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The Bridegroom and New Wine in Old Wineskins

*Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn
as long as the bridegroom is with them?*

—Jesus Christ

Conflicts tend to arise between competing groups, even sometimes when the groups are supposed to be serving the same interest. In Jesus' day there were many conflicts between diverse groups of religious people who were supposed to be serving God.

After the Old Covenant was broken in Jeremiah and Ezekiel's days, and since it would be quite a while before the Messiah was to come and give the New Covenant, some rabbis became famous by teaching their own special understanding of what was required, in the meantime, to be pleasing to God. A famous rabbi might choose disciples to follow and imitate him; these disciples would submit to his "yoke" and obey his personal list of rules interpreting God's will. On the other hand, the Pharisees still endeavored to keep all 613 original commands contained in the Law of Moses. When John the Baptist started his ministry, his disciples followed him and, of course, Jesus Christ also had disciples. While responding to

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conflicts the disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees are having with His disciples, Jesus gives the parable of “New Wine in Old Wineskins.”

At the beginning of His ministry, when Jesus calls disciples to follow Him and His new way, He tells them that they will become “fishers of men” (Lk 5:1-11; cf. Jer 16:14-16). When Jesus sees Matthew working at a table collecting taxes, He calls him, saying “‘Follow Me,’ so he arose and followed Him” (Mt 9:9; Mk 2:14; Lk 5:27). Soon afterward, Jesus visits Matthew’s house and shares a meal with his friends. The Pharisees take issue with the type of people with whom Jesus is associating and question His disciples: “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (Mt 9:11; Mk 2:16; Lk 5:30).

The Jewish people consider the Jews who work as tax collectors to be traitors, because they seem, by doing the dirty work of collecting Roman taxes, to have switched their allegiance from God’s people to the Romans. (As a rule, a Pharisee would not befriend, let alone eat or have fellowship with, a known sinner or anyone who was not loyal to God and His covenant people.) Tax collectors are also considered unclean, since they are in regular contact with the Romans and are handling their tax money. Thus the Pharisees, endeavoring to keep the Old Covenant Law, think that any contact they might have with a tax collector will make them unclean in God’s eyes.

When Jesus hears the Pharisees questioning His disciples, He tells them three things: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire covenant loyalty and not sacrifice.’ For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance” (Mt 9:12-13).

Jesus’ first point is that only the sick need to be made well. As far as the Pharisees are concerned, they have made every effort to be clean and healthy and thus, seemingly, they have no need to be treated by a physician. Remember, under the Old Covenant economy, a person might become sick because of his disobedience to God’s instruction (Ex 15:25-26; Num 14:12).

Certainly the Pharisees, who spend all of their time and money pursuing the righteousness of the Old Covenant, cannot be sick, so Jesus encourages them in their self-satisfaction by pointing out how healthy they are.

Jesus' second point concerns the meaning of this statement: "I desire covenant loyalty and not sacrifice" (Hos 6:6). In this verse, God describes His desire—covenant loyalty, which is more than mere compliance with His Covenant Law. Even though the Pharisees are careful, spending their time and resources to observe all the commands, covenant sacrifices, and rituals required by the Old Law, this is not what God desires from them. Instead of endless religious rituals and "burnt offerings," God desires that a believer would "know" Him and that his heart would be loyal to Him (Hos 6:6).

Jesus' third point concerns His ministry: "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance." At first glance, this sounds like He is complimenting the Pharisees; in fact, He is not. Certainly, they do their best to keep the Law of Moses and are righteous accordingly, but Jesus has just emphasized (in the quotation from Hosea) that God does not desire outward observance of the Law; God desires the loyalty of their hearts. Apparently, Jesus is informing the Pharisees that He is not ministering to those who are righteous¹ according to the Law of Moses; instead, He is ministering to sinners who are not able to meet the requirements of the Old Law. The poor are more likely to repent and change their minds after they hear His new message. Because the Pharisees are certain that they are righteous and have no need to repent, Jesus' new message is not likely to change their minds.

"The Bridegroom"

Further conflict arises when the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist have been fasting in compliance with Jewish

¹ In His New Covenant, Jesus informs His disciples that their righteousness would have to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees if they want to enter the Kingdom from Heaven (Mt 5:20).

tradition, but see that Jesus and His disciples are not fasting. They question: “Why do the disciples of John fast often and make prayers, and likewise those of the Pharisees, but Yours eat and drink?” (Lk 5:33). Jesus responds to their inquiry with a question: “Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them; then they will fast in those days” (Lk 5:34-35). Undoubtedly, few understand the underlying significance of Jesus’ answer (cf. Mk 4:11).

Obviously, a wedding is a time of celebration. Here Jesus compares the Messiah to a bridegroom and the Messiah’s coming to the celebration of a wedding, where everyone is feasting with the bride and groom and no one would ever think of fasting (cf. “The Wedding Feast,” Mt 22:1-14). After a wedding celebration is over, when the bride and groom have left and all the food has been eaten, then their friends might think of fasting. Believing that Jesus is the Messiah, His disciples are celebrating with Him, not mourning or fasting.

Why does Jesus choose the illustration of a wedding and describe Himself as “the bridegroom” and His disciples as celebrating friends? Previously, John the Baptist described Jesus Christ as a bridegroom:

You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, “I am not the Christ,” but, “I have been sent before Him.” He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease (Jn 3:28-30).

Describing the Messiah as a “bridegroom” is largely based on the well-known portrait, throughout the Old Testament, of Jehovah being the husband of the Israelite nation. However, the marriage relationship of Jehovah God and the Israelites ended when they broke His Covenant, even “though [He] was a husband unto them” (Jer 31:32), and the broken Old Covenant is why God has promised to make a new “marriage” Covenant with them (Jer 31:31-34).

A wonderful presentation of the coming Messiah as a bridegroom is found in Psalm 45, which looks forward to the Messiah coming as king and marrying His bride. This psalm is part of the introduction of the second book of Psalms (Psalms 42-72) which develops a theme of believers' hope in God. Psalm 42, the first psalm in the second book of Psalms, sets an initial mournful mood in order to highlight the developing theme of hope. The psalmist begins with a description of the mournful Israelites yearning for God during their time of separation from Him:

As the deer pants for the water, so pants my soul for You, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
While they continually say to me, "Where is your God?"

....

I will say to God my Rock, "Why have You forgotten me?
Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?"
As with the breaking of bones, my enemies reproach me,
While they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"

(Ps 42:1-10).

In Psalm 43, the psalmist repeats the mournful theme, asking God, "Why do you cast me off? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of my enemy?" (Ps 43:2), but then he encourages the hearts of His people by exhorting them to "hope in God" (Ps 43:5).

In Psalm 44, the psalmist recounts the history of the Israelite fathers and how God has worked on their behalf: "You drove out the nations with Your hand, But [the Israelites] You planted [in the Promised Land] Because You favored them" (Ps 44:2-3). Yet again, the psalmist returns to the theme of their separation from God because of their failure to obey the Covenant:

But You have cast us off and put us to shame,
And You do not go out with our armies.
You make us turn back from the enemy

....

You have scattered us among the nations (Ps 44:9-11).

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The psalmist concludes with a prayer to God:

Awake! Why do You sleep, O Lord?

Arise! Do not cast us off forever

....

Arise for our help,

And redeem us for the sake of Your covenant loyalty (Ps 44:23-26).

In Psalm 45, the psalmist initiates a total change in attitude; no longer mournful, he celebrates the Messiah's coming to marry His bride: "My heart is overflowing with a good theme; I recite my composition concerning the King" (Ps 45:1). Describing the Messiah as "fairer than the sons of men" and having God's blessing forever (Ps 45:2), he points to the Messiah's throne and the rejoicing of His friends:

Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,

A scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom.

You love righteousness and hate wickedness;

Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You

With the oil of gladness more than Your companions (Ps 45:6-7).

Next, the bride of the Messiah comes into view and the psalmist advises her: "Listen, O daughter . . . Forget your own people and your father's house; So the King will desire your beauty, Because He is your Lord, worship Him" (Ps 45:10-11). The psalmist describes the bride's beautiful clothing and virtuous companions in the King's palace, then concludes by prophesying about the generations of her sons who will become "princes in all the earth" (Ps 45:13-17).

The New Covenant handed down by Jesus Christ is a new marriage covenant, betrothing the Messiah (the Son of God) with His bride, God's new covenant people (family). New Testament Scriptures refer to this new marriage according to its New Covenant terms every time the church is called "the bride of Christ." This marriage will be celebrated with a feast during the Millennium and will ultimately be fulfilled on the New Earth, with the "New Jerusalem coming down out of Heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband," where God will come to live with His family in the New Jerusalem and reign over the New Earth (Rev 21:1-3).

The subsequent psalms look forward to other events related to the Messiah's coming. For example, Psalm 46 describes God as our refuge even when this Earth is destroyed. Next, Psalm 47 describes God subduing all the nations under the feet of His people and becoming the Great King over all the Earth. Then Psalm 47 describes Mount Zion, the beautiful and holy city of the divine Great King.

When Jesus describes Himself as the bridegroom celebrated by His companions, He is reminding His Jewish audience of these psalms and presenting Himself as the promised Messiah. John the Baptist also alluded to these messianic psalms when he said: "'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him.' He who has the bride is the bridegroom. . . . He must increase and I must decrease" (Jn 3:30). For these reasons, when others ask why Jesus' disciples are not fasting, He reminds the disciples of John (and the Pharisees) of the themes of these psalms. Truly, when Jesus Christ lived on Earth, it was a time for celebrating the messianic Bridegroom, not a time for mourning or fasting. Now, however, "the days [have] come when the bridegroom [has been] taken away . . . [believers] will fast in [these] days" (Lk 5:35).

"New Wine in Old Wineskins"

Jesus follows up His reference to the messianic Bridegroom with a well-known parable concerning the common problem of mixing new things with old things:

No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one; otherwise [the new piece pulls away from the old, and] the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was taken out of the new does not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins, and [the wine] be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved. And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, "The old is better" (Lk 5:36-39, inserted text from Mk 2:19-22).

Every experienced seamstress knows better than to patch an old garment with "unshrunk cloth" (Mk 2:21). Today, the age-

old problem of patching an old garment with newer cloth has mostly been solved with the invention of iron-on, adhesive-coated patching material. Similarly, new wine bursting old wineskins is no longer a problem because most winemakers now ferment wine in barrels. However, many in Jesus' day understood the risk of losing new, fermenting wine which would overstretch and burst an old wineskin. The obvious lesson illustrated by this parable is the difficulty of mixing or filling something old with something new. To what old and new is Jesus referring?

Many commentators agree that Jesus' parable is teaching that the Messiah's new way cannot be mixed with the Old Covenant and its Law. Specifically, one should not try to fill the Old Covenant with the commands of the New Covenant, because the Old Covenant cannot contain the New Covenant. If the two are mixed, the New Covenant and its Law (new wine) will destroy the Old Covenant (old wineskin, cf. Heb 7:18-19; 8:6-7). The New Covenant is for the new covenant people of God, the bride of Christ, who are not bound by the commands of the Old Covenant but "should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter" (Rom 7:6; cf. Eph 2:15).

An interesting proverb from the Jewish Mishnah is often cited as being similar to Jesus' parable of "New Wine in Old Wineskins." In this author's opinion, the proverb from the Mishnah is not that similar, but it might have an application which complements Jesus' lesson. The proverb suggests that making a disciple of a young person is better than making a disciple of an older person (Avot 4.20). According to the proverb, discipling a young person is like writing on new parchment, from which (after written upon) ink is not easily erased. On the other hand, discipling an older person (specifically one who has already been disciplined by someone else) is much more difficult: it is like writing on an old, smudged piece of parchment from which the old ink has been washed out; thus, the new writing on this old, washed parchment does not always remain, because it is easily erased.

Along the same line as the lesson of this Jewish proverb, Luke records a remark which Jesus adds at the end of His parable: “And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, ‘The old [tastes] better’” (Lk 5:39). This general truth concerning aged wine is reminiscent of the comment of the governor of the wedding feast in Cana when he was served better wine later during the feast (Jn 2:10). Jesus’ comment goes further than the obvious generalization that older wine tastes better; He is emphasizing the general difficulty that a believer might face when changing from following the Old Covenant to following the New Covenant. Disciples of Moses will find repenting difficult because they have already acquired a taste for the Old Covenant Law and will likely have an aversion to the New Covenant Law. Even John the Baptist and his disciples might have difficulty developing a taste for the New Covenant.

