

“New Wine into New Wineskins”

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Mark 2:13-22

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¹³Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. ¹⁴As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him.

¹⁵And as he sat at dinner in Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” ¹⁷When Jesus heard this, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

¹⁸Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” ¹⁹Jesus said to them, “The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. ²⁰The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

²¹“No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. ²²And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.”

Prayer.

Scribes and Pharisees pour old wine into old wineskins. It just wouldn’t work.

Organized religion in the days of Jesus was akin to organized crime. Judaism was the political middle-man with Rome, the centralized government. Rule was brutal, violent, and swift. Jewish authorities used the Roman sword to enforce their practices. Rome used Jewish authorities as pawns to raise taxes, keep the peace, and to placate the crowds. They allowed a Temple based economy to thrive and grow, bringing in money to support the Temple coffers. Money and power, as we all know, is a recipe for abuse. And the religious authorities at the time of Jesus are cooking up a double batch!

The connection between people and God was being stretch and near to the point

of destruction. The system was almost at the breaking point. The people were tired of being taken advantage of. They had their fill of oppression and injustice. Heavy taxation subjected the majority of the population to abject poverty. Conservative, unbending religious laws broke families apart, fostered abuse, and stirred the revolutionary hopes of the masses.

Temple priests, scribes, and Pharisees pound the people with adherence to the Law of Moses - *as they interpret it*. They preach compliance and non-resistance to authority. They so manipulate and so narrowly define the Law that nearly everyone could be considered non-compliant and be jailed, tortured, exiled or killed.

This type of totalitarianism can only exist for so long before it begins to crumble under its own weight. Stars collapse and go supernova, just as regimes spiral out of control into coups and civil war. Domination has a lifespan, thankfully, of just about a life span (hopefully less).

Clearly the old way of doing things was becoming more problematic. Revolution was in the air. When it finally snapped a decade after the time of Jesus the Romans responded by crushing Judaism, leveling Jerusalem and the temple right to the ground, scattering the few remaining Jewish refugees to every corner of the world.

While the crowd desired Jesus to go revolutionary, the Jewish authorities were attempting to keep control; to keep the people contained and in order. It is akin to refilling old wine skins with old wine. There comes a point when it just doesn't work anymore. It didn't take long before everything began to leak all over, leading to a catastrophic disaster.

If you have ever heard the modern day saying, "we've always done it that way before," then you know about trying to put old wine into old wineskins. For a time it works, but after a while, after the effective life cycle is exceeded, even the old tried and true ways of doing things begins to fail, and the worn out skins begin to leak.

You've probably heard how some have defined insanity: repeating the same behavior but expecting different results. This approach may appeal to our old Protestant work ethic, but there comes a time when we stop and scratch our head in exasperation wondering what it is that we are doing wrong.

The natural, human response is to innovate. We turn to innovation and hope that this is what will save the day. We attempt to create something new based upon *the old way of doing things*. We try to tweak the system, make modest improvements a little at a time. We begin to believe ourselves that what we are doing is important or life changing, when, in fact, it is a rehashing of what always used to take place.

This is the limiting nature of John the Baptist. He preached repentance and forgiveness of sins – essentially a modification, or an innovation, of what was already on the books. Here is the Law and the Covenant. This is what happens when we break the Law or turn away from God.

John is preaching to wild and receptive crowds. He is saying that the way back to God is to repent and return to God and his Laws. John is preaching about returning to a life living in a covenantal relationship with God. This is what repentance and forgiveness of sins is all about.

Theologically, John was right on the mark.

But this could only last for a limited period of time. John can only plug his finger into the leaking dike for so long. John the Baptist could only endure long enough to be a crowd favorite. But when John became a danger and a threat to the established order, he lost his head, literally and figuratively. His followers dispersed in anguish and disappointment.

The demise of John the Baptist was akin to putting new wine into the same old wine skin. The establishment can't adapt and adjust to the attempt at systemic change. The content may be new and innovated, but if it comes packaged in the same old, same old, in the end, it, too, will self-destruct.

For Jesus to adapt to the ways of John the Baptist, he would have to ask his disciples to pour new wine into old wineskins. It just wouldn't work. Jesus would have become a second John the Baptist. Believe me, the world doesn't have a shortage of forgotten martyrs. What it did have a shortage of was ... a messiah. The world was looking for *a messiah*.

I hate to use the "p" word, because it is so overused in today's world. In the realms of leadership development and management training the term "paradigm" is so overused that its meaning is often overlooked or watered down. In this instance, paradigm is helpful.

When Jesus uses the metaphor about pouring new wine into new wine skins, he is advocating for a complete paradigm change. That is, Jesus is calling us to start fresh and new, with a completely different way of conceptualizing the issues that confront us. Not only is the approach brand new, so is the product, and so is the way the product relates to the world.

Jesus comes to make all things new. He means it, too. He wants to wipe the slate clean and start fresh. For Jesus the future meant that they had to walk away from organized Judaism. They had to leave behind oppression and injustice. They had to leave money, assets, and the temptation for power and authority on the table – and simply walk away.

Jesus comes to pour new wine into new wineskins. He has a new way of doing things, a new way of bringing people together, a new way to relate to others, a new way to relate to the world. He doesn't destroy or dismantle the old way of doing things. Rather, he tells us that he has come to compliment the Law of Moses and the Covenant of Abraham.

There are many implications for disciples of Jesus. According to the old way, we live according to the condemnation of our original sin. There are some who measure up, and some who don't. Those who don't are excluded and banished, cast out of community, and discarded into the darkness, where there is gnashing of teeth.

But Jesus comes along and tells us that there is a different way to address the issue of sin. He doesn't reach out to the righteous, where he would find a smug, adoring audience. Instead, he reaches out to the lost, the discarded, the throw-aways in this world, where there is little hope of finding wealth or riches, status or power.

According to the old way, power comes from accumulating wealth and status. Individual advancement and promotion is the ideal upon which all behavior is judged. Life value comes from how much one can earn, how much one can command, to what extent one can get his or her own way.

And Jesus comes along with a new paradigm and tells us that the only way to have power is to give it away. Give it all away. The only way to achieve status is to give it up. Give it all up. The only measure of success in God's kingdom is how much of yourself you give away, ... simply for the glory of God.

It is easy to be critical about the old way of doing things. After all, equal justice under the law was a big improvement over what was previously generally accepted behavior – revenge and punitive reparations. An eye-for-an-eye was better than a life-for-an-eye.

But Jesus is making another quantum leap forward with his new paradigm. The way of Jesus is not to fight our enemies, rather to bless them and to pray for those who persecute us. We are not to overcome evil with evil, match evil for evil, to counter violence with violence. We are to overcome evil with good. Jesus calls us to love our enemies. Jesus wants us to pray for those who intentionally attempt to bring us harm.

Jesus is calling us to enter a brave new world.

To point out how radical a shift this is in our values, beliefs, and thinking, consider this: how would Jesus respond to terrorism? Is it his approach to overcome terrorism with superior force? More technology? Additional troops,

guns, or fighter aircraft? I don't think so.

This brave new world is not a naive world. Equal justice is weighed just as importantly as is love, forgiveness, and peace. Jesus knows that true peace only comes between people that respect one another, who treat one another fairly, who equalize the bar of justice, and who gives everyone a place at the table.

I admire John the Baptist; I really do. However, he was limited as to how far he could take us. Jesus wants more than a simple repentance from sin and a one time "Get Out of Jail Free" forgiveness card. Jesus is prepared to grant us forgiveness of sins, and to make his atonement his death upon the cross, as the final solution to the sinful nature of man. Jesus puts his words into action in and through the cross.

Finally, when all is said and done, either for the observant, practicing Jew, or for the dedicated follower of John the Baptist, death was the end, the abrupt stop at the end of a life lived righteously and faithfully. Death was it, the conclusion; the completion of all that could ever be hoped for.

Both God and humankind longed for more. And Jesus provided the way. God longed for relationship, companionship, to love and to be loved. Humanity longed to be free from the grave, freed from the grasp of death, to live on into eternity with our God. Jesus rose from the dead giving us this freedom, this gift of salvation.

Old wine into old wineskins? No way. It would never last. None of us would be satisfied.

New wine into old wineskins? Well, it might have worked for a while, but no, that wasn't the solution, either.

New wine into new wineskins? Now we're talking. Jesus comes to make all things new. Jesus comes to be a new creation. And he calls us to make a brand new start, too.

"It has always been done that way before?" you say. "That may be," Jesus replies, "but now, come with me, and we'll make a new beginning together."

The word of the Lord, as it has come to me. Thanks be to God. Amen.