

A Breath of Fresh Air

Luke 5:33-39

On June 4, 1783, at the market square of a French village not far from Paris, a smoky bonfire was fed by wet straw and old wool rags. Tethered above, straining its lines was a huge taffeta bag 33 feet in diameter. In the presence of a “respectable assembly and a great many other people,” and accompanied by great cheering, the balloon was set free from its moorings to rise majestically into the noon sky. Six thousand feet into the air it went – the first public ascent of a balloon, the first step in the history of human flight. It came to earth several miles away in a field, where it was promptly attacked by pitchfork-waving peasants, who tore the balloon to pieces, convinced that it was an instrument of evil.

Throughout history, people have feared and even despised that which was too novel. Men were not meant to fly, so a pack of French peasants ripped a bag of hot air to shreds. The stakes get higher in the world of religion. In the church, it is easy to view ourselves as guardians of revealed truth, but the line between revealed truth and the practices and rituals with which we are comfortable becomes easily blurred. Too much innovation too fast is unnerving. That is what troubled the Pharisees about Jesus. It even unnerved some of the disciples of John the Baptist, who were otherwise friendly towards Jesus.

Not every Pharisee who opposed Jesus was insincere. Most were just products of their experiences. All of their lives, the traditions of their forefathers had been presented to them alongside the Law of Moses to the point that one became almost indistinguishable from the other. Religion among the Jews was a stale regimen of rituals and sacrifices that supposedly could render a man righteous before God.

To the Pharisees, a man was either devout, conscientiously observing all the rules so as to be proven “righteous.” Or, he was numbered among “the people of the land.” These were working peasants, simply trying to feed their families while hoping that God might ultimately extend them mercy at the end of this life. The people of the land had neither the time nor the means to stay on top of all the demands of “legal righteousness.” They were simply dismissed by the Pharisees as “sinners.”

Jesus was a breath of fresh air in a stale religious world. He still is. He showed little interest in guarding the status quo or man-made traditions. He had little affection for any ritual or institution that failed to reflect the love, holiness and other attributes of His Father. Still, He held out hope to His countrymen that even without all the legal trappings of Judaism, God loved them and wanted to be a Father to them

I. A Pattern of Objections (33-35)

³³They 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.

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

A. Did Jesus Really Have Loose Views on Fasting?

The only fast Moses required was a single day of national fasting on the Day of Atonement. Jesus certainly observed that fast. After the Babylonian captivity, the Jews began observing four annual fasts, but no prophet ever endorsed them. The Pharisees fasted every Monday and Thursday. Tradition stated that these were the days when Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Law. There wasn’t much to those fasts. One basically skipped lunch and ate dinner after the sun went down, but they felt it was enough to draw God’s attention to their piety. John’s disciples fasted. Fasting was identified with repentance, and John’s preaching was all about repentance. Jesus disciples did not fast very often at all, and certainly not when the traditionalists felt that they were supposed to. So, Jesus was asked about it.

Jesus did not attack or belittle the fasts of the Pharisees at this point. On the contrary, He answered in a very straight-forward way: "It's not needed. The occasion for your fasting has ended. The presence of the bridegroom is not an occasion for solemnity or somber faces. It is a time for celebration and joy." Jesus was claiming to be the object of their hope, the appearance of God's consolation of Israel, the Bridegroom that God had sent to His nation. This was an audacious and powerful claim. Jesus was asserting that He was *Messiah* for Whom they and their ancestors had been waiting for centuries.

There were then, as there are today, proper occasions for fasting. Perhaps, sin or rebellion has caused a believer to miss the joy of walking with Christ. Fasting might need to accompany soul-searching and repentance. Perhaps, a great challenge lies ahead of a believer. Fasting might need to accompany the pursuit of wisdom, guidance and power from God – a way of clearing life of its distractions so as to focus on discerning the mind of God. Perhaps, a believer's heart is torn by the need of a brother or of his community. Fasting might accompany ardent intercession. But, no fasting should be legislated by community expectations, and the Christian life should not chronically reflect the somber sobriety expressed by constant fasting. The joy of Jesus must be manifested in our lives. Joyless religion is not true religion at all. When we are living in the power and the presence of Jesus, fasting is unnatural.

B. This Was Just One of Many Criticisms

Fasting was hardly the only issue over which the Pharisees took issue with Jesus. In fact, our immediate text is flanked on both sides by Jesus' encounters with Pharisees who were trying to nit-pick Him to pieces. Jesus was disturbing every notion of religious practice with which they were comfortable.

Luke 5 is a busy chapter. It begins as Jesus calls several fishermen to be His first disciples. *Messiah* as He existed in the imaginations of the Pharisees would never have sought out companions from among fisherman. They represented those people of the land. A real *Messiah* would have turned to men like themselves, men of the Law who were meticulously pursuing righteousness according to the Law.

Next, Luke records Jesus' healing of a man covered with leprosy. Evidently, Jesus had reached out and touched the man. "Gross!" they thought. This was unspeakable. Jesus would have defiled Himself. In spite of Jesus' desire to not advertise this healing, news of it got back to the Pharisees.

Jesus declared that the sins of a paralyzed man were forgiven when his friends lowered him through the roof of the house in which He was teaching. It was a creative way to work around a crowd, but the homeowner could not have been thrilled. The Pharisees were livid at the audacity of Jesus to declare anyone's sins forgiven. So, in order to convince the skeptics that the power of His Word was absolute, Jesus commanded that the man to get up and walk. This is precisely what the man did.

Finally, Jesus accepted a dinner invitation from a publican named Levi. We know him as Matthew, who became one of the Apostles. Publicans were locally hired hands who collected revenues for a chief tax collector over a given region of the Roman Empire. Jews hated publicans because they hated Rome. Publicans were regarded as traitors to Israel. "*Publicans and sinners*" became the Pharisee's catch-all designation for all the human debris in Israel. The Pharisees were disgusted by the company Jesus kept.

Things got more serious in chapter six, following our text. The disciples were wandering through the grain fields, picking and eating the grain they could reach from the pathway that cut through the fields. The practice itself was legal. The Pharisees objected to the fact that the disciples were doing this on a Sabbath day. In their logic, to pick even a single head of grain was to reap a crop and to rub it in their hands so as to loosen the kernels from the head was to winnow grain. These activities were technically "toil," and toil was expressly forbidden on the Sabbath. Jesus insisted that human need is bigger than Sabbath rituals. He backed up His words by restoring a man's shriveled hand on another Sabbath day.

Wonderful miracles passed right over the heads of the Pharisees. Changed lives and repaired people failed to get their attention. But, if any of these things happened with a decorum they deemed inappropriate, they got all riled up. Charlie Campbell writes: “To the Pharisees, Jesus was a 3-year-old finger painter, turned loose in their white living room.” The people of the land were drawn to Jesus. The Pharisees were repelled by Him. Why were the responses so diametrically opposite? Jesus responded with words that cut to the heart of why most Pharisees were unable to embrace Him.

II. Two Parables of "Old Meets New" (36–38)

A. Old and New Garments verse 36

³⁶He told them this parable: “No one tears a patch from a new garment and sews it on an old one. If he does, he will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old.

The first parable is simple enough. If you tear up a new shirt to make a patch for an old shirt, you just ruin a perfectly good new shirt, and the old shirt looks dumb. Jesus was telling these men, “You guys are so caught up in thinking that coming to God is some sort of an *OLD*, dead formula of “Do this” and “Don’t do that” that you are not ready to embrace the *NEW* life that God wants to give to you.” It’s mindless and comfortable to reduce faith to a list of “Do’s and Don’ts.” We don’t have to think. We don’t have to process divine truths and apply them to life choices. We don’t have to love or relate to people or to God. We just keep checking our list and assume we are where God wants us to be.

B. Old and New Wineskins verses 37, 38

... ³⁷And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, 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.

A goat skin was tanned over fires of acacia wood. The openings were sewn shut, the neck of the goat was used as a spout, and unfermented grape juice was poured in. The neck was sewn shut, and the process of fermentation began. Only a new wineskin would have the capacity to stretch and not break as gases were emitted through the process of fermentation. If new wine was put in an old wineskin, both the wine and the skin would be lost. The lesson is fairly clear. In the absence of some appropriate degree of flexibility to grow and to change, the power of the Gospel is squandered on a man.

C. The Parables Applied

1) Christianity was never intended to be reformed Judaism. The two systems are as different as night and day. Judaism is a pursuit of personal righteousness based on works of law. Allegedly, by his own effort, a man can outrun the penalty due him as a sinner. This exercise, albeit God revealed, was a futile one. God used the Law to teach His people the futility of trying to come to God this way. A man’s inability to justify himself before God serves to awaken his heart to his need for God’s grace. Christianity requires this grasp of our inability to save ourselves. We need a Savior outside of ourselves. Jesus came to be that Savior when He took the penalty for our sins upon Himself and died on the cross in our place. The Gospel formula is not “**Jesus + Works of the Law = Righteousness.**”

This was the formula of the Judaizers, a group of false teachers who plagued the Apostle Paul in his ministry by telling Gentile believers that they must also become Jews. Paul taught his Gentile converts:

²Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised (**come under Jewish Law**), Christ will be of no value to you at all. ³Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. ⁴You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. – Galatians 5:2-4

Luke was himself a Gentile and was closely associated with Paul. He understood that the Gospel is not a formula for earning God's favor but the free gift of that favor.

2) Christianity is not a band-aid on a willfully sinful and stubborn life. The Gospel has a dynamic life-changing power. If the believer is not a flexible wineskin, he will not endure the change. Those who receive Christ must be of open heart and willing to obey Him. Many professed believers never escape the sins and selfishness of the past because they like those vices. They are accustomed to them. They don't want to change. They don't want to deny themselves. They don't want to bear a cross. They are inflexible old wineskins, and the newness Christ offers holds little appeal for their old natures. Often, it just infuriated them.

3) Christianity cannot flourish in an atmosphere of censure. This parable serves as a warning to all who would dare to establish themselves as guardians of the faith and/or monitors of the religious expression of others. There are sacred and ancient doctrines over which we dare not compromise. But, there are also innumerable preferences and tastes to which we hold just as dearly. If we refuse to be discerning, then, just like Pharisees, we can arrive at a point where we cannot distinguish the eternal truths of God from the traditions and institutions to which we are emotionally and culturally bound. When a Christian settles in with his own comfortable ideas about God-pleasing matters of religious practice, prideful self-satisfaction, inflexibility and intolerance will inevitably follow. Discomfort becomes all the reason we need to condemn the faith practices, preferences and expressions of others.

III. The Problem of Obstnacy (39)

³⁹And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, 'The old is better.'"

A. Change Comes Hard for the Stubborn

Old habits and behavioral patterns die hard ...

- A 43-year-old Reading, Pennsylvania man was in court awaiting a hearing on a charge of receiving stolen property when he was rearrested for carving his name into a courtroom bench.
- A 32-year-old Alabama man, having just pleaded guilty to 42 burglary charges, was rearrested after swiping his own lawyer's portable tape recorder from the defense table.

Inertia is defined as "a tendency to remain in a fixed condition without change." We must constantly be on our guard against spiritual inertia. Our text says: Old wine-drinkers like their old wine. They don't want to have to develop new tastes. They don't think they need to. Nostalgia is good, especially when it reminds us of God's past faithfulness, but nostalgia can also be evil. When love of the past becomes a barrier to winning people in the present, we need to rethink matters. Sometimes, especially in churches, we can become so attached to our old ways that we no longer are willing to examine whether those old ways are effective, rooted in truth, or relevant. We only know that we are comfortable with them.

The church of Jesus Christ has been in a state of transition for 2000 years. The manifold wisdom of one Holy Spirit has guided her through the centuries by equipping saints through the ages with the necessary gifts to minister to the age at hand. Change has always stung for those caught in the midst of it. A young boy once complained to his father that church music was boring. The tunes were tiresome. The words didn't speak to him. His father challenged him to write better hymns if he thought he could. The boy went to his room and did just that. The year was 1690. The boy's name was Isaac Watts. He called his first new-fangled worship hymn "*When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.*"

B. Change Stings, but Change Is Inevitable

Listen to this excerpt of a letter President Andrew Jackson received, dated January 31, 1829:

“... As you may know Mr. President, ‘railroad’ carriages are pulled at the enormous speed of fifteen miles per hour by ‘engines’ which, in endangering life and limb of passengers, roar and snort their way through the countryside, setting fire to crops, scaring the livestock and frightening women and children. The Almighty certainly never intended that people should travel at such breakneck speed. Martin Van Buren, Governor of New York.

The greatest mission field we face is not some faraway land. The strange and foreign culture American Christians fear most is not across the ocean. It's across the street. The culture most lost to the gospel is our own – our children and neighbors. It's a culture that cannot put together two sentences without referencing a TV show or a pop song. It's a culture more likely to have a body part pierced than to know any of the Ten Commandments. It's a culture more likely to have a tattoo than to name the four gospels. The language of this vast mission field is raw, the behavior rude, the demeanor disrespectful and the values frivolous. But, this is the world into which we are called to bring new wine.

How have we responded to this strange culture? Piously, we have declared a culture war upon it. We say we want to win souls, but we don't very much like the pool of sinners that we've been dealt. Still, the King of kings has called us to move into this field and impact it. Inflexible believers will make no impact. May this church always respond to Christ's call to be a new wine community in a stale world.

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