

Are We Ready for God to Do Something New in the New Year?

Five years ago, a picture of a dress broke the Internet. Some people looked at the dress and saw blue and black. Others looked at the same dress and saw white and gold. The debate became a viral phenomenon: how could two people look at the same photograph and see totally different colors?

One day the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “why do you speak to the people in parables?” A parable is a simple story that illustrates a profound truth so the answer seems obvious, doesn’t it? Jesus spoke in parables so that people would hear and understand the truth he’s teaching. So that everyone would see and hear the same thing and walk away saying, there’s no confusion about what Jesus is saying – it’s perfectly clear and obvious to all. Right?

Wrong. Jesus answered, *“The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables: ‘Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.’”* Matt. 13:10-13

The parables of Jesus were meant to reveal the secrets of the kingdom of heaven to those whose hearts were open and conceal them from those whose hearts weren’t open. To open the eyes of those with ears to hear and further blind the eyes of those who don’t have ears to hear. Like the dress, two people can hear Jesus’ parables and hear totally different things, depending on the state of our heart.

This morning we start a series called *The Parables of Jesus* and I thought an appropriate place to start, seeing it’s the first Sunday of the New Year, is the parable about New Wineskins, so turn with me to Matt. 9 and then let’s pray and ask God to give us ears to hear, hearts to understand, and eyes to see the secrets and principles of the kingdom of heaven.

Matt. 9:14-17

To keep it simple, let’s break it into three segments: the reason, the reveal, and the relevance. The reason Jesus told the parable, the kingdom truth it reveals, and the relevance it has to our lives.

The Reason

Jesus shares this cluster of parables in response to a question asked by some of John the Baptist’s disciples. They ask, “how is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples never seem to fast?” Implied is the accusation that Jesus’ disciples just aren’t taking spiritual things very seriously.

The Pharisees had a knack for taking external practices and turning them into barometers measuring how spiritual a person was. When they prayed, they made sure to make a show of praying loud and long in public so everyone could see how close they were to God. They did the same with fasting. Spiritual people fasted religiously twice a week to show how much they were willing to deny themselves in order to walk humbly before their God. But there’s a problem – can you see it? I may have fasted breakfast this morning to prove how devoted I am, but you can’t tell that I fasted by looking at me.

Fasting can only work as a measurement of how spiritual we are if people can read the measurement. The Pharisees could fast twice a week and no one know it and what good is that? What good is it to be humble if no one knows you’re humble? What good does it do you being the most spiritual guy in the room if no else in the room knows it?

The solution was that on the days the Pharisees fasted instead of splashing cold water on their faces they splashed ashes over their faces making their faces even more miserable than they usually were.

They walked around with this streaked and disfigured face, obviously deprived, obviously suffering, obviously sad and somber and miserable, and that made it easy for everyone to know they were fasting. They loved knowing people were whispering how humble and spiritual and close to God they were. It was all a show.

John's disciples were probably less prideful and more sincere in their fasting, but still they bought into the idea that fasting was a visual barometer of how spiritual you were, so when they asked Jesus why his disciples didn't fast, they really were asking him, why aren't your disciples spiritual? Like us. Like the Pharisees. What gives, Jesus?

The Reveal

As he often did, Jesus answers their question with a question: "*How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them?*" Notice there's nothing about fasting or his disciples in his answer. It's a parable about a bridegroom and his guests.

In those days when two people got married, instead of going on a honeymoon, they opened their house up and had a weeklong party with friends and family. That may not sound great to us, but it was one of the best weeks of their lives because it was totally devoted to celebrating the bride and the bridegroom.

Jesus is telling them they're too focused on *what* when they should be focused on *who*. The Bridegroom is with you – the Messiah, the Lord, the One Israel has been looking for and waiting for for thousands of years is finally with you. It's not a time for deprivation, it's a time for celebration. It's not a time for walking around looking miserable, it's a time for joy and laughter!

Comedian Brian Regan astutely points out that in the greeting card section, there are all these subcategories of greeting cards. You've got thank you cards and thinking of you cards and "just because" cards. There are "blank inside" cards – the guy who thought that up is laughing all the way to the bank. You do the work, he makes the money. And there are humorous cards: humorous birthday, humorous anniversary, humorous divorce, humorous get well, and humorous you just quit your job cards. But he points out you never see a humorous sympathy card. That's the wrong time to try and be funny. It would be terribly inappropriate to the moment. In the same way, with the Bridegroom present, the One Israel has been waiting for and looking for, it's horribly inappropriate to be walking around with ash-covered, miserable faces. It's time to celebrate, to rejoice, to party!

By the way, it's still a time for joy and celebration in the church cause Jesus is still in our midst through the Person and ministry of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said we can and should fast, but not the way the Pharisees did, making themselves look miserable so everyone would be impressed with them. Instead Jesus said, do it privately, don't let anyone know. It's just between you and your heavenly Father.

Then Jesus tells two parables that have the same point: you can't add the new to the old without destroying both. The reason is the new is constantly moving and adapting and changing – it expands, it contracts. The old is...old. It's stretched out – it has no more stretch left in it. If you sew a new patch on an old piece of clothing, the new will shrink when it's washed and tear away from the old. If you put new wine in an old wineskin, when the new wine ferments it will expand, but the old wineskins have already been stretched – they have no stretch left. There's nowhere for them to go except to burst and both the wine and the wineskin are destroyed.

Jesus didn't come to put a new patch on Judaism. He didn't come to fill in the gaps where the law fell short. He came to bring something entirely new. Jeremiah 31:31-32: *Behold, the days are coming,*

declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, 32 not like the covenant that I made with their fathers...

Jesus looks at the religious system of the Pharisees and diagnoses it as terminally brittle - so rigid, so hardened that it had no room for growth, no room for grace, no room for the expanding life of God. Rigor mortis had set in in their religious system. God's not going to pour into them any of the new thing He is doing because they can't contain it; they will burst and God's work will be spilled out and wasted. With these parables, Jesus is warning John's disciples either be new wineskins or miss the new that God is doing.

John was a new wineskin, he was flexible, he pointed his followers towards Jesus and encouraged them to follow him. John knows things are changing, he speaks in terms of expanding and contracting when he said Jesus must increase (expand), but I must decrease (contract). John was a flexible, new wineskin.

But some of his followers weren't. Instead of following Jesus they were comparing him to what they were used to following the Baptist. "That's not the way John taught us to do it!"

Jesus is warning them, what God was doing isn't what God is doing and if you are old and stretched out, you will miss what God is doing *now*. Be new wineskins or miss out!

The Relevance

These are so relevant for us today. And a good reminder for us as we enter a New Year. The truth is, we can get old and brittle and inflexible and not even know it. And I'm not talking about chronological age. You can be 95 years old and have a new, flexible heart, and you can be 12 years old and be rigid, inflexible, and completely stretched out. Here are some thoughts for us staying new in heart.

a. Know the difference between what needs to change and what never changes

The Gospel truths we believe are unchanging. God's word is unchanging. Being new wineskins doesn't mean that we're ready to believe any new teaching that comes along in the name of being "flexible". But there's a way to rigorously hold onto the unchanging truth of God's word without becoming rigid and unchanging ourselves. We should always be growing, expanding, deepening, and stretching.

In the 1980's I worked at a music store and I remember one afternoon a guy came in who looked like he stepped out of the sixties. When he left the store my boss and I were talking about why someone would get stuck in an era and never leave it. My boss had an interesting theory: he said the guy probably got married in the 60's and stopped trying to keep up with the times from that point on. I guess the idea is, the only reason a guy keeps up with the times is in order to be attractive to a potential wife – once you snagged your wife, you didn't need to keep up with the times anymore.

I don't know if that's true, but I know you shouldn't be able to tell when a person became a Christian cause that's when he or she stopped changing. Becoming a Christian should be the beginning of change, and growth, and expansion, not the end of it. The truths we believe are unchanging, but our faith should always be expanding and growing.

b. Treasure the ways God has worked in your past, but expect God to work in new ways in the future

Some of us can probably look back on times when God moved in our lives or our churches, and we can wish we could have that again. We long for those days, for the way God was working, for the glory days.

Maybe if we sing that song again, maybe if we worship with the songs we used to again, maybe if we do church like we did back then...we'd get it back.

It's good for us to treasure those times, but we shouldn't try to reproduce them again. Nostalgia turns our focus to the past rather than the future. We reduce God's work to the stretched out container of what He did then. God wants to meet His people in a fresh way, in a new way – and I'm not talking about us always looking for new and novel either, that can lead to error and weird stuff – I'm talking about us keeping our faith limber and fresh and able to be stretched. I'm talking about us being containers that can stretch with faith without bursting a wineskin. What God does tomorrow probably won't look exactly like what He did yesterday.

c. Don't limit God to one style, one method, or type of vessel

We become brittle when we start to think that God only works through one style or method or type of vessel. I remember my grandmother coming to the church I was pastoring when she was in her 70's. Grandma grew up in a Baptist tradition where you sang hymns from hymnals accompanied by an organ and the whole service was laid out in the bulletin. We, on the other hand, sang newer worship songs accompanied by electric guitars and drums. There was no order of service in the bulletin (now we don't even have bulletins). It was totally different than what she was used to and I was concerned she would be turned off but she loved it. Not that she loved the music, or the style of the service, but she loved seeing God working in younger people's lives and appreciated the worship styles that expressed their love for God. I love meeting older saints who aren't brittle and rigid but have remained young in faith.

By the way, this goes both ways. We shouldn't look down on hymnals and organs. Or liturgy. Let's acknowledge that God works through many different kinds of vessels and styles and methods – you may prefer one kind but appreciate any wineskin that can flex with God's work. Let's not limit God to one style or method or type of vessel.

d. Keep our focus on Who is with us

Jesus' first parable helps us remember to keep our focus on Who is with us – Jesus. If we lose sight of Jesus, we will end up doing what the Pharisees did – construct a religious system that is rigid and brittle, and one that Jesus wants nothing to do with. The Pharisees loved their religion. Jesus loved people. The Pharisees loved keeping the rules. Jesus loved saving the lost. The Pharisees loved being isolated from sinners and their mess. Jesus loved being up close and personal with sinners and their mess.

Let me close with a story. It's the story found in all three gospels just before the parables we read about. Jesus accepted an invitation to eat dinner at Matthew the Tax Collector's house, and all of Matthew's friends happen to be sinners and outcasts, so Jesus and his disciples are eating with this house full of untouchables. And the Pharisees ask, "why do you eat with sinners?" Jesus answers, I didn't come for the healthy but for the sick. That's the difference between the brittle religious system of the Pharisees and the new thing that God was doing in and through Jesus. The Pharisees were focused on prim and proper, Jesus was focused on people. The Pharisees were focused on rules. Jesus was focused on rescue.

If we remember Who is with us – Jesus – we will also remember Jesus' heart for people. And yes, that's going to be messy at times. We have to stay limber with grace for people messing up. Which should be easy when we remember how much grace Jesus shows to us when we mess up. We have to stay limber

if we're going to care about people because what people are dealing with and going through isn't simple and neat. It's complex and layered and did I say messy? We have to stay limber with patience and forgiveness, cause people will disappoint us and let us down and sin against us.

But in all this, Jesus is with us and working through us, and the Holy Spirit is growing and stretching and expanding our service for the kingdom. Let's ask God to grow and expand us this year. To use us in new ways for His kingdom. To reach out to new people with the love of Jesus, and to renew our prayers for those we've been praying for what feels like forever.

God is always doing something new and fresh. GCC, are we ready for God to do something new in the New Year?