

# *Jesus is Doing an Old Thing*

Luke 5:33-39

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ February 25, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

<sup>33</sup> Then they said to him, “John’s disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and pray, but your disciples eat and drink.” <sup>34</sup> Jesus said to them, “You cannot make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you? <sup>35</sup> The days will come when the bridegroom will be 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 sews it on an old garment; otherwise the new will be torn, and the piece from the new will not match the old. <sup>37</sup> And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and 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 wine, but says, ‘The old is good.’” (Luke 5:33-39, NRSV)

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

Nobody understood what was happening. Jesus had shown such promise. He forgives sins. He works wonders. He teaches with authority. But then he goes and makes friends with the wrong sorts of people, the sorts of people who everybody else knew God had condemned as outsiders. And he isn’t just *kind* to these people, he goes to parties with these people. Which brings up another point. What kind of serious man of God hangs out at parties all the time? Religion is serious business. Everybody knows that.

Dan Kimball is a pastor in Santa Cruz. He writes about the time he joined a gym and, as part of the orientation, was given a tour of the equipment by a young woman who worked there as an instructor. As they got to talking they both realized that they were into the same kind of music, mostly 80’s bands from England like the Smiths, the Cure, the Banshees. At some point she asked him what he did for a living and he told her he was a pastor. “No XX#\$\$ way!” she said. “No way you’re a pastor.” It took Kimball several minutes to convince her that he actually was a pastor. He seemed too normal to her, too likeable, into the sorts of music pastors would never be into. When he asked her what she thought pastors were like she simply said, “Pastors are creepy.”<sup>1</sup>

Billy Joel once famously sung, “I’d rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints. The sinners are much more fun.” He’s far from alone in his perception that to be a Christian means to have chosen a serious life that is largely undesirable. Whether their perception is right or wrong, many people outside the church today view Christians as judgmental, prude, sheltered, angry, naïve, boring, unpleasant, and apparently even creepy. They may be closer to heaven than some, but if their life is any indication of what heaven is like, perhaps it isn’t such a desired destination after all. Religion is serious business. Everybody knows that.

Here’s the thing. It was the same in Jesus’ day. You see, it’s not only the religious leaders who can’t believe that Jesus is partying it up with the outcasts, I think the outcasts themselves can’t believe it. Remember that question that begins our passage today, I think it’s the tax collectors and sinners that ask it: “**John’s disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and pray, but your disciples eat and drink.**” You don’t act like a religious person, Jesus. Shouldn’t you be more serious? Shouldn’t you be in church? Shouldn’t you be off fasting and praying somewhere, you and your disciples? How is it that you are enjoying this feast with us? If you really are from God, then this is a whole new way of thinking about God!

Can you imagine if people outside the church these days started asking these same sorts of questions? What is it about those Christians? Nobody seems to enjoy life more than they enjoy life. How is it that the people I know who go to church are the most joyful people I know? What is it that makes their lives so attractive? Lots of religious people are such a drag, but those Christians are different. I’d love to know what their secret is.

Can you imagine? Sadly, it’s not always easy to do. Many of us who are Christians can’t imagine asking those questions!

Here’s the problem. It’s right here in our story this morning. Try to follow me closely.

Jews in the time of Jesus fasted, refrained for a time from eating. They’d been doing it for a long time. The Old Testament, in fact, instructed Israel to fast and to do so for very specific reasons. Specifically, fasting in the Old Testament was a sign of waiting and lament.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church* (Zondervan, 2007), 25-26.

The Messiah, the one God promised would come and set all things right, had not yet come. In the meantime, therefore, Israel was overcome with the burden of their sin and the hardship which had come as a consequence of their sin. God's favor was fleeting, as was justice and righteousness. So the people fasted as a way of repentance, as a way to show their sorrow and their longing for a Savior.

Imagine your best friend has a serious, life-threatening medical condition. The doctors have determined that they must operate immediately, and that if they do your friend should recover. It's a long operation, all day long. And as you and others count the hours in the waiting room it's not a time for celebration. Not yet. You don't feel like eating as your friend's life hangs in the balance. You hold vigil. You pray. You plead. You hope. You wait.

That captures the essence of the purpose of fasting in the Old Testament. But now, those days are over. Right? The Messiah has come. Jesus is the long-awaited Savior of the world, God's Son right in front of you, come to set all things right again. The surgery is successful! Your friend is going to be okay. Now it's time to celebrate. Or, to use Jesus' metaphor, one that is often used in scripture, the bridegroom has come and so the wedding feast is underway!

Our wedding reception was the best party I've ever attended. I know I'm biased, and I know I was one of the two guests of honor that evening, but even so I've been to a lot of weddings and our party was amazing. The setting was first class. No expense was spared on the food and drink. Our family and friends came ready to celebrate. Laughter was everywhere. People – all ages! - danced for hours. I wish you could have been there. If I'd known you then, I would have invited you.

I'm not sure I've had a more joy-filled time in my life than I had that night of my wedding. Because of the food? No. The music? It was great, but no. And while the presence of all my friends and family in the same place at the same time was amazing, not even that was the main reason for my joy. My joy came from the fact that the love of my life had actually agreed to marry me and had showed up at the wedding and made vows to be my wife for the rest of my life.

Now pay attention here, because this isn't about me and my wedding. This is about us and Christ. The deepest longing of Israel was to see the day when the Messiah would come and set them free and bring them home and establish them, forever, as God's beloved. Waiting for that day was naturally filled with lament and longing. Fasting was appropriate. But when that day came,

when the Messiah did come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and came filled with more love and more grace and more power than anyone before had thought possible, that time of lament and longing was done. The Bridegroom had arrived. The wedding feast had commenced. The time for sorrow and seriousness was over.

But here was the problem. The serious-minded religious leaders of Jesus' day missed it. Even the outcasts there partying with Jesus were in danger of missing it. You see, Jews in Jesus' day continued to fast even though they were in the very presence of the Messiah whose coming should have ended such fasts. What made it worse was that they had made their fasting into something God had never even intended it to be in the first place. Now it had become a work of righteousness, a way for insiders to prove their religious faithfulness and to separate themselves off from outsiders who were not worthy of God's favor. Remember the Pharisee in Jesus' parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18? As he prays aloud in the Temple he lists before God all his righteous deeds to prove his worth before God. Included in that list of righteous deeds is the fact that he fasts twice a week.<sup>2</sup>

Do you see what's going on? This is what religion does. It convinces me that the reason God likes me, accepts me, finds me worthy in the end, has something to do with me. My status before God depends on my righteousness, my pedigree, my ability to live by the rules, especially in comparison to others who can't or don't. This sort of religion makes people very serious, and understandably so. How do you ever know if it's enough? How do you know if you've been good enough, done enough, given enough? The weight of the guilt and fear pushes all the joy out of life. And sometimes the only way you can cope is to compare your life to other people you imagine are less worthy as a way to talk yourself into believing that by comparison you are worthy. I may not be perfect, but I don't look like those people, act like those people, use my money like those people, vote like those people, carry on like those people, have a past like those people. It's serious business, this making sure you're in better shape than *those* people.

And you want to know why Jesus' disciples were eating and drinking like guests at a wedding feast? Because they were 'those' people once, but then Jesus came and made clear to them that God loved them in spite of it all, wanted to be friends with them anyway, could give them a new life no matter what their old life looked like!

---

<sup>2</sup> See Luke 18:9-14

Apparently we don't have to earn God's favor, which is unbelievable good news because we thought that we'd messed things up so badly that God wanting nothing to do with us. Now he comes treating us like friends? You'd celebrate too!

And by the way, don't miss the outrageous claim Jesus is making here. All throughout the Old Testament God had pictured himself as the husband of his people, Israel. In Hosea 2:19, for example, God proclaims to his people, **"I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy."**<sup>3</sup> Now Jesus is claiming that he is the Bridegroom, the husband of God's people. Anyone listening that day who knew the Old Testament knew that Jesus was making a claim of divinity. So if God has truly come to be united in relationship to his people, to all who would receive him, in eternal righteousness, justice, love and mercy, why in the world should we not feast!

Just to clear something up, Jesus wasn't against fasting. He fasts himself at points<sup>4</sup> and along the way teaches his own disciples how to fast.<sup>5</sup> In the book of Acts, Luke records several instances when the early church fasted and prayed.<sup>6</sup> Some of us have embraced the practice of fasting ourselves. Even here, Jesus is clear that a time will come when we ought to fast. That time is now, by the way, between the time of Jesus' resurrection and his second coming. But now our fasting is by nature different from fasting in the Old Testament, because we live on the other side of resurrection. Like Israel waited for the Messiah to come, we also now wait for Jesus to come again, but now we wait with joy and hope because we know that God's favor is already ours by the grace won for us at the cross and the empty tomb. That means we don't engage in any spiritual practice, fasting or otherwise, as the Pharisees did, as a way to earn our righteousness before God or to set ourselves above others we believe have not been as faithful as we have been faithful.

The people in Jesus' day, however, weren't waiting for the Bridegroom. He was right there with them! There he was, calling them all, regardless of who they were or how they had lived their lives, to come after him and be his disciples and share in his life. But tragically some people missed it. They missed the joy of it all and instead kept seriously working like hell to set themselves above others in a place where God would have no choice but accept them. For them it became all

about boundary-making and claims to self-righteousness. And when you meet joyless Christians today, seriously-committed religious people who seem to always be drawing boundaries between the insiders and the outsiders, chances are those people are also working like hell to earn God's favor. They've missed it too.

Could it be that some of us have missed it as well?

So Jesus tells a parable. It's more of an analogy than a story, but it serves the same purpose.

**"No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment; otherwise the new will be torn, and the piece from the new will not match the old. <sup>37</sup> And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and 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 wine, but says, 'The old is good.'"**

Just to make sure we're all on the same page here, you don't patch an old shirt with a piece of cloth from a brand new shirt because, for one, it won't match, but also the new piece will shrink and tear the garment. It's a waste. The new shirt and the old shirt will both be ruined. Similarly, in Jesus' day animal skins were commonly used as containers for liquids. No plastic or glass in those days. At first these skins were fairly elastic but with use they lost that quality and become so brittle that they could easily burst under pressure. New wine, as you may now, expands when it ferments and so it needed a new wine skin that could expand with it. If you put new wine in an old wineskin the wine and the wineskin will both be lost. Another waste.

Now, the popular interpretation of this parable is that Jesus came doing a new thing, but that many of the serious religious people of his day weren't open to giving up their old way of doing things and the two were simply incompatible. If you tried to combine Jesus' new ways with their old ways you'd ruin them both. The old, therefore, must be discarded in favor of this new thing God was doing in and through Jesus.

Here's the problem with that interpretation. Luke, along with all the New Testament writers, goes to great lengths to associate Jesus with what is old.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> NRSV. See other examples in Isaiah 62:4, Jeremiah 2:2 & 3:20, Ezekiel 16:8.

<sup>4</sup> See Matthew 4:2

<sup>5</sup> See Matthew 6:16-18.

<sup>6</sup> See Acts 13:1-3, 14:23

<sup>7</sup> I'm largely indebted to Joel B. Green for this interpretation which has helped me to understand this parable in a different way. See *The New International Commentary*

Think of the lengths Luke goes to in the Christmas narratives which fulfill so many Old Testament prophecies, the genealogy which ties Jesus ancestrally to a lineage all the way back to David, to Abraham, even to Adam, Jesus' inaugural sermon at Nazareth when he claims that he is the Messiah about whom Isaiah spoke. In these ways and so many others, even here in Jesus' claim to be the Bridegroom the Old Testament said would one day come, Luke is not claiming that Jesus has come to do a new thing but rather that *Jesus has come as the fulfillment of an old thing God has been working out forever!*

How does it all begin? Remember? All the way back in Genesis 12 God makes a covenant with a childless, old, idol-worshipping couple named Abraham and Sarah and promises them that he will not only give them a child but give them generation upon generation of ancestors which will in time number as many as the stars in the nighttime sky. God also promises that he will bless this family, who one day will become the family and nation of Israel, and that through them he will eventually bless *every other family and nation on earth*. Abraham and Sarah did not earn this. It was simply grace. And their family was not set above other families when it came to God's ultimate favor, but was merely chosen as the vehicle through which that favor would ultimately be extended to the whole world through Christ, Abraham's ancestor!

So you know what's old? Grace is old. Specifically, *God's grace* is old. Hebrews 13:8 declares, "**Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.**" God does not change. So where in the world did we ever get the idea that the grace and love and hospitality and compassion we see in Jesus is a new side of God we've never seen before? In Jesus we have the clearest picture of God we have ever been given and it's a picture that reflects the character and person of God as God has always been.

You know what's new? Religion is new. Specifically, the sort of religion that seriously takes the joy out of people as they become convinced that they need to do everything they can to set up boundaries between themselves and others and claim self-righteousness in an effort to prove their worth before a God who, unbeknownst to them, already loves them, and everybody along with them, unconditionally, and has saved us all by pure grace. If you then try to take religion and sew it into grace, or think that you can fill up the church, Jesus' community, with boundary-

making and self-righteousness, you will ruin everything.

Jesus is clear, "**No one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, 'The old is good.'**" Someday I'll tell you the whole story of how I once ordered what I thought was a \$25 bottle of wine at a family celebration and the server mistook my order and brought us, though we didn't realize it at the time, a \$250 bottle of wine. It was the best \$25 bottle of wine any of us had ever tasted, so good that we ordered a second bottle. It wasn't until the \$500 wine bill came at the end of the meal when we realized why it was such good wine. Old wine isn't cheap. It's the good stuff. And after that experience, it was hard to go back and drink the stuff that comes in a box. Once you come to taste the old grace of God made real to us in Jesus Christ, you'll never want to drink new bitter religion again.

Writer Robert Fulghum tells the story of a wedding he once officiated at which the Mother of the Bride – the MOTB as people started calling her – took things far too seriously. An eighteen-piece brass-and-wind ensemble, gift registries spreading across the continental United States, twenty-four bridesmaids, groomsmen, flower girls and ring-bearers – this wedding was going to be the wedding to end all weddings. All the plans were going smoothly until the climactic moment of the processional. Fulghum writes,

Ah, the bride. She had been dressed for hours if not days. No adrenaline was left in her body. Left alone with her father in the reception hall of the church while the march of the maidens went on and on, she had walked along the tables laden with gourmet goodies and absentmindedly sampled first the little pink and yellow and green mints. Then she picked through the silver bowls of mixed nuts and ate the pecans. Followed by a cheeseball or two, some black olives, a handful of glazed almonds, a little sausage with a frilly toothpick stuck in it, a couple of shrimps blanketed in bacon, and a cracker piled with liver pâté. To wash this down – a glass of pink champagne. Her father gave it to her. To calm her nerves.

What you noticed as the bride stood in the doorway was not her dress, but her face. White. For what was coming down the aisle was a living grenade with the pin pulled out.

The bride threw up.

Just as she walked by her mother.

And by “threw up,” I don’t mean a polite little ladylike urp into her handkerchief. She puked. There’s just no nice word for it. I mean, she hosed the front of the chancel – hitting two bridesmaids, the groom, a ring-bearer, and me...

Only two people were seen smiling. One was the mother of the groom. And the other was the father of the bride.

Fulghum goes on to explain how everybody pulled things together for what turned out to be a much quieter, gentler ceremony in the reception hall. “Everybody cried,” he says, “as people are supposed to do at weddings, mostly because the groom held the bride in his arms through the whole ceremony. And no groom ever kissed a bride more tenderly than he.”

But the best part of the story is that ten years later everybody was invited back to celebrate the anniversary of the disaster. Since the MOTB, who herself had the idea for this reunion party, had originally stationed three video cameras during the ceremony, the slow-motion, play-by-play recording from different angles was re-lived by everybody that day. Laughter filled the air and joy filled their hearts. How could it not? After all, in spite of the mess, the bride still got the groom.<sup>8</sup>

Life is not easy. It’s often a mess. Sometimes the pain can be unbearable. And all this is true for followers of Jesus as much as it is true for anybody else. Jesus never promised life following him would be easy. He actually promised the opposite. And so now, in a world that is often full of hardness and sorrow, it’s right that at times we fast, and lament, and even grieve. But we do not do these things as those who have no hope.<sup>9</sup> Because the Bridegroom has already come! The great, central, decisive act of salvation for us and for the world today has already occurred. The Lamb is slain. Death is defeated. Sins are washed away. The crucified Bridegroom is risen. Status as God’s beloved sons and daughter is now permanently established for all who would simply, but wholeheartedly, claim it in faith. The Spirit has flooded the earth and is at work in powerful ways to subdue hearts and transform lives in preparation for the day in the not-too-distant future when the Bridegroom will come again and gather up and purify his bride forever.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> As retold by John Ortberg, *The Life You’ve Always Wanted* (Zondervan, 1997), 73-74.

<sup>9</sup> See I Thessalonians 4:13

<sup>10</sup> I’m borrowing some language here from a sermon preached by John Piper: *When the Bridegroom Is Taken Away, They Will Fast—With New Wineskins*, preached January 8, 1995). Read the sermon at <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/when-the->

Do you believe it? Do you live as if you believe it? Christians, followers of Jesus, ought to be the most joyous, hopeful, hospitable, worry-free, forgiving, compassionate, grateful people on the planet. When we are not it’s probably because we’ve gone back to sipping on the new wine instead of sticking with the old stuff.

I find it very interesting – and I’ll close with this – that on the day of Pentecost, the day shortly after Christ’s resurrection and ascension to heaven, when the Holy Spirit flooded the world, beginning with the church, and those first Christians were so transformed that others watching them thought they must be drunk. Luke tells us, “**All were amazed and perplexed [on that day], saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’**”<sup>11</sup>

New wine? Not at all. It was the old stuff, the grace and love of a never-changing God who would give up everything to bring us home, a grace and love so radical that it intoxicates people with such joy that the watching world cannot help but notice. Oh, that this joy would be ours to the extent that those around us would demand to know the reason for it.

Amen.



## The Next Step

### *A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Why do so many people outside the church today view Christians as judgmental, prude, sheltered, angry, naïve, boring, unpleasant, and even creepy? What’s going on here?
2. Read Luke 5:33-39 again. What stands out to you from this passage?
3. Jesus says that it is not right to fast while the bridegroom is present. What does he mean by this?
4. Think about Jesus’ parable about the garments and the wineskins. What is he saying here? In Christ, is God doing something new or something old?

---

[bridegroom-is-taken-away-they-will-fast-with-new-wineskins](#)

<sup>11</sup> Acts 2:12-13, NRSV

5. Jeff said that grace is old and religion is new. Do you agree?
6. Think about spiritual practices like fasting, sabbath, solitude, and silence. Why do we practice these spiritual disciplines today? What are we hoping will come out of them?
7. C.S. Lewis said, "Joy is the serious business of heaven." What do you think he meant?
8. Is the joy of your salvation in Christ so evident in your life that others around you demand to know the reason for it? If not, why not?

**Table to Table Question**

***A question for kids and adults to answer together***

Is it okay to laugh in worship? Are church people the most fun people you know? Why or why not?