

The Parables of Jesus

- "The Children of the Bridechamber and the Bridegroom"
- "The New Cloth on an Old Garment"
- "The New Wine in Old Wineskins"

(Matthew 9: 15-17; Mark 2:19-22; Luke 5:34-38)

The traditional view of these parables - the "Children of the Bridechamber and the Bridegroom," "New Cloth on an Old Garment" and "New Wine in Old Wineskins" - is that Jesus was speaking about the Holy Spirit coming into the

lives of new believers. The "traditional teaching" is that you cannot put new ideas and Christian thinking into the "old" ways of the Old Testament. The "traditional" explanation of these parables goes on to say that the Holy Spirit can only come and dwell within a person who has been made new through a born again experience. These are very true principles. However, in the context of when and why these parables were given, as we shall discuss, Jesus may have had something different that He was trying to bring forth with these parables. Let's see...

Other than some analogies and other teachings that we know of as seen through the first chapters of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the parables used at this setting seem to be the first usage by Jesus of the "teaching tool" known as parables. All the Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke place the giving of these parables at the same event. They are also in unison concerning at what point in time within Jesus' ministry they were given. It was in the first year of Jesus' public ministry. He had just officially "called forth" His first disciples - Peter, Andrew, James and John. This took place in Capernaum. We read that after Jesus had called Peter, Andrew, James and John, He went about the region teaching and preaching. Matthew's account gives us insight into what Jesus was teaching. It became known as "The Sermon on the Mount." (Matthew 5, 6, 7) We also, see that Jesus went about setting people free from sickness, as well as from the bondage of demonic activity. He and this small group of first disciples then returned to what has been considered Jesus' "home base" - Capernaum.

It was at this time, Jesus, saw "Levi" (Matthew), sitting at his "tax collector's booth." He called out to him to, "Follow me," to which Levi immediately left his position and followed Jesus. It is apparent that Levi must have heard about Jesus and possibly heard Jesus teach and preach. We read in the Gospel accounts that news of Jesus spread throughout Galilee and "everyone" went out to see and hear Him. It is quite possible that Levi was "looking for the truth" and went out to see if what everyone was saying concerning Jesus was true. In any case something was happening within Levi, for when Jesus called out to him, he was ready and left everything behind. Levi then took Jesus to his home where he had invited all of his fellow tax collectors and other "sinners" (the Amplified Version refers to them as "notorious sinners") for a dinner to come and listen to Jesus. Levi's heart was stirred so much by Jesus, that he wanted everyone he knew to have the opportunity for the same thing to happen for them.

It was at this dinner/banquet that these three parables were given. The reason we are looking at these three parables together is because they are connected with each other, as we will see. Just a quick note - all twelve of the disciples were not "called" as of yet. So far, up until this time, we have Peter, Andrew, John, James who have been with Jesus for just a short time and now Levi (Matthew) who was just called. This is important for us to keep in mind as we continue with our discussion concerning these parables. The other "soon to be disciples" may have been present but were not yet officially "called" by Jesus to be one of His "twelve disciples."

We must keep in mind the context in which these parables were given. This, I believe is vital for us in grasping Jesus' intent in the giving of these parables. The Pharisees had just finished questioning Jesus' new disciples about why Jesus "eats with sinners." We know that they did not answer; most likely because they did not know what to answer. After all, as we mentioned, they were new to all this "spiritual stuff." In their minds they were not that much different than those attending this banquet. Notice, the Pharisees did not ask Jesus this question. They went to these "brand new" disciples of Jesus and asked them what seemed

like a serious “spiritual” question. It was, I believe, a form of intimidation towards these new disciples, as well as they didn’t want to deal with Jesus at this time. We will see why in a moment.

Jesus overheard the Pharisees asking His disciples the question. Jesus responded, *"They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."* (Matthew 9:11-13). The first thing we see here is that Jesus, as a Good Shepherd, immediately, comes to the aide of His sheep. He sees the “wolves” gathering around the “sheep” and He comes to protect them. We also can see the irony in Jesus’ response to their question. He tells them that He did not come for the “righteous.” He was actually referring to them for they looked upon themselves as being “righteous.” Were they really righteous? The scriptures are clear, even in their own Jewish scriptures - there are none that are righteous, not one. (Psalm 14:1–3; Psalm 53:1–3; also found in Romans 3:10–12) Romans 3:23 goes on to tell us, *"For all have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God."* Unfortunately, these Pharisees were steeped in their own “self-righteousness” and could not see the real state that they were in. They were in the same state as the tax collectors and the sinners. Unfortunately, they were actually in a worse state because of their “self-righteousness” – they were too blind to see their sorry state.

A short time later that day, while they were still at Levi’s home, another question arises. The question asked to Jesus concerned, "Why were Jesus' disciples not fasting?" This came up as the Pharisees and the “disciples of John the Baptist” were apparently having a discussion with each other. The Pharisees and their disciples, as well as John the Baptist's disciples were those who would have had a lifestyle that included fasting. Most probably, John, who came from a priestly line (Zacharias), had disciples who were most probably Levites, as well as some who may have possibly been from the Essene sect, which was a very "religiously, devout" sect of Judaism. It was at the ruins of the Essene community in Qumran, the "Dead Sea Scrolls" were found.

Both the Pharisee's disciples and John's disciples, being followers of what they considered devout Judaism, seemed to be in agreement concerning this aspect of fasting. (Even though the Pharisees and their disciples were not totally sold out concerning John the Baptist and His message.) They were also in agreement that if Jesus was preaching a return to the true spiritual things of God, then why were His disciples not doing what they thought were the "spiritual things of God," one of which would be "fasting."

The question was really asked by the disciples of John. The Pharisees may have "stirred them up" as a ploy by the Pharisees to try to get a "division" to rise up between John's disciples and Jesus to cause John's disciples to back away from Jesus and His teachings. John was most likely already in prison at this time and He most likely had pointed his disciples to Jesus. After all, even at the baptism of Jesus, John said that Jesus must increase and he must decrease and they needed to now follow Jesus. Jesus realized that they were being stirred up to asking this question being prompted by the Pharisees and their followers. They came to Jesus and asked, *"Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not?"* - Matthew 9:14 (KJV)

Let's take another quick look again at Jesus' disciples at that time because I believe this is a vital aspect of this whole scenario and to the understanding of these parables by Jesus. He had just recently called Peter, Andrew, James and John to come and follow Him. What were they doing? They were fishermen who had very little background in living a "spiritual" lifestyle that a priest, Levite or devout Jew would have understood and lived. Levi (Matthew) was just called from his tax collector booth. He was a "sinful publican." The spiritual lifestyle of a priest was the farthest thing from his mind. His life and his thinking were all about money. These men were new to all this "spiritual" stuff. Their hearts were stirred by Jesus, which prompted them to follow Him. However, when they did choose to follow, they were about to enter into a totally new and different world than what they were used to and understood.

Let's now continue with our discussion. When asked the question, we see Jesus responds in a gentle manor because of the fact that they were John's disciples. He actually goes into "teaching mode." Being in "teaching mode," he uses a "teaching tool" – parables.

Jesus' answer to the question presented to Him was to give these three parables - *"Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast. No man putteth a piece of new cloth unto an old garment, for that which is put in to fill it up taketh from the garment, and the rent is made worse. Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish: but they put new wine into new bottles, and both are preserved."* - Matthew 9:16-17

In context, these parables were given in response to a question concerning "fasting" and why were His disciples not practicing the "spiritual" aspect of fasting. That is vital and it is vital as to why Jesus responded the way He did with these parables. I believe His response had to do with His newly called disciples and not with actual fasting or some other deep, deep spiritual meaning.

We must understand that Jesus was not doing away with fasting. Jesus does say that there will be a time when His disciples will indeed enter into a fasting lifestyle. Jesus was not expressing, at least not at this time that He was bringing in a new teaching that needed a new mindset. Although that would be true as He continued on in His ministry. It was not the point that I believe He was trying to make in His answer to the question given. Remember, the question was, "Why are they not fasting?"

Jesus was saying that this whole thing of being a "disciple" was totally new to these newly called disciples of His. There would be things that they needed to grow into. He did not want to put extra burdens on them at this time. In other words, He was "easing" them into this whole new way of life. These parables are connected with each other and are speaking of the same thing.

Jesus first uses the parable of the "Children of the Bridechamber and the Bridegroom." Obviously, the "bridegroom" in this parable is referring to Jesus. The term "children of the bridechamber" literal refers to the friends of the bridegroom who were entrusted with the function of preparing the bridechamber for the bride as she awaits the groom's appearance to come for her. Obviously, this would be an important function entrusted to only those who were the closest in relationship with the bridegroom. The term "children of the bridechamber" therefore is referring to His new disciples that He would be entrusting with the function of preparing the "Bride" for when the "Bridegroom" makes his "appearance." Obviously, Jesus is referring to a time in the future when He (the Bridegroom) returns for His Bride – the Body of Christ. These terms used by Jesus in this parable tell those asking the question that because He is with them now, there is no need for fasting. He was inferring that while He, the Son of God was with them, and because He, the Son of God was on the earth, there was no need for it. The fullness of what they would be praying and fasting for was right there in front of them and with them.

Unfortunately, for the Pharisees, their disciples and even for some of John's disciples, they were missing what was there right in front of them – the answer to their prayers. It was to be and should have been, a time of rejoicing, not fasting. For these new disciples of Jesus', it was not the time for fasting but rather it was a time for learning and growing in the lifestyle that was initially established in the scriptures. The Living Word of God was going to role-model this lifestyle for them. If we look closely, Jesus uses the terms, "bridegroom" and "friends of the bridegroom." These terms express a desire for Jesus to enter into a deep relationship with His disciples. With the Son of God now with them, it was a time to begin the process of establishing and restoring relationship between God and man that was breached due to sin.

Jesus goes on to say that the aspect of fasting, at this time, would be like putting "new cloth on old garments." It would put undue stress upon these men before the proper time and it would "tear" them from

Him and He would lose them. It would be like putting "new wine in old wineskins." These new "disciples" were just leaving behind their "worldly, carnal" ways and to now quickly drop them and force them into a new "spiritually" led lifestyle, especially in the area of fasting, would cause them to "burst." He was saying that now is not the time for them to deal with fasting. After all, they were fishermen and a tax collector. They were used to having big appetites and eating a lot. They were big guys and most likely never fasted.

Here they were just starting out. It was Matthew's first day. It was just a few weeks for the others on this new venture and journey. Jesus' main task was to form relationship with them, as well as to form and gain their trust in Him. Fasting, therefore, was a little further down on His priority list. If Jesus had placed the "fasting" initiative immediately upon them, it may have been too much for them to handle in this "infancy stage" of their "discipleship." It may cause them to "be torn away" from Him and/or cause them to "burst" and walk away.

Through these parables we see that Jesus did not do away with the "spiritual" aspects of the Word that included fasting. Even though now was not the time for His disciples to be pressed into doing these things, there will come a time "*when the bridegroom will not be with them.*" He was pointing to a time, 3 ½ years later, when they would have had time to be with Jesus and grow. They would have experienced His resurrection. They would be able to grasp the whole concept of who Jesus actually was. They would then also receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit. All of that would help give them the ability to live the Christ-like lifestyle. In other words, Jesus was saying that there will come a time when His disciples will be **spiritually prepared**, have the **correct** spiritual understanding and the **correct** motives for fasting. Their fasting would be done in the correct attitude of heart and not with the attitude of "religious ritual." Hmmm.....

I believe the point that Jesus was teaching to those present, was not so much that He was bringing in a "new" movement of God's Kingdom. This was true. However, I believe He was trying to tell the Pharisees and John's disciples to "cut my disciples some slack." They are new to all of this. They will be spending time with me and there is a time and place for all these things you bring up. However, concerning this aspect of "fasting," now is not the time. Jesus was "**protecting**" His newly formed group of disciples.

I believe leaders and believers in general would do well to heed the message and learn from this teaching from a very wise "disciplor" when it comes to "discipling" new believers. We need to be careful that we do not over burden new believers. Sometimes, we immediately put requirements on new believers. We require such things as, being in church seven days a week. We make them pray three hours a day when they really don't even know what prayer really is. We tell them that they must be doing this or that and yes, even fasting, because "now you are a Christian." What we should do is allow the new believer to grow in the Lord and allow them time for growth. People grow at different levels.

We must be careful that we do not take new believers and make them into disciples of Bob, or Ray, or Joe, or Mary, or pastor so and so, or prophet so and so, or ... you fill in the blank. The most important thing we can do for new believers is to point them to a deeper relationship with Jesus - not by giving them things to do - but by allowing Jesus and the Holy Spirit to work in their lives according to **His timetable** for each individual. We just need to be there to support them as they grow.

Yes, we may need to add a little "water." Yes, we may need to add some "fertilizer." Yes, we may be used to do some "pruning." But ultimately we must allow Jesus, through the Holy Spirit within each believer, to lead him or her on their "spiritual" journey of being a disciple of Jesus and live the Christ like lifestyle from out of a correct attitude of heart of love and worship and not out of a heart steeped in "religious ritual." Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, takes His disciples on their own journey to where they become full-grown "disciples of Jesus" - ones who choose to change their lifestyle to that of the One they are now choosing to follow.