NEW WINESKINS

Mark 2:18–3:6

Key Verse: 2:22

“And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins.”

Learning. It’s an interesting subject. They say that early childhood is the best time to really learn; it’s when the human mind is most able to absorb things. So there’s a famous saying, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” With age we become creatures of habit, and old habits die hard. Actually, the capacity to learn is a major aspect of Christianity. We see it in today’s Bible passage.

Jesus has launched his ministry. And his ministry is shocking. He touches a man with leprosy. He tells a paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” And he calls a terrible man Levi to be one of his disciples. Jesus even goes to Levi’s house to celebrate with many other tax collectors and “sinners.” The religious people are so shocked they go into “red alert” mode. They consider Jesus too liberal and heretical. They think if they let him go on like this, he’ll disrupt their entire religious system, which is their security. So they keep pointing out what they see as faults in Jesus. And Jesus responds. Today we want to learn what’s *most* important to Jesus. And we especially want to think about his principle: “New wine into new wineskins.” May God speak to us through his living word.

When Jesus took his disciples to have dinner at Levi’s house, the Pharisees were pushed past their limits. They asked his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (2:16) To them, a holy man of God should never be eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners. As today’s passage opens, we see this same perception develops. Look at verse 18a. People knew that John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. But now they could see Jesus’ disciples not fasting; in fact, the whole atmosphere around him was so joyful. Look at verse 18b. Some people come and ask, “How is it that John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?” By eating and drinking with many tax collectors and sinners, Jesus looked like he didn’t know how to train his disciples. In these people’s eyes, he was not helping them live a holy life. It was pretty serious. Real grace is still kind of a scary thing.

How does Jesus respond? Read verse 19. Jesus answers with his own question. And in his question he likens his ministry to a wedding. He especially highlights the bridegroom and his guests. Today we think of a wedding as mainly for the bride. But in Jesus’ time the bridegroom was the focus. A wedding would last an entire week. Guests would gather, and when the bridegroom finally arrived, people would become so happy. If someone wasn’t joyful on such an occasion, people would think there was something seriously wrong. In this analogy, the bridegroom is Jesus, and the guests are his disciples and followers. Jesus is saying here that Christianity is basically meant to be joyful like a wedding. People like to think that being very solemn and serious is more pleasing to God. But God likes for his people to come and rejoice before him. God is actually very interested in making us happy.

What makes us happy? There are many sources of human joy: a good meal, meeting a dear, old friend, seeing lovely babies and little children, getting a nagging problem solved at last—these are just a few examples. But in Christian life, what really makes us happy is when we have our bridegroom Jesus with us. What does that really mean? As we read about him in the Bible, we get to know Jesus better and better. In life we encounter many kinds of people, but Jesus is so different, and so refreshing. We especially begin to taste his forgiving grace and love. We begin to find that Jesus really cares about me, me personally, as an individual. He really wants a relationship with me. In fact, he loves me. He’s so committed to me that he even gave his life for me, and he’s ready to love me to the very end. The more we grow in a real relationship with Jesus, the happier we become. There’s a deep and lasting joy in our souls, a joy that no one and nothing can take away.

So Jesus doesn’t want us to withdraw from people in the real world and isolate ourselves in a “holy huddle.” He showed by his example that he wants us to get out into the real world full of real sinners and share his joy and his grace with all kinds of people. He wants us to learn from him to really make friends with people who are lost. Why was Jesus with scandalous people? He said back in verse 17, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.” As Jesus spends time with these people, they gradually begin to be healed by his love and mercy, and real joy comes into their hearts. Today people know we are Christians not by how we dress or talk, but by our real joy. Are we joyful because of our relationship with Jesus?

Now let’s look at what else Jesus said. Read verse 20. One day, Jesus the bridegroom would be “taken from” his followers. It was a veiled reference to his death on the cross. Jesus said that would be the appropriate time to fast. The only time the Old Testament required fasting was on the Day of Atonement. The Pharisees added many other rules about fasting. People began to think they could make themselves spiritual by refraining from food. But Jesus put fasting back in the box. And he was again teaching by analogy. When’s the appropriate time for Christians to fast? Some people do it during the Lenten season before Easter, to commemorate how Jesus was taken from us. But the best time to fast is anytime we feel far away from Jesus. When we’ve committed some sin, when we’ve become too engrossed in the world, it’s a good time to fast and pray to really get serious about coming back to God, about reconnecting with Jesus.

After saying this, Jesus goes on to give two similar parables, because he wants to teach a much larger principle. Read verses 21,22. The first parable is about a patch of unshrunk cloth and an old garment. Jesus is explaining that he didn’t come to patch up the spiritual problems of Judaism. If he tried to do that, things would only become worse. Instead, he came to start all over. His ministry was new, like a new garment, not like an old garment that needed lots of patching. Read verse 22 again. Here the new wine is the good news of Jesus, and the old wineskins are the rigid religious people of his day. The new wineskins are Jesus’ disciples, and all the sinners who came to really learn about Jesus. Jesus refused to spend his time struggling with people who were like old wineskins. He came to pour the new wine of his grace into people who were like new wineskins. To be like a new wineskin means to be open and willing to learn.

The Pharisees knew a lot about the Bible and were very faithful to their religious traditions. But they were like old wineskins. They were unable to learn, even from Jesus. They had too many of their own ideas. Today many people are still like old wineskins. They may not be super-strict about religious activities. But they are people who think they already know everything they need to know about Jesus and the Bible. Even though they may attend Bible studies, they’re not there to really learn, but just to repeat things they already know. Some even think that by going to a Bible study, they’re doing church people a favor. On the other hand, there are some people who are like new wineskins, so eager to learn. They are like David who wrote, “You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water” (Ps63:1). The concept of new wineskins reminds us of Jesus’ words: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Mt5:6). Today we should take Jesus’ words here seriously. We should look honestly at ourselves and ask, “Am I like an old wineskin or a new wineskin?” And we should learn from Jesus to invest our time in ministry not with people who are like old wineskins, but with people who are like new wineskins.

Look at verse 23. Jesus’ disciples seem to be always hungry. Picking heads of grain in someone else’s field was common at that time; in fact, in the Old Testament God told his people to allow the poor to do this. Clearly, while following Jesus, the disciples became poor. Also, they’re so busy and struggling just to keep up with Jesus. But there are some odd people in the grainfields spying on them. Look at verse 24. The Pharisees were like the Sabbath police. They went around strictly enforcing what people were allowed or not allowed to do on the Sabbath. The original idea was really good—really to honor God on the Sabbath with an undivided heart. But they turned it into something strange, until their whole approach to the Sabbath became wrong. They accused Jesus’ disciples of breaking the law that taught that people should do no work on the Sabbath. They considered picking heads of grain, rubbing and eating the kernels as “work.” They’d lost the spirit of God’s law. The spirit of God’s law can be summed up with two main principles: love God and love your neighbor as yourself. This especially should be done on the Lord’s Day. But the Pharisees are fixated on outward things. They’re more concerned about what people are doing outwardly than about what’s in their hearts.

How does Jesus respond? Read verses 25,26. Jesus quotes the story in 1 Samuel of how David broke a special law in order to show compassion to his men. If even David, the best king of Israel, did that, how could they criticize Jesus for allowing his disciples to eat grain on the Sabbath? Jesus goes on to teach some really important things. Read verses 27,28. The first important thing here is in verse 27: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” God didn’t intend his Sabbath law to be taken to a strange extreme, so that people had to squeeze themselves into all kinds of contortions to keep it. No, when God gave the Sabbath law, his main intention was to give human beings a day of rest. God wants people to rest from all their labors, both physically and spiritually. It’s not about sleeping all day one day a week. God wants us to find rest in him. One of my favorite psalms is Psalm 62. It begins: “Truly my soul finds rest in God; my salvation comes from him. Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.” Later it says: “Yes, my soul, find rest in God; my hope comes from him. Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken. My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge” (Ps62:1,2,5–8). We should set aside regular times in our lives to really find refuge in God. During those times we should pour out our hearts to God about all our burdens and troubles, and find new strength and new hope in him. We should especially do this at church on Sundays. But the Pharisees had turned the Sabbath day into nitpicking about rules, so much so that they intensely criticized Jesus and his disciples for eating heads of grain on their way to the synagogue. In light of this, we need to repent of our critical minds and remember the main reason why we’re supposed to go to church on Sundays. Let’s read verse 28. Jesus is the Son of Man. These religious people were criticizing Jesus for breaking their Sabbath traditions, but Jesus the Son of Man is actually the Lord of the Sabbath. He’s the one we should worship on the Sabbath. He’s the Lord. Going to church on Sundays for Christians is the practical expression of faith that I’ve made Jesus the Lord of my life. I center my life not around myself but around him and around worshiping and obeying him.

The tension between Jesus and the Pharisees comes to a climax in the last part of today’s passage. Look at 3:1,2. The Pharisees consider healing people a form of work. One Sabbath they’re delighted to see a man with a shriveled hand in the synagogue where Jesus is going, because they think they have their chance to brand Jesus as a Sabbath-breaker.

We should stop for a minute to consider this man. He has a shriveled hand. This surely affects his whole life. It doesn’t just limit his daily activities; it has left a wound in his spirit. He must feel ashamed of his hand and be hiding it under his clothing. He must feel less than others because of his shriveled hand. These so-called religious leaders really care nothing for this man; they only see him as a tool they can use for their own agenda. They have no capacity even to appreciate that he’s a fellow human being with his own thoughts, feelings and intrinsic value. They just size him up outwardly as a handicapped man, and write him off in their minds. There seems to be real tension in the room. People sense Jesus might get into trouble this time.

So how does Jesus respond to this situation? Read verse 3. This man is probably so reluctant to do this. He’s just there to listen to God’s word on the Sabbath, and now he’s gotten into the middle of this conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. We may wonder why Jesus puts the man into this embarrassing predicament. Jesus is trying to make a point. By having the man stand in front of everyone, he’s appealing to everybody’s hearts and consciences. Without words, Jesus is saying: “Just look at this man. Look not only at his hand, but also at his face. Think about him and his entire life. Think about what he’s been through. Do you really think it would displease God to heal him on the Sabbath?” What does Jesus actually say? Read verse 4. Why does Jesus use such extreme language, even mentioning doing evil and killing? It’s because that’s precisely what the Pharisees have in their hearts. There they are, in the synagogue on the Sabbath, all dressed up, looking holy and thinking they’re better than everybody else. But Jesus can see right into their hearts. He can see their motives. They’re the *real* Sabbath-breakers because they have evil motives in their hearts, even while going through the motions of worshiping God. How do they respond to Jesus’ question? It says, “But they remained silent.” The answer is obvious—do good, save life! But they’re too proud to repent and admit that they’re wrong and Jesus is right. They sit there in their silence, supposing they’re better than Jesus, better than this man, better than everyone. Their hypocrisy is intolerable.

What does Jesus do? Read verse 5. It’s one of the few times the Bible shows us Jesus’ anger. Jesus is angry because they’re too proud to repent, and even more, because they care nothing for this man. They’re supposed to be religious leaders, but they’re useless and poisonous. We should turn our attention again to the man. It must have been so hard for him to stand up in front of everyone. Now he also has to stretch out his hand in front of everyone, the very thing he’s most ashamed of. But it’s part of his healing. Jesus is helping him learn real faith, to really trust him and look to him. When the man obeys, he experiences Jesus’ amazing healing. By doing this Jesus risks ticking off the religious leaders; in fact, he’s risking his own life. He knows this will put him on a path of being killed (3:6). But Jesus is a real shepherd of people. He’s not trying to use this man; he’s risking his own life to heal and save him. For those of us doing ministry, this passage really challenges us to check our motives. Are we trying to make use of people for our own glory? Or do we really love them and really want them to be healed? Jesus is watching.

Today we thought about what is most important to Jesus. It’s not fasting. It’s not keeping Sabbath rules. It’s being with Jesus, our true bridegroom, and being filled with joy. It’s about showing mercy and compassion to poor and hard-pressed people. It’s about showing real love, respect and value even to one person who may seem too badly damaged. Let’s read our key verse, 2:22 again. Mainly let’s ask ourselves today: “Am I like an old wineskin, constantly critical, or like a new wineskin, constantly learning?” What’s keeping us from really learning of Jesus? May God have mercy on us to be like new wineskins, so that the new wine of Jesus can really work in us.