

The New Wine of the New Covenant (Luke 5:33–39)

A New Work Needs a New Covenant

The context of today's passage is found in vv. 27–32. Jesus' radical behavior in calling Levi the tax-collector to repentance and His choice of Levi as a disciple (vv. 27–28), followed by His attendance at Levi's house for a feast with the most despised segments of Jewish society (v. 29), provoked the ire of the religious elite.

And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" (5:30)

In response, Jesus reminded them of the mission of His messianic ministry:

And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." (5:31–32)

As we saw last week, Jesus has come to heal those who are spiritually sick—to grant cleansing and forgiveness of sins to those, like Levi, with leprous, paralytic souls. This redemptive mission of Christ is then punctuated with foretastes of the coming salvation in the healing of those who are physically sick—like the healing of the leper and the paralytic. In effect, Jesus informed the Pharisees and the scribes that they have it backwards. Jesus did not come to grant a certificate of health to the healthy; He came to heal the sick. Jesus did not come to justify the righteous; He came to justify the ungodly (Rom 4:5).

But this was not the religious framework within which the Pharisees and the scribes operated. In their conception of things, God had made a covenant with humanity in the Garden, and then a covenant with Israel at Sinai; and in both covenants, God established the terms of the covenant (the law), promised blessing for obedience to the law, and threatened cursing for disobedience. Therefore, the righteous (the law-keepers) inherit the blessing, and the wicked (the law-breakers) inherit the curse. Or, to put it in the terms Jesus used, the healthy inherit life, and the sick inherit death. It was as simple as that. So why was Jesus, who claimed to be the Messiah

sent from God, blessing the wicked? Why was He associating Himself with tax-collectors and sinners? It made no sense. So they asked Jesus a question:¹

And they said to him, “The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink.” (5:33)

You can see in their question just how perplexed they were by Jesus. John the Baptist they understood; he was calling Israel to repentance, which the Pharisees would have agreed that many in Israel needed (not *them*, of course, but *those*). And many who repented at John’s preaching (not *them*, of course, but *those* who needed to repent), demonstrated their repentance through fasting and prayers. The Pharisees understood that, for fasting was a common Old Testament expression of repentance (e.g. Joel 2:12–17; Jonah 3:5–9).² Indeed, the Pharisees fasted on Mondays and Thursdays (*Did* 8:1; *b. Ta’an* 12a), not so much as an expression of their repentance (what did they have to repent of?), but as an expression of their righteousness.³ But what the Pharisees could not understand was Levi’s response to Jesus’ call. Levi did not fast; Levi threw a feast, and he invited all his degenerate friends to attend. And Jesus feasted with them! They might have understood if Levi and his friends had put on sackcloth and ashes and held a fast. If Jesus had attended that kind of function, the Pharisees likely would not have grumbled. But they simply could not understand the actions of Jesus and His disciples.

In response, Jesus spoke three parables—the first about a bridegroom and a wedding feast, the second about a new patch and an old garment, and the third about new wine and old wineskins. All three make the same point—in Jesus God has brought full and final redemption to

¹ It is debated whether vv. 33–38 occur within the same context as vv. 27–32. Edwards writes, “The preceding story of Levi offers no antecedent to ‘they said’ in v. 33. This may indicate that 5:33–39, as is recognized by Matt 9:14–17 and Mark 2:18–22, was an independent unit of tradition. Luke may append this story here because it continues the themes of feasting and fasting”; James R. Edwards, *The Gospel of Luke*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 172. Likewise, Marshall comments, “It is doubtful whether the scene follows on directly from the previous one, and probably it should be regarded as a separate tradition”; I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 223. Garland, on the other hand, treats the two pericopes as occurring within the same context; David E. Garland, *Luke*, ECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2011), 252. Morris appears to do the same; Leon Morris, *Luke*, TNTC (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1974, 1988), 141. I understand the context to be the same, for otherwise there is no antecedent to “they” (οἱ) in v. 33.

² Gardner, 252.

³ Edwards, 173. Edwards writes, “Although not a legal requirement except on the Day of Atonement, fasting had become in Jesus’ day a prerequisite of religious commitment, a sign of atonement of sin and humiliation and penitence before God, and a general aid to prayer. The rabbis often referred to fasting as ‘an affliction of the soul,’ thereby designating it as a characteristic and sacrificial act of piety”; *Ibid.*

sinners, and this redemptive work cannot be forced onto or into the old covenant. A new redemptive work requires a new covenant.

The Mediator of the New Covenant

Before we dig into these three illustrations, I think it would be wise do a brief review the covenantal framework of redemptive history. This is neither unrelated nor irrelevant to the text at hand, for as I will argue momentarily, the old garment and the old wineskins are symbols of the old covenant, and the new garment and the new wineskin are symbols of the new covenant. The problem with the Pharisees was that their covenant theology was malformed. We dare not make the same mistake. If we are to understand what Jesus is teaching, if we want to understand what Jesus is doing, and if we want to know and experience the joy of the wedding feast, wearing the new garment and drinking of the new wine, then we need to make sure our covenant theology is accurate. Biblical covenant theology is structured around three overarching covenants. These covenants provide the underlying framework of redemptive history, like the foundation and frame of a house.

The first covenant is known as the *covenant of redemption*. In eternity past, having decreed in Himself the creation of man, having decreed in Himself the fall of man, God decreed in Himself the redemption of man. The covenant of redemption is an eternal and inter-trinitarian covenant—that is, a covenant forged in eternity past amongst the three Persons of the triune Godhead. In the covenant of redemption, God the Father chose a people to redeem, appointed His Son to accomplish their redemption by His blood and righteousness, and appointed His Spirit to apply their redemption by regenerating them, sanctifying them, and glorifying them. In turn, God the Son covenanted to redeem the elect through His blood and righteousness, and God the Spirit covenanted to regenerate, sanctify, and glorify those whom the Father chose and the Son redeemed. The frequent biblical references to decrees made for our redemption from “before the foundation of the world” have reference to the covenant of redemption (Eph 1:4; 2 Tm 1:9; Rv 13:8; 17:8). The covenant of redemption is the fountainhead, the source of our redemption.

The second covenant is known as the *covenant of works*. This covenant was made between God and humanity in Adam. In the covenant of works, God promised Adam—and in Adam all mankind—eternal life and fellowship in exchange for obedience to His law; and God threatened Adam—and in Adam all mankind—with death and alienation for disobedience to His

law. Adam disobeyed, violating the covenant, and all mankind was thus condemned to death and wrath.

The third covenant is known as the *covenant of grace*. This covenant is the historical outworking of the eternal covenant of redemption. It is a covenant between God and humanity in Christ. In the covenant of grace, God promised a Redeemer, born of woman, who would save His people from their sins by representing them perfectly in His life and in His death, so that by His blood and by His righteousness He would redeem them from the law's curse and secure for them the law's blessing. It is the covenant of works in Adam and the covenant of grace in Christ of which the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 5:

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.
(Rom 5:18–19)

All men are born under the covenant of works in Adam, and remain so unless or until they are born again into the covenant grace in Christ.

The covenant of grace, first revealed to Adam after the fall (Gn 3:15, 21) was then administered through various historical covenants that further revealed the promised redemption in Christ. There is only one covenant of grace; there is only one promise of redemption, only one redeemed people, only one Redeemer. But this one promise was advanced and revealed through four historical covenants before finding its ultimate fulfillment in the new covenant in Christ:

- In God's covenant with Noah (Gn 9:8–17), God promised to preserve the world for Noah and his descendents (all mankind) until the Redeemer had come and all the redeemed had been saved. The Noahic covenant was a covenant of *preservation*.
- In God's covenant with Abraham (Gn 12:1–7; 15:1–21; 17:1–14), God promised eternal redemption and an everlasting inheritance to Abraham's spiritual descendents (the elect) and a physical, temporal inheritance to Abraham's physical descendents (Israel). Thus, there were two groups of people included in the Abrahamic covenant—Abraham's spiritual seed (those who share Abraham's faith) and Abraham's physical

seed (those who share Abraham’s DNA). Some (faithful Israelites) were members of both groups.⁴ The Abrahamic covenant was a covenant of *promise*.

- In God’s covenant with Israel given through Moses (Ex 19:1–8), God further expanded upon the promise of redemption by providing a multitude of types and shadows of the coming Redeemer and the coming redemption by which His elect might learn to hope in the gospel. This was the inestimable privilege granted to Israel—for 1,500 years, Israel was the steward of the gospel promises. For 1,500 years, Gentiles were all but excluded from the covenant of grace, as Paul said, they were “separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph 2:12). The Mosaic covenant was a covenant of *law*, even though it was an administration of the covenant of grace; for the law was intended to reveal the coming redemption and to prepare the people to receive and participate in it (Gal 3:24).⁵
- In God’s covenant with David (2 Sm 7:1–17), God promised His people an everlasting King who would reign upon an everlasting throne and establish an everlasting kingdom of righteousness and peace. The Davidic covenant was a covenant of *kingdom*.⁶

Finally, in the fulness of time, God sent forth the promised Redeemer who accomplished the promised redemption:

But when the fulness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts,

⁴ “We may picture the seed of Abraham as two overlapping circles. One circle is his physical offspring through Isaac and Jacob (Gen. 17:19; Acts 3:25). The other circle is Abraham’s spiritual offspring, those who share in his faith in God’s promise, whether they are Jews or Gentiles (Rom. 4:11–12). The area where the circles overlap is the Israelites who are saved by faith in Christ. At the center of that overlap is Christ, the great Seed (Gal. 3:16)”; Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Essentials of Reformed Systematic Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2025), 354.

⁵ “Was the covenant of law a covenant of works? If people take the commandments themselves as a way to be justified, the law becomes a covenant of works. It promises eternal life for perfect obedience (Matt. 19:16–19; Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:12) and threatens a curse against all lawbreakers (Gal. 3:10). But in the context of God’s word to Israel, the covenant of law was another temporary administration of the covenant of grace”; Beeke and Smalley, *Essentials of Reformed Systematic Theology*, 355.

⁶ The preceding survey of the historical covenants is based upon Beeke and Smalley, *Essentials of Reformed Systematic Theology*, 351–58.

crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. (Gal 4:3–7)

In Christ, God has brought the covenant of grace to fulfillment; every historical promise of grace finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Son of Man (2 Cor 1:20). This ultimate fulfillment of the covenant of grace is in Scripture called the “new covenant.” On the night of His betrayal, when Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper, He told His disciples,

“This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” (Lk 22:20)

And the author of Hebrews wrote,

Therefore [Christ] is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant. (Heb 9:15)

Look closely at the language the author of Hebrews employs. Jesus Christ is the mediator of a “new covenant,” who by His death redeems those who had sinned under the “first covenant.” If the “new covenant” is the fulfillment of the covenant of grace, what is the “old covenant?” The “first covenant” or “old covenant” was God’s covenant with Israel through Moses. This is not to say that there was no sin in the world prior to Moses (Rom 5:13–14), nor that the death of Christ only redeems those under the Mosaic covenant, as though Jesus were only the Savior of the Jews (Rom 3:29–30; 4:11–14). Rather, the author’s purpose in Hebrews is narrow—he is speaking to Jews, and he is arguing for the supremacy of Christ and the new covenant over the types and shadows of the old covenant.

We have finally come to the definitions of the terms that are crucial to our understanding of Luke 5:33–39. The new covenant (represented by the wedding feast, by the new garment, and by the new wineskin) is the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant of grace. Jesus came to mediate this new covenant by His blood and righteousness—His righteousness achieved the blessing of the law on behalf of those whom He represented in His life, and His blood satisfied the curse of the law against the sins of those whom He represented in His death. The old covenant

(represented by fasting, by the old garment, and by the old wineskin) is the Mosaic covenant—that covenant God made with Israel at Sinai, particularly as it was (mis)understood by the Pharisees. And Jesus’ point in these three illustrations is that the new covenant, while the fulfillment of the old, is incompatible with the old. You cannot tear a piece from the new covenant and sew it onto the old covenant; you cannot take the wine of the new covenant and pour it into the old covenant. If you do, you will ruin both the old covenant and the new, and render yourself miserable because you are fasting when Jesus intends you to be feasting.

The Misunderstanding of the New Covenant

So what does it mean to fast when you should be feasting? What does it mean to tear a piece from the new covenant and sew it onto the old? What does it mean to pour the wine of the new covenant into the wineskin of the old covenant? What were the Pharisees doing, and how are we in danger of doing the same? I see in Jesus’ words three ways in which the Pharisees were deficient in their understanding of both the old and the new covenants.

I. They Failed to Recognize the Presence of the Bridegroom

First, the Pharisees failed to recognize the presence of the Bridegroom. And because they failed to recognize the presence of the Bridegroom, they failed to recognize that the time had come for the wedding feast.

And Jesus said to them, “Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.” (5:34–35)

Jesus used an event familiar to everyone in His audience to make His point. A wedding feast was a community event, and everyone understood that it was a time for feasting and joy, and that fasting at such an occasion was utterly inappropriate. A Jewish wedding feast usually lasted seven days, during which the entire community joined in the festivities and everything else came to a halt. Edwards writes, “Friends and guests had no responsibility but to enjoy the festivities. There was abundance of food and wine, as well as song, dance, and fun both in the house and on the street. Rabbis, too, were expected to suspend Torah instruction and celebrate with their

students.”⁷ But these Pharisees did not understand that it was time to feast, time to celebrate. Yet the tax-collectors and sinners who had become Jesus’ disciples through repentance did. What made the difference? The disciples of Jesus understood that Jesus was the Bridegroom, and the disciples of the Pharisees did not; therefore, the disciples of Jesus feasted while the disciples of the Pharisees fasted.

The image of the Messiah as the Bridegroom is not found in the Old Testament. But it is found at least four times in the New Testament: here in Luke 5:33–34 (and in the synoptic parallels of Mt 9:15 and Mk 2:19), in John 3:29 where John the Baptist says,

“The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete.” (Jn 3:29)

in Ephesians 5:22–33 where Paul speaks of Jesus as the bridegroom and the church as the bride of Christ, and in Revelation 19:6–9 where John sees the vision of the wedding supper of the Lamb (Christ) to his Bride (the church). But the image has its roots in the frequent Old Testament descriptions of God as Israel’s husband (Isa 5:1; 54:5–6; 62:4–5; Ezk 16:6–8; Hos 2:19). Therefore, by assuming the role of the Bridegroom, Jesus was making implicit claims to a divine, messianic identity.⁸ Levi, and those tax-collectors and sinners whom Jesus effectually called to repentance, saw in Jesus the promised Messiah, their Redeemer, their Lord, the One with whom they desired to enter into an everlasting covenant. Therefore, when they were united to Him by faith, they intuitively knew that it was time to feast, time to rejoice. The Lover of their soul had appeared! Who could think of fasting, who could think of mourning at a time like this? The Pharisees, on the other hand, did not see in Jesus the long-awaited Messiah; they did not see

⁷ Edwards, 173.

⁸ “The ‘bridegroom’ (v. 34) is normally not a messianic metaphor; nowhere in the OT is the Messiah presented as a bridegroom, and only rarely so outside of the OT. This does not diminish its christological significance, however, for in the OT God is not infrequently described as Israel’s husband and lover (Isa 5:1; 54:5–6; 62:4–5; Ezek 16:6–8; Hos 2:19). The same nuptial imagery increases in later Judaism. In this stunning metaphor, which appears in all four Gospels, Jesus does not allude to his messianic office, but presumes the prerogatives of God himself. Similar to the forgiveness of sins in 5:24, Jesus invites hearers to supply their own answer to his identity. Both episodes, powerfully though implicitly, provoke hearers to recognize that, in the mission of Jesus, the *person of God is present*”; Edwards, 173–74.

in Jesus the Lover of their soul; they did not see in Jesus one with whom they desired to enter into an everlasting covenant. So they did not feast, but continued to fast.

Now, it must be added that Jesus spoke of days to come when the Bridegroom will be taken away, days when it will be appropriate once again to fast. While this may mess with the marriage metaphor somewhat (it was not a normal situation; once the bridegroom arrived for the wedding feast, he usually stayed with his bride), it does fit with the two-fold, already/not yet nature of Christ's advent. Christ came, He has been taken away, and He is coming again. While He was here, fasting and mourning were inappropriate. While He is away, there are times when fasting and mourning are appropriate once more, though not as though Christ has not come and is not coming again. In other words, new covenant fasting should differ from old covenant fasting in its tone; it is mourning mixed with rejoicing, sorrow mingled with joy (2 Cor 6:10). The example of the NT church testifies to the ongoing validity of fasting (e.g. Acts 13:1–2; 14:23; 1 Cor 7:5; 9:25–27).⁹ But when Christ returns, fasting will be entirely inappropriate once more. Why? Because fasting is an expression of longing and of sorrow, and in the presence of Christ there is fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore (Ps 16:11; Rv 7:15–17; 21:2–5). One does not fast in the presence of Christ; one feasts in the presence of Christ. The Pharisees fasted rather than feasted, at least in part, because they did not recognize in Jesus the coming Messiah, the Bridegroom of the elect Bride.

Do not make the same mistake. Do not fail to recognize Jesus Christ as the promised Redeemer, the promised Messiah, and the Lover of your soul. If your life is marked by sorrow more than joy, by fear more than confidence, by fasting more than feasting, it is a sure sign that you have not recognized Jesus rightly. The fruit of saving faith in Christ is joy. How could it be otherwise? The Jesus of the gospel cleanses the leprous heart. The Jesus of the gospel heals the paralytic soul. The Jesus of the gospel forgives sin. The Jesus of the gospel calls you into His fellowship and invites you to His wedding feast. Now, because Jesus has at present been taken away, our joy is mingled with grief and sorrow as we wrestle against sin and suffering and Satan. But if your Christian experience is all fasting and no feasting, all sorrow and no joy, then I must ask, do you actually know Jesus? Or have you believed in a Jesus whose covenant is in reality a

⁹ “In his chronicle of roughly the first thirty-five years of the Christian movement in Acts, Luke describes the deprivations, hardships, and opposition faced by early Christians after the ascension of Jesus, and the role that fasting played in sustaining the nascent community of faith. The discipline of physical privation in fasting was an aid to watchfulness, contrition, and strength and sensitivity in Christian life”; Edwards, 173.

covenant of works rather than a covenant of grace? For a faith that has no place for feasting has either failed to recognize in Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, or it is a faith that is trying to somehow fit the new covenant into the old. In other words, it is a faith that is trying to sew a new patch onto an old garment, trying to pour new wine into an old wineskin.

II. They Failed to Recognize the Purpose of the Law

That brings us to the second way in which the Pharisees were deficient in their understanding of the covenants—the Pharisees failed to recognize the purpose of the old covenant law. Therefore, they failed to recognize that the new covenant was incompatible with the old. This is the point of the parables Jesus told in vv. 36–38:

He also told them a parable: “No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on the old garment. If he does, he will tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts the new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins.” (5:36–38)

As I argued earlier, the new garment and the new wineskin represent the new covenant, and the old garment and the old wineskin represent the old covenant—specifically, in this case, Judaism as understood by the Pharisees.¹⁰ I think there are two problems addressed in these parables—the first is with the Pharisees’ understanding of the purpose of the old covenant, and the second is with their understanding of the perpetuity of the old covenant.

Let’s deal with the first problem, which was that the Pharisees had turned the old covenant, a covenant intended to be a temporary administration of the covenant of grace, into another manifestation of the covenant of works. You will remember from our brief primer on biblical covenant theology that God’s covenant with Israel through Moses (the “old covenant”), even though it was a covenant of law, was intended to advance and expand upon the promise of the covenant of grace. It did this in two primary ways.

¹⁰ “One must interpret this and the following parable as having allegorical significance; otherwise, it just offers the kind of wisdom that might be found in *Good Housekeeping* magazine”; Gardner, 254. “Both this and the previous illustration drive home the point that Jesus is not simply patching up Judaism: he is teaching something radically new”; Morris, 141.

- First, it was to that point in redemptive history, the clearest exposition of the law, the clearest exposition of righteousness, that God had yet given to mankind. As such, it was intended to reveal man's sin, man's inward corruption and legal condemnation, man's hopeless and helpless condition before God, in order that it might drive man to seek God's promised mercy through God's promised Messiah. This purpose of the old covenant was explicated by the apostle Paul in Galatians 3 and Romans 7:

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. (Gal 3:23–24)

What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." . . . So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. (Rom 7:7, 12)

God gave the law as a mirror for humanity that we might gaze intently into it and see our own depravity. And recognizing our corrupt and condemned state, our hopeless and helpless condition, we might cast ourselves upon God's mercy and hope in the promise of God's Messiah. But instead of receiving the law as a mirror that revealed their depravity that they might seek justification through God's mercy, the Pharisees received the law as a ladder by which they might climb their way to justification by their own merit. They flattered themselves that they kept the law, and were on that basis justified in the sight of God. This was why they could not comprehend Jesus' forgiveness of and fellowship with tax-collectors and sinners. Such sinners had not merited God's forgiveness and fellowship.

- Second, the law contained all manner of types and shadows of the gospel, and these were intended to reveal to man the coming Redeemer and the coming redemption. The clearest example of this purpose of the law is the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16), on which the high priest would receive from the people of Israel two goats. One goat would be slain, and its blood would be presented before the LORD to make

atonement for the sins of the people. The high priest would then take the second goat, lay his hands upon it and confess over it the sins of the people, and send it away into the wilderness, never to return. Thus, the first goat, the goat for the sin offering, revealed the promise of *propitiation*—a sacrifice of atonement to satisfy the righteous wrath of God. The second goat revealed the promise of *expiation*—that God would remove the sins of His people as far as the east is from the west (Ps 103:12). The old covenant was full of these kinds of types and shadows of the gospel that would be fully and finally revealed in the new covenant. But instead of receiving such sacrifices and offerings, such rites and rituals, as pictures of the mercy of God to be revealed in God’s coming Messiah, the Pharisees viewed such acts as works of righteousness by which they merited justification. They turned these gospel pictures of the old covenant into so many rungs of righteousness upon the ladder of merit by which they sought to climb to justification.

In these two ways, the Pharisees turned the old covenant, which was given by God to be a temporary administration of the covenant of grace, into a manifestation of the covenant of works. And lest you think I’m misinterpreting the Pharisees, or, for that matter, the majority of Israel, this is precisely what the apostle Paul said in Romans 9 that they had done with the law:

What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based upon works. (Rom 9:30–32)

They turned the law into something to do in order to merit justification before God. But because of the corruption and condemnation they inherited from Adam, the law, which requires personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience, is beyond their reach. It is beyond the reach of anyone born in Adam. In attempting to merit justification by the keeping of the old covenant law, the Pharisees were sewing a new patch upon an old garment; they were pouring new wine into old wineskins. But the old covenant was never given for that purpose, and by doing so, they destroyed both the law and the gospel.

The second problem addressed by these parables is the Pharisees' understanding of the perpetuity of the old covenant. God's covenant with Israel through Moses (the "old covenant") was intended to be a *temporary* administration of the covenant of grace. It was never intended to be permanent or perpetual. Regarding the purpose of the law revealed in the old covenant, the apostle Paul wrote,

So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. (Gal 3:24–26)

And regarding the promises of the gospel revealed in the old covenant, the author of Hebrews wrote that,

In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away. . . . According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation. (Heb 8:13; 9:9–10)

The sacrifices and offerings, the statutes and ordinances relating to ritual cleansing and purity, these were only imposed "until the time of reformation," until Christ mediated the new covenant. Such things were never intended as a means of justification, as an end in themselves.

But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. (Heb 10:3–4)

No one was ever justified by offering bulls and goats upon the altar; they were justified if, and only if, they looked beyond these sacrifices to the perfect sacrifice to whom they pointed. In so far as one offered a sacrifice as a way of meriting justification, that sacrifice was a work of law; but in so far as one offered a sacrifice as a sign of God's promise of grace to come in the future Messiah, that sacrifice was an act of faith in the gospel.

III. They Failed to Recognize the Preeminence of the Gospel

Jesus has appeared as a new garment, as new wine, and He is incompatible, not only with the old garment and old wineskin of Pharisaic Judaism; He is incompatible with any works-based, merit-oriented attempt at self-justification. These three parables (wedding feast, new garment, new wine) are not merely about the old covenant giving way to the new covenant. It is about the fundamental incompatibility of a religion of merit and a religion of mercy. For an Israelite who received the old covenant as a temporary administration of the covenant of grace, as a way of advancing and revealing the promise of the gospel, would have recognized and received the Bridegroom when He appeared and would have feasted on His grace, for all of the statutes, all of the ordinances, all of the sacrifices and offerings had pointed to the grace to be found in the coming Redeemer. But the impulse to try to sew Jesus onto the garment of our self-righteousness, or to pour Jesus into the wineskin of our self-righteousness is not a uniquely Jewish problem. It is a universally human problem, made manifest from the very beginning. Think of Cain and Abel, the first two historical sons of Adam. Both were born (quite literally) in Adam, under the broken covenant of works, having inherited from Adam both the condemnation of sin (Rom 5:18) and the corruption of sin (Rom 5:19). Both were taught the promise of the coming Redeemer (Gn 3:15); both were taught the necessity of atonement (Gn 3:21). But when they approached God, only Abel brought faith in the promised Redeemer and the blood of a lamb; Cain brought the fruit of his labors produced by the sweat of his brow. Consequently, Cain was rejected, and Abel was accepted (Gn 4:3–5).

And yet, ever since Cain—indeed, ever since Adam and Eve attempted to cover themselves in fig leaves—men have been trying to present themselves before God in their own righteousness. Why? Jesus put His finger on it in v. 39:

And no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says, “The old is good.” (5:39)

This brings us to the final problem with the Pharisees— they failed to recognize the preeminence of the gospel over the law; they failed to recognize the newness of the new covenant, and how it is in every way better than and incompatible with the old. Two final questions need to be answered—why is the new covenant preeminent, and why did the Pharisees not see it?

The answer to the first question is simple: in Christ we have the substance of the covenant of grace, of which all the previous covenantal administrations were but shadows. All of the previous administrations of the covenant of grace were covenants of promise; in the new covenant in Christ, we have the fulfillment. Because of our failure to keep the covenant of works, all of mankind born in Adam face two insurmountable problems—our condemnation due to sin, and the corruption of our souls. In the new covenant in Christ, we have the full and final remedy to both problems. The eternal Son of God became incarnate as the sinless Son of Man. As the Second Adam, as our representative before God in the covenant of grace, He lived a life of personal, perfect, perpetual obedience to God on our behalf, thereby meriting for us the reward of everlasting life and fellowship with God. In His death upon the cross, He became our substitute in the judgment of God; bearing our unrighteousness and guilt He made full and final atonement for our sin. In His life and in His death, Jesus satisfied the requirements of the covenant— He lived to provide our righteousness and He died to atone for our unrighteousness. He then rose from the dead, ascended to the right hand of the throne of God, and poured out the Holy Spirit upon those He redeemed in order to regenerate and renew their souls, and to sanctify and preserve them unto everlasting glory. In every way, Jesus is the Redeemer of God’s elect, removing both our condemnation and our corruption. Truly, all the promises of God are “yes” and “amen” in Jesus Christ (2 Cor 1:20).

But why did the Pharisees not see it? Why were they content with the old wine, saying, “The old is good?”¹¹ The apostle Paul repeatedly identified the motive in rejecting the gospel in favor of the law, of rejecting the covenant of grace in favor of the covenant of works, as arrogance; the depraved desire to boast before God (e.g. Rom 3:27–28; Phil 3:2–4). There is something about us that is drawn like a magnet to self-righteousness. We want to achieve merit; we do not want to receive mercy. “Give me a law, and I will keep it; give me a standard, and I will reach it; give me a requirement, and I will fulfill it.” It is pride; it is arrogance; and it is actually a manifestation of our rebellion against God. Mercy brings us into a relationship with God; merit keeps God at an arm’s length, like an employee who does his job, collects his check, and goes his separate way. Mercy is an admission of our need; merit is an assertion of our self-

¹¹ “[Jesus] sees that His teaching will not be palatable to some. A man drinking old wine does not want even to try the new. *The old is good*, he says (not ‘better,’ as the margin). He is not even comparing them. He is so content with the old that he does not consider the new for a moment. ‘It’s the old that’s good!’”; Morris, 142. For an alternative interpretation, see Edwards, 175–76.

sufficiency. But it is all a delusion. If they had truly understood the depths of their depravity, if they had truly understood that they stood helpless and hopeless before the law, they would have eagerly received the grace of Christ. And then they could have comprehended why the tax-collectors and sinners who had been called and converted by Jesus feasted.

Likewise, if you cannot comprehend Levi's joy, it is because you have not comprehended Levi's Jesus and the new covenant He has inaugurated through His life, death, and resurrection. Like the Pharisees, you are still attempting to relate to God, at least in part, upon the basis of your own merits rather than entirely upon the basis of God's mercy in Christ. Do not try to sew a little Jesus onto the garment of your own righteousness. Cast off your old, ragged, filthy garment and receive from Jesus the new garment of His righteousness. Do not try to pour a little Jesus into the old wineskin of your corrupt heart. Receive from Jesus the new wineskin of a new heart that is capable of containing the new wine of the new covenant. Then come and enjoy the feast that is the grace of God in Christ.