Unshrunk Cloth and Old Wineskins

What Jesus Brought Needed Its Own New Container — Matthew 9:14-17

Understanding Jesus' Ministry: The Keys to the Gospels

The Passage

Matthew has just been called away from his tax table, and the house where Jesus is eating is full of tax collectors and sinners. The Pharisees have already complained about the company He keeps (Matt. 9:9-13). In the two chapters before this, Jesus has shown authority over nature, over the spirit world, over the body, and over sin itself (Matt. 8:23-9:8). How the nation will answer Him hasn't been settled yet, but the first objections are already being voiced.

Into that room comes a question about fasting. Jesus answers it with a wedding and two pictures from ordinary household life.

Matthew 9:14-17

> Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?"And Jesus said to them, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast."No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and the tear is made worse. Nor do they put new wine into old wineskins, or else the wineskins break, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But they put new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."

Four verses, and every one of them raises a question. Who is asking, and why does it matter that John's men are among them? Why does a question about fasting get answered with a bridegroom? What is the old garment, and what is the new wine? And what are the two things that end up *preserved*?

The usual reading is that the old garment and old skins stand for the Law and Judaism, the new wine is the gospel of grace, and the point is that the old system was finished and has been replaced. This paper reads it differently, and the reasons come out of the text itself. Matthew's account starts with the room the question was asked in.

Where This Sits

This teaching sits inside that long stretch of Matthew 8 and 9 (see *Power Over Nature, Spirits, the Body, and Sin*), and the question about fasting is asked at a dinner party:

Matthew 9:9-13

> As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, "Follow Me." So he arose and followed Him.Now it happened, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, that behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to His disciples, "Why does your

> Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"When Jesus heard that, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

Matthew — the writer himself — has just left the tax office and thrown a meal, and the house is full of the wrong sort of people eating and drinking. Mark and Luke make the setting explicit (Mark 2:15; Luke 5:29). So the question that follows, *why don't Your disciples fast*, is not asked in the abstract. It is asked with a banquet going on in the next breath.

Jesus has also just quoted Hosea (Hos. 6:6) in answer to the first complaint. Keep Hosea in view. He is about to come up again, and the second time it will be the marriage.

Who Asked, and Why It Matters

The three accounts do not all name the same questioners, and putting them side by side gives the fuller picture — "here a little, there a little" (Isa. 28:10).

Matthew 9:14

> Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?"

Mark 2:18

> The disciples of John and of the Pharisees were fasting. Then they came and said to Him, "Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?"

Luke 5:33

> Then they said to Him, "Why do the disciples of John fast often and make prayers, and likewise those of the Pharisees, but Yours eat and drink?"

Luke never says who "they" are. He doesn't need to — he had named them three verses earlier, and nobody else has spoken in between:

Luke 5:30

> And their scribes and the Pharisees complained against His disciples, saying, "Why do You eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

The same men, still talking, still on the same subject. Luke even lets them repeat themselves: their first complaint is that Jesus *eats and drinks* with the wrong people, and their second is that His disciples *eat and drink* instead of fasting. It is one running objection to the same meal.

Matthew names John's disciples. Mark has both groups coming together. There's no conflict in that. The men putting the question were a mixed group, and each writer names the part of it he wants the reader to see: Matthew, who was in the room, names the ones who spoke; Luke names the Pharisees and scribes who had been objecting since the meal began. The two parts of that group were not standing in the same place, and keeping them apart makes the rest of the passage clear.

Matthew's detail gives the answer its edge. John the Baptist is already in prison by this point (Matt. 4:12). His disciples have a master in a cell, and men in that position fast. Their question isn't necessarily hostile; it may be a real question, and a hurt one.

And their own master had already answered it. Before any of this, John's own disciples had come to him troubled that everyone was going to Jesus instead (John 3:25-26), and John told them:

John 3:29

> "He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled."

John had already identified Jesus as the bridegroom and himself as the bridegroom's friend, and had told his own disciples that the right response to the bridegroom's voice is joy. So when Jesus answers John's disciples with bridegroom language, He is not producing a new image to deflect a question. He's handing them their own teacher's words back.

What the Law Actually Required

The question takes for granted that frequent fasting is what faithful people do. The Law says otherwise.

The Law of Moses commanded one fast a year. On the Day of Atonement, Israel was told to "afflict your souls" (Lev. 16:29-31; 23:27-32) — the standard biblical expression for fasting. One day, once a year, and that's the whole standing requirement. God could also call His people to a fast when a particular hour demanded it: "Turn to Me with all your heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning" (Joel 2:12; cf. 2:15). Those were summons for a moment, not a calendar.

Four more national fasts were added later, during and after the Babylonian exile, mourning the stages of Jerusalem's fall. God never commanded those, and Zechariah records what happened when the people asked Him about them. Chapters 7 and 8 are one exchange. It opens with men sent to the house of the LORD to put the question: "Should I weep in the fifth month and fast as I have done for so many years?" (Zech. 7:3). God's answer runs through both chapters.

He questions their motive first: "When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months during those seventy years, did you really fast for Me—for Me?" (Zech. 7:5). Then He points them to what He had asked of them all along, the same thing the earlier prophets had said (Zech. 7:7): "Execute true justice, Show mercy and compassion Everyone to his brother" (Zech. 7:9). He never commanded the fasts, but He didn't treat the grief they marked as false either. Jerusalem really had fallen, and under His own judgment.

His final answer comes in chapter 8, and it is not an endorsement of the fasts. It's a promise to remove the reason for them. The verse that gives it doesn't say *when* on its own; the verses around it do. Zechariah 8 is one continuous block of promises, and it opens by naming the occasion:

Zechariah 8:3

> "Thus says the LORD: 'I will return to Zion, And dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. Jerusalem shall be called the City of Truth, The Mountain of the LORD of hosts, The Holy Mountain.'"

That is the setting for everything that follows in the chapter: old men and women sitting in the streets of Jerusalem again, and the streets full of children playing (Zech. 8:4-5) — a description of the city with God dwelling in the middle of it, which was not the case when Zechariah wrote and has not been the case since. Inside that same block comes the word about the fasts:

Zechariah 8:19

> "Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'The fast of the fourth month, The fast of the fifth, The fast of the seventh, And the fast of the tenth, Shall be joy and gladness and cheerful feasts For the house of Judah. Therefore love truth and peace.'"

That's the answer to the question of Zechariah 7:3. The fasts end because what they mourned has been undone, and they become feasts. Even here the last words go back to what God wanted all along: "Therefore love truth and peace," the same demand He made in 7:9-10.

And the block closes with the nations coming to Jerusalem to seek the LORD — "In those days ten men from every language of the nations shall grasp the sleeve of a Jewish man, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you'" (Zech. 8:20-23).

So the change from fasts to feasts is not left floating in time. It is announced inside a paragraph about the LORD returning to dwell in Jerusalem and the nations streaming to Him there, which is the kingdom age and nothing else. That's when the days of mourning turn into feast days. Fasting is not a permanent fixture of how God's people relate to Him; it belongs to a stretch of time in which something is missing.

Beyond the one commanded fast, the fasts God called for a particular hour, and the four exile fasts, what remained was the tradition of men. That is not a slur — it's Jesus' own term, and He applied it to the same kind of thing: rules about washings and vessels that had grown up alongside the Law and were being enforced as though they were the Law. "Laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men" (Mark 7:8). "You reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition" (Mark 7:9). "Making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down" (Mark 7:13).

The Pharisee in Jesus' later parable states his own practice plainly: "I fast twice a week" (Luke 18:12). That was not commanded anywhere. It was a devout habit, handed down, that had hardened into a measuring stick.

So the question in Matthew 9:14 rests on a practice the Law never required, used as the standard by which Jesus' disciples are found wanting. Hold on to that; it changes what "old" means when the parables arrive.

The Bridegroom

Matthew 9:15

> And Jesus said to them, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast."

The phrase rendered "friends of the bridegroom" is literally *sons of the bridechamber* — the wedding party, the men whose entire assignment for that week is the celebration. Jesus answers a question about religious practice with a claim about who He is.

"Bridegroom" is not a general figure for a happy occasion. In Israel's Scriptures it's God's own word for His relationship to His people, and it runs a specific course from beginning to end.

He betrothed her in the wilderness (Jer. 2:2). He entered into the covenant with her at Sinai, and Ezekiel describes it in marriage terms: "I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you, and you became Mine" (Ezek. 16:8). She was unfaithful (Hos. 2:2; Jer. 3:1-9). The northern kingdom went first, and He put her away:

Jeremiah 3:8

> "Then I saw that for all the causes for which backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but went and played the harlot also."

The same verse names Judah, the "treacherous sister," who watched it happen and went the same way (Jer. 3:8-10). That's where the nation stands when Jesus opens His mouth in Matthew 9: Israel put away, Judah following her into the same harlotry. And the two passages a reader would reach for as the bridegroom texts are both promises of what comes *after* that — they are remarriage:

Hosea 2:19-20

> "I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me In righteousness and justice, In lovingkindness and mercy; I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, And you shall know the LORD."

Isaiah 62:5

> For as a young man marries a virgin, So shall your sons marry you; And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, So shall your God rejoice over you.

Even the new covenant passage runs on the same picture. God describes the covenant Israel broke as one in which "I was a husband to them" (Jer. 31:32), and promises a new one to come — with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, and still future when Jeremiah wrote it and still future in Matthew 9.

So when Jesus calls Himself the bridegroom, standing in a room in Galilee among a divorced nation, He's claiming the role Scripture had reserved for God Himself, at the exact point in the story where the promise on the table is that the Husband will come back for her. The men asking Him about fasting are asking the wrong question with the right vocabulary. Their whole tradition of mourning had been waiting for this.

That's why His disciples are not fasting. Grief is out of place at the wedding.

"Taken Away"

The second half of His answer is darker than the first.

> "But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast."

This is the first time in Matthew's account that Jesus speaks about His own removal. The verb, *apairō*, means to be lifted off and carried away; the rest of Matthew supplies the violence the word itself leaves unsaid. He is at a banquet, answering a question about a religious custom, and He tells the room He's going to be taken from them.

Two things follow from that. First, He doesn't abolish fasting — He relocates it. There will be days for it, and those days are the days of His absence. Second, the order: the bridegroom is taken away first, and the joy Isaiah and Hosea promised comes after. Scripture puts the suffering first and the glory afterward (Luke 24:26; 1 Pet. 1:11).

Matthew records the other end of that fast as well. Near the close of the same Gospel, speaking to the same nation, Jesus names both the leaving and the return in a single breath:

Matthew 23:38-39

> "See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!'"

The house is left, and He is not seen again until the nation says that sentence. That's the span of the fast He describes back in chapter 9. It begins when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and it ends when Israel welcomes Him back.

That is the story Matthew 9 belongs to — God, the people He had betrothed, and the Messiah standing in front of them waiting for a nation to turn.

Two Pictures, One Point

Matthew 9:16-17

> "No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and the tear is made worse. Nor do they put new wine into old wineskins, or else the wineskins break, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But they put new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."

Both pictures come out of ordinary household life, and both turn on the same physical fact.

Cloth straight off the loom has not yet been washed and shrunk. Sew a piece of it over the worn place in an old garment, and the first washing shrinks the patch while the old fabric, already shrunk and weakened by years of use, has nothing left to give. The patch pulls, and the tear ends up bigger than it was before the repair.

Wineskins were whole animal hides, sewn and sealed. A new skin is supple and stretches; wine still fermenting inside it gives off gas and expands, and the skin gives with the pressure. An old skin has

already been stretched once and has dried hard. Put working wine into it and it does not stretch — it splits. The wine runs out on the ground and the skin is finished as well.

Neither picture is a story about carelessness. Nobody in either illustration is doing anything malicious; they're trying to make something useful out of what they have. Both are stories about two things that will not go together *by nature* — not because either one is bad, but because one has already finished moving and the other has not.

And the parable ends on what the right pairing accomplishes:

> "But they put new wine into new wineskins, **and both are preserved**."

Both are the new wine and the new skins it was just poured into. The old skin is not in that sentence; it's the one that split. What Jesus names as the goal is that the wine not be lost — that what He brings find a container able to hold it, so that neither is wasted. Matthew and Luke both keep that clause (Matt. 9:17; Luke 5:38). The wrong pairing ruins the skin and spills the wine; the right one keeps both.

Luke's version of the first picture is slightly different from Matthew's and Mark's:

Luke 5:36

> Then He spoke a parable to them: "No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one; otherwise the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was taken out of the new does not match the old."

In Matthew and Mark the patch is a scrap of new cloth. In Luke someone cuts up a perfectly good new garment to repair an old one, and ends up with two ruined garments and a patch that doesn't even match. Same argument, with the waste made more obvious.

What the "Old" Is, and What It Is Not

This passage is most often explained as law versus grace: the old garment and old skins are the Law of Moses and Judaism, the new wine is the gospel of grace, and the point is that Christianity replaced the old system, which had served its purpose and was now finished.

The text stands against that reading on four counts.

Jesus said the opposite about the Law, in this same Gospel. "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Matt. 5:17). A reading that makes Him say, four chapters later, that the Law is a worn-out garment He has come to discard is at war with His own stated position.

The question that started it was about a practice the Law never required. Nobody asked Jesus about the Day of Atonement. They asked why His disciples did not keep a fasting schedule that had grown up around the Law without ever being commanded in it. That's what had gone rigid — not the word of God, but the structure men had built on top of it and then mistaken for it.

Israel is not a discarded garment. Paul takes up exactly this question and answers it flatly: "Has God cast away His people? Certainly not!" (Rom. 11:1), and "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29). The wineskins in this parable cannot be the nation being thrown out.

And the marriage settles it. The northern kingdom was given a certificate of divorce (Jer. 3:8), Judah followed her into the same harlotry (Jer. 3:8-10), and God promised to take the nation back (Hos. 2:19-20; Jer. 31:31-33). Those promises are still standing. The bridegroom who is taken away is coming back for the woman He betrothed — that's the entire point of the passages the bridegroom language is drawn from. So a reading of Matthew 9 that has Him finished with her, her promises handed off to somebody else, contradicts the texts the metaphor comes from.

One more piece of vocabulary needs guarding here. Jeremiah's new covenant is made "with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (Jer. 31:31), and it is tied to the nation's restoration. It had not been enacted when Jesus spoke in Matthew 9, and it is not a description of the Christian's present standing. So the new wine in this parable cannot be "the new covenant now in force." It was something present in the room that day, and Matthew names it plainly.

So What Was the New Wine?

Matthew answers this himself, in the verses immediately around the parable.

From His first sermon, the announcement had been one sentence: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17). Two verses after the wineskins, Matthew sums up what Jesus was doing:

Matthew 9:35

> Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people.

The new wine is the King and the kingdom He was offering — a real government, heavenly and earthly both (Dan. 4:26; 7:13-14), offered to a real nation, with a real King present and identifying Himself. Israel was not a people outside of relationship with God waiting to be told how to be saved; she was God's own redeemed people, with a sacrificial system He had instituted (Ex. 4:22; Lev. 17:11). What was being offered to her was a King and a throne.

And wine needs a container ready to receive it. That work had been going on for months before any of this, and it had a name.

Luke 1:17

> "He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

That was said about John the Baptist before he was born. His whole assignment was preparation, and what he was told to prepare was a people — not the temple, not the priesthood, not the nation's institutions. Matthew states the content of his preaching in a single line, and it is the same line Jesus would preach: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matt. 3:2; cf. 4:17).

"Repent" is a word most people have been trained to hear as *feel worse about yourself*. It means something more useful: to change the mind — to turn around and face the other direction. John attached a visible act to it, a baptism of repentance (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3): men and women going

down into the Jordan and coming up again, the old way of thinking put under the water and a turned mind coming out of it.

That baptism was not a doorway into relationship with God for people who had none. These were Israelites — already God's redeemed people, already inside the covenant He had made with them, already sacrificing at a temple He had instituted. John's baptism was a washing for people who already belonged to Him, a turning back and a getting ready. Paul described it in exactly those terms years later: John baptized with a baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe on the One who was coming after him (Acts 19:4). The preparation was never the point. The Person it prepared for was.

That is the making of new wineskins. Before the wine arrived, a man was sent ahead to produce containers with some give left in them — hearts turned around, minds changed, settled expectations loosened enough to receive something they had not yet seen. The inward man was the thing being worked on, because the inward man was the thing that would have to stretch.

And Luke names who took the preparation and who refused it:

Luke 7:29-30

> And when all the people heard Him, even the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the will of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.

Now set that beside the room in Matthew 9. Tax collectors were among those who came to John for baptism (Luke 3:12), and here are tax collectors at the table with Jesus. John's own disciples, asking their question, were prepared men too; what they were still holding was a fasting schedule, and their master had already told them whose voice they were hearing (John 3:29). The hard skin was elsewhere in that group. The Pharisees and their scribes, who had been complaining since the meal began (Luke 5:30, 33), are by Luke's own account the ones who declined to be prepared. The wine went where there were skins to hold it, and the hardest objection came from where there were not.

And the old skins were the structure the nation's teachers had built and then hardened inside — the schedule of fasts, the tests of who may eat with whom, the accumulated fences that had become the measure of who was acceptable. That structure had no give in it. It could not stretch far enough to hold a King who ate with tax collectors, healed on the Sabbath, and forgave sins on His own authority.

Matthew proves the point before the chapter is over. Seventeen verses after the wineskins, the Pharisees reach their verdict on where His power comes from:

Matthew 9:34

> But the Pharisees said, "He casts out demons by the ruler of the demons."

That is the skin splitting. Jesus described what would happen if the new were forced into the old, and Matthew, within the same chapter, records it happening.

None of this makes Jesus an enemy of what came before. He said as much a few chapters later: the man properly instructed about the kingdom "brings out of his treasure things new and old" (Matt. 13:52). Both, from the same storehouse.

Luke's Extra Line

Matthew and Mark end the teaching on the wineskins. Luke's account of the same day adds a sentence found nowhere else:

Luke 5:39

> "And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, 'The old is better.'"

This is a different note from the two parables — an observation about people rather than a warning about forcing incompatible things together. Someone accustomed to the old rarely wants the new, even when the new is better, for no other reason than that the old is what he knows.

Read in context, this is not Jesus granting that the old covenant was superior. It's Jesus naming, dryly, the resistance He is about to meet from the Pharisees standing in that group. They will not reject the kingdom because they have examined it and found it wanting. They will reject it because they have been drinking something else for a long time and have no appetite for anything new. That is a harder problem than a bad argument, and the parable offers no answer to it. He simply says it out loud.

What the Passage Explains

Set beside the escalating claims of authority in Matthew 8 and 9, this teaching supplies the reason a new container was necessary in the first place.

Authority over nature, over spirits, over the body, and over sin is not a series of impressive but disconnected demonstrations. It is the credentials of a King, presented to a nation, along with the offer of the kingdom Israel's prophets had been describing for centuries. That offer could not have been folded into the fasting schedules and social rules that the nation's teachers had built around the Law without either tearing them apart or being cut down to fit them.

Jesus tells them which of those two would happen. Then Matthew shows it happening.

Where This Lands for the Reader

Everything above belongs to Israel's story. The bridegroom, the fast, and the promise of the Husband's return are hers, and none of it transfers. What carries over to a Christian comes as a second step, along a different line. By refusing the King, Israel forfeited the kingdom's heavenly portion, and that is what's offered now to him (Matt. 21:43). Her earthly portion is still hers and still waiting (Rom. 11:29). And the question of whether a container can still receive what's poured into it is put to him as well.

That turn has to be taken carefully, because the passage is very easy to use as a weapon against other people's traditions while leaving one's own untouched.

Notice what the old wineskin was. It was not wickedness. It was a right thing — reverence, discipline, the fear of God — that had been shaped by long use and then set hard in that shape. It started as devotion. The men who held that schedule were not frauds; most of them were sincere, and the practice they were defending had grown up out of real grief over real sin. That's exactly what made it so difficult to see. Nobody guards a bad habit that carefully.

So the question the passage puts to a Christian is "what have I stopped being able to stretch about?" rather than "which traditions do I look down on?" Is there anything God could say to me now that I'd actually receive, if it didn't fit the shape I've already set?

There's a remedy in the passage's own background, and it is the same one John was sent to apply. What made a skin new was never the skin's own quality. It was repentance — a mind willing to be turned (Matt. 3:2). John's assignment was to produce people in that condition, and the same turning is what keeps a container pliable afterward. It is not a single act performed at the beginning of a Christian life and then filed away.

And the parable does not end on a threat. It ends on wine poured into a skin that can hold it, *and both are preserved*. The aim was never a split container; it was that nothing He brings be spilled. What the passage asks for is a container that can still move, and grace is given to help in exactly that kind of need (Heb. 4:16).

The King is still absent, and the heavenly kingdom He offered is still being offered. Nothing is asked of a soft container in the meantime except that it still be able to receive what He pours into it.

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.