passage falls in Jeremiah, we are to understand that God's decision to make a new covenant with his people was due to their persistent problem of sin. In order to repair the relationship between God and human beings, God had to make a way of reconciliation. This new covenant, God says, would not be like the old one. That's not to say that the new covenant would be entirely dissimilar to the old. However,

the new covenant would not merely be a renewal of what came before. The new covenant would not be a new patch on an old garment or new wine poured into an old wineskin.

Commenting on this passage in the sermon we know as the Book of Hebrews, the author says,

“But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises. For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. ...By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear” (Heb. 8:6-7, 13, NIV).

We need to return to our passage in Luke 5:33-39 to see how it ends. Following Jesus’s parables in verse 36-38, he finishes with a proverb in verse 39.

“And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, ‘The old is better’” (Luke 5:39, NIV).

What Jesus says here is that people are stubborn. Not everyone wants to try what is new. This stubborn sentiment appears in verse 39: **The old is better.**

Parents, how many times have you said to your kids at a meal, “How do you know you don’t like it if you don’t try it?”

The Pharisees weren’t the only ones in Jesus’s day who wouldn’t try the new wine, but their persistent resistance to the gospel represented the attitude that the old was better. The problem was greater than that they were stuck in their ways. The problem was that when faced with the question “Who is Jesus?” their response was “We don’t care.”

As I said earlier, the most important question a person can ask is this: “Who is Jesus?”

As we close in prayer, I invite you to consider this very important question. Let’s pray.