

Old and miserable

No man also having drunk old wine straightway desireth new: for he saith, The old is better.

Luke 5:39

Jesus concluded His parable illustrating the ineffectiveness of mixing new and old with this statement, evidently aimed at the murmuring Pharisees. They had complained of His eating and drinking with publicans and sinners, at the celebration of Levi (Matthew) repenting of his purloining past and deciding to follow Him. As a publican in Israel, Levi had no other kind of friends, besides the other outcasts of society, to invite to the celebration with Jesus and His disciples. Yet, instead of recognizing and appreciating the new and better life that Levi had chosen, the Pharisees continued to condemn. They then proceeded to criticize Jesus and His disciples for not fasting often and praying like they did, and even like the disciples of John the Baptist (whom they despised), implying that their pretentiously holy state was superior to His.

Jesus once again responded with wisdom and clarity, emphasizing His joy and purpose for sinners to repent, as opposed to the self-righteous who saw no need. In addition, the two-fold parable of the uselessness of trying to repair an old garment with new cloth, or to store new, fresh wine in old wineskins, was designed to emphasize the new and living way that He had come to bring to His disciples, which would free them to enjoy the pleasure of His righteous presence in their lives. This new freedom would not mix with the old legalistic traditions that the Pharisees had created to bring themselves and the people of Israel under bondage to ritual, in vain hopes of fulfilling the law. The empty adherence to prescribed fasting in an attempt to achieve holiness was no match for the present fellowship with the One who bestows holiness. They needed to repent of the old wineskins of legalistic tradition in exchange for the fresh new wine of His Spirit of holiness. But alas, He rightly declares the problem that the persistent drunk is deluded to think that his familiar old bottle of despair is better, rather than to trade it in for a fresh new fountain of life. Thus were the murmuring, miserable Pharisees described. May this warning cause all that read to cast off the old garment of self-righteousness and receive from Him the new garment of salvation, which provides both eternal and abundant life.