

Prayer

Holy Spirit of God, surround my day with Your peace, steer me through the day with Your power, touch my mind with Your wisdom, and comfort my heart with Your love. May I live to the Glory of God as long as I have breath to proclaim it and time to live it, and may I always witness to the truth of God found in Jesus Christ my Saviour. Alleluia; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Look at where you sit or work during the day. What does this reveal? Give this to God and pray about it.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the people you know** Pray firstly for the people you love, and for those with whom you spend most of your time
- Praise God for the way he has guided his people in past times
- Pray for Iraq. Pray for peace and the cessation of violence

Meditation

Almighty God, You transform people,
You change everything for the better:

You call a sinner and create a saint;
You call a failure and make a success;

You call a girl and reveal a woman;
You call a boy and uncover a man;

You call a servant and anoint a leader;
You call a stranger and create a friend

You call a loner and arouse a colleague;
You call a pauper and inspire a giver

You call a loser and motivate a winner;
You call a rebel and rouse a companion;

You call us all to aim for higher things
In Your Kingdom, both now and forever.

Bible passage – Luke 5:33-39

³³ Then they said to Him, 'John's disciples often fast and pray, just like the disciples of the Pharisees, but Yours eat and drink!' ³⁴ Jesus said to them, 'Should you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? ³⁵ The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.'

³⁶ So He told them a parable: 'No one tears a piece of cloth from a new garment and sews it on an old one; otherwise the new will be torn, and the piece 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 be lost and the skins destroyed. ³⁸ But new wine must be poured into fresh wineskins. ³⁹ No one wants the new wine after drinking the old, for he says, "The old is good."

Bible Study

Review

In this reading today, Jesus makes three different comments about Christian disciples, and when we read the passage, it is easy for us to separate out the different parts to what He says. The first is about fasting; Jesus was challenged about why His disciples did not pray and fast as others did (5:33), and His reply suggests that He thought fasting was not relevant during His earthly ministry, only later. The next two sayings complement each other and are about the 'old' and the 'new'. Jesus offers two common sense allegories about cloth and wine suggesting that it is not wise to mix the two.

The passage about fasting is hard to interpret, but it suggests that although Jesus did not require fasting of His disciples during His life, it is appropriate for Christians now that he has, as He said Himself, '*been taken away ...*' (5:35). After this, Jesus' sayings about the 'old' and the 'new' are so clear, people use them to justify the idea that any new venture must break away from its roots and ignore the past. However, if we follow these interpretations, then we will have unfortunately misunderstood Jesus' words. These sayings are not abstract comments, they are specific sayings that would have been very clear to those who first heard Jesus and read the Gospel. In the passage of time, we have lost track of the attitudes and feelings about God and His Messiah that connect these sayings, so we tend not to interpret them well.

Jesus had just healed the paralytic (5:17-26) and called Levi, the tax-collector (5:27-32). This had clearly raised questions in people's minds; for they could see Jesus doing things their teachers said would be done by the Messiah. They believed that the coming Messiah would indeed forgive sins and heal the sick, and also, that he would establish a new Kingdom by having a great banquet!

Because of this, they were confused when Jesus ate with Levi and his friends, and they asked why it was that Jesus' disciples were not observed to be 'religious' (5:33). From their point of view, they saw the disciples of the Pharisees and of John fasting and praying regularly, but Jesus and His disciples did not. Now, Luke tells us that Jesus prayed a great deal but usually in private, but this was not known by people of the day. His reply, as usual, went straight to the heart of the matter. He said that those who were fasting were obviously waiting to eat and have a banquet when God eventually sent His Messiah. However, His reply to the people cheekily suggests that they believe He is the Messiah (the Bridegroom) and it is quite inappropriate to fast in His presence! The reply would have shocked those who heard it. Jesus all but said He was the Messiah and the Kingdom had come!

Jesus' next two sayings follow His comment about fasting in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark as well as Luke, so there is strong evidence that Jesus spoke about the incompatibility of 'old' and 'new' for a reason. Having challenged those who heard Him to believe that God was active in their midst, he went on to use a double and therefore emphatic allegory to tell them that God's new Kingdom could not be mixed with the old. His words were revolutionary; Jesus was speaking to those around Him in a language they could understand to say that what He was doing in their midst was a work of God, and it was not to be compared with the old Jewish covenant!

You might feel that this interpretation is built on presumptions about the beliefs of people in the first century, and it is. There is ample evidence that early Christians understood Jesus as saying precisely this. His words are reflected, for example, in Paul's comments about the 'old' and the 'new' when he argues that the circumcision of the old Jewish covenant has no place in the Christian church (Galatians 5:2f.). Today, we must remember what these words were meant to convey by its author before we try and make them into generalisations that fits our own circumstances!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Why did Jesus use the illustration of the wedding banquet and what does it mean for us?
- What more can we find within the illustrations of the cloth and the wine?
- What does verse 39 mean, and why does it seem to contradict everything else?

Notes on the text and translation

Significant phrases

V39 'No one wants the new wine after drinking the old, for he says, 'The old is good.'

Other translations:

'And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, 'The old is better.' (NIV)

'And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, 'The old is better.' (New Authorised Version)

The two translations I have quoted above conclude this verse with the sentence, 'the old is better'. However, the Greek says simply 'the old is good'. The translations change to 'better' because it seems to make more sense, but although this is easier to read, it is theologically wrong. The one who drinks only the old wine is in no position to make a comparison and say 'the old is better', this person only knows what is old, and obviously, he says 'it is good' (see study).

Problems with the ancient Greek/Hebrew text

V39 'No one wants the new wine after drinking the old, for he says, 'The old is good.'

A few ancient manuscripts do not have this verse. In the second century, the heretic Marcion (who said that the God of the Old Testament was different from the God of the New), cut this sentence out of his version of the Bible because it made Jesus appear to say that the 'Old might be better than the New'. He misunderstood the text, of course, but because of his influential teaching, his 'deletion' found its way into some of our ancient manuscripts.

Going Deeper

Why did Jesus use the illustration of the wedding banquet and what does it mean for us?

This passage of Scripture is found in Matthew (9:14-17) and Mark (2:18-22). In both these accounts, it was John's disciples who came to Jesus, asking about the need to fast. Firstly, it is interesting to note that the other Gospels do not mention prayer, as Luke does. Pray seems to be a matter of concern to Luke, who mentions it more times in his Gospel than the others. However, as far as our passage is concerned, Luke has generalised the setting in order to make the point more applicable. The questions asked of Jesus assume that good religious observance is a better witness to pagans than joining them at table (as Jesus had just done at Levi's house 5:27-32), and it is a reasonable question to ask (5:33). Nevertheless, Jesus may have been concerned that those who asked did not see the difference between Jesus' evangelistic work and the religious rituals of the Pharisees. The illustration of the wedding banquet enabled Jesus to separate these issues in people's minds, and the Jewish people had long since believed that when the Messiah came, there would be a great 'banquet'!

According to the Laws of Moses, Jewish males were only required to fast once a year on the Day of Atonement, but rigorous Pharisees had introduced the practice of fasting twice a week, on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Fasting meant abstaining from food in the daylight hours from morning until sundown; and a meal was had in the evening. It is not clear, but the implication in this passage is that John's disciples had taken up the rigorous weekly rules of fasting advocated by the Pharisees. Note that the term '*the disciples of the Pharisees*' in verse 33 is rather strange, and although we can understand what it might mean, there are no other references in Jewish writings of Pharisees having 'disciples'. It seems therefore that in this passage, it simply refers to those people who followed the Pharisees' practice of fasting.

However, Jesus was concerned that people understand the nature of the work of God that was happening in their midst, and the creation of the Kingdom of God. Everyone knew that fasting was a sign of sorrow, and normally expressed repentance for sins. However, Jesus but now that Jesus had now come as the Messiah, indeed, this had been announced by John himself (3:15-17) so what reason was there for sorrow? Clearly referring to Himself as the Bridegroom, Jesus said that sorrow would be relevant when He was '*taken away from them*' (5:35); He was referring to His future and His eventual death in Jerusalem, and He said that when it came, this would be the time for mourning. Jesus' boldness is extraordinary, and the imagery would not have been lost on those present or on the people of the early church who first read this letter.

We should also notice that this is the first time that Jesus likens Himself to the figure of the 'Bridegroom'. The marriage of God with His people was a long established image of the relationship of God and Israel, going back at least to the prophecies of Hosea, which is interesting, because in Hosea, the Bridegroom is God. Jesus was bold enough to equate Himself with the Bridegroom, and the imagery would not have been lost on those present.

What more can we find within the illustrations of the cloth and the wine?

The two sayings of Jesus that come next are very well known, and are about the false wisdom of sowing a patch of new cloth onto old material, and the true wisdom of putting new wine into new wineskins that would allow for the expansion of the fermenting wine. Jesus said absolutely nothing new when saying this; it was all common knowledge. The allegory He gives however is radical, and not necessarily what we expect, and

it does not really say anything about how to combine new and old. If you read the first part about sewing up an old coat again, you will find that Jesus' concern is that the 'old coat' is not torn unnecessarily! This comment is possibly a rebuke to the disciples of John, who were still hankering after the old religiosity of Judaism, having been given a glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven through John's ministry. On the one hand, Jesus was inviting John's disciples to look forward to God's fulfilment of John's work in Him, and not look back. On the other hand, He was not about to damaged the 'old coat' of the Old Covenant. Those who lived by it needed it even if they failed to understand the Messiah.

Next, we come to the saying about wineskins. It is easy to see that new wine that is still fermenting might burst an old wineskin which has become hardened with age. All in all, putting new wine into old wineskins was not simply a false economy, it was daft, and it would not work at all! The message appears clear enough, saying that when it comes to delivering the 'new' things of God, the 'old' will not do. This is exactly what Jesus said and meant, because by the evidence of the previous two incidents (the healing of the paralytic – 5:17-26, and the calling of Levi – 5:27-32), the new message of the Kingdom of God could not live alongside the old system of Jewish faith. The old religious systems simply could not cope with what He was making – the 'new wine' of the Kingdom of God.

But this is not all that these verses say. Read them carefully, for you will see that whilst Jesus talks about new and old not being able to live together, and He is clearly identified with the new, the mini-parables (which is what they are) make it clear that it is not right to rip old garments or burst old wineskins! The moral of these texts could well be that even though the new is important as God's work for the future, the old should not be compromised. The old does not have to be torn or burst for the new, even though the two cannot be integrated! It is helpful to read the passage in this way because unless we do, we cannot make sense of Jesus' heartache for His own people (Matt 23:37f. and Luke 13:34f.). This also helps us keep a perspective on the relationship between the Covenant of the Old Testament and that of the New. The Old is our heritage and must be respected as such, but it is not the same as the Gospel found in the New Testament.

What does verse 39 mean, and why does it seem to contradict everything else?

If you have read the notes on the translation, you will know that verse 39 is a little contentious. Certainly, people tend to read it and express puzzlement because according to the way you read it, it could seem to suggest that there is nothing wrong with the 'old ways', for those who appreciate them and keep them. Indeed, I have heard people say that when starting a new church, these sayings justify leaving Christians who are content with an 'old' form of church life to their own devices. I doubt that this is a good use of Scripture given that the whole of God's Word testifies to God's desire that His people be 'one' (see the work of David to unite the people of God in 2 Samuel 1-7, for example, or Jesus' prayer in John 17).

So we must be careful about words and try to work out what Jesus meant by what He said. If you accept my argument that the last word in the passage is 'good', not 'better' (5:39 – see above), then the passage reads like this. Jesus said this as a sad remark about people who were content in themselves and did not want to change or follow Him into God's new Kingdom. It is a prophecy which said that some Jews would prefer to stay as they were with the Old Covenant, and it is a prophecy that has already been proved true. In the early days of the church, especially when the Romans raised Jerusalem to the ground in 70AD, some Christians hoped and prayed for the day when all Jewish people would accept Jesus as their Saviour. The fact is that Scripture says two things about this. Jesus says (here) that not all Jews will want to be a part of the new wine of God's Kingdom. Secondly, Paul says (Romans 11), that the Jews will persist in their ways until the end of time, when God will 'graft' them back into the true stock of God's people; for at the present time they have been 'pruned' and are not connected to the covenant of God because of their rebellion.

Application

There are many discussions about the various points raised in this text; firstly, the issue of fasting. Jesus suggests that people only fast when the bridegroom is absent (2:20) seems a throw-away remark, but it is important, and we should be aware of the history of how this passage has been interpreted. In truth, it is the basis for the main long-standing regular Christian practice of fasting on Friday's. This is because Friday is the day Jesus died, and was taken away from His disciples as the 'bridegroom'. Of course, in fulfilment of this passage, He was taken away only 'for a time' until the resurrection. Because of this, it has been the practice of many Christians over many centuries to fast until sundown on Friday, and some people still observe this today. Most know that this is done because of the link with Jesus' death, but are unaware of the connection with this passage.. Today, many Christians in new or growing churches are asked to fast, but only a few (to my knowledge) make a particular point of this centuries-old, Scriptural Christian practice. It is certainly worth considering this, and doing it regularly as a memorial of Christ's death, as this passage suggests.

I close with the observation that too often, people take the sayings of Jesus about the cloth and the new wine as a way of promoting 'the latest thing' in church as God's way forward, and trying to indicate that what has gone before is useless. This is an unhelpful misinterpretation of this passage. Jesus was talking about His establishment of the Kingdom of God, and not discussing what we do with it! Christ died to save us and bring us into His New Kingdom once for all time, and this has completed its purpose for us when we accept that Jesus has died and risen again for us, and we are part of His 'new' Kingdom, which is the Church of God. We would be unwise to use it in now for anything less than this pure Gospel message, because it is an allegory about the meaning of the Gospel, not about what we think we should do to put it into practice! The Holy Spirit will frequently work amongst His people by sweeping away what has been precious for previous generations so that the Gospel may be preached afresh to others, but this is not 'new wine' in the Scriptural sense. Scripture bids us remember that the church of God's people is always the 'new wine'. We should not be too quick to condemn what God has used in His church in the past as if it were comparable to the Old Covenant which has been superseded.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does this reading tell us about the Kingdom of God and the work of Jesus as the Messiah?
2. Does this passage of Scripture have anything to tell us about fasting today; if so, what, and if not, why does Jesus use the illustration of fasting?
3. Do you think that the saying about the old and new coat and the old and new wineskins is making the same point, and if so, what is this point?

Topics covered by this text

- *The coming of the Kingdom of God through the work of the Messiah*
- *The incompatibility of the old Kingdom and the new Kingdom*
- *The importance of understanding the background to a text before interpreting it*

Personal comments by author

In this passage of Scripture, Jesus catches religious people off-guard. Interestingly, the passage catches many Christians today off-guard. Frankly, I became aware of this passage of Scripture as a youth when people attempted to justify to me the idea that anything new they did was incompatible with the old. The matter was particularly interesting to me because some of my friends used this passage to justify joining a new church because they could not put up with a previous one, and I could not see that Jesus really wanted people to reach such a conclusion from what He said here. Back then, I could not work out why I felt this, and I have only been able to work it out over time. There may be good reasons for someone to leave one church and join another, and even good reasons for people to leave one church and start another, but this is not one of them.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Whatever conclusions you may come to about this Scripture and the issue of fasting, it is worth checking out whether fasting is something you feel you should be doing or not. Take the opportunity to pray about this, preferably with a friend or close family member.*
- *Dwell on the last three verses of this passage and ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand what it may be saying to you. Even though it may not be about justifying being a member of one church or another, this passage is still about the old and the new and what God is doing. What is it saying to you?*

Final Prayer

We love You, Lord Jesus Christ, because although we find it hard to understand what You are saying to us sometimes, You are always helping us on our spiritual path and we can depend upon You for sure, careful

and just guidance. May we always hear what You are saying to us through Your Word, and with Your help, live it, until You come again, and we are transformed in glory. AMEN!
