Mark’s Gospel Lesson 7 (2022)

**NEW WINE INTO NEW WINESKINS**

*(Not Better Religion, But New Creation)*

Mark 2:18-22

Key Verse: 2:22

“And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins.”

As I mentioned earlier, Mark 2:1-3:6 records five incidents showing Jesus’ conflicts with the Jewish religious leaders. The first conflict was with the teachers of the law. They questioned him for his authority as a man to declare to forgive man’s sins (2:1-12). The second confrontation was with both the experts in the law of Moses and the Pharisees, concerning Jesus’ free association with so-called *“the law-breakers”* or *“sinners,”* like tax collectors and their associates. (2:13-16) To them, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners.” (2:17)

Today’s passage is the third conflict concerning the observance of fasting. Jesus defended his disciples and indirectly told those who questioned him that he had not come to observe the old religious regulation but to bring an entirely new way of life. It was a direct challenge to Judaism. We see more and more heightened tension between Jesus and Jewish religious authorities, which would eventually bring him to death on the cross. This morning let’s think about why Jesus said that new wine should be poured into new wineskins and what it means to us.

Look at verse 18a. “Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting.” Fasting has been practiced throughout history across all religions, including the Jewish faith. It seems that John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting while Jesus was having a party at Levi’s house, eating, drinking, and possibly even dancing. The law of Moses requires the Jews to fast once every year on the Day of Atonement, called “Yom Kippur.” Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the year in the Jewish religion. The Jews fasted the whole day, trying to focus on reflection, prayer, and repentance. More fast days were proclaimed in times of national crisis. During the time of Jesus, it was customary for the Pharisees to observe the fasting twice a week on Mondays and Thursdays. Unfortunately, however, Phraisees’ fasting was not necessarily an act of repentance before God. It was the display of their religious piety in people's eyes. It was more of an act of hypocrisy.

However, fasting practiced by John’s disciples could have been more sincere. It was to deepen the consciousness of their sins and induce repentance. Apparently, John’s disciples fasted, following the ascetic lifestyle of their master, mainly due to his unjust imprisonment by King Herod (1:14). Unlike these religious elites in Israel, Jesus’ disciples didn’t practice fasting at all. Instead, they appeared to live a carefree life, often feasting joyfully. Jesus’ disciples didn’t look pious or spiritual.

So some people came to Jesus and asked. Look at verse 18b. “How is it that John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?” In asking **why** they indicated their desire to know the reason for the difference between their practice and that of Jesus’ disciples. Fair enough! I don’t think Jesus was offended by their question. Often, good questions bring excellent opportunities to address God’s truth and wisdom fresh and more effectively.

How did Jesus answer them? Jesus’ answer to their question in verses 19-22 has two parts: ***1) Jesus defended his disciples’ behavior (19-20), and 2) Jesus gave a further explanation of a new life principle (21-22).***

Look at verses 19-20. “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.’” In these verses, Jesus didn’t repudiate the value of fasting. He simply defended his disciples by saying that it would be inappropriate to fast at the wedding feast. The wedding has been a time of great joy and festivity throughout history. Everybody enjoys the wedding feast, eating plenty of delicious food and drinks and sharing the joy of the bride and bridegroom. After all, Jewish custom exempted people from specific religious observances, including the weekly fasts. Jesus compared his disciples to the guests of the bridegroom.

Jesus didn’t say clearly that he was the bridegroom in the parable. However, his picture of the bridegroom was an indirect reference to himself. It reminds us of what John the Baptist said to his disciples about his relationship with Jesus in John 3:29, “The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete.”

At the wedding, the bridegroom (& the bride) is the center and the cause of the joy for all his friends and guests. As long as the wedding guests have the bridegroom, they cannot fast. Yet, this condition will not remain undisturbed. Jesus also said, “The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.”

Jesus didn’t clarify when the bridegroom would be taken away from them, why, or who would take him. Of course, we do know now, in retrospect, that he was talking about his death on the cross. At that time, his disciples would fast but only until they had their bridegroom back. If the disciples had their bridegroom, they don’t need to fast. Instead, they would celebrate the joy of the bridegroom.

Thus, Jesus differentiated between the practice of the Pharisees and that of his disciples. Yet, his real teaching point is in the following verses, verses 21 and 22, in which he elaborates on the difference between living a religious life and a spiritual life. Most people don’t realize the difference between the two. But there is an enormous difference between living a religious life and spiritual life.

Look at verses 21 and 22. “No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins.” According to Jesus, if his disciples were to follow the practice of the Pharisees or even that of John’s disciples, they would be like people who put a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment or pour new wine into old wineskins. Religious correct but spiritually foolish.

No wise person would try to repair or fix an old garment with holes and tears by sewing pieces of unshrunk cloth over it. If he does, it will make it worse. Therefore, seeking to preserve the old religion by patching it with what was new is worse than useless. Probably, Jesus was telling this parable of the old garment to John’s disciples. John’s disciples fasted to prepare for God's coming kingdom, especially in its aspect of judgment.

When Jesus came to proclaim God’s coming kingdom, his message of God’s kingdom differed from that of John the Baptist. It was not in its aspect of judgment. It was more in its characteristic of God’s living presence in our day-to-day lives now and forever. Jesus, our bridegroom, is the center and the cause of joy and everlasting life. Jesus didn’t come to improve our religious life but give us eternal life in our day-to-day lives. It reminds us of John 1:4, “In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind,” and John 15:5, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

The parable of the new wine contains common sense to everyone in those days. Nowadays, wine bottles are made of glasses. But back in ancient Israel, goat or sheep skins were used to contain wine. As time went by, such skins became hard and lost their elasticity. To put new wine, fresh and unfermented, into old wineskins would mean inviting an inevitable burst of the wineskins, which results in double loss, both the wine and the wineskins. Common sense tells us that new wine should be poured into new wineskins.

Both parables teach us that if anyone wants to follow Jesus, they should have a new way of life, apart from following religious rules and traditions, no matter how pious they appear to be. To hold the dynamic and vibrant energy of the new wine, one should not remain stiff and rigid but be flexible, open, and ready to change. Legalistic Judaism, or any descent religious practices, including ascetic life, cannot fully contain new and everlasting life through Christ Jesus. We have to become new wineskins.

There is a difference between living a religious life and spiritual life, particularly the outcome. That’s why Jesus said to Nicodemus, who was one of the top Jewish religious leaders, a Pharisee, and a member of the Sanhedrin, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” (Jn. 3:3) Jesus also said to him, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.” (Jn. 3:5) At that time, Nicodemus was taken aback by what Jesus said. To be born again does not mean just a one-time conversion experience. It’s more of a lifelong process to become new in Christ Jesus.

I believe that Christianity as a religion is excellent and beneficial. But good religion does not save us or automatically give us eternal life, no matter how good religions or denominations we choose. Vine Deloria Jr., a Native American Indian scholar, said, *“Religion is for people who’re afraid of going to hell. Spiritual is for those who’ve already been there.”*

It’s not surprising that Jesus didn’t advocate for his disciples to follow a particular religion, including the Jewish religious traditions. Instead, he challenged his disciples to live a new life, which is being constantly transformed, through repentance and faith in him. That’s what he meant when he proclaimed, “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news.” (Mk. 1:15).

Let’s think a little more about becoming new wineskins. According to Paul’s theology, we need to crucify our sinful nature and live by faith in Christ Jesus. He said in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” These days, the term ***“Christian”*** lost its true meaning. Christians are not those who attend church. They are those who live a life in Christ, crucifying their sinful nature moment by moment and live by faith in God’s redeeming love through Christ.

We live in a world where people want to save themselves. We are not so different from most people in some sense. Yet, unless we crucify ourselves, our sinful self and sinful nature, we cannot be united with Christ. We belong to Christ only when we crucify ourselves and remain in God’s redeeming love through Christ (Gal 5:24-25).

We, as parents, feel happy and relieved when our children come to church and seem to follow Christian traditions. We, as Bible teachers, may feel satisfied when our Bible students seem to be faithful to the ministry and grow as leaders. We may feel elated when our church attendants are increasing. Yet, what remains to the end is being the new creation in Christ. In other words, it’s not necessarily about religion but spirituality in Christ Jesus. Apostle Paul said in Galatians 6:15, “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation,” and in 1 Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old has gone; the new is here!”

I believe that’s what Jesus also meant when he said, “And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins."

I am aware that I am getting old. I have more grey hair and wrinkles. Sometimes, I wish I were younger. But I can not reverse the aging. Even though I may not become physically young, I can still be renewed in my inner person through Christ Jesus as I struggle to repent and believe the good news. The fact of the matter is that I am thrilled to live day-to-day and be fully alive, meeting small and big challenges in life personally and globally. The kingdom of God is not far from us. It’s right here within us when we struggle to remain in Christ Jesus. The world we live in is unpredictable, and our livelihood is being challenged more than ever. But we have the good news for us and all people through Christ Jesus. May we become a new creation in Christ Jesus day by day and year by year. **“New wine into new wineskins!”** **“Not better religion but new Creation!”**