

**Ever-fresh Wineskins for Ever-fresh Wine**  
(Series: Parables of Jesus)

As we now resume our series of studies in parables of Jesus, I invite you to give your attention to the first parable Jesus spoke. Like His first miracle, Jesus' first parable sets the stage for the rest of His ministry.

First miracle: turning water into wine at a wedding party in Cana of Galilee.  
First parable: the new wine must be put into new wineskins.

In His first miracle, Jesus is showing that He has come to make all things new. In His first parable, Jesus is saying that the newness He brings cannot be held for long in any of the categories and institutions we humans devise. Because of its potency, the new wine simply does not fit; it does not fit any of the thought-forms or behaviour-patterns we held before He caused the wine to flow.

Jesus' first parable is found in Luke 5:33-39. But as is the case any time we work with any parable, we need to see and hear it in the original context Jesus spoke it. So we will read Luke 5:17-39, all of it taking place "one day," as Luke puts it.

<sup>17</sup>One day He was teaching; and there were some Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem; and the power of the Lord was present for Him to perform healing. <sup>18</sup>And some men were carrying on a bed a man who was paralyzed; and they were trying to bring him in and to set him down in front of Him. <sup>19</sup>But not finding any way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down through the tiles with his stretcher, into the middle of the crowd, in front of Jesus. <sup>20</sup>Seeing their faith, He said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." <sup>21</sup>The scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, "Who is this man who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone?" <sup>22</sup>But Jesus, aware of their reasonings, answered and said to them, "Why are you reasoning in your hearts? <sup>23</sup>Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins have been forgiven you,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? <sup>24</sup>But, so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,"—He said to the paralytic—"I say to you, get up, and pick up your stretcher and go home." <sup>25</sup>Immediately he got up before them, and picked up what he had been lying on, and went home glorifying God. <sup>26</sup>They were all struck with astonishment and began glorifying God; and they were filled with fear, saying, "We have seen remarkable things today." <sup>27</sup>After that He went out and noticed a tax collector named Levi sitting in the tax booth, and He said to him, "Follow Me." <sup>28</sup>And he left everything behind, and got up and began to follow Him.

<sup>29</sup>And Levi gave a big reception for Him in his house; and there was a great crowd of tax collectors and other people who were reclining at the table with them. <sup>30</sup>The Pharisees and their scribes began grumbling at His disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?” <sup>31</sup>And Jesus answered and said to them, “It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. <sup>32</sup>I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

<sup>33</sup>And they said to Him, “The disciples of John often fast and offer prayers, the disciples of the Pharisees also do the same, but Yours eat and drink.” <sup>34</sup>And Jesus said to them, “You cannot make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you? <sup>35</sup>But the days will come; and when the bridegroom is taken away from them, then they will fast in those days.” <sup>36</sup>And He was also telling them a parable: “No one tears a piece of cloth from a new garment and puts it on an old garment; otherwise he will both tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. <sup>37</sup>And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled out, and the skins will be ruined. <sup>38</sup>But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. <sup>39</sup>And no one, after drinking old wine wishes for new; for he says, ‘The old is good enough.’”

“New wine must be put into fresh wineskins” (5:38). Why? Why can’t we just squeeze Jesus, and the new thing He brings into the world, into existing ways of thinking and feeling and being and acting? Why the “must”? “New wine must be put into fresh wineskins.”

Like so many of Jesus’ parables recorded by Luke, this one is also spoken in a context of conflict with the religious leaders of the day, with the scribes and Pharisees. The scribes are the professional theologians and ecclesiastical lawyers of the day. The Pharisees are the devoted lay leaders of the day. Together they are the self-appointed guardians and protectors of the Law of Israel, and, thus, the guardians and protectors of the reputation of the God of Israel. And as far as they are concerned, Jesus of Nazareth is violating that Law, and thereby, shaming that reputation. Why? Because Jesus is not being “religious” enough. He is not acting the way “religious” people are supposed to act.

For one thing, Jesus is forgiving sinners. He meets sinners and almost immediately extends forgiveness, without any appeal to any higher authority! He just does it: “Friend, your sins are forgiven,” He says to the paralytic, before Jesus heals the man’s legs. “Only God can forgive,” the religious leaders respond. And forgiveness is supposed to take place in the Temple, through prescribed ritual of designated priests. Jesus is forgiving on His own ... away from the Temple ... in the ordinary places where we live.

And then He starts calling the wrong people into His movement – tax-collectors, like Levi (also known as Matthew). In the minds of scribes and Pharisees, tax-collectors are “triple bad” (David Gooding, *According to Luke*, 109). They work for the Roman imperialists, so in some people’s minds they were traitors. They fraudulently extort people; the rabbis labeled them “robbers.” And because of their constant contact with Gentiles, non-Jews, they were “permanently ritually unclean.” Yet Jesus reaches out to tax-collectors and calls them into His company! He grants them the privilege of discipleship with Him!

And then He parties with them! Levi (Matthew) is so grateful for the unexpected grace, that he throws a party for Jesus; and invites other tax-collectors so that they too might meet Jesus. Jesus parties with the traitors, robbers, ritually unclean. He eats with them, which, as we have learned, is a bigger deal in the Middle East than is the Western world. To eat a meal with someone in the Middle East signifies total, unconditional acceptance. Eating a meal is an act of intimacy, treating guests as members of one's family. Scandal of scandals: Jesus of Nazareth, Whom people were already beginning to conclude must be the Messiah, the Son of God is eating with the wrong people, accepting them unconditionally, treating them as His own brothers and sisters.

And at the party with tax-collectors and sinners, the scribes and Pharisees confront Jesus with the issue that gave Him the opportunity to speak His first parable. They raise the issue of His own "religious devotion." He simply is not "religious" enough. In particular, Jesus and His disciples are not practicing the discipline of fasting. John the Baptist and his disciples did, the Pharisees and their disciples did, but not Jesus and His disciples. Jesus is not acting the way "religious" people are supposed to act.

The Pharisees of the first century fasted weekly. The really committed ones fasted twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays (A.B. Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve*, 72). In that day, "to go beyond what was prescribed in the law was held to be the mark of piety, to neglect such practices was held to be a sign of doubtful devotion" (G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, 139).

What is important to know is that nowhere in the OT does God require or command the practice of weekly fasting. There is only one required day of fasting, the solemn Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur; the day the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies to atone for the sins of the people. Yet by the first century, the practice of fasting had become for the Pharisees, THE sign of "religious devotion." Some scholars argue the practice had become "nearly obsessive" (Ibid). Jesus and His disciples are not fasting. So the scribes and Pharisees challenge Jesus' spirituality.

Jesus' response? It is important to note that He does not "put down" the practice. Indeed, in His Sermon on the Mount, He assumes that those who love God will periodically go without eating as a way to more intentionally seek God. Jesus' response? He gives a theologically loaded justification for not doing it, for not doing things "the way we have always done them." Listen carefully – explosive words. Luke 5:34: "You cannot make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is present, can you?"

In first century Israel a wedding feast was one of the happiest occasions in the life of a village or town. The feast might last as long as a week! People eating and drinking, singing and dancing the whole time! So important were such feasts to the health of any village or town that the rabbis had a rule: "... all in attendance on the bridegroom are relieved of all religious observances which would lessen their joy" (Quoted by William Barclay, *Mark*, 59).

Jesus picks up on this rule in responding to the accusation that He and His disciples are not "religious" enough. He declares that something has happened in the world which the "religious" folk, the "religious" establishment, has failed to grasp, but which changes everything. The something? The Bridegroom has come! THE Bridegroom has come!

What did You just say Jesus? Are You implying that You are the Bridegroom? You? What amazes me is that the scribes and Pharisees did not immediately pick up stones and throw them at Jesus!

For you see, in the OT the Bridegroom is Yahweh, the Living God.

Isaiah 54:4-5: "Do not be afraid, for you will not be put to shame ...  
For your husband is your Maker,  
Whose name is Yahweh of hosts ..."

Isaiah 62:4-5: "It will no longer be said of you, 'Forsaken,'  
Nor to your land will it any longer be said, 'Desolate,'  
But you will be called 'My delight is in her,' and your land, 'Married';  
For Yahweh delights in you, And to Him your land will be married. ...  
And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,  
So your God will rejoice over you."

Hosea 2:16-20: Speaking of unfaithful Israel, God says,  
"she went after her lovers, but Me she forgot.  
Therefore I am going to allure her,  
I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her ...  
In that day, declares Yahweh, you will call me 'my husband';  
you will no longer call Me 'my master.'  
In that day I will make a covenant with you."

A marriage covenant.

"You cannot make the attendants to the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you?"  
It is one of the hugest claims imaginable! Jesus is saying, "the Bridegroom has come... and I am He." And because I am present, everything changes. Things will no longer be done the way they used to be done. Old ways of thinking and feeling and being and acting will be set aside; new ways of thinking and feeling and being and acting will begin to emerge. My disciples, the attendants of Me, the Bridegroom, are relieved of all the old forms of religion which would lessen their joy.

Do you hear what Jesus is saying? "Because I am here, your traditions, your habits, your rules are all secondary. I am here – I am what matters."

By the way, you hear what Jesus is saying about His disciples, do you not? If He is the Bridegroom, who is the bride? We are! As the rest of the story unfolds, the first disciples slowly discover that they are not just the attendants at Jesus' party. They discover that they, and we, are Jesus' Bride! The men and women Jesus calls into His company become His Bride! He is taking tax-collectors and sinners as His Bride!

"You cannot make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you?"  
How much less the bride? You cannot make the bride fast when the bridegroom is present, can you?

Jesus does say that one day the party would stop for awhile. For one day the Bridegroom would be "taken away." The word He uses is a violent word. He is referring to that day when people would violently seize Him, and He would suffer the violence of crucifixion. "On that day," He is saying, "they will fast." For that day will be a day of sorrow. That day will be THE Day of Atonement, THE final Yom Kippur. But after that day, the party would resume. For He promised He would come back to His disciples, never to leave them without His presence.

Jesus responds to the charge of not being “religious” enough, on the grounds that something has happened in the life of the world that changes everything. HE has come. His presence is now what matters. He, not “religion,” is the issue. All that matters now is living in relationship with Him.

Which is what He is getting at in His parable. “New wine must be put into fresh wineskins.” “No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins, and it will be spilled out, and the skins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins.”

In the first century (and for centuries afterwards), wineskins were made of animal skins. At first the skins did the job; they were pliable enough to expand with the fermenting wine. But soon they became dry and hard. And when new wine was poured into them, the internal fermenting of the wine would give off gases, and the gases would exert pressure on the skins.

“New wine must be put into new wineskins.” So that we do not lose the wine! Never mind the skins bursting. The whole point is to keep the wine!

And what IS the new wine? Clearly it is Jesus Himself. The new wine is a Person. The new wine that is put into fresh wineskins is a Person Who is the same yesterday, today and forever, as the writer of Hebrews joyfully declares (13:8). But though He is the same through all the ages, He is ever new. He is ever creative. He is ever expansive.

The new wine is Jesus Himself, and therefore His Kingdom, and His Spirit. Jesus-Kingdom-Spirit. The new wine is Jesus-Kingdom-Spirit. The new wine is Jesus Himself, bringing the glorious, re-creating Kingdom of God into the world, and breathing, pouring out, the Spirit of God into our lives.

The new wine is Jesus as the Bridegroom. The new wine is the LOVE of the Bridegroom for His Bride. The new wine is the love that flows from Him to her. This is why the wine is so potent: His love is ever new, ever fresh, ever creative, ever lavishing, ever extravagant, ever expansive.

“New wine must be put into fresh wineskins.” If the skins are new they can yield to the pressure of fermentation. But if they are old, however good they once were, the pressure will burst the skins. And we lose the skins ... and the wine! Oh dear God ... not the wine!

Jesus was telling the scribes and Pharisees that the old forms of “religion” had become too hard, too brittle, too dry, too static, to contain the new, vital, pulsating Life He brings. As was the case for first century Judaism, so it is for twenty-first century Christianity. Some forms of Christianity, especially in its institutional forms, are too hard, too brittle, too dry, too static, to contain the ever new, ever vital, ever pulsating life and kingdom and Spirit of Jesus.

A number of years ago, Missiologist Howard Snyder, most recently of Tyndale Seminary in Toronto, wrote an insightful book entitled *The Problem of Wineskins*, subtitled, *Church Structure in a Technological Age*. Commenting on Jesus’ parable, Snyder makes this helpful observation. “Jesus distinguishes here between something essential and primary (the wine) and something secondary and also necessary and useful (the wineskins)” (13). The wine is the gospel: Jesus-Kingdom-Spirit. Wineskins, says Snyder, “include traditions, structures and patterns of doing things which have grown up around the gospel.” Wineskins therefore “are the point of contact between the wine and the world.” And as such wineskins “are determined both by the wine’s properties and the world’s pressures” [ibid].

Now, since the time Howard Synder wrote the book, many church leaders have focused on the implications for the wineskins from the world's pressures. It is argued that since the world is always changing, the church wineskins will have to also always be changing. Traditions, structures, patterns of doing things that have grown up around the gospel have to adapt to the ever new context in which we are called to live the gospel. You would agree.

The gospel has to be presented in ways that connect with the prevailing cultures, without, of course, endorsing everything about the culture. The gospel has to be lived in "patterns of doing things" that are assessable to the prevailing cultures, without, again, becoming captive to the culture. And this is the challenge before us in this city at this time in history. I do not need to articulate all the ways the world has changed since this church was established on this corner. Nor do I need to articulate all the ways the world has changed since I started preaching from this pulpit in 2009! The change has almost happened at warp speed! The wineskins have to be pliable in our day, very pliable, if we are going to be partners with Jesus in His mission in His changing world.

But there is also the pressure from the wine. The wineskins, says Snyder, are determined, by the world's pressures, but also by the wine's properties. I would say *primarily by the wine's properties*. The wineskins have to be very pliable because of the wine.

Here is the point of Jesus' first parable: Even if the world did not change; even if the world exerted no pressure; the wineskins would have to always change. That is what Jesus is emphasizing. The wineskins must be pliable because of the potency of the wine. The new wine is so potent it will burst any hard, dry, up-tight, static wineskins.

Yes, churches die, they become irrelevant, because they do not keep up with the changes in the world. But churches mostly die, they mostly become irrelevant, because they do not keep up with the fermenting of the new wine. The challenge in our time is not due to the pressures of the world. The challenge in our time is due to the pressure of the wine! The challenge is not to keep pace with the world. The challenge is to keep pace with the fermenting of the wine!

"Must." But of course. "New wine must be put into new wineskins." Ever-fresh wine must be put into ever-fresh wineskins.

Wineskins are simply ways and means of enjoying the wine. They are ways and means of being in relationship with Jesus. They are ways and means of living in His Kingdom. They are ways and means of being filled by and walking in His Spirit. They are ways and means of experiencing the love of the Bridegroom.

The conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders was due to the fact that the discipline of fasting had become an end in itself. But it is not an end ... it is a means to an end. No religious exercise, no spiritual discipline is an end in itself. The end is entering into relationship with the Living God, experiencing and enjoying the love of God.

What Jesus is saying at the beginning of His ministry is that the forms, patterns, structures of our lives will now be determined by one thing: Do they enable us to stay in love with the Bridegroom? That is bottom-line. Do they enable us to be alive in the unexpected love of Jesus?

This is true of us both as individual disciples, and as “a community following Jesus with a heart for the city (and beyond).” Do the patterns of our daily lives, do our life-styles enable us to stay close to Jesus, to live the kingdom life, to be alive in the Spirit? If not, they have to be changed. Simple as that. We have to make the choice: do we want to live with and in Him, or not? The patterns have to keep changing to keep up with Him. The fermenting will burst rigid, dry patterns.

Do the structures and patterns of being the church enable people to stay close to Jesus, to live the kingdom life, to be alive in the Spirit? If not, they have to be changed. Simple as that. Let old ways go. They may have worked in other decades. But if they do not work now, let them go.

This is why Jesus also speaks of old and new garments. If you sew a new piece of cloth on an old garment, He says, you will tear the new. The patch and the garment will not hold together. “Can we not just mend the old?” No, Jesus is saying, it will not work. “Oh, please Lord, let us keep the old. We will mend it real good.” Jesus says it simply will not work.

It is all part of growing up. The clothes that fit us when we were young children do not fit us when we are teenagers. The clothes that fit us when we were teenagers do not fit us when we are young adults. The clothes that fit us when we were young adults do not fit us when we are middle-age. And on it goes. Not only because the styles change. But because we change! When Jesus calls us to follow Him we are going to have to get new clothes! He gives us new clothes! And as His potent life expands in us we are going to have to change clothes again and again!

At the dinner party at Levi’s house, Jesus quotes someone who, after tasting the new wine, says, “the old is good enough.” As a matter of fact, the old wine is good. It is just that it is not as good as the new! Jesus is not jettisoning Judaism. Jesus is bringing Judaism to its fulfillment. He is bringing all “religion” to fulfillment. In Him. He is the fulfillment. The new is the fulfillment of the old. Why settle for the old when the fulfillment of the old has come?

“New wine must be put into new wineskins.” Or we damage the wineskins – they burst. And we lose the wine. Oh, dear God, no! I do not want to lose the wine! Neither do you.

I would imagine you are likely expecting me to now name the old wineskins that need to go, and the new wineskins that need to be taken up. I would love to do so. But I will not right now. Partly because each of the changes in wineskin needs to be developed more fully than we have time for right now:

- Time in the Word of God.

- Daily prayer.

- Weekly fellowship with a small group.

- Lord’s Day worship.

- More flexible decision making processes in the church.

- Everyone a minister.

- Greater freedom in worship to respond to the Spirit.

- More connection groups.

The list goes on.

But mostly I will not suggest changes in wineskin right now because I do not want to be guilty of doing what the scribes and Pharisees did. I do not want to prescribe for any of you any way of thinking or feeling or being or acting except what Jesus is calling you to take up. I have to leave it for Him to show you what changes He wants you to make.

Presbyterian preacher Lloyd John Ogilvie, who recently retired as Chaplain of the US Senate, begins his commentary on Jesus' parable this way: "There is a great difference between the God of our experience and our experience of God" [*The Autobiography of God*, 248]. Because the God we experience is more than our experience of God. Right? So much more. Infinitely more. But sadly, many of us settle for our past of experience of God. "That was good enough." Yes, it was good. But enough?

Many of us settle for our present level of experience of God. "This is good enough." Yes, it is good. But enough? The Living God, the Triune God, is so much more than any of us have yet experienced! And God wants us to press into that more. He wants to expand our experience of Him. And He is doing it in this church. It is so wonderful to witness. So many of you are speaking of encountering God in ways you never imagined possible. So many of you are speaking of seeing God work in ways you never dreamed you would see. He is taking me to whole new places with Him, requiring major changes in the wineskin. I mean, major! Not easy to make. But if I want to go where He is taking me I have to make them.

First miracle: At a wedding party, Jesus takes 120 gallons of stagnant water and turns them into 120 gallons of the finest wine.

First parable: At a party thrown by a sinner overwhelmed by Jesus' unexpected unconditional embrace, Jesus tells us that none of the water pots in the room are big enough to contain the new wine!

Ever-fresh wine must be put into ever-fresh wineskins.

Bottom-line. Do whatever it takes to enjoy the wine. Make whatever changes we need to be made so we do not miss out on the fermentation of new life. Do whatever it takes to stay in love with the Bridegroom. Do whatever it takes to enter His Kingdom. Do whatever it takes to let His Spirit expand our capacity to receive His fullness. Make whatever changes we need to make so we do not miss out on the fermenting new wine.