

Chapter 31: New Wine in Fresh Wineskins

Matthew 9:14–17

Right in the middle of a series of stories where Jesus is asserting his authority through cleansing, healings, miracles, and calling disciples, the disciples of John the Baptist ask Jesus a question. Why don't Jesus and his disciples follow the same fixed patterns of fasting twice per week that they and the Pharisees practice (v. 14)? Although this is not one of the main cycles of teaching in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus takes their question seriously and teaches them something profound about how different he is from the religious disciplines they have observed thus far. Here, we learn that *Jesus has authority to command worship in spirit and truth*.

Formalism in Worship (Matt. 9:14–15)

The next passage begins with a question from the disciples of John the Baptist: “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” (v. 14). In the previous passage, we read about Jesus eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners (Matt. 9:10–13). Some commentators believe that John's disciples were offended that Jesus had been feasting on the very same day that they had been fasting.¹ It is possible that the timeline is in view, but not certain. Instead, William Hendriksen is probably on better grounds when he writes, “though there may not have been a close chronological connection between these two events, there may very well have been a logical relationship.”² Indeed, Matthew connects the question of John's disciples to the previous passage with the conjunction “then” (τότε; *tote*). Concerning this word, Dennis Hagner writes, “Whereas often it implies no connection with what precedes, in this case it does show the logical link with the preceding pericope.”³

Notably, the disciples of John connect their own practices with that of the Pharisees, since we know from other passages that the Pharisees fasted twice per week (Luke 18:12).⁴ Certainly, given the oppression that the Jewish people endured under the Romans, there was some value for them to fast so frequently as they awaited the coming of God's Messiah; however, as Jesus will point out to them, “now those blessings are present. Jesus' inauguration of the kingdom stimulates celebration and rejoicing, as at wedding festivities.”⁵ Even so, the disciples of John must have known that the only fast commanded in the Bible was for the Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:27).⁶ We perhaps should not read too much into their motives, since they very well may have been

¹ e.g., Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 367.

² Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 427.

³ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 242.

⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 356.

⁵ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 158.

⁶ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 427.

asking Jesus for clarification on whether they still needed to continue their rigorous regiment of fasting.

In response, Jesus illustrates why his disciples do not fast through three comparisons. First, he asks, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast” (v. 15). The wording of the question demonstrates that Jesus expects a negative answer:⁷ “The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they?” By this, Jesus is not only saying that his disciples *may* refrain from fasting, but that it would be “inappropriate” for them to fast while Jesus is with them.⁸ Furthermore, by the verb “can,” Jesus is even saying that such mourning would be “a complete impossibility. The bridegroom’s attendants cannot be fasting with the feasting is at its height!”⁹

Even while he says this, however, Jesus goes on with a cryptic prediction: “The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast” (v. 15). As R. T. France observes, this warning is “the first hint” that Jesus will be “taken away,” so that Jesus’ ultimate fate to suffer unjustly at the hands of the authorities will follow the same general pattern set by John the Baptist (Matt. 4:12; 11:12; 14:1–12; 17:12–13).¹⁰ Thus, while it may be appropriate for *John’s* disciples to fast at this time, it is inappropriate—and, even impossible—for *Jesus’* disciples to fast, until Jesus must follow in the footsteps of suffering and death in which John the Baptist has already begun to walk. Thus, Jesus’ initial contrast is between the present rejoicing of Jesus’ disciples against their future mourning, as they experience the sorrow that John’s disciples are experiencing now.

Force-Fitting the New Covenant (Matt. 9:16)

In Jesus’ second analogy, he says, “No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made” (v. 16). The basic details of this symbolism are clear: what Jesus doing is so radically new that he is not merely patching an old garment. Rather, if someone were to try to attach Jesus’ ministry to the ministry that Jesus came to replace, it would tear the whole garment apart. What aspect of old covenant ministry, then, does Jesus symbolize by this “old garment”?

Lenski is on the right track when he connects the “old garment” to the formalism of old covenant worship:

The old robe is the Judaism of that period, namely, what the scribes and the Pharisees had made of it with their doctrine and their practice, all the old formalism, outward observance, and false righteousness (5:20). It was useless to try to patch this with a bit of the teaching or the practice of Jesus. The new would only tear the old more than ever. The doctrine of grace and faith and the life that springs from it cannot possibly be combined, even in small part,

⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 368.

⁸ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 428.

⁹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 224.

¹⁰ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 356.

with Pharisaic Judaism either in its ancient or its modernistic forms. Discard the old, rotten robe, take in its place the robe of Christ's righteousness!¹¹

What Lenski captures well here is to recognize that Jesus did not come to make a clean break with the old covenant altogether. Rather, Jesus came to abolish the external formalism that the Jewish religious leaders had made of old covenant worship.

In this vein, it is helpful to remember what Jesus said about the Law back in the Sermon on the Mount. On the one hand, he insisted that he had “not come to abolish [the Law or the Prophets] but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17). Thus, Jesus made clear that he did not consider the Old Testament (the Law and the Prophets) themselves to be the old garment to cast away. Rather, he showed that the Law and the Prophets had been interpreted in an external, formal way that tried to get around the internal, spiritual requirements of the law. Thus, the Sixth Commandment forbade not only outright murder, but even anger; the Seven Commandment prohibited not only physical adultery, but lust of the heart, etc.

By this analogy to the impossibility of patching an old garment, Jesus is explaining that he has come to do away with the external, formalistic aspects of the old covenant. No longer should people imagine that they could please God by adhering to set schedules for fasting twice per week (for example).¹² This does not mean that fasting would never again be appropriate, but only that it would be connected to times of genuine mourning. In this way, new covenant worship does not force us into outward postures of mimicry, but it teaches us how to approach the Lord in spirit and truth.

Fresh Wineskins for New Wine (Matt. 9:17)

In the third analogy, Jesus says, “Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved” (v. 17). In several respects, this analogy carries forward the previous analogy with “a parallelism of thought. But again both illustrations speak of conserving: the first, the old robe; the second, the new wine. The old robe cannot be conserved by adding the new patch; the new wine cannot be conserved by pouring it into old wineskins.”¹³ Once again, then, we must not imagine that Jesus is sweeping away the entirety of the Old Testament law by this word. As Hendriksen writes, “Not the law of God as such was in question here, for, as previously stated, the frequent fast was a purely human institution. What Jesus did show was that the salvation which he brought was out of line with fastings from which the note of joy was completely excluded, and that this was especially true with respect to his disciples, the men who stood in the closest relation to him.”¹⁴

Where this third analogy represents a development beyond what Jesus illustrated in the second comes in the destruction of both the old and the new by attempting to combine them. In the second analogy, the patch came out unscathed, even though the garment suffered a greater tear. Here, though, Lenski notes the difference well:

¹¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 369–70.

¹² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 356.

¹³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 370.

¹⁴ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 429.

The second, however, ends in a climax: both the new wine and the old wineskins are lost...Jesus is not a foolish person who tries to combine the old Pharisaic ways with the glorious new doctrine of grace and faith, by this folly ruining both, with a result that is even worse than if he combined the old ways with a scrap of the new doctrine. Nor does Jesus want others to attempt this folly. Cast aside all the old Pharisaism with all its ways; take only the new ways of life that fit the new doctrine.¹⁵

Or, as Leon Morris writes, “What he repudiated was not Scripture, but the current religious practices allegedly based on Scripture. He did not even repudiate those practices all at once and call on his followers to forsake Judaism. But he did repudiate the suggestion that they should remain confined within the accepted understanding of the old system. His new approach could not be fitted into those old forms.”¹⁶

One important application of this principle comes in explaining the reason that Reformed Christians do not observe the seasons of mourning imposed through the practices of Advent and Lent. Both of those seasons represent an attempt to set fixed times for mourning and preparation as we await the coming of Christ. In almost all respects, these practices follow closely with the set times for fasting established by the Pharisees and practiced by the disciples of John. They were formal, external practices that did not necessarily connect to genuine reasons for mourning in the lives of the worshipers. So, while we may still observe seasons or mourning and fasting, those arise from actual events and circumstances in our lives, and not the imposition of an artificial season of the church calendar.

As the Bible acknowledges, there remains “a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance” (Eccl. 3:4). Jesus, then, is not rejecting the time for mourning, but only the idea that new covenant worship would involve play-acting mourning at fixed intervals in December and again in late winter. It is one thing to give special attention to the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus, since those facts of salvation history are relevant at all times. It is another thing entirely to force oneself into a posture of mourning to accommodate an unbiblical, human tradition. We should fast during times of true mourning, and rejoice otherwise. Jesus has not come to add the events of his life like an unshrunk patch onto the old garment of Judaism’s rigorous calendar of festivals, and to pour the new wine of Christianity into the old wineskins of old covenant formalism will destroy both. Rather, Jesus has called us in the new covenant to observe weekly Sabbath worship on the first day of the week, with space for fasting during times of mourning and thanksgiving during times of rejoicing. By pouring the new wine of the gospel into the forms of fresh wineskins of a simple, weekly Lord’s Day calendar, both will be preserved.

Discussion Questions

1. What has Jesus already taught us about fasting in this Gospel (Matt. 6:16–18)? How might this question of John’s disciples connect with Jesus’ feast with tax collectors and sinners in the previous passage (Matt. 9:10–13)? What kind of fasting, then, do the disciples of John and the Pharisees practice (see Luke 18:2)? How does this question relate to the subject of religious formalism? What is religious formalism, and where might we find it today?

¹⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 370–71.

¹⁶ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 226–27.

2. Why does Jesus first explain that his disciples cannot “mourn” (v. 15)? In what sense is Jesus the bridegroom? What does he mean when he speaks of “wedding guests”? When will the bridegroom be “taken away” from the disciples? How does Jesus differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate times for mourning? Why does Jesus insist that fasting should arise from genuine mourning, and not from set schedules for these forms?

3. In Jesus’ second explanation, what does Jesus mean by the symbolism of the unshrunk cloth (v. 16)? What is the old garment? In what way will Jesus’ newness tear apart the old garment of old covenant external formalism? What makes Jesus so different from what Old Testament believers had before his arrival? How does Jesus force the abrogation of all the outward glory of the old covenant?

4. How is Jesus’ third explanation similar to the second explanation (v. 17)? How does Jesus’ third explanation go beyond what the second explanation warned? Why do our attempts to mix the pure, new covenant worship of spirit and truth, with old covenant formalism, only serve to ruin both? Why can’t we augment the simplicity of word and sacrament with other forms of worship that we feel might be helpful? What does Jesus really want from us in worship?