

“ILLUSTRATING THE NEWNESS OF THE NEW COVENANT”

I. Introduction

- A. This is one of those passages where it is easy to lose the forest for the trees.
 - 1. That is, we can get so caught up in the details that we lose sight of the main idea that is being conveyed here.
 - 2. When we read about this reference to the practice of fasting, we have a tendency to start thinking about how this might apply to us today.
 - 3. We wonder, ‘Should I be fasting, and if so, how should I go about doing it?’
 - 4. But the main point of this passage is not to teach us something about fasting.
 - 5. Instead, the main point is to help us see the earth-shaking significance of Jesus’s coming into the world.

- B. These verses are telling us that Jesus’s coming ushered in a completely new era in redemptive history.
 - 1. Prior to Jesus’s coming, all of God’s dealings with his people were oriented toward the expectation of something that was still to come.
 - 2. But now that Jesus has come, the reality for which God’s people had long been waiting has arrived.
 - 3. As we study this text today, we will see how Jesus uses three illustrations to help us understand the newness of the new covenant.

II. The Present Bridegroom

- A. The passage begins with a group of people coming to Jesus and pointing out that while the disciples of the Pharisees and of John the Baptist fast on a regular basis, Jesus's disciples do not fast.
1. These people were obviously talking about religious fasting, which is a matter of abstaining from food for spiritual purposes.
 2. The one fast that was explicitly imposed upon Israel in the Old Testament was the one that was held on the Day of Atonement. (see Lev. 16:29-31)
 3. Fasting was also used by God's people at other times as an accompaniment to earnest prayer and to express repentance and grief.
 4. When the temple was destroyed and the Israelites were taken into captivity by the Babylonians, the loss of the sacrificial system caused some Jews to think of fasting as a practice that could in some sense replace the sacrificial system and perhaps even merit divine favor.
 5. By the first century, Pharisees and other Jews fasted twice each week and viewed this practice as an important expression of their piety and devotion.
- B. In the Bible, fasting is legitimately used when it is done in order to focus and intensify prayer.
1. It is a way to express humility, dependence, and sincere resolve when calling upon the Lord for mercy and help.
 2. Now, because fasting is a matter of privation, there is always an element of sorrow in it.
 3. Its overall tone is one of longing.

4. This helps us to understand Jesus's explanation of why his disciples were not fasting.
 5. Jesus said, "Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?"
 6. This is a very effective illustration.
 7. People in all cultures know that a wedding is a time of joy, a cause for celebration.
 8. When the wedding ceremony is over, the wedding party and the guests typically enjoy food and drink together.
 9. Even if there isn't a dinner or an elaborate reception, we certainly wouldn't associate a wedding with abstaining from food.
 10. A wedding is not a time of sorrow and longing, but a time of rejoicing and consummation.
 11. Jesus is using this illustration to teach that his coming into the world is like that.
 12. He is the Christ, the long-expected one, the one in whom all of God's promises find their 'Yes' and 'Amen.'
 13. Now that he has come, the long period of yearning and waiting has ended.
 14. That is why his disciples were not fasting.
- C. Having said this, Jesus also explains that the time will come when he will be taken away, at which time his disciples will fast.
1. The phrase "taken away" refers to Jesus's violent death.
 2. After seeing Jesus taken away from them through Judas's betrayal and the ensuing crucifixion, the disciples' grief and shame would

cause them to fast.

3. It is also possible that Jesus's words have a secondary reference to the ten day period of waiting that his disciples experienced in between his ascension and the day of Pentecost.
 4. While Jesus was taken up into heaven at the ascension, he kept his promise of coming to his disciples and being with his church to the end of the age by sending his Spirit at Pentecost.
 5. Even though Jesus is not with us now in a physical sense, he is with us by the power of his Spirit.
 6. We certainly long for the day of the bridegroom's bodily return in glory, yet we do so as those who are indwelt by his life-giving Spirit.
- D. This interpretation of these verses helps us to see that, in spite of what some Christians claim, there is no New Testament command for Christians to fast.
1. While fasting can be a useful spiritual discipline, it is a voluntary practice.
 2. It is true that there can be times of crisis or decision when the church decides to proclaim a season of public fasting and prayer, but participation in such fasts is still voluntary.
 3. When we think about a practice like fasting, we always need to remember how easy it is to make it into something meritorious.
 4. And even if we do engage in fasting, we should not lose sight of the fact that the bridegroom has come and is still with us by the power of his Spirit.

III. The New Garment

- A. In the next part of the passage, Jesus employs two more illustrations to make his point.
1. The first of these has to do with articles of clothing.
 2. Jesus says that if you have an old garment that needs mending, you do not take a new garment and destroy it in order to get material to patch the old garment.
 3. Not only would this ruin the new garment, but it would also cause further damage to the old garment.
 4. The new fabric would shrink when washed and make an even worse tear when it pulls away from the old garment.
 5. Jesus is saying that it would be just as foolish to take his teaching and try to add it to the old, obsolete forms of Judaism under the Mosaic law.
 6. Jesus did not come simply to patch up the old covenant.
 7. He came to inaugurate an entirely new one.
 8. While this new covenant is the fulfillment of the old covenant, there is a fundamental incompatibility between them now that the new has been inaugurated.
- B. This same point is expressed in several other New Testament passages.
1. One such passage is Galatians 4.
 2. Paul likens the old arrangement under the law covenant at Sinai to the slave status of Sarah's maid Hagar and her child, Ishmael.
 3. And he likens the new arrangement under the gospel to the free status of Sarah and her child, Isaac.
 4. Then Paul stresses the incompatibility of these two arrangements by telling the Galatians, "Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children

of promise... we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery... if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you." (Gal. 4:28, 31; 5:1, 2)

- C. We see something along the same lines in Hebrews 8, where the author of that letter says that "Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant that he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises." (Heb. 8:6)
1. Then, after citing the prophecy of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31, the writer says, "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." (Heb. 8:13)
 2. This is really the same basic point that Jesus is making in our text in Luke.
 3. He is saying that we are not bound by the ceremonies and practices that belonged to the old covenant and its era of expectation.
 4. Christ is the reality to which all of those things pointed, and in him they reach their fulfillment.

IV. The New Wine

- A. Jesus's second illustration has to do with wine and wineskins.
1. In those days, wine was fermented in leather skins.
 2. As the wine fermented, the skin would get stretched out.
 3. Because an old, previously stretched out wineskin would be inflexible, it would burst if you filled it with wine that was still going through the fermentation process.

4. New wine needs a new wineskin, or else both the wine and the skin will be ruined.
- B. This illustration makes the same basic point as the previous one about the garments.
1. Jesus is saying that there is an incompatibility between the new covenant that he is inaugurating and the old covenant that had been established under Moses.
 2. While the new covenant is the reality to which the old covenant was pointing, the gospel cannot be contained within the bounds of Judaism.
 3. The piety of God's people under the old covenant was a piety of expectation, and it found expression in forms that were suitable for that purpose.
 4. But the piety of God's people under the new covenant is a piety of fulfillment, and it finds expression in different forms.
 5. One of the ways in which we can see this so clearly is in relation to the sacraments.
 6. The principle sacraments of the old covenant, which were circumcision and Passover, involved the shedding of blood because they pointed forward to Christ's one for all sacrifice.
 7. But the sacraments of the new covenant, which are baptism and the Lord's Supper, are bloodless because Christ has completed his atoning work.
 8. As we have already said, new covenant believers still have a sense of longing as we await the day of consummation, but we wait as those "on whom the end of the ages has come." (1 Cor. 10:11)
- C. We should note that Jesus's words in verse 38 have at times been misapplied.

1. In declaring that new wine needs new wineskins, Jesus was not advocating contemporaneity as a value system.
 2. He was not saying that we should always prefer the new to the old and should always think of the past as passé.
 3. Remember, Jesus is talking about the old and the new in reference to the old and new covenants.
 4. The Scriptures often place great value upon old things, things that are handed down from one generation to another.
 5. In fact, the gospel itself is described as “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” (Jude 3)
 6. This leads one writer to conclude that “it is un-Christian to reject out of hand all connection to the rest of the catholic (universal) church, as though their prayers, examples, faith, hope, or, yes, hymns could not possibly be expected to assist us.” [T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Sing Hymns*, 123]
- D. This brings us to verse 39, where Jesus says, “And no one after drinking old wine desires the new, for he says, ‘The old is good.’”
1. A connoisseur of fine wine might read those words and say, ‘Of course. Everyone knows that the older wine is better.’
 2. But we have to keep in mind what Jesus means by “old wine” here.
 3. The “old wine” is the old covenant and the expressions of piety that grew out of it.
 4. Jesus’s point is that the Pharisees prefer the ceremonial law and their traditions over the new situation that he was inaugurating.
 5. They had made so much of their practices that they had no taste for the new wine that Jesus was offering.

- E. While Jesus was speaking about those who were clinging to the traditions of Judaism when he made this point, the basic principle that he is expressing does have a broader application.
1. We all tend to get comfortable with the things that we are used to.
 2. While this is understandable, it is something that can keep us from Christ and from the blessings that are found in him.
 3. For example, a non-Christian might respond to the gospel by saying, 'No thanks. I like my life the way that it is.'
 4. And even Christians can get bogged down in habits and patterns that may be comfortable to them but are not really helping them grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ.
 5. When this happens, people do not even realize the joy that they are missing out on.
 6. In the words of C.S. Lewis, we are "like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."
 7. To use the imagery of this passage, Christ and his blessings are like a fine wine, but wine is something that you have to develop a taste for.
 8. The more you cultivate your spiritual palette, the more you will be able to taste and see that the Lord is good.