

New and Improved

Matthew 9:14-26

Whenever an item is marketed as “new and improved” I am always tempted to think rather cynically that the reality is more accurately, “not as good as it was.” “New and improved” meant that the product, whatever it was, had been altered in a way that made it less useful, less effective, less enjoyable. Thus “new and improved” becomes the kiss of death. Often, a product that is “new and improved” is no longer of much value.

Thankfully, the new covenant doesn’t have that sort of relationship with the old covenant. The new covenant really is “new and improved.” And that is the point of our text this afternoon, the contrast between the old covenant and the new. The transition from the old covenant to the new. The prophecy came through the mouth of Jeremiah,

Jer. 31:31 “Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah— 32 not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. 33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. 34 No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

In our text today, we have the disciples of John the Baptist actually questioning Jesus—pointedly and directly, about

appropriate behavior in this new covenant. John the Baptist was the last prophet representing the Old Covenant, the last prophet before Jesus. And this was the question.

v.14

That is an interesting questions, especially since we as a congregation had a day of prayer and fasting last April, with expectations of doing it again. In the Bible, there is an obvious emphasis on the positive experience of fasting in the life of a Christian. But Jesus seems to be discouraging fasting, and that is what bothered John’s disciples. Interestingly, they were united in their practice with the Pharisees, so well known and identified as legalist, conforming outwardly to the requirements of God’s law while being aptly described by Jesus as “white-washed tombs.”

So the point is not so much about fasting per se, but about the role of fasting in the outward duties of the Old Covenant. The obvious reality was that Jesus’ disciples were not fasting according to the tradition of the Pharisees, twice a week. And Jesus’ answer serves to point out,

I. THE GLORY OF THE NEW COVENANT.

Look at that answer, v.15

Perhaps that seems like a strange answer, but in the broader context of the coming of the new covenant, it makes perfect sense. It is a great analogy, a very helpful picture of the context of the coming of the new covenant. And the point is this

A. Jesus comes with the joy of a wedding banquet, not the grief of a funeral service.

Fasting, in this context, is associated with grief. It is an expression of grief. It is associated with a funeral, with death, with sorrow. Fasting meant mourning.

But the New Covenant is more like a wedding! The kingdom of Jesus is associated with a wedding banquet, isn't it? In Jesus' own words, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son." And in the book of Revelation, the consummation of that glorious kingdom is described this way,

Rev. 19:6 "And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, "Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! 7 Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready." 8 And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. 9 Then he said to me, "Write: Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!" And he said to me, "These are the true sayings of God."

When you have a marriage banquet, you celebrate! You feast! Not fast. And Jesus comes to inaugurate the new covenant in that context, a wedding! That's why the Lord's Supper ought to be such a delightful experience as well. It's a wedding celebration. Not a funeral. And wedding guests are far different than the professional mourners often hired to attend funeral services. Jesus comes in the new covenant with the joy of a wedding banquet. That's why they don't fast.

The imagery gives you the sense of joy and delight. New really is improved! The writer of the book of Hebrews gives us these additional comments,

Heb. 8:13 "In that He says, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away."

As Hebrews 9 would continue, we read that the Old Covenant

was "concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation."

Heb. 9:11 "But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. 12 Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, 14 how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"

"Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready." That's why the disciples of Jesus didn't fast.

There would be a time of mourning, a time of temporary sadness, when Jesus would suffer and die for the sins of his people, and fasting would be appropriate on that occasion.

v.15

But in the broader context, with the coming of Jesus, with the establishment of the New Covenant in all its glory, there was no fasting. And then, to make the point clearer, an illustration.

v.16-17

The image itself is easy to understand. Actually, two images. Unshrunk cloth and an old garment. They don't mix. The new, unshrunk cloth will eventually shrink, and cause tear worse than what the original hole. So it is with wineskins. A new wine skin would be sufficiently elastic to stand the pressure of newly fermenting wine, but an older wineskin would be much more stiff

and rigid. If you poured new wine into an old wineskin, the new, fermenting wine would spill out. It might burst the old skin altogether. So the new wine would have to go into the new wineskin.

But what does that mean? I think the easiest answer is to identify the new wine with the new covenant. Jesus inaugurates the new covenant, he is the new wine. But that new wine requires new wineskins. The new covenant requires a new outward form, and indeed, the new covenant has that as well. With a focus upon our worship as the people of God, that new wineskin would be the worship we now offer to God in the new covenant.

B. The new wine of our salvation and the new wineskins of our worship.

“They put new wine into new wineskins,” verse 17. So the Old Covenant context of fasting is over. No more sackcloth and ashes. No more external rituals and ceremonies that are mere types of what is to come. Now we have Jesus, the fulfillment of all those shadows. Again,

Heb. 8:13 “In that He says, “A new covenant,” He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.”

So the new wine was the broad and free invitation of the gospel to all who would believe, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female. The new wine is the gospel of Jesus so clearly proclaimed by the Apostle Paul, when he wrote of Jesus,

Eph. 2:14 “For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, 15 having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, 16 and

that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. 17 And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. 18 For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. 19 Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”

So the new wineskin is the church, the new wineskin is the worship of the church. And Jesus is the new wine that fills us. We are no longer “concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation.” We have Jesus. We no longer have human priests, because we have Jesus. We no longer require priestly intercession, because we have Jesus. We are all priests, a kingdom of priests. We eat his body and drink his blood. So Jesus says to his father,

Heb. 10:8 “Previously saying, “Sacrifice and offering, burnt offerings, and offerings for sin You did not desire, nor had pleasure in them” (which are offered according to the law), 9 then He said, “Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God.” He takes away the first that He may establish the second. 10 By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”

We have Jesus. He is the new wine, and the worship we offer to God is the new wineskin. So with Jesus, you can’t go back to the old way. You can’t go back to the old wineskin. You can’t go back to those old, ceremonial regulations of the old covenant.

Not with the new wine of Jesus. Such is the glory of the new covenant.

Then notice the power.

II. THE POWER OF THE NEW COVENANT.

Another miracle, and one which is designed like so many of the others to demonstrate,

A. The power of life.

Jesus didn't perform miracles just to show off. He didn't perform miracle just to heal peoples' bodies. Rather, he performed miracles to demonstrate with physical power the spiritual authority he possessed as the son of God. So clearly from last time,

Mat. 9:4 "But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? 5 For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Arise and walk'? 6 But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins"—then He said to the paralytic, "Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house."

Do you remember Lazarus?

John 11:21 Now Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You." 23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." 24 Martha said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." 25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. 26 And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She said to Him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

Not very helpful, so it seemed, in terms of Lazarus' physical life. But Jesus went on to perform a miracle in that circumstance as well, in order to demonstrate that he was, indeed, "the resurrection and the life." He raised Lazarus from the dead to prove that, "Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live..."

So Jesus restored this dear daughter of Jairus for the same purpose. And along the way, he healed a woman so distressed by a discharge of blood for twelve years. The curse would be reversed, but death and even the suffering that leads up to death. Jesus had the power over it all, the power of life.

v.18-22

Notice something in that, however. Notice,

B. The instrument of faith.

Faith as the instrument by which the woman was healed. The alone instrument, the only instrument. The only way by which this power of God could be granted to this woman, by means of her faith.

v.22 "Be of good cheer, daughter; your faith has made you well."

Surely, the power was not in her faith. Her faith was not a good work that Jesus rewarded. No, her faith was the instrument by which she became the recipient of God's grace. Faith was the instrument which was used by the hands of God to communicate the blessings and benefits of his salvation. Thus the words are so appropriate, "Your faith has made you well."

There is one more thing I need to emphasize from this miracle, and that is the method. Just look at what exactly Jesus said, and did. And if the question is, "Why...?", then the answer is,

“Because of his compassion.” Why did he say what he said?
Because he is,

C. A compassionate shepherd.

Why did he do what he did the way he did it? Because he is a compassionate shepherd. Consider his words in,
v.22 “Be of good cheer, daughter...”

Such affectionate language. Such a personal and compassionate encouragement. The words weren’t necessary for Jesus to perform the miracle. But they were necessary for him to demonstrate that he was a compassionate shepherd, a good shepherd who loves his sheep.

We see that same affection as he raised this young girl.
v.23-26

He didn’t have to go to the house. Matthew didn’t have to mention the flute players and the commotion, normally associated with a funeral; nor the apparently derisive mockery and laughter he was willing to endure. And Jesus didn’t have to take the girl by the hand. But we’re told he did all those things. And we know all of those things happened in order that we might have the fuller picture of our good and compassionate shepherd. Jesus put away all the crowd, and took the girl by her hand. And then, with both compassion and power, he raised her from the dead.

So what do I say in terms of application and conclusion to all of this? First, most importantly, I would say the same thing Jesus said at Lazarus’ bed.

John 11:25. “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. 26 And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?”

Do you believe this? That is the ultimate question I could ever ask. Do you believe this, that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, Jesus is the author of life, Jesus is the source of life? You must believe it, if you wish to have eternal life.

1 John 5:11 “And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.”

Secondly, by way of application, to you who believe in Jesus, the conclusion is simple—worship him. Worship him with the new wineskins of new covenant worship. Worship him with the sacrifice of your whole life, your body, as a living sacrifice. Worship him in all the ways that he prescribes, that you might bring him delight. Offer to God your own acceptable sacrifices of worship, with reverence and awe. And worship him knowing that he is a compassionate shepherd, a good shepherd.

So come to the wedding feast, that is the invitation to worship. Come with great joy and delight. It is not a time for weeping and mourning and fasting, but a time to rejoice. In the words of the Psalmist,

Ps. 122:1 “I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go into the house of the LORD.”