

Parables of Luke 5

The first parable recorded by Luke is in Luke 5:36-39. However, to be able to understand what Jesus was actually teaching in the parable, there is a need for us to back up in the passage and see the context in which Jesus was teaching.

In Luke 5:33, the scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus about the practice of fasting. This continues to be an oft overlooked topic of discussion under the New Testament covenant, and is certainly worthy of examination. However, Jesus' response did not necessarily address whether fasting would ever be something that New Testament Christians should be involved in. Instead, it addressed the question that was directly asked in that moment: Why do your disciples eat and drink when everyone else practices fasting?

Notice that Jesus gave His answer concerning fasting very directly at first, and then later spoke the parable to give a little more explanation of the answer. He first said:

...“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.”
(Luke 5:34–35)

The Jews had turned fasting into a ritualistic practice that they believed identified them as “more righteous” than everyone else around them. Someone who fasted openly would clearly be more pious than those who did not! Jesus addressed that misconception in Matthew 6:16-18. There, He identified the hypocrisy of the Jews who made a big show of their fasting. He made it clear that they were not supposed to draw attention to themselves when they fasted. Their fasting was supposed to be between them and God!

A part of the ritualism that had developed among the Jews was

that they had lost focus on what their fasting was supposed to be for. It was something that would help to bring them closer, spiritually, to God. They had made it some kind of outward sign of their spirituality. It was something that would be the natural result of difficult spiritual times; they would be so focused on their spiritual circumstances that the physical would fall by the wayside. But, they had begun to make it an artificial activity that was really in no way (other than perhaps superficially) tied to spirituality.

This second problem is at the heart of Jesus' response to the scribes and Pharisees in Luke 5. Jesus used the example of a wedding feast to make His point. Why would those who attended to the bridegroom fast? It did not make sense, and was not proper for those at a wedding to be fasting. In like manner, the disciples of Jesus were with the Messiah. Why would they be fasting at a time when they should be celebrating? There would be a time, Jesus said, when the bridegroom would be taken away. Then, it would be proper for those who were celebrating to change their demeanor, and at that time it would be proper for them to fast.

It is in this context that Jesus spoke the two parables that follow in Luke's immediate context. This will help us to more fully understand these two parables.

Parable of the New and Old Garment

The first parable that Jesus told in this context is that of the new and old garment. The practical, earthly lesson that Jesus draws from is that you would never use a piece of new cloth as a patch on an old garment. Since the old garment is already shrunk, it would no longer change when washed. However, the new piece of cloth would shrink when washed after being used to patch a hole in the old garment. If that were to happen, then the shrinking of the patch would cause yet another tear in the garment, and would not serve the purpose of the patch at all! Jesus went on to say that the piece from the new garment would not match the old. That is, it would be clear that the patch was not a part of the original garment.

Among people who had to make and mend their own clothing, this illustration would be easily understood. It may be more diffi-

cult for an audience today to understand the analogy here, because most do not sew their own clothes today, and holes are now preferred in clothing by many people! Having said that, the story that Jesus told is not completely lost on us, as we can understand that clothes often shrink, and putting a piece of unshrunk patch on clothing that had already been shrunk would produce the same problem as Jesus cites in this parable.

Parable of the New and Old Wineskins

The second parable told by Jesus in this context follows the same thought. One would not put new wine into old wineskins, else the wineskins would burst and the wine would be spilled.

When wine was being preserved in the first century, it would be poured into bags that were made from preserved animal skins. As the wine would ferment, it would expand. The new skin would expand with the fermenting wine, to accommodate the liquid and gasses throughout the process. Eventually, the skins would begin to dry and harden, making it impossible for them to expand or stretch any further. If a person tried to reuse those skins with new wine, which had not gone through the fermentation process, they would not have the flexibility to stretch and accommodate the liquid and gasses. The wineskins would therefore rupture, and the wine and the skins would be lost!

For the process to work, one had to put new wine into new wineskins. Only by doing that would both the wine and the skins be preserved.

At the end of this parable, Jesus added a comment concerning the approach that one would take to the wine presented. Those that had drunk the wine that had properly aged would not be quick to request something new. Wine that had been properly cared for and allowed to reach its full potential in flavor would be preferred over the new wine that had only begun the process. If a person had already had some of the good, older wine, they would decline when offered the new, declaring that the older wine would be better. This was not something that would be debated. Everyone would have known that the aged wine would be better than that which had not had the time to do so!

The Spiritual Message...

To understand Jesus' spiritual message from these physical examples, we need to remember the context in which the parables were spoken. The scribes and Pharisees were asking Jesus why His disciples were not fasting. These parables help to explain why the disciples were not fasting, when other religious people were doing so.

If we consider the first part of Jesus' teaching (Luke 5:34-35), we can get a clue about what the parables mean as well. Jesus said that it was not proper for the friends of the bridegroom to fast while they were with the bridegroom. What purpose would there be for such an action? Such a response would not make any sense.

The main point of both parables told by Jesus here is that a person should not do that which is not proper. This had nothing to do with what would be right or wrong. It was not sinful to fast, or to not fast. But, under the current circumstances, which was the proper thing to do?

In the parable of the garments, it was simply not proper for a tailor to take a brand new piece of cloth and use it to patch an old garment. It would not, in the end, fix anything at all. In fact, it could make the situation worse! Secondly, Jesus said that the new fabric would not match the old garment. This again speaks to what is proper. It would not appear to be proper, as it would stand out as being different.

In the parable of the wineskins, the same message is conveyed by Jesus. It would not be proper to put the new wine into old wineskins, as the old skins would rupture and destroy both the wine and the skins. Anyone who worked with the wine would know that this mishandling of the wine would be destructive and unprofitable. They would know how to handle the wine in the proper manner. Following suit, Jesus also made a secondary point with this parable. He said that a person who had drunk the old wine would not want the new. He would know that the older wine was the better product. It would not be proper to ask for the newer wine when the older would be the better drink. Both of these parables emphasized the need to look for, and participate in, what

was proper. It was clearly not proper for the disciples of Jesus to be fasting while he was still with them. The time would come when it would be proper for them to fast--when He was taken away from them. Until then, they should not be involved in the practice of fasting.

A second possibility...

Quite often, these two parables are interpreted in a different manner. Many see Jesus speaking of "old" and "new" and they immediately think that He is drawing a distinction between the old covenant and the new covenant. They believe that Jesus was making the point that the new covenant does not fit in with the old covenant, thus the old covenant could not be "patched" with the new, nor could the new be put into the old. The idea is that Jesus was making a clear distinction between the new covenant and the old.

While it is true that the new covenant is completely different (thus new) from the old covenant, that is probably not the point that Jesus was making here. There are a couple of reasons that this author does not believe that Jesus was addressing this particular distinction.

First, in the parable of the garments, Jesus did not say that the old garment was ready to be done away with, but rather that it needed to be repaired. It was not that it couldn't be repaired, it was that it would be improper to try and repair it with fabric from a new garment. Choosing the wrong thing to repair it with was the problem!

Second, in the parable of the wineskins, Jesus specifically identified that the old would be identified as being better than the new. One has to read beyond what Jesus said in the parable itself to deduce that this man would be wrong in that assessment. Only by reading the parable with the preconceived notion that Jesus was talking about the covenants could one decide that the new wine is really better than the old.

While it is possible that Jesus was speaking of the distinction between the Old Testament covenant and the New Testament cov-

enant, that explanation does not fit the context of the parables as well as the first explanation proposed in this study does. As we established early in our study of parables, the main spiritual lesson is usually something that can be easily correlated to the story that was told. We should not try to force a lesson that was not intended by Jesus, even if the lesson is true and can be established from other scriptures!

Conclusion

The scribes and Pharisees were trying to condemn the practice of the disciples of Jesus, who were not fasting. Instead of using fasting as a means of strengthening themselves spiritually, they had turned it into a way to compare their spirituality with others. They “showed off” by making a show of their fasting. Clearly, they thought that the disciples of Jesus were not as pious as those who were fasting.

Jesus' response was to tell these critics that fasting was not proper for His disciples. There would be a time for fasting, but it wasn't right then. They would fast later...and fasting continues to be proper in certain circumstances. They should have been able to examine the situation and realize that these men were not fasting because they were celebrating the presence of their master!