

Introduction

Those who want to emphasize the unity of the Bible and the foundational character of all sixty-six books must give some careful attention to the relationship between the testaments. The relationship of the thirty-nine OT books to the twenty-seven NT books is critical. How we understand this relationship is of the utmost importance. Thus, we face a difficult challenge, a necessary task, and a rewarding endeavor, but the fruit will not spring out of thin air. There must be some reflection, comparison, meditation, and study. There must be some careful weighing of many diverse threads of truth to get “the lay of the land” and form a mental picture of the whole Bible to help us deal with the two main parts.

The central thread, of course, is the coming of Christ in the middle, between the testaments. His coming brought about a significant shift in thinking, a massive scale reorientation of teaching. To understand this move from OT to NT, we must weigh, and put into the mix, the necessary presence of new wineskins. In this connection, Matthew 9.14-17 is an important passage that gets us thinking in the right way about the relationship between the testaments.

Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" ¹⁵And Jesus said to them, "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. ¹⁶No 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. ¹⁷Neither 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."

When I read these words, a number of interesting things immediately strike my attention, and a brief comment on each will get us “into the guts of the text.” 1) Here, the disciples of John are in the same boat with the Pharisees on the matter of fasting. John’s disciples inquire as to why they and the Pharisees fast while the disciples of Jesus do not fast. Why not simply inquire as to why they do and the disciples of Jesus do not fast. 2) Jesus shows us that mourning and fasting go together; the purpose of a religious fast is to express sorrow, just as the purpose of religious feasts is to express joy. 3) Jesus says of His disciples, “then they will fast.” This makes us ask, “Is fasting properly part of the healthy Christian life and what some call a spiritual discipline (“spiritual disciplines” are times of silence, meditation, prayer, etc. that cultivate spiritual growth, cf. Piper)? 4) Finally, Jesus uses the interesting analogies of the new cloth and new wineskins. Because the two analogies blend into one, we can talk about both of them under the title “The Necessary Presence of New Wineskins.” There are two things to discuss, the illustration of a new wineskin, and the principle of a new wineskin (exposition and application).

1A. The Illustration of a new wineskin

The illustration of the new wineskin comes in answer to a question about fasting, **Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"** It is important to note who is asking the question (the disciples of John the Baptist). What emerges from this question is a contrast between John and Jesus, between their respective ministries. It is this contrast between what each stands for that lies behind the difference between fasting and not fasting. The answer is given in verse 15 where the contrast begins to fill out, **And Jesus said to them, "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.** Obviously, the key to the contrast is the presence of the bridegroom. Thus,

John and his disciples fast as mourners, while Jesus and His disciples do not fast as bridegroom and attendants.

Now let us consider both sides of the question more closely in the contrast between fasting and not fasting.

1B. Why do the Pharisees and the disciples of John fast?

Why do they characteristically practice the sign of humiliation, sorrow, and mourning? Regarding the Pharisees, we know that they used fasting in a hypocritical way; they let everyone know of their fasting to receive praise for being such religious giants. However, because the Pharisees and the disciples of John are tied together in the question, it seems best to view fasting here in Pharisaic practice as a token of how they understood, misunderstood, and misused the OT examples of fasting (notably, there is no OT command to fast).

For the disciples of John, we have a different story. John and his disciples fasted to signify a central theme in the message he preached. In making the paths straight, he announced the coming of the kingdom with an accent on the Messiah's role in judgment. In this, he shows himself to be one with the OT prophets who embodied and acted out their teaching (cf. marrying a prostitute, holding up and joining broken sticks, digging a hole in a wall, and laying on the ground on one side for three days). John was truly a prophet and more than a prophet in the role of way preparer of the Lord. Thus, his life style, his clothing, his diet of locusts and wild honey, and his fasting embodied the sober aspect of his message:

I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Mat 3.11-12)

Judgment is about to fall with unquenchable fire. Therefore, John was announcing the formation of a new covenant community that will emerge in the judgment of Israel and the nations, and baptism was the means of entry into that community: **Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand...and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins** (Mat. 3.2, 6). John's baptism was repentance-baptism saying, "You are not the people of God, come, repent, and cross the line of baptism into the new covenant community."

Thus, we can summarize by saying that fasting was a judgment sign and in the conduct of the Pharisees, it represented an understanding (i.e. misunderstanding) of the OT.

Now we can contemplate the other side of the question.

2B. Why specifically did the disciples of Jesus *not* fast?

They did not fast because Jesus is the bridegroom. He has come into the world to save His people (Mat 1.21) and claim His bride. The accent of His life style and diet is joy not judgment. Thus, since the bridegroom has come with great delight and joy to secure for Himself a bride, it would be inconsistent for His disciples, followers, and attendants to mourn. You do not mourn at a wedding festival. Instead, you have a feast of joy and rejoicing. You break out the good wine, even the very best wine (cf. the wedding at Cana, Jn 2). You share with the groom in his delight and anticipation.

The presence of the bridegroom brings a number of things together at once. His presence establishes the time of fulfillment of all the OT promises. Fulfillment brings happiness, or better joy, because this happiness arises from love and has depth. This is messianic love. It is eternal covenant love that sets the tone and tenor of things that abide since His appearance. This is the time of good news. We live in the gospel age. That is what Paul means by "the day of salvation" and "the acceptable year of the Lord" (2 Co 6.2).

However, in the latter half of verse 15, Jesus says, "**The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.**" Does He mean by this to throw a cloud of sadness over the time of His absence from the church? Are we to understand that He is telling us, that when He returns to the Father, we are to then characteristically mourn and embody our mourning in the ritual of fasting?

To answer these questions, we should think about what happened “when Jesus was taken away” by arrest, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Did the disciples fast when Jesus died? Perhaps they did, but there is no such record. Unquestionably, they mourned. Just consider Peter, for example, who wept bitterly. Yet when the early church began its ministry on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), there is no fasting. Instead, there is breaking of bread from house to house in joyous fellowship. Any fasting, specifically, any mourning of the disciples that occurred was deep and distressing in the hour of Jesus’ execution. However, Jesus arose from the grave triumphant and glorious with the keys of death and hell in His hand. That means that He went to the cross as a sacrifice for sin to claim His bride, paying the price of her sins. He obtained the church “with his own blood” (Acts 20.28). By His blood, He secured “eternal redemption” (Heb 9.12) for His covenant people (Heb 2.13-14). The great shepherd of the sheep equips us to do God’s will “by the blood of the eternal covenant” (Heb 13.20).

Thus, even though there is this season of mourning, at bottom, the disciples of Jesus – His followers, His church, His people, and His bride – do not mourn and they do not adopt the sign of mourning. Instead of fasting, they feast with joy and rejoicing in the acceptance of sinners. A major complaint that the Pharisees raised against Jesus is that He ate with tax collectors and sinners, but that fact is our very salvation and it all comes together in the symbolic action of communion. The Lord’s Supper is a symbolic feast in which Jesus is present with us, with sinners that He owns as His new covenant family.

Therefore, if we wonder about the need to practice fasting today, we have our answer and we have it with an exclamation mark! We do not practice fasting today because that practice was an old wineskin that illustrated the promise of the coming of the kingdom by the baptism of fire. Fasting accented the sober reality of messianic judgment that will fall on Israel and the nations. Thus, when Jesus brought in the kingdom, He brought the new wine of fulfillment and that necessitated a new wineskin. Fasting had to give way to feasting. The old wineskin of fasting cannot contain the joy of fulfillment. All the feasting of Jesus recorded in the Gospels pictures the fact that judgment of the nations is delayed to the end of the age, and He is with us to the end of the age; they all come together in the special communion feast. Although He is absent from us bodily, He is present with us by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the gift of the accomplishment of Christ. Thus, Jesus said, if I go away I will send the Spirit and if I go away I will come to you (Jn 14.18; 16.7).

Therefore, fasting is not a characteristic of the Christian life. It is not a “spiritual discipline.” The Lord’s Supper is a symbolic feast of joy and rejoicing, and thus, it is a “spiritual discipline” that the Lord has ordained for our spiritual strengthening and growth. Some Christian thinkers try to ground the duty of fasting as a spiritual discipline in two main passages: from “then they will fast” here in Matthew 9 and “when you fast” cited in the Sermon on the Mount. However, if we take into account the great shift that occurred in the coming of the kingdom and the coming of the new wine, then we know that in the end we must view fasting as transformed into feasting because promise has become fulfillment. It is as simple as this: because Jesus is alive from the dead and with us to the end of the age, it is inconsistent for His disciples to fast in token of grief. Instead, they must feast in token of joy.

2A. The Principle of the New Wineskin (vs. 16-17)

The principle of the new wineskin is the same as the principle of the new piece of cloth (or the unshrunk cloth principle). These verses open the door from fasting as a case in point to other similar examples and practices. There is pointed affirmation of the principle and its application reaches broadly to all the issues at stake in the movement from OT to NT.

1B. Justification

Before going any further toward application, we should justify the point that we can extrapolate from the fasting example to other similar examples and practices. Put in the form of a

question, “what justifies the use of the new wineskin principle in areas other than the shift from fasting to feasting?”

1) Matthew 5.17

Jesus deals with the significant fact of change regarding the law and the prophets (a summary of the entire OT) that is clear to all. He tells His audience, however, that concentrating on the great change is not the way to think about His relation to the law. Instead, His disciples are to think about fulfillment: I have not come to abolish but to fulfill the law and the prophets.

Thus, Matthew 9.14-17 goes with Matthew 5.17 in that new wine is comparable with fulfillment. Fulfillment takes place in a context of great change and new wine brings about the great change. It is a simple step to conclude that His coming to fulfill the OT is the new wine. That new wine must have new wineskins, and the way we are to think about the new wineskins is in terms of continuity with the OT, in terms of fulfillment, not the discontinuity of abolition.

Ultimately, we have reference to the entire OT (law and prophets) brought to fulfillment and poured into new wineskins (fulfillment is what is poured in; it is the new wine).

2) Matthew 13.52

Disciples are scribes of the kingdom, which means they are students of the law. What they do as kingdom-law-students is bring out of their storehouse of Scripture things new and old. Again, we have the interplay between new and old. The old is present (cf. new *and* old), but transformed by the coming of new wine. The old wineskins must undergo a change, yet we must think about the change in terms of fulfillment and continuity *that thus preserves the old in some way*. The old wineskins give way to new ones, but *wineskins continue to exist*.

2B. Application

We can apply the principle to sacrifice, Sabbath, baptism, and communion for starters.

1) Offering sacrifices

How the principle of the unshrunk cloth applies is readily evident in the example of bringing sacrifices to the altar in worship (Mat. 5.23-24). If we think continuity and fulfillment, then we will not go about propounding the view that Jesus abolished OT sacrifices. The truth of change does not allow us to think this way. We must look for fulfillment/new wineskin forms of sacrifice. This means that the lambs have become the Lamb of God on the altar, and we offer sacrifices by giving ourselves on the altar, by giving of our money to the gospel, and by the fruit of our lips giving praise (Rom 12.1; Heb 13.15-16; 1 Pet 2.1-8). Granted, one might still say that the literal blood offerings are abolished, but true as that may be narrowly speaking; it is not the way to think productively according to our Lord. We think rightly if we think in terms of fulfillment and new wine. Then when we look at the removal of the old wineskins, we accent the new wine and the fact that there are still wineskins. Thus, *the structures of the old are still present* but transformed. *They* have a new covenant form. It is not that the new covenant replaces them so they cease to exist. Instead, the new covenant transforms them *in the way they continue to exist*.

2) Acknowledging the Sabbath Lordship of Christ

The shift from the Saturday Sabbath to the Sunday Lord's Day is due to the new wine of fulfillment. Thus, Sunday is the old Sabbath in a new wineskin. How we apply the fourth commandment in detail is not immediately evident, but the key here is that how we use Sunday, how we spend the day is how we acknowledge and honor Christ as Sabbath king.

3) Practicing repentance-baptism

From Matthew 3 and Acts 2, we get a new definition of the children of Abraham. John called Israelites to cross the line of repentance-baptism in order to enter the new covenant community. Abraham's children are those who receive repentance-baptism (Mat. 3.11) as they come confessing their sins (3.6). The old wineskin washing rituals of the OT now give way to the single washing ritual of repentance-baptism. The way of entry into the covenant community

is not birth or circumcision; the way of entry is confession of sin in a washing rite that applies to both adults and children (Act 2.38-39).

4) The Christian Passover meal

In the book of Colossians, Paul mentions a number of OT shadows that pass away in NT sunlight. Included in the shadow things are Sabbaths and feasts. However, the passage does not teach that the coming of the “reality” means that nothing of the old remains (if it did then communion would be eliminated; 1 Co 11 would be excised from the NT). The Sabbaths give way to the new wineskin of the Lord’s Day. The feasts give way to the new wineskin of the Lord’s Supper (thus we have the Christian Sabbath and the Christian Passover Meal).

Conclusion

If you do not use the new wineskin of feasting with joy and rejoicing in the acceptance of sinners (instead of their judgment), then it is like using unshrunk cloth to patch an old garment; it is like putting new wine in old wineskins. The tare will be worse, and the old wineskins will burst, the old garment will show more damage, and the new wine will be lost.

Thus, per the grouping of the miracles in this context of Matthew 8-9, Jesus says to us, “Because as living dead people you have been healed of your leprosy, because your healing is bound up with the restoration from all the effects of the fall, because the waves and winds bow down before me as cosmic Sabbath Lord, because I have disarmed principalities and powers in high places, because you have been set free from the paralyzing dominion of sin, and because in summary, your sins are forgiven, then be of good cheer, rejoice, enjoy the new wine, and enjoy it by using the new wineskin of feasting instead of fasting.”

It is, therefore, a joy to acknowledge the cosmic and Sabbath Lordship of Christ. Therefore, repentance-baptism is a practice we take up with joy. Therefore, communion is a meal of joy and rejoicing in the acceptance of sinners. Therefore, we gladly offer ourselves as living sacrifices to Christ our risen Lord. These implications are all true because Jesus is the bridegroom who secured the eternal freedom of His bride by giving His own body and blood. What else, then, can we do? We offer ourselves, and the praise of our lips, to Jesus as our Sabbath Lord.