

“New Wineskins,” Luke 5:27-39 (Third Sunday in Lent, March 24, 2019)

<sup>27</sup> After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, “Follow me.” <sup>28</sup> And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.

<sup>29</sup> And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them. <sup>30</sup> And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” <sup>31</sup> And Jesus answered them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. <sup>32</sup> I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

<sup>33</sup> And they said to him, “The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink.” <sup>34</sup> And Jesus said to them, “Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? <sup>35</sup> The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.” <sup>36</sup> He also told them a parable: “No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment. If he does, he will tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. <sup>37</sup> And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. <sup>38</sup> But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. <sup>39</sup> And no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says, ‘The old is good.’ ”

## PRAY

Jefferson Bethke (BETH-key) is a spoken word artist, and several years ago he made a video called “Why I Hate Religion, But Love Jesus.” It was one of the first, self-produced Christian videos to go viral – it had millions of views in just a few days. We’re kind of used to viral videos now, but in January 2012 this was a new phenomenon. You felt like every Christian who spoke English and was on Facebook watched this video.

The video received criticism from various Christian leaders because it seemed to some Bethke set up a false dichotomy between the person of Jesus on one hand and the church on the other, or Jesus on one hand and biblical truth on the other. Some took issue with him using the word “religion” when maybe “self-righteousness” or “false religion” would have been better. And soon afterwards even Bethke himself said that if he had it had to do over again he would have worked harder to make those distinctions clear.

Still, it’s obvious that his performance touched a nerve among millions of Christians around the world. Intuitively many understood there is a difference between what we think of as religion and Jesus. If there’s ever a passage in the Bible that sums up why it’s our text for today.

In it, Jesus talks about religion and uses the metaphors of wineskins to make his point. The old wineskins represent the laws of the old covenant established between God and his people Israel through Moses on Mt. Sinai, which we read about in the Old Testament. The new wineskins represent the new covenant established between God and his people through Jesus at the cross, which Jesus and the apostles preached. And I want us to see two things about these covenants: first, the limitation of the old wineskins and, second, the power of the new wineskins.

First, the limitation of the old wineskins. We read in verse 29 that one of Jesus' disciples, a man named Levi, also known as Matthew, holds a "great feast in his house." What makes this feast interesting is that it filled with "tax collectors." Levi himself is a tax collector. He had just become a disciple of Jesus (we read that in verse 28) and he wants all his co-workers to meet the Lord Jesus.

Tax collectors had a horrible reputation in first century Palestine. They were Jews who were employed by the occupying Roman forces to collect their taxes for them, so the collectors were seen as traitors by their countrymen. But even worse was how they went about their collection. The Romans told each tax collector: "You must collect X amount of money for us, but anything above that you can keep for yourself." Therefore, the collectors were notorious for taking far more money than was actually owed and getting rich off the people. In fact, the only reason you would want to become a tax collector was because of the money, for you knew the moment you become one you'd immediately be hated by all your Jewish neighbors.

It's in that light we read verse 30: "And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?'" The Pharisees were the Jewish religious leaders of the day, and Jesus was a Jewish celebrity because of his healing and teaching ministry. The Pharisees clearly don't approve of him associating with these "sinners" and they just can't understand: Jesus claims to be God's man, yet he and his disciples eat with such greedy, disreputable people – how can this be?

But it's not just the Pharisees who are confused. "And *they* said to him, 'The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours [Jesus] eat and drink.'" Luke 5:33. The "they" in verse 33 probably refers to the regular townspeople, the ordinary people of Israel, who are watching all this unfold. They have a common understanding of how "religious" men are supposed to act (maybe you have it, too): serious, somber, with great restraint. Yet here's Jesus, this miracle worker, this teacher of the Bible, *and he and his disciples are actually having a good time! They are eating and drinking!* Jesus doesn't wear sackcloth and cover his head with ashes, he's not emaciated from constant fasting, yet he's a religious man – how can this be?

In response to their confusion, Jesus tells them the parable in Luke 5:36-38: "No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment. If he does, he will tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old.<sup>37</sup> And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed.<sup>38</sup> But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins."

Wine, of course, is made from grapes, and in biblical times they used the skins of animals (like goats) as containers. In the first few weeks of the winemaking process, the grape juice goes through fermentation and gives off a lot of carbon dioxide. If you put the new wine in a fresh, clean goat skin, no problem: the skin is flexible and can handle the stretching that comes with fermentation. But if you use old skins that have lost their elasticity, they will split under the pressure and the wine will spill out.

Jesus tells the Pharisees and the townspeople, “You’re grumbling about whom I choose to associate with and you are confused about how we have a good time. But you can’t help it, ***because all you’ve had are the old wineskins, and they cannot contain the kingdom of God in light of what I’ve come to do.***”

What does that mean? The old wineskins represent the old covenant, and in the old covenant the way the people related to God was overwhelmingly a matter of two things: *first, the rituals centered around the temple in Jerusalem.* The big question in the books of the Bible that established what temple worship should look like is, “What kind of people can come to the temple and worship God?” The answer is “only clean people.”

That didn’t mean people who bathed. It meant people who kept the ceremonial laws and rituals of the Old Testament. It meant only people in Israel who did not eat certain foods, women who had not just had children, and men who had not just had sex could come and worship. It meant only people who did not have certain diseases or birth defects or injuries could come and worship. It meant only people who did not touch things God had declared unclean, like dead animals, or dead bodies, or been around other people who might have touched those things themselves, could worship.

*Second, the old covenant was, in addition to ritual, overwhelmingly a matter of race.* Only ethnic Jews were permitted to come to worship, and these Jews wore a certain kind of clothing, wore their hair a certain way, and, above all, the Jewish men were circumcised.

You add the rituals and race up, and what happened was that in the old covenant it was easy to get the impression that the kingdom of God ***was a matter of excluding the “wrong kind” of people.*** It was a matter of policing boundaries and making sure they didn’t get too close to the holy things of God and making sure you didn’t get too close to them. Old wineskins are **brittle**, so you just couldn’t let everyone in. **They’d burst under the pressure.**

And, of course, it’s hard to have fun when that’s your job. No one gets joy out of policing boundaries. You must be serious and suspicious of outsiders. It’s hard to want to hold huge feasts and welcome people into your home like Levi did when you’re worried about ritual and race, because what if one of your guests is unclean for some reason? What if one of them wasn’t a Jew? Then, all of the sudden, you’re unclean, and now *you can’t go to worship.*

Let’s be clear: that was not the point of the old covenant. There was love and grace in the Old Testament. The people of Israel were commanded to love God. “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” Deuteronomy 6:5. Leviticus 19:18 says, “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The story of the people of Israel is a continuous tale of their failure to obey God and falling under his discipline but then God graciously rescuing his people from their enemies and restoring them to a place of safety and well-being. People born Gentiles outside of Israel could nevertheless become part of the people of God, like Rahab in the book of Joshua and Ruth wife of Boaz, grandmother of King David. Speaking of David, the psalms he wrote are full of the joy and celebration that comes from knowing the God of the Bible.

*However, as long as Israel used the old wineskins, it was all too easy for them to be unable to see the forest for the trees: the forest of joy in God's love and grace for the trees of ritual and race. The law of God, understood in this way, had become by the time of Jesus, in the words of the apostle Peter, "a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear." Acts 15:10. Paul in Galatians 3:23 says the law turned the kingdom of God into a prison for God's people.*

Now I think if you had asked the Pharisees, "Are you trying to hurt outsiders with all your rules?" they would have replied, "Never! We are only trying to be faithful." ***Likewise, in the name of faithfulness too many Christians today have looked at religion as if it's still poured out of old wineskins and primarily about policing boundaries instead of loving our neighbors.***

For example, something Christians have struggled mightily with in recent years is how to relate to people who identify as gay, lesbian, queer, transgendered. This isn't a question of whether or not we might agree with homosexual behavior. The Bible is clear that any sex outside of marriage between a man and a woman is wrong. The question has been: can we share a meal together? Can we work together? Can we join forces and tackle problems in our community? Can we be friends (if a gay person would have a Bible-believing Christian as a friend)?

The kneejerk response for so many Christians has been an old wineskin approach: no! To be safe, just exclude them and maintain the boundaries between the clean and the unclean.

Even closer to home is how we raise our children. Christians in our community feel intense pressure to provide our kids with an ideal childhood, and part of that means keeping them away from any possible bad influence. Exclude the bad people; keep them away from our families. Now, of course there is evil in the world, and parents can't be naïve or too trusting. Proverbs 13:20 does say, "Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm." Parents must keep an eye out for their young children and be alarmed when their older kids start running with a crowd that's up to no good.

But for so many parents we have turned raising our children almost exclusively into a matter of policing boundaries and trying to keep the unclean out. It's so tempting to think, "If I just keep my kids away from sinful influences until they are 18, everything will be fine!" But that's a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of sin. Sin is not primarily like an extremely contagious form of the flu, where if you are exposed to it you will catch it. Sin is primarily like a cancer that we are all born with. Given time that cancer will metastasize and kill everyone. There are people who were basically quarantined by their parents until age 18, and then they went out and immediately got into all the trouble they possibly could. Why? Not because the sin was out there in the world; it was already growing inside of them.

Whenever we make religion primarily about policing boundaries to keep the so-called "wrong kind" of people out, so that we refuse to associate with people *who look different* from us or *believe different* from us or *behave different* from us, or *who have made different mistakes* than us, we are pouring our religion out of the old wineskins. No wonder the word "religion" has such a bad name. No wonder Jefferson Bethke's spoken word video went viral. And Jesus, in

telling the parable the way he did, is making clear that he came into the world to do away with all that.

Second, the power of the new wineskins. To understand just how radically new Jesus' approach to religion is, you must understand the evolution of religion in the ancient world.

The first religions on the scene in antiquity were the pagan religions, the religions of the Greeks, the Romans, the Canaanites, the Babylonians. These religions were polytheistic; you worshiped many gods. For example, in one little town in northern Italy, archaeologists have uncovered inscriptions dedicated to more than eleven different gods. In all the ordinary activities of day-to-day life, you were expected to worship. In the morning you'd offer a sacrifice to the god of your household. Then, if you were having a meal, or working, or travelling, or adding on to your house, or your social club was having a meeting, you'd worship the appropriate gods for those occasions. All aspects of life were presumed to have connections with the various divinities.

In these religions, all that mattered was going through the rituals. These gods didn't care how you lived your life and they didn't care what you believed. In fact, pagan religion had nothing to do with belief, or faith, in the gods, the way we think of it. You never signed a statement of faith in ancient Rome saying you believed Jupiter was the chief god of the pantheon. You just had to go through the motions of the ritual.

But then in Israel God revealed himself as the one true God. This is the old covenant and the second stage of evolution. God gave Moses the law, and everything about religion changed. For the first time on earth you had **monotheism**, belief that there is one and only one true God. For the first time it was wrong to worship any other gods.

And, for the first time, **people understood God cared how you lived**. Unlike the pagan gods, the one true God of Israel is holy. He hates sin. He created us with a purpose and therefore he hates it when we hurt one another and ourselves by living contrary to his design. The worship of God at the temple was marked by the blood of sacrificed bulls and goats, showing God's people that death was the consequence of sin.

In the old covenant, you could only properly worship this God ***through keeping the rituals and by being a part of the Jewish race***. Outsiders could become Jews, but it wasn't easy to do and few did it. And if you ask, "Why did God make religion a matter of race?" the answer is that humankind was so thoroughly polytheistic and unfamiliar with the concept of sin that God had to set one group of people aside and for two thousand years just train them and drill them. The story of the Old Testament is one of the Jews, under God's guidance, slowly understanding the concepts of monotheism and sin.

But then, after two thousand years, the fullness of time had come, and the third and final stage of religion, the new covenant, begins. Under the old covenant, Paul says, the Jews were like children. The father of these children was away, so they needed a guardian to raise them and train them. That was the purpose of the law. "So then, the law was our guardian... I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of

everything, <sup>2</sup> but he is under guardians and managers until the date [of emancipation] set by his father.” Galatians 3:24a, 4:1-2.

But by the first century that date had come. God’s people had been trained by the law and they are ready to live without the ritual of the temple and without being separated from the rest of the world by race. Why? Galatians 3:24-28: “<sup>24</sup> So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by *faith* [so there goes ritual; it’s now a matter of the heart]. <sup>25</sup> But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, <sup>26</sup> for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. <sup>27</sup> For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. <sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Greek [and there goes race], there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Paul says now that Jesus Christ has come, we no longer need the rituals of temple worship, because Jesus is our temple. He is the one around whom we gather to draw near to God.

Now that Jesus Christ has come, there is no longer any need for sacrifices, because Jesus is our sacrifice. We don’t need bulls and goats anymore, because Jesus paid for our sins once for all by shedding his blood on the cross.

The ancient pagans and ancient Jews looked at the first Christians and said, “What kind of religion is this?” And the Christians replied, “Strictly speaking, we don’t have a religion at all. We have a person.” Now that Jesus has come ***ritual and race no longer matter, but only repentance and faith***. The only thing that matters in the new covenant is that you acknowledge that you are a sinner, justly deserving God’s displeasure, and that you trust in Jesus alone to save you. If so, you are in. That’s all it takes! You are loved by God, no ifs, ands, or buts.

Part of the power of the new covenant is that Christians can eat with so-called “sinners” because ***they don’t have to worry about becoming unclean***. Nor must they fast and be somber like the disciples of John the Baptist. They can eat, drink, and have a good time.

How? Because in light of Jesus religion is no longer about policing boundaries and keeping the wrong people out. ***It’s about enlarging boundaries and continually bringing new people in***. New wineskins can stretch, so there’s always room for new people in Christianity.

And ***it’s fun to get to know new people, different people, interesting people, and invite them in to the kingdom of God***. New wineskins mean joy. Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners, and had fun doing it. So in the new covenant, Christians and non-Christians can work together, can eat together, and can be friends (if a non-Christian would have a Christian as a friend). Their kids can play together and go to school together. Christians and non-Christians can attend church together and be in small groups together. In fact, if you’re here this morning and not yet a Christian, as far as we’re concerned at Grace Bible the only thing you can’t do is take the Lord’s Supper and be a member of the church. But that’s not because we don’t want you to do those things. We badly want you to. It’s only because you don’t yet believe. If you took the Lord’s Supper you’d be lying. But the instant you do believe, you’re in. ***No more boundaries!***

It's a joyful way to live to meet new people, invite them to lunch, into your home, and get to know them and learn from them and not let race or tradition divide or worry about what others may think if they saw them or whether they might somehow contaminate you and your kids.

Now, I've already quoted the Proverb warning about being a companion of fools. Again, Christians like all parents can't be naïve and must always be aware who is around our children.

But at some point we've got to believe 1 John 4:4 and obey Matthew 5:13-14. "Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." Christians, the Holy Spirit of God dwells within you and is greater than any contamination you might find in the world. And Matthew 5:13-14 says, "You are the salt of the earth" and "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden." We have to go into the world, meet new people, and be salt and light.

Christians, poured out of new wineskins, can hang out with anyone. Even tax collectors and sinners. Even prostitutes! That's Matthew 21:31b: "Jesus said to them, 'Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.'"

Tony Campolo, who's a Christian speaker and a sociologist in Philadelphia, tells a true story in one of his books about how he once flew to speak at a conference in Honolulu, Hawaii. There's a six-hour difference between the two places so when he got to Honolulu he was jet-lagged, wide awake at 3:00 a.m., and hungry. Up a side street he found a little place that was open. It was a dirty, grimy diner, but it was the only place he could find, and it was run by an even dirtier and grimmer man named Harry.

Tony ordered a cup of coffee and a donut and began to eat when, at 3:30 in the morning, the door of the diner suddenly swung open and, to his great discomfort in marched eight or nine provocatively dressed and loud prostitutes. They sat on either side of Tony. Tony was embarrassed and was just about to try and slip out of the diner when the woman beside him said, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be 39."

Her so-called "friend" responded in a nasty tone, "So what do you want from me? A birthday party?" "No," she replied. "I was just telling you, that's all. I mean, why should you give me a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

When Tony heard that, he made a decision. He waited until the women left and he asked Harry, "Do they come in here every night?" "Yeah," he answered. "Does the one right next to me come here every night?" "Yeah," he said. "That's Agnes."

"Harry, what do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her – right here – tomorrow night?"

Harry actually smiled and said, "That's a great idea. We like Agnes, she's nice." Tony said, "I'll get back here tomorrow morning about 2:30 and decorate the place. I'll even get a birthday cake!" "No," said Harry. "I'll make the cake. That's my thing."

At 2:30 the next morning, Tony was back at the diner. He'd bought a ton of decorations and had the place looking pretty good. But word about the party and spread all over town such that by 3:15 every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. It was wall-to-wall prostitutes and Tony.

At 3:30 on the dot, the door of the diner swung open, and in came Agnes and her friend. Tony had everybody ready and they all screamed, "Happy birthday!"

Tony said he'd never seen anyone so stunned. Agnes' legs buckled. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her and then sat her down on a stool. They sang happy birthday, but Agnes just stared off into space. She was too stunned to even blow out the candles. Harry had to do it. Then Harry handed her a knife and told her, "Cut the cake, Agnes. We all want some cake."

Agnes looked down at the cake. Then without taking her eyes off it, she said, "Harry, is it all right with you if I keep the cake a little while? Is it all right if we don't eat it right away?" Harry shrugged and answered, "Sure. It's your cake. Take it home, if you want to."

"Can I?" she asked. Then, looking at Tony, she said, "I live just down the street a couple of doors. I want to take the cake home and save it, okay? I'll be right back, I promise!"

She got off the stool, picked up the cake, and carrying it like it was the Holy Grail, walked out the door. Then everyone looked at Tony. Not knowing what else to do, he broke the silence by saying, "Why don't we pray for Agnes?"

This is what Tony wrote. "Looking back on it now, it seems more than strange for a sociologist to be leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes in a diner in Honolulu at 3:30 in the morning. But then it just felt like the right thing to do. I prayed for Agnes. I prayed for her salvation. I prayed that her life would be changed and that God would be good to her.

"When I finished, Harry leaned over the counter and with a trace of hostility in his voice said, 'Hey! You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?' In one of those [rare] moments when just the right words came, I answered, 'I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning.'

"Harry waited a moment and then almost sneered as he answered, 'No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it.'"

Wouldn't we all? ***But that's precisely the kind of church Jesus came to build, and they can only be built when we are poured out of new wineskins.*** Jesus said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. <sup>32</sup> I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." Luke 5:31-32. The calling of true religion, Christian friends, is to go out and find sinners (which is everyone of us, after all), and tell them about the love of Jesus. AMEN