New Wine into New Wineskins

Mark 2:18-28

Key Verse: 2:22c “No, they pour new wine into new wineskins.”

In today’s passage Jesus defends his disciples from the religious leaders who accused them of being law-breakers. While defending his disciples, Jesus teaches us the true meaning of the law, and who he really is. May God give us ears to hear and wisdom to understand his teaching.

First, new wine and new wineskins (18-22) What Jesus has done thus far in the last two chapters is remarkable. His teaching and action were revolutionary. The crowds responded with many wows and were amazed with Jesus’ new teaching with authority. Jesus touched the leper and healed him. Jesus violated Moses’ law by touching the leper. But Jesus sent the leper to show himself to the priest according to Moses’ law. Jesus healed the leper to keep the law. Jesus also called his disciples not from the religious leaders or socially high-class people, but from unlearned and low-class fishermen and tax-collector. Jesus ate with them at the same table. He said that he came to call sinners not the righteous. Jesus’ teaching and performance were sensational one after another.

Look at verse 18. “***Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus. “How is it that John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?***” Fasting is an intensive prayer which requires food restraint. In the past the people of Israel fasted in the time of national crisis or personal emergency. In the book of Esther, Mordecai, a national leader of Jews, proclaimed the national fasting prayer when all the Jews were in danger of extermination by the evil Haman. (Es 4: 3) King David fasted when his first-born son from Bethsheba was ill and dying. According to Luke 18:12, on Jesus' day the Pharisees fasted twice a week. John’s disciples expected Jesus’ disciples’ fasting prayer as they did. But Jesus’ disciples enjoyed lots of food. To the eyes of John’s disciples, the disciples of Jesus were law-free, tradition-free, and always in the mood of festival.

How did Jesus answer them? Look at verses 19,20. “***Jesus answered, ‘How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.***” Jesus compared himself to a bridegroom and his disciples to the guests of the bridegroom. According to the Jewish wedding custom, the feast lasts a week long. While the wedding feast is on, all guests become joyful and happy. This is because the wedding is one of the most joyful, happy, and blessed occasions in human life. In a wedding banquet no one wants to see a gloomy and sorrowful face of those who practice a fasting prayer. So, while a bridegroom is with his guests, no one fasts. Likewise, Jesus’ disciples were joyful and happy to follow Jesus. They were free to eat and joyful to play while Jesus was with them. They were like little children who hung around and played under the supervision of their parents. But they will fast and pray when their bridegroom is taken away from them. This indicates Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion. Jesus compared his absence to his death. Then his disciples had to fast and pray.

Jesus continued. Look at verses21-22. “***No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins.***” Here are two different occasions, but one single theme. In ancient days wine was kept in goatskins. New skins were soft and pliable and would stretch when the gas from the fermenting wine expands. But old wineskins which had been stretched would become brittle and were not able to stretch. So, the gas from the fermenting wine burst them open, destroying both wine and wineskins. The illustration of the cloth is the same story. Here Jesus compared himself and his teaching to new wine and new pieces of cloth, and the old Judaism and tradition to old garments and old wineskins. The newness of Jesus’ teaching is dynamic and explosive in a way that old Judaism and tradition could not bear. Jesus’ disciples are new wineskins. Even though they were unschooled, they were humble, obedient, active and full of the learning mind, who are able to hold Jesus’ teachings.

In this world politicians often quote Jesus’ teaching for their political purpose: “New wine into new wineskins” “We need new leader for new generation.” What does this teach us today? What does it mean that we become old wineskins? Jesus’ teaching is powerful and explosive like new wine, good for rebuking our sins and leading us to repentance and salvation. Jesus’ teaching is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitude of the heart. (He 4:12) People didn’t like hearing Jesus’ message of repentance: “Repent and believe the good news. The kingdom of God has come near.” But more people came to Jesus to hear his message. But the Pharisees, the teachers of the law and the religious leaders didn’t respond to Jesus’ teachings. They thought that they were righteous, who didn’t need to repent. They thought that they didn’t need to listen to Jesus. They were the old wineskins. Like these people, if we think that we are righteous and do not need to repent, we are old wineskins. If we don’t have any response to Jesus’ message, we are old wineskins. No matter how long you attend the church or no matter who you are, if you don’t respond to Jesus’ teaching, we are the modern Pharisees.

Who, then, are new wineskins? They are those who repent of their sins everyday before God and renew their hearts for God’s holiness. They are those who constantly talk with God and work with him. New wineskins are also those who put Jesus’ teaching into practice. They not only hear God’s word, but also put them into practice. They are active, creative, energetic, dynamic, and positive. There are two big lakes (seas) in Israel; the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. The Sea of Galilee always contains fresh water so that fish and plants can grow in it. The sea receives water from Mt. Hermon and flows down through the Jordan River to the Dead Sea. It receives and gives. Unlike the Sea of Galilee, the Dead Sea only receives water from the Sea of Galilee and from the valley between Judea and Edom. There are no fish or plants, but only salt in the Dead Sea because it does not flow down. The water which doesn’t flow becomes decomposed. Old wineskins are the same as the Dead Sea. If we only hear the word and don’t obey, our hearts become corrupt, and we become useless like old wineskins or the Dead Sea. No one will pick up the old wineskins even in a yard sale because it is useless.

The person who is like a new wineskin is the one who is led by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit provides power, wisdom and love of Christ. The Holy Spirit gives him creativity and passion for the work of God. 2 Timothy 1:7 says, “God did not give us the spirit of timidity, but the spirit of power, love, and self-discipline.” I pray that we all may be transformed into new wineskins and follow Jesus as his disciples, not the Pharisees. New teaching should be put into a new heart. Let us pray that God may give us a new heart, the heart of Jesus, through Mark’s gospel study. Amen!

Second, Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath (23-27) Look at verses 23-24. “***One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?***” In the beginning after creating the whole universe for six days, God took rest on the seventh day. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy. (Ge 2:2-3) In the Ten Commandments God commanded Moses and his people to remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. God commanded them not to work on the Sabbath day, but set apart for God and for their rest. (Ex 20:8-11) Whoever violates this Sabbath law is punished. Jesus’ disciples were hungry and went into the grainfield and ate some heads of grain. The Pharisees thought that they violated the Sabbath law by reaping. They thought of picking grain as reaping and rubbing as grinding. How did Jesus defend his disciples?

Look at verses 25-26. He answered, “***Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions***.” Jesus quoted the Scripture to defend his disciples. This story is written in 1 Samuel 21:1-6. While carrying out his mission David was hungry. He went to Abiathar (*Ahimelek*) , the priest, to ask for some food. Abiathar gave David the bread of Presence (the consecrated bread) which was allowed only for priests to eat because there was no ordinary bread at his hand. Even though David and Abiathar violated Moses’ law, they were not condemned or killed. In Matthew’s gospel Jesus added what he wanted to say. “*I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. If you had known what these words mean, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent*. *For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath*.” (Mt 12:6-8)

In these verses Jesus teaches us two important things. First, God desires mercy, not sacrifice. This does not mean that God only shows sympathy and does not receive offerings. This means that God prefers fulfilling human needs to practicing religious ritualism. God is love. His law is the expression of his love. As Paul said, love is the fulfillment of the law. (Ro 13:10) When we love God and love our neighbors as ourselves, we fulfill God’s law. But the Pharisees didn’t know this spirit of the law, which is love. They looked only outward appearance and criticized Jesus’ disciples. We often make the same mistake as the Pharisees did. We often judge others based on their outward appearance, visible result, and instant phenomena. We judge them based on what is visible. But Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:18, “*So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal*.” We need spiritual insight to see God’s love and his mercy behind all the laws and regulations. Jesus explains this more in verse 27. Let us read verse 27. “***Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”***

Second, Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath. Look at verse 28 again. This means that Jesus is God the Creator who made the Sabbath. Jesus is the object of our worship, devotion, and service. John 1:2,3 says, “*He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made*.” Paul said in Romans 11:36, *“For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen*.” This is the reason why I pray that the name of Jesus may be highly glorified in my beginning prayer. We can come to God the Father through Jesus, who reconciled between God and us by his death on the cross. Jesus opened the way for sinners to come to God and gave us the privilege to become children of God. Therefore, Jesus is worthy to be praised, honored, loved, and worshiped. Amen!

Today we learned that Jesus reinterpreted the Jewish tradition and Moses’ law. Jesus said that he didn’t come to abolish the law, but to fulfill the law. (Mt 5:17) Jesus taught us the true meaning and purpose of the law which is to love God and love others as ourselves. When we love God and love others, we obey the law. We obey all the laws by loving. Let us repent of our self-righteousness and pride and ask God for forgiveness. Let us renew our mind for Jesus’ teaching and practice the love of God for others. Each Sunday we may worship Jesus and glorify his name who is the Lord of the Sabbath. Amen!