

# OpenTheo

## Q&A#147 New Wineskins, New Covenant

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Today's question: "How should the illustrations of wineskins and garments in Mark 2 inform our understanding of the relationship between the old and new covenants?"

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## Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, how should the illustrations of wineskins and garments in Mark chapter two inform our understanding of the relationship between the old and new covenants? The context for Mark chapter two is given by controversies concerning Jesus' eating habits and those of his disciples. Jesus, first of all, after the call of Levi, eats with tax collectors and sinners, and he's challenged on that front by the Pharisees and their scribes.

The next challenge is from people who come to him and ask, why is it that your disciples don't fast, whereas the disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees do fast? And so Jesus' response, first of all, is to give the illustration of guests at a wedding feast. They do not fast when the bridegroom is with them, but when the bridegroom is taken away

from them, they will fast. Now, that may be referring to Jesus' death prior to his resurrection, or it may be referring to the longer period of time after Jesus ascends into heaven and prior to his final advent in glory.

Now, whichever of those it refers to, it's framed in a more eschatological setting. So when we're thinking about the fasting of the disciples, it's not just an act of standard piety or devotion, rather it's seen within an eschatological frame. The bridegroom, the Messiah has come.

The Messiah is with them right now, and so they don't fast when he's with them. But yet the day will come when he's taken away from them, whether that's his death prior to his resurrection, or whether it's referring to the period after his ascension, at that point they will fast. And that fasting will be informed not just by general practice of piety and a sort of asceticism, but by an anticipation of his eschatological coming.

There's fasting in waiting for something else that's going to come in the future. Now, first of all, that eschatological frame is important to keep in mind when we're thinking about the difference between the Old and New Covenant and the way that's playing out here. The other thing to note is that each one of the synoptic gospels includes this account, and each one proceeds it with the account of Jesus calling Matthew or Levi and eating with tax collectors and sinners and being challenged concerning that.

And the events occur in much the same manner, except there are slight differences between the gospel accounts. In Mark, it's people that come to him and ask him the question. In Luke, it would seem that it is the Pharisees and their scribes that ask him this question.

It's not explicitly said, it says, and they said. But the previous people who've been mentioned, who've been challenging him, are the Pharisees and their scribes. In Matthew, it's the disciples of John.

Now, I would say it's most likely that it's a mixture of the Pharisees and the disciples of John, because they're asking him concerning the fact that his disciples don't fast, whereas both the disciples of John and the Pharisees do. And so it would seem that those two groups together are asking him this question. Now, the slight differences between the accounts of this are helpful for answering the question.

First of all, in Luke's account, there's an interesting concluding statement, a perplexing one to some extent. And no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says the old is good. The other thing that we see as a difference between the accounts is found in Matthew.

The concluding statement in Matthew is also a curious one and one that helps to answer the question. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved. Now,

this seems to express a concern, not just for the new wine, that that be preserved, but also that the old wineskins be preserved.

Now, that's maybe helping us to answer the question a bit. Whereas in many accounts, the wineskins are seen as the old wineskins, they must be discarded, they're done with, they're finished, they're no more of use. Whereas in Matthew, there seems to be concern that both are preserved.

Luke describes these two statements, the statements concerning the garment and the statements concerning the wineskins, as a parable, that Jesus is giving some explanation in response to what the Pharisees and the disciples of John have asked. And first of all, he gives the illustration of the bridegroom and the wedding feast, and then he goes on to give this parable about the garments and the wineskins. Now, wine, I think, is also an important part of the picture.

Wine is associated with the eschaton, this great feast of wine that you hear in places like Isaiah, that God is going to bring this great feast of wine. We have many of these themes within the New Testament too, not least in our celebration of the Lord's Supper with wine, which is a drink associated with joy, it's a drink associated with rest, and it's a drink that anticipates that promised rest that we'll have at the end as all things are made new. So there is that wedding feast theme as well, the wedding feast that we see in the rest of the New Testament being focused upon that final advent of Christ, where Christ is going to establish this great celebration with his bride.

There is going to be a great feast, a wedding feast, and we want to be present at that feast. Now, at this moment in time, the Messiah is among the people. They don't necessarily recognize it, but his disciples do, and so they don't fast while the bridegroom is with them, but the bridegroom will be taken from them, whether by his death, prior to his resurrection, or by his ascension, and at that point, they will fast.

They will fast in anticipation of the eschaton, when God will make all things new, when Christ will return. The bridegroom will be present at the feast once more, and then they will feast once more. So there is a framing of the practice of fasting within this eschatological framework.

So if you're going to fast, you fast as an expression of the fact that you've not yet arrived. It's associated with the not yet of salvation, whereas the feasting theme is associated with the already. It's already Christ is with them.

There is this celebration taking place. Christ's ministry in the Synoptic Gospels often reads as if it were a movable feast. Jesus is going from place to place, and he's eating with people.

He's inviting certain people to eat with him. He's eating with controversial people. He's

giving illustrations that are focused on the meal table, illustrations about where you sit at the meal table, who you invite to your meals, great feasts that are held by a king and other people being invited and not coming, all these themes that are associated with a meal.

Now, here we have eschatological themes that are playing in the background, the bridegroom and the wedding feast, and then we also have that theme of fasting being brought into that context. So within that context, it makes sense that the disciples would not fast because the bridegroom is with them, and while he's with them, they will not fast. The time will come, he's taken away from them, and then they will fast, but it's all placed within an explanatory framework.

Now, when Jesus goes on to talk about the garments and the tear and the unshrunk cloth that's put onto the old garment, what he's talking about in part is playing upon themes and motif that we'll find within the New Testament on several occasions, the motif of the tear or the bursting of some fabric, whether that's the fabric of the garment that's torn, and in both cases, it's the new and the old, something is made worse by the addition of this new onto this old fabric. And then in the second case, pouring the old new wine into old wineskins will burst it. But in Matthew, the expectation is if you put the new wine into new or fresh wineskins, the word is different, then you will find that it's preserved and that the old wineskins are preserved.

Now, when we think about these themes in the context of Jesus teaching about the relationship between old and new covenant, I think a number of things emerge. First of all, the new covenant is focused upon the personal ministry and presence, more particularly presence of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the bridegroom and things are ordered around the bridegroom.

So when the bridegroom comes, you feast. When he invites people to eat with him, it's an eschatological or anticipation of the eschatological celebration. Jesus is going through Israel, eating with people, inviting people to eat with him and giving all these parables and statements and teachings about meal tables and eating together.

And that's an anticipation of this great wedding feast that's to come, but it's already beginning. It's already being anticipated in what he's doing in the ministry in Israel. There are other ways in which the eschaton is anticipated with his healing and his exorcisms and other practices that anticipate what will later come to pass when Jesus comes and makes all things new, heals all diseases, wipes away every tear and has the great wedding feast of the lamb.

So there's an anticipation and it's focused upon Jesus Christ. The other thing to note is that in Matthew, we see that the old wineskins matter. The old wineskins are not there to be just burst and discarded, but they're there to be preserved, but they cannot contain the new wine.

Now, how do we understand these old wineskins? Are the old wineskins referring to the pharisaic tradition? Some have said on the basis of the cryptic statement, Joel Green, I think, says this, based on the cryptic statement that Jesus makes at the end of Luke's account, no one after drinking old wine desires new for you, but he says the old is good. He suggests, and a few others have suggested that Jesus is referring to his teaching, his practice as the old. I don't think that's the case.

Jesus' framework for his teaching here is very much framed around something new, something not just new, but something eschatological. What Jesus is introducing is the life of the age to come. There's an anticipation of the life of the age to come in the present.

Think about the Israelites wandering through the wilderness and the spies return from the promised land and they come bearing these great clusters of grapes, the grapes of Eshcol. And in the middle of the wilderness, they are anticipating the life and the fruit of the promised land as they eat those grapes. And in a similar way, Jesus is giving his disciples and the other people that he invites to eat with him an anticipation of that age to come.

And while that is taking place, you don't fast. But yet there are other things taking place here that I think help to, also the fact that this is asked by John the Baptist's disciples as well, suggests that there may not be quite as negative a tone to the old new contrast. The old is not necessarily being dismissed or discarded or discounted.

Rather, it is being seen as something that cannot contain the new life that's being introduced. And you want to maintain the old to preserve what's good about the old, but you can't do that by trying to force the new into that. It will not contain the new.

Indeed, if you try and force the new into that, it's going to burst it and neither will be better off as a result. You'll lose both. Whereas what Jesus teaches is that the old will be preserved as the new wine is poured into fresh wineskins.

Now, how does this relate to the old and new covenant? We've seen the fact that it relates to Jesus as the eschatological themes of Jesus as the bridegroom, the one who brings that feast, anticipates the feast of the end in the middle of history. But there's something more going on here. And I think what more is going on is that there is a preservation of the old covenant, even with the admission of the new, that the new is brought in and it comes with a fresh form.

The fresh form cannot be assimilated to that of the old. We cannot force the new covenant into old covenant structures because it is truly a new covenant. But yet that old covenant is not just discarded and abandoned, thrown in the rubbish heap, but yet it is preserving something which is in constant relationship and engagement and interaction with what has come, what is new.

And so Jesus talks about the scribe of the kingdom who brings out old and new things, old and new treasures. Likewise, in Jesus' teaching, he does not discard the old, but he brings something new. And that new cannot be contained within the structures of the old tradition, the old institutions, the old system, and et cetera, traditions.

It can exist in a way that fulfills those, in a way that does not discount or dismiss or discard those things, but in a way that fulfills them. Now, when we think about the relationship between old and new covenants, it may be helpful to think about this in terms of our relationship between old and new testaments. The old and new testaments are not just assimilated into a single book without any division.

There is a bursting of the old, well, if we try to force the new covenant into the old covenant structures, we'd find that it bursts it. There is a tear that takes place. And that theme of the tear, whether in the temple, curtain, or whether in the wineskins or the garment, whatever it is, there is a tear that takes place.

And that tear is not something that we should lose sight of in a focus upon continuity. Though continuity clearly does exist, but there's a continuity, but then there is also a breach, there is a tear. And that tear involves the addition or the institution of something new, a new covenant is established.

And that new covenant does not discount what God has done before, but yet it exists as sort of dying and rising again of what preceded it. Jesus dies to the old order, rises again to a new one. He brings a new creation, he brings a new covenant.

Now that old covenant order is still something that we draw from. Whenever we read the old testament, we're drawing from those old wineskins and we're finding great riches. And those riches are riches that are associated with Christ himself.

Christ himself can be found in the old testament, throughout it in fact. But yet we cannot force Christ into, or the new covenant realities that Christ introduce, introduces into those old covenant structures and expect the old covenant to survive unchanged or for Christ to be present within those structures in a way that is very clearly manifest. Rather, there will be an antagonism between the two, not because either is wrong, but because it's like the experience of a child growing up.

There comes a point where the shoe that was helping that child to run is causing them to hobble because it's too small for them. There's something about the new reality that exceeds the old. Now, when we're talking about the old wineskins, I think it's maybe going a bit further with that analogy.

The old wineskins still preserve the wine. They're still doing a job and that job that they're doing is one that we'll need them for. We still go to the old covenant.

We still go to the old testament and we find within it great riches and treasures that are

contained within those old wineskins. We're not replacing the old wineskins with new. We're adding new wineskins to the old and those new wineskins are the ones that present a new structure, a new system, a new institutional order in which Christ is seen, in which Christ's eschatological reality that he's introduced in the church, in his death and resurrection, et cetera, all these things are preserved.

Whereas if you tried to force those into the old covenant and assimilate everything into one, you'd find that it collapses. Either you'd find that the life and the reality of the new covenant is lost and quenched and spilt or you would find that the old covenant is torn up and it's lost its true character. Now, I think the way that Christians have related to the old covenant is distinctive.

Christians, as Rene Braughe talks about this in his discussion of medieval Europe and the differences between Jews and Muslims and Christians, Christians did not, like Muslims, try to assimilate all previous revelation into their own. Rather, they preserved old and new covenant, old and new testament alongside each other and they digested the insights from the old covenant without collapsing the old covenant and the new covenant into a single entity. And that's a very insightful point, I think.

When we're reading the old covenant, we are reading something that is genuinely old wine from old wineskins and there's great richness to be found there, but yet, if we were to assimilate everything to the new, it would lose its character and we'd end up finding that, one way or another, things would be burst or spilt and it would not be a good situation. Now, what does Jesus mean by people who say that the old is better or the old is good? I think partly because if you value tradition, if you value the old, and if you've seen the goodness of the old, it's very hard to admit the possibility that something that's come along in a more recent period might be better than it. I think this may be a more general conservative impulse.

Now, when we read a book like Ecclesiastes, Ecclesiastes challenges that conservative impulse and says that it's not from wisdom that people say the old days were better. There are ways in which there is some truth to the fact there was merit in certain things that we have lost, but yet that more general statement that prefers the old over the new is one that we should treat with caution. And I think Jesus is referring to that attitude, that posture, that conservative impulse that cannot recognize the goodness of the new, that acts towards it on a basis of prejudice.

This is not someone who's tasted the new wine. This is someone who's tasted the old and because of the goodness of the old, cannot admit the possibility that the new might be better or the new might admit something that is worth participating in. Maybe we should also connect all of this with Jesus' practice in the wedding at Cana when he brings wine at the feast.

Again, think about the themes that are playing here. Jesus is playing the role of the

bridegroom at the feast. He's providing the wine, but yet he provides new wine that is the better wine.

And no one knows where it's come from except for the people who draw it. And his disciples and mother. Now, when we think about what's taking place there, Jesus is showing that the old wine is not necessarily the best wine.

Although we might instinctively prefer the old wine, and when we taste it, we think this is great and how could anything be better than this? When we actually taste the new wine that Jesus brings, we'll find that the best has been kept till last. And the whole new covenant is ordered not to the continuation of a system of the old wine, but the introduction of something new that leads to a breach with the old, the addition of something new, and the advent of a new period that anticipates the age to come. And so the eschatological framing is again very important.

Now, when we think again about the fact that Jesus brings the new wine, that Jesus is the bridegroom, I think it helps us to see that the difference between old and new covenants, if we are to think about is something that should be focused upon Christ himself and what Christ himself brings, what Christ himself brings by his presence, that something has changed in him. Now, putting these things together, I think what we'll see is an image that is played out within John's gospel in that particular account, and is played out in each one of the accounts of the synoptic gospels of this particular incident in a way that brings together a host of different images or a number of different images, bridegroom and feast and wedding feast, the image of the garment that gets torn when something new is added to it, trying to patch it up, trying to fit Jesus into the structures of the existing system, rather than actually realising that Jesus has come to make all things new, or this other idea of burst wineskins. When we put this together, I think we have a very clear understanding that Jesus has come to bring something new, not to discount the old and the goodness of the old, but to add something new that cannot be contained by the structures of the old.

That something new is framed not just by a temporal progression, but as anticipation of the last things. What has come last, the new wine, is the best wine. I don't think it's an accident that disciples are treated with suspicion that they are drunk with new wine on the day of Pentecost.

They have indeed tasted new wine, and that new wine is the wine of the Holy Spirit that has been given to them. Now, Jesus comes to bring that new wine that is the best wine. It's the wine that anticipates the age to come.

And in this framework, what is new is not necessarily worse than what has gone before. It's the new actually is the best. The new is the anticipation of not some golden age in the past when God was close to his people, and we're harking back to that, but we're looking forward to that age to come.



And I think that orientation is one that is particularly distinctive of the new covenant. Now, there are elements of that within the old, but this is particularly pronounced within the new, that forward-looking anticipation of what's to come, that Christ and what he offers is connected with the new, not just in the case that it has come later in history, but because it comes as an anticipation of the end of history. It's ever new.

It's ever something that is coming to us from the future, an anticipation of what is yet to come. And so it's new in a fuller sense than just historically more novel. When we're thinking about the old, the old does not have quite that same anticipation of the age to come.

Now, I've rambled a bit, but I hope this helps to articulate some of the difference between the old and new covenant, part of the relationship between them and how Jesus' teaching relates to that. Thank you very much for listening. If you have any questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account.

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