

Back to the Future
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Brian R. Wipf

Korby and I are drawn to things that are vintage. Our aesthetic eye is pleased by seeing something that reminds us of something old. Korby loves old farm houses (of course, she likes modern-day plumbing); we bought an old house and one reason we like it is because it looks vintage.

Vintage clothes are popular, too, right? Take a look at this picture of my dad from the mid 80's (PIC). Korby and I were shopping for clothes the other day and saw all kinds of similar shirts for 14 year old boys. Fashion is cyclical... pretty soon we'll be wearing parachute pants and pegging our jeans (some are doing so already).

But, we live in a world that values the new. If it's new, if it's modern, that's what we want. New cars, new clothes, modern homes and kitchens. New can even mean youthfulness. Old celebrities don't get much attention (the Harrison Fords, the Farrah Faucets of the world); so they have work done to look more youthful (and then we might feel that pressure, too).

Even in church-world, the new is celebrated. New mega-churches; new rockin' praise bands. New, young pastors (what will boring, middled-aged pastors like us do?) And why not? Didn't Jesus come to make us New Creations? Didn't he come to make a New Covenant? Yes, he did, but if you dig a little deeper you recognize something. You recognize that Jesus came to make us new by taking us back to ancient ways and truths of God. And the covenant that God made with us in Christ isn't a brand new covenant, but instead it is a renewed covenant. When you dig deeper you see that the vibrancy, the new-life, the new-birth that Jesus gave comes from the beginning of time; nothing is older, in fact.

The prophet Jeremiah wept for his people; they walked away from God. He so desperately tried to warn them and to point them to a new start, a new beginning with God. And where did he point? He pointed back in time; he told them about God's ancient truth - not new truth. Jeremiah 6:16 says, "Thus says the Lord: 'Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it and find rest for your souls.'" Where will you find your way? What will lead you back to God? The ancient paths will, the old truth. That's God's word. Go back! Go back to the ancient paths. They are straight, truthful and reliable. You'll find your way there. But, as you can see God continues and says, "But they said, 'We will not walk in it.'"

Let's read our passage today and listen to this way of Christ that leads to life; if you've been with us for a while you may not hear anything new... but that's just the way I like it (READ Luke 5:33-39).

Let's talk about this passage in reverse order. In vs. 36 we are told, "He also told them a parable." I find that interesting. Parables are stories told by Jesus that are meant to drive home one particular point. But most of the time parables sound more like... a story. This doesn't sound like a story at all; yet, Luke calls it a parable nonetheless. Here's what I take from that: While this may not sound like a typical parable in a story-like way, Jesus talks about old clothes and new clothes, old wine and new wine to make one, big point just like the other parables. What is Jesus trying to say? He's saying, "Some things just won't go together; they can't go together." You can't put a new patch on an old garment. It won't match, the seams will tear.

Likewise, you can't put new wine in old wineskins; you can't mix them. If you do, the skins will burst.

Of course, Jesus isn't concerned about clothes and wine; he's concerned about faith, he's concerned about people. He's comparing his teaching and way to the teaching and way of the Pharisees. And he's saying, "What I'm teaching, what I'm presenting to the people is completely different, completely irreconcilable to what you are teaching." My way leads to life and forgiveness; your way leads to death and self-righteousness. I'm looking to give healing; you're looking to keep people in bondage.

What's a little confusing from this passage is discerning what Jesus is calling new and what's he calling old. And is new good or is the old good? Most of the time when we read this passage in Luke or in Matthew or Mark, I think we immediately think Jesus is saying he's bringing the new wine; he's the new clothes that can't be put on old, dreary religion. I'm not so that's what he's saying. Notice in vs. 39 that Jesus doesn't call the new wine good, he calls the old wine good. The wine you want is the kind that's been sitting in the cellar for a few years, not the new stuff.

The other thing I might say is that Luke has spent the first 4 chapters of his book trying to convince us, his readers, that Jesus is connected to the ancient past and truth of God. His birth was predicted by the prophets. He was tempted just like Israel was long ago, but remained faithful. His genealogy roots him into the first man, Adam. And his preaching is just what Isaiah said it would be 700 years ago. One commentator I read said the last thing Luke would be trying to say is Jesus is something new and different. No, his way, his truth, his message, his grace comes from the ancient truth of God from the beginning.

So, we have a couple of options. I've shared with you what I think. That rather than Jesus saying he's the new cloth or the new wine, he's actually doing the opposite. He's like Jeremiah saying, "Go back to the ancient paths of God, you'll find life there." But, there are a lot of godly, biblical people who think Jesus and his message is the new wine, the new cloth that can't be attached to old religion. I'll let you come to your own conclusion.

But I'd like you to notice that the point is the same; whichever position you land on, we can all embrace Jesus' point, which is, "My way is incompatible with the message and way you Pharisees are talking about. They can't be reconciled. Every person must either decide to trust in the free grace of God found in me, "Jesus says "and live as his disciples, or you continue the religious charade, trying to be good enough, trying to be better than other people." Friends, pick Jesus.

But what spurred Jesus' parable? Why did he bring that up? His comments were sparked by their previous discussion so let's review that again. Just like before when the Pharisees criticized Jesus and his disciples for eating and drinking with sinners, they criticize the disciples again because of the perceived lack of piety. So, here's the scene: Jesus' disciples are living it up; they are eating a lot, they are drinking their fair amount (it was a party) and the Pharisees say, "Wait a minute. Our disciples fast and pray. John's disciples fast and pray. But Jesus, your disciples don't. What gives?"

Here's another example of form being more important than heart. "We pray more, Jesus. We don't hang out with the wrong people." Next week it's going to be about the Sabbath. "We obey the Sabbath commands." Look how we are doing all the right things and your disciples are not!

What might that look like today? What religious forms or methods do we value and even tempted to make the big idea?. “Look how many verses I know; I haven’t missed a day in my Bible reading plan all year. I don’t miss a Sunday service; wish I could say that about my neighbor. I’ve been a member here for 30 years. I give more than 10%. I listen to Christian radio. I’ve served over 10 years in the nursery. I would never go to those movies.” Form. The structure and shape of religious life.

Are those things good? Of course! We want you to read the scriptures and come to church. It’s absolutely critical that you embrace a lifestyle of service in your church. How can you receive an abundance of grace from God, but keep all your money to yourself? It’s unChristian. Yes, it’s good to avoid certain cultural practices of ungodliness. But our faith is not about those things. Its about Jesus. You do those things to see and know Jesus. Read the scriptures to see Jesus. Pray to commune with Jesus. Serve in your church to honor and display Jesus. Listen to Christian music to keep reminding you of Jesus. It’s about Jesus. But if you miss Jesus in all those things they mean nothing.

The Pharisees got lost in the form; the outside looked really clean and beautiful, but the inside stank. It reminds me of Jesus’ rebuke of the religious leaders at the end of Matthew (READ Mt. 23:25-28).

Look how Jesus corrects these pharisees. They had lost their way; they had drifted from the ancient path. The outside looked great; they didn’t do anything “wrong.” But on the inside, their heart, was missing it. They couldn’t see they were out of step with God no matter how their form looked; no matter their religious appearance. We learned several weeks ago from the Levi and sinners episode that Jesus values repentance; he values and prizes a heart that says, “Yes, I am wrong” and heart that turns to Jesus and receives the forgiveness he offers. Jesus’ opponents didn’t value that. Next week, we’ll see Jesus favoring those who recognize the Lordship and authority of Jesus and those who see that the greatest law is love. That’s not what the these pharisees valued. This week (how do I put this... I’ve struggled with the right words or phrase) Jesus is saying, “Do you have eyes to see me, my way, my glory?” The Pharisees actually thought that fasting was the appropriate response for Jesus’ disciples. What does Jesus say? “You can’t fast at a wedding feast when the bridegroom in all of his glory is present! The last thing you do is fast at a time when celebration is taking place.” But they didn’t have eyes to see that. They couldn’t see Jesus’ glory, his grace, his power, his splendor. They were blind. “Why?” you might ask; “Why couldn’t they see?” Their hearts were hard; their necks were stiff. They didn’t want to serve God’s kingdom; they were too wrapped into theirs.

Can I say a word about fasting? Jesus says fasting is absolutely the right thing to do at the right time. You don’t fast when the bridegroom is present; you don’t fast when Jesus is on earth and he is accomplishing God’s glorious purposes. It’s time to celebrate. But Jesus knew a day was coming where he would be gone and guess what, that’s when fasting is really important.

Why might you fast? You fast to protest; you fast to declare, “things are not right!” We are getting more and more familiar with protests, aren’t we? If you lived during the 60’s you remember the protests in the streets over civil rights, over the Vietnam war - they resemble the recent protests for racial reconciliation. What do protesters say? “We’re not satisfied; we’re discontent with the way things are!” Fasting is prayerfully expressing that to God. It’s a way of crying a persistent prayer saying, “God, your world is not the way it’s supposed to be. Please, come! Please, heal!” Obviously, always before our holy God we are humble even in our protests never accusing God of being wrong. But God wants us to persist in our prayers; he wants us to

cry for justice, mercy and forgiveness. There's even a complaint that is good; a complaint that God accepts. "God, it's not ok that these things are happening!" But that complaint is a hopeful prayer that we accompany with fasting. And do you know what, when we fast and pray, God hears and answers.

So, can I ask: Are you dissatisfied? Are you dissatisfied, like we heard from Tom and Tanya Clyde, that there are more people in bondage to slavery today and many of them are people trapped in the sex trade? Are you discontent that racism is a much greater reality in 2015 than you thought? Are you dissatisfied that people entrusted to serve the public good in Madison and in Washington DC often work to serve their own good at the expense of the people who elected them? Are you sad and discontent that the church of Jesus Christ fails to be a witness to the glorious grace that God has for all people? Are you discouraged by your own sin? I hope so. I hope the spirit of protest is rising in you right now as you hear me list all of these problems. But are you fasting? Are you calling out to God in prayers with fasting to see God's kingdom come? Why not? Maybe you're not so dissatisfied after all.

Jesus is simply saying, "Now's not the time. Things are right! I'm here! How can my disciples (or anyone else for that matter) fast when I'm here. When I'm gone and you begin waiting for my second coming, that's when you will see all that's wrong and it will be good and right for you to fast."

Let's put a bow on this sermon: what's the big idea? The big idea from Luke for this passage fits the big idea for the section. The good and glorious way and message of Jesus is different than ugly religion that merely outwardly conforms to God's methods of pursuing him. Jesus favors and forgives repenters; Jesus is partial only to people who turn to him. Not to the rich or poor, black or white, powerful or weak... whoever. Do you repent? And the form of prayer and fasting, the form of bible reading, charitable giving, church attendance are only valuable and good when it leads us to Jesus. Don't miss Jesus, friends, in the form of your religion. Go back to the ancient paths that lead straight to the Lord Jesus. It's a good way; it leads to rest.

Questions for the week

- What "forms of religion" are you tempted to trust for your righteousness?
- What are you most encouraged or impressed by concerning Jesus' words from this passage?
- What's keeping you from fasting?