

# “Prayer for the Journey: The Taste of New Wine”

Matthew 9:14-17; Luke 5:36-39; John 2:1-12 <sup>1</sup>

Today’s text is very interesting, and I encourage you to keep your Bibles open to Luke 5 as we think about it. Let’s begin with verse 33, where bystanders asked Jesus a question that implied disapproval of His behavior: <sup>33</sup> *They said to him, “John’s disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking.”*

<sup>34</sup> *Jesus answered, “Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? <sup>35</sup> But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast.”*

<sup>36</sup> *He told them this parable: “No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one. Otherwise, they will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. <sup>37</sup> And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. <sup>38</sup> No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. <sup>39</sup> And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, ‘The old is better’ ”* (Luke 5:33-39).

Jesus answered this question by using two short parables to clarify the difference between what his critics were expecting and what God actually intended. Jesus’ first example had to do with patching a garment using unshrunk cloth. Anyone with experience in such matters knows that new cloth will shrink when it’s washed, making an even larger tear in the repaired fabric. “Old goes with old,” Jesus said; and “new goes with new.”

The second example made the same point using the metaphor of “new wine.” When Jesus used this illustration, the handy containers in our refrigerators that we so easily take for granted were still two thousand years away, and wine had to be stored and fermented in specially-prepared animal skins. Fresh skins were still elastic enough to contain the pressure created by fermentation, but like many other things, the skins became brittle as they aged. Everyone knew that skins could hold new wine only once.

I expect that you have no trouble understanding Jesus’ point, but He ended His response in a rather perplexing way. Although the point of Jesus’ answer was that He was bringing “new wine” to the party, He concluded by noting that “*no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, ‘The old is better’*” (Luke 5:39).

When Matthew recorded this conversation, he left that final statement out, perhaps being as perplexed as we are in knowing what to make of it. I actually think that this perplexing sentence may be the most important part of Jesus’ answer, so let’s sit with it for a few minutes.

First of all, it was common knowledge then, as it is now, that aged wine has a more robust flavor than new wine does, and is thus more desirable. The point in both examples is that Jesus was doing a new and wonderful thing, and that new containers would be required in order to receive and to experience the power of this New Thing.

Jesus’ critics were arguing for proper procedure without realizing that their procedures missed the main point of what God was doing before their very eyes. They failed to recognize the incredibly new kind of relationship with God that Jesus offered.

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on March 3, 2013.

This conversation supplied the title for Keith Miller's classic book, *The Taste of New Wine*.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps you've read it. The book was first published in 1965, and it took American evangelicalism by storm. Miller's book was one of the first signs of the lay renewal movement in American Christianity, and was very important in my own faith development as a teenager.

In *The Taste of New Wine*, Miller argued that faith is not something that exists separately from the rest of our lives, but rather is something that transforms our lives thoroughly, entirely and completely. Miller contended that faith doesn't have nearly as much to do with "correct doctrine" or "proper procedure" as it does with "personal fellowship with the living God."<sup>3</sup>

Miller confessed that "suddenly I realized that there are no small decisions—since every deciding either takes one closer to or further from God's will."<sup>4</sup> "I realized that God does not want [our] money, nor does He primarily want [our] time . . . He wants [our] will; and if you give Him your *will*, He'll begin to show you life as you've never seen it before. It is like being born again."<sup>5</sup>

My friends, this is not a matter of something God did two thousand years ago, or even fifty years ago; God continues to this very day to bring into being a New Reality through the life and power of Jesus in us, and this New Reality continues to be birthed within the "wineskins" of the Church. The challenge that you and I face today is the same one that the religious leaders of Jesus' day faced: this "new wineskins" thing means change, and change is both difficult and uncomfortable.

We, too, are tempted to say "the old is better." The old is familiar. It feels safer. The taste of new wine is sharp, not mellow, and yet it is the new to which we are called.

You've probably noticed that the world is changing, and very quickly. Indeed, Leonard Sweet has written that "More changes now occur in one *decade* than occurred in entire *centuries* in the past. **You can count on this: what works today won't work tomorrow.**"<sup>6</sup>

Cynthia Ann Broad, the Michigan Teacher of the Year in 1990, wrote even then that "In times of change, it is the *learners* who will inherit the earth, while the *learned* will find themselves beautifully equipped for a world that no longer exists."<sup>7</sup>

New thinking, new ideas, and new ways can be scary; but if we're not careful, our efforts to recapture the comfortable feelings we enjoyed in previous eras will burn the bridges that still connect us to the world rather than building new ones. For example, it's awfully easy to slip into insisting that folks outside the church learn to like what we like, dress like we dress, and live like we live before we make them welcome; but our mandate is to go out into the world with the love of Jesus, not to find slick ways to entice the world to come to us.

The message of redemption through Jesus, while old and tested, tried and true, still has to be reinterpreted, refocused, and reapplied in every generation. If it is to change the world, the message of Jesus must become "new wine" for each generation, even though we'd frequently be more comfortable if that wine were just turned back into water.

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<sup>2</sup> Keith Miller, *The Taste of New Wine* (Waco: Word, 1965). When he wrote this book, Miller was Director of Laity Lodge, a well-known retreat center in the hill country of Texas. Some years ago, when I was leaving the faculty of Southern Seminary, Laity Lodge asked me to consider becoming their Director, but I declined in favor of returning to the local church, which has always been my passion.

<sup>3</sup> Miller, p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Miller, p. 57.

<sup>5</sup> Miller, p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> Leonard Sweet, *AQUAchurch* (Loveland, CO: Group, 1999), pp. 210-211.

<sup>7</sup> Sweet, p. 233.

In his fascinating book, *The Church of Irresistible Influence*,<sup>8</sup> Robert Lewis suggested that the early Christians changed their world through what he called an **irrefutable incarnation**. In those early centuries—in A.D. 165 and again in A.D. 251, to be exact—two great plagues swept the Roman Empire, killing a third of the population each time. According to historian Rodney Stark, “the willingness of Christians to care for [their neighbors] was put on dramatic public display. . . . Pagans tried to avoid all contact with the afflicted, often casting the still-living into the gutters. Christians, on the other hand, nursed the sick, even though [some] died doing so. . . . Even in healthier times, the pagan emperor, Julian, noted that the followers of The Way ‘support not only their poor, *but ours as well.*’”<sup>9</sup>

When they got it right, Lewis argues, the early Church was passionately committed to Jesus and to the proclamation of salvation through Him. They were people of winsome lifestyles characterized by unusually high moral standards, and they gave themselves to radically selfless good deeds that amazed their friends and neighbors.<sup>10</sup> It was an irrefutable incarnation, indeed.

That’s what Jesus was talking about when He said, “*You are the light of the world—like a city [or a church] on a mountain, glowing in the night for all to see. Don’t hide your light under a basket! Instead, put it on a stand and let it shine for all. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father*” (Matthew 5:14-16, NLT).

Leonard Sweet wrote that “As a child in the 1950s, I heard a story at a . . . revival meeting in New York. It seems a certain missionary, home on leave, was shopping for a globe of the world to take back to her mission station. The clerk showed her a reasonably-priced globe and another one with a light bulb inside. ‘This one is nicer,’ the clerk said, pointing to the illuminated globe, ‘but of course, a lighted world costs more.’”<sup>11</sup>

That’s what Kingdom living is all about: lighting our world with tangible expressions of the love of Jesus—with irrefutable incarnation. Our next chapter of ministry together in this place will doubtless be costly in many ways. But it will also be very, very exciting!

“Strategy,” Lewis wrote, “involves asking a series of tough questions: What are our unique strengths as a church? What are the critical issues of our community? Which of those can our church effectively influence? Do we have a structure that can move our people out to those needs? Are we willing to commit resources, staff, and people to make an impact,”<sup>12</sup> remembering that “a lighted world costs more.”

Bob Buford has written that “when church leaders develop a heart for their cities, everything changes in how they view their calling and mission. They develop a *kingdom* mindset more than a *church* mindset. [This mindset] calls them to deploy their resources of time, energy, people, dollars into what I call a ‘50/50 church.’ This is a church where over half its resources are directed outward rather than inward.

“Many reluctant leaders [are afraid that such a] shift will eventuate in the weakening of the local congregation. Wise leaders know that the opposite is true. **Following Christ’s call to mission leads to strength.**”<sup>13</sup>

When Wayne Gretzky, the renowned hockey player, was asked about the secret of his success, he responded, “I don’t skate to where the puck is. I skate to where the puck is going to

<sup>8</sup> Robert Lewis with Rob Wilkins, *The Church of Irresistible Influence: Bridge-Building Stories to Help Reach Your Community* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 13-14.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Lewis, pp. 45-46.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis, p. 74.

<sup>11</sup> Sweet, p. 47.

<sup>12</sup> Lewis, p. 87.

<sup>13</sup> Bob Buford, in foreword to Lewis, p. 12.

be.” That’s what we have to do, too. We can’t steer toward someplace in the past. We have to steer toward what God calls us to be in the future.

As we continue our Spiritual Strategic Prayer Journey together, let’s continue to nurture a willingness to let God transform us and draw us toward the future that God intends. Let’s continue to search out our congregation’s unique strengths and seek to discern where those strengths match the critical needs of our community. Let’s dare to imagine that God might once again do something amazing through this congregation. God will answer us when we come to Him with honest and open hearts that genuinely seek His will.

We have a saying that “If you keep on doing what you’ve always done, you’re going to keep on getting what you’ve always gotten.” The message of the new wineskins is that God is not in the “what you’ve always gotten” business. As God spoke through Isaiah, “What I have done is nothing compared to what I am going to do. For I am about to do a brand-new thing. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it?” (43:18-19).

It was for such “new wine” moments that F. B. Meyer wrote, “Be not afraid to trust God completely. As you go down the long corridor, you may find that He has preceded you and locked many doors that you would have entered in vain. But be sure that beyond these there is one that He has left unlocked. Open it and enter, and you will find yourself face to face with . . . the river of opportunity, broader and deeper than anything you had dared to imagine in your sunniest dreams. Launch forth on it, for it leads to the open sea.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> F. B. Meyer, *Life of Paul: A Servant of Jesus Christ* (Lynnwood, WA: Emerald Books, 1995), p. 69.