

Luke

Patches and Wineskins

Luke 5:36-39

With Study Questions

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6999
pastorpaul@branchofhope.org
www.branchofhope.org*

9/1/2024

Luke

Patches and Wineskins

Luke 5:36-39

Then He spoke a parable to them: “No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one; otherwise the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was *taken* out of the new does not match the old.³⁷ And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined.³⁸ But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved.³⁹ And no one, having drunk old *wine*, immediately desires new; for he says, ‘The old is better’” (Luke 5:36-39).

Introduction

According to a 2019 article in *Forbes Magazine*, the most dangerous phrase in business is “we've always done it this way.”¹ Some say it's the most dangerous phrase in the language. It is generally said with the best of intentions and with a smidgeon of wisdom, similar to ‘If it ain't broke, don't fix it.’

There might be some insight to that thinking in a vacuum. But Blockbuster wasn't broke when Netflix (a much smaller company at the time) offered to partner with them regarding online movies. Netflix, it has been said, was all but laughed out of the room. Nobody laughing now. At least not at comedies purchased at Blockbuster. Blockbuster wasn't broken, but the landscape of watching movies was about to encounter a major shift.

We're in a chapter where Luke records Jesus calling disciples. They will shift from fishers of fish to fishers of men. This is followed by Jesus cleansing a leper by touching him (an edgy move to say the least) then sending him to the priest, which should have been a sign to the religious community that something significant was happening. Jesus then heals a paralytic. In doing so He established that His declaration of the power to forgive sins should be believed.

¹ <https://www.forbes.com/councils/forbeslacouncil/2019/01/28/the-most-dangerous-phrase-in-business-weve-always-done-it-this-way/>

He then encounters Levi, a tax collector, perhaps the most hated people in that culture. He calls Levi (Matthew) to be a follower, which Levi does. The chapter then shifts to the scribes and Pharisees criticizing Jesus and His followers for eating and drinking with sinners. Jesus responds by informing them that it is for sinners that He came. It would have been wise to include themselves in this category but were unwilling.

The accusers then highlight the poor religious habits of those who are following Jesus. They appear to be neglecting a practice of fasting and prayer that the current religious environment viewed as necessary. Jesus responds by explaining that His earthly presence was an occasion for joy, like a wedding. Nobody fasts at a wedding. Tough times will come, and His followers should be, and were, prepared by Him and the Holy Spirit. But right now, they rejoice that God has fulfilled His promise, His covenant, to send a Redeemer, His Son.

Jesus completes His explanation with two, somewhat cryptic, parables. They, and we, are left to figure out what He means by a **“new garment”** and an **“old”** patch/piece. What is the **“new wine”** and **“old wineskins”** and **“new wineskins?”** How would they have understood this? How should we? What difference does it make?

Then He spoke a parable to them: “No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one; otherwise the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was *taken* out of the new does not match the old (Luke 5:36).

Obvious Conclusions

In a moment we will discuss the various (really just two) views on what Jesus is referencing in this parable. Prior to that, let us recognize the obvious, incontrovertible conclusion of His lesson. When Jesus says that **“No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one”** He is appealing to that which would have been common practice with almost all of His listeners. People tended to fix clothing rather than buy new clothing. There was no Nordstrom in Jerusalem and Walmarts were in short supply.

It was common knowledge that you didn't use new fabric to patch an old garment. If you did, your effort to improve your garment would actually ruin it. The old garment has already shrunk, and the new patch has not. It might work for a moment, but one washing and your garment is

ruined. Not only that, but they also won't match. It is very difficult, once a fabric has been bleached by the sun, worn and washed many times, to find a patch that would look the same.

Whatever Jesus is talking about (certainly it has some religious connotation), we should conclude that syncretism (the amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions) is a bad idea. Or to put it in the words of Jesus,

No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other (Matthew 6:24).

Of course, this does not mean we cannot, or do not, have earthly masters (Colossians 4:1) to whom we should be submissive or deferential. But any institution, be it church, family or state, will inevitably suffer division (to the point of despising) if they don't share a similar ultimate master. It would be very difficult for us to work together if you hate my master. We've clearly seen this in our currently political chaos, where being a nation under God has hit the exits.

One might ask, if this is so, how do we justify that the Christian faith (especially Protestants) have so many denominations? To this I would respond, that just because we have the same master, does not always mean we understand that master in the same way. The human element is unavoidable. What makes for good Christianity is not that we are all uniform (certainly that would be an ultimate goal) but that we have the same standard, the same Master, which is God revealed in the Holy Scriptures.

The Word of God is magnetic north². The true Christian's heart is ever pulled in that direction. But there are many chasms, rivers, mountains and other impediments (i.e., the world, the flesh and the enemy) that inhibit a straight path. But if the magnetic north of God's word is abandoned, anarchy ensues.

Another conclusion, similar to the above, we can draw from the illustration of Jesus is that whatever the deficiency might be, it cannot be

² I realize that magnetic north, unlike true north, moves from time to time. This does not mean I think God's word changes (Matthew 24:35; 1 Peter 1:25). Please allow some poetic license. A magnet illustrates better.

mended by somehow applying a “Christian ‘patch.’”³ The call Christ puts forth is not somehow patching up your life with some Christian tips. It is the complete, utter, comprehensive denial of self.

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me (Matthew 16:24).

It is not the mere denial of things about ourselves. It is the denial of self. If, during the time of Christ, you saw someone carrying a cross, they were carrying it to their death. This is what Jesus is teaching when it comes to our old, unregenerate, unsaved life. It must be crucified, that a new person might burst forth. It would be the acme of poor self-assessment to think all we need is a patch. Jesus then elaborates.

**And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined.
³⁸ But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved.
³⁹ And no one, having drunk old *wine*, immediately desires new; for he says, ‘The old is better’” (Luke 5:37-39).**

A Healthy Critique

Clearly, Jesus is making a similar point here. Trying to combine the old with the new results in the destruction of both. Here, He illustrates with the use of wine and wineskins. Similar to the prior garment, putting new wine in old wineskins will (likely due to fermentation) cause the old wineskins to burst and both the wine and skins are ruined.

My youngest son came home from his first day of college last week and informed me that his political science teacher pressed upon the class (in a word) the beauty of all things liberal and the evil of all things conservative. He didn’t want to begin his school year by being overly argumentative, so we discussed how to go about approaching the subject.

We came up with approaching the teacher as a student who truly desires (as we all should) to know both sides-to be informed. A good question might be something along the lines of ‘If we were to eliminate that

³ Marshall, I. H. (1978). *The Gospel of Luke: a commentary on the Greek text* (p. 227). Exeter: Paternoster Press.

they are merely evil or stupid, what would be the conservative's best argument for their position?' I guess we'll see if that works.

I mention this because, as Christians, we should offer a healthy critique of the things we hear our pastor's say. We are to be like the noble-minded Bereans who poured over the Scriptures to see if the teaching is accurate (Acts 17:11). Some things are iron-clad wrong. Others are iron-clad right. Others are iron-clad maybe. It is necessary at this point to offer the two major views as to what Jesus is addressing.

A Light Burden

Some say Jesus is primarily concerned with the immaturity of His disciples and seeking to place a burden upon them they were not ready for. Calvin put it this way:

The comparison is beautifully adapted to the matter in hand, if we explain it as referring to the weak and tender disciples of Christ, and to a discipline more strict than they were able to bear.⁴

Similarly, Matthew Henry wrote that Jesus was avoiding being overly firm and austere on young converts. He compared it to God, not bringing the Israelites by way of the Philistines, lest they "**change their mind when they see war and return to Egypt**" (Exodus 13:17). He wrote,

So Christ would train up his followers gradually to the discipline of his family... The disciples will be tempted to think their old way of living better, till they are by degrees trained up to this way whereunto they are called. Or, turn it the other way: "Let them be *accustomed* awhile to religious exercises, and then they will *abound* in them as much as you do: but we must not be too hasty with them."⁵

⁴ Calvin, J., & Pringle, W. (2010). *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Vol. 1, p. 407). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

⁵ Henry, M. (1994). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume* (p. 1841). Peabody: Hendrickson.

There is a temptation to desire patience in others while we are seeking maturity in Christ yet withhold that same patience from those who might appear behind us in step. We need to practice a biblical patience in this incrementalism. God is patient with us, we should be patient with others. Jesus held back from teaching things His followers were not yet ready to bear (John 16:12). The Jerusalem Council put together a very short list of requirements to operate within the boundaries of the covenant (Acts 15). These provide examples for us as a church. Let us follow that example.

A New Covenant

Though these are fine theologians, making valuable points, and with whom I hesitate to disagree, I think they are not quite on the mark in their assessment. I rather fine myself in agreement with Hendriksen, Marshall and Sproul. The position is not that Jesus is seeking to be patient with His young followers as they mature in their personal faith, but that the ceremonial and somewhat burdensome practices of the Old Covenant (WCF 20, 1) must yield to the simplicity and beauty of the New. Hendriksen expresses it winsomely:

Don't try to mix the new with the old; instead, accept the new, strong, vigorous, joy-imparting teaching of Jesus and the salvation brought by him. In the joy he and his teaching bring to those who by grace are transformed by it there is no room for Judaistic, legalistic fasting.⁶

The Old Covenant, which was and should have remained a covenant of grace (since all of Scripture is about Christ – John 5:39), had been reduced by its members into a covenant of works, of personal merit. They were seeking to establish their peace with God through their own goodness or religious observances. It is difficult to convey how commonly held this thinking is, even to this day, yet how counter it is to the entirety of Scripture. Paul wrote of them:

⁶ Hendriksen, W., & Kistemaker, S. J. (1953–2001). *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke* (Vol. 11, p. 311). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. ³ For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness (Romans 10: 2, 3).

Therein lies the heart of the Christian faith, the heart of the Christian message. As Paul would write elsewhere that it was his great desire to be,

...found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith (Philippians 3:9).

Skins and Wine

Though it might be overly ambitious to pursue all that is new about the New Covenant, or to be overly specific about what the skins and wine represent, I think I am safe (at least on theological grounds) to suggest a couple of things that would help us appreciate what Jesus seems to be getting at.

Recognizing that wine (or other alcoholic drinks) can be dangerous (Proverbs 20:1), they are generally put forth in the Bible as a blessing (Judges 9:13; Ecclesiastes 10:19; Proverbs 31:6, 7). And eventually, wine came to symbolize the blood of Christ in communion. I think, therefore, it is safe to suggest that the wine is symbolic of blessing, the greatest of which is the blood of Christ Himself as presented in the New Covenant.

Also, the wineskins of the New Covenant are significantly different and superior to the wineskins of the Old. It would be wrong here to think the message of Christ is in conflict with the Old Covenant. But the way the New Covenant was to be administered and to whom it would reach and power of the full and fulfilled message of the New leaves the old **"obsolete" (Hebrews 8:13).**

In the New we don't kill lambs (or any animals for religious reasons) for the Lamb has come, Jesus, **"the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).** The New is not restricted to Israel or any single people group. Jesus did not die merely for Israel, but the power of His sacrifice will span all of history and all the globe, **"the whole world" (1**

John 2:2). And the means by which the redemption comes is not by a pilgrimage to a temple in Jerusalem, but by the temple (Christ, through His body), going and making disciples of **“all nations” (Matthew 28:29).**

The New Covenant can be compared to the New the way we might observe a firework. In the Old, it is a single stream of light in an otherwise dark sky. The true God was found only among the Hebrews. But in the New, the firework explodes the gives light to the entire sky. Some wish to keep the firework stuck in its casing. As Marshall articulates,

...the gospel is radically new...and must be allowed to express itself in its own way.⁷

It is an international rescue mission, and the first responders are all who are willing. Henry also conveys words we can all learn from:

Christ’s disciples, though they had not so much of the *form of godliness*, had more of the *power of it*.⁸

Jesus concludes with a statement only found in Luke, not in Matthew or Mark’s account. He addressed our natures, saying, **“no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, ‘The old is better.’”** Sometimes the old is better. But sometimes it is obsolete.

We must be careful, even within our own traditions, to avoid thinking something is correct, simply because it’s been done over a long period of time by good people. I often hear a reference to ‘the reformed tradition’ only to find that it is not really the reformed tradition at all and not as clearly biblical as you might expect. Let us be aware of our own nature in this capacity.

But the case in point is that the new wine in the new wineskins can be understood to be the blood of Christ put forth in the manner He has chosen. Let us be faithful in that capacity, lest we seek to snuff out the firework while it is seeking to explode.

⁷ Marshall, I. H. (1978). *The Gospel of Luke: a commentary on the Greek text* (pp. 227–228). Exeter: Paternoster Press.

⁸ Henry, M. (1994). *Matthew Henry’s commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume* (p. 1841). Peabody: Hendrickson.

Questions for Study

1. Are there times when you've felt yourself embracing the 'we've always done it this way' mindset? Was it good or bad? Explain (page 2).
2. Review the events that led up to this parable. Why do you suppose Luke places it here in his gospel (pages 2, 3)?
3. What are some solid, obvious conclusions we can draw from the parable of the garment? How do these conclusions affect you and the decisions you might make (pages 3, 4)?
4. What is the magnetic north of the Christian faith? Why do we not all just go directly north (page 4)?
5. What is wrong with Christianity being a "patch" (pages 4, 5)?
6. Is it good to be a critical listener/learner? Are there times when it can be bad (pages 5, 6)?
7. What are the two ways we can understand the parable of the wineskins? Which way makes the most sense to you and why (pages 6-8)?

8. Compare the Old Covenant to the New. How are they the same? How are they different (pages 8, 9)?