

Same old same old or New Wine: What does 2011 have in store?

A sermon by Bob Mendelsohn
Given at the Mustard Seed Church
30 January 2011
Lawrence Kansas

Reading: Matthew 9. 9-26 (Text below) [If you have time read all of chapters 8 and 9]

Thank you as always Pieter and Alice, Paul, the elders, staff and all here in Lawrence who make me feel so welcome each time I visit the Mustard Seed Church. I miss your dad, Pieter. I miss your mom. I miss so many others with whom I walked in my beginning days in the 1970s here. And some of my memories will help us today as we unpack a bit of Bible together.

Last Sunday morning I drove from my house in Sydney Australia to the Blue Mountains, a drive of about 2 hours, to preach in a small Anglican church in Wentworth Falls. Nice drive. The first service there began at 8:00, so I had to leave very early. And it is summer. And the sun was shining at 6:00 as I drove away. The windows were down. The air was crisp.

Still sleeping at my house were Kansas City friends Tom and Debbie Kolarik. Debbie graduated KU. They arrived a few days earlier to have a vacation in Sydney. Not a bad idea compared to the snow and cold here. And I've stayed at their place in KC each time I visit here, for the last two decades, so this one trip should make up for all my residential imposition.

I turned on the Christian radio station, which in Sydney doesn't always play Christian music. Don't ask. And they were playing the old Andre Crouch song, "Take me back." Let me read, not sing, you the words.

Take me back, take me back, dear Lord, to the place where I first received you. Take me back, take me back, dear Lord to where I first believed.

That felt good to hear, to sing with the windows down, and to enjoy a quick godly prayer with Crouch and his choir.

May I take you back to some of my earliest recollections in faith, to my first reading of the Gospel of Matthew, and bring some of you with me to our simplest form of faith, trusting what Messiah Jesus said to his friends, in reading Matthew chapter 9, and learning what the new wine and old wineskins is about, and purpose to be disciples today and every day as a result.

In the ancient and desert-like Near East with its scarcity of water, wine was a necessity rather than a luxury. Throughout the Bible, wine became a symbol of sustenance and life. It often took on the meaning and represented covenant blessings to the Jewish people, and sometimes even carried eschatological imagery as well. Joel the prophet said, "In that day the mountains will drip new wine." (3.18)

To be fair, sometimes wine carried eschatological judgment as well. God instructed Jeremiah to “take from my hand this cup filled with the wine of my wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it” (25.15, also 13.12-14)

Wine could be either an image of a man who would lose self-control by imbibing (Prov. 20.1) or alternatively as a symbol of joy, celebration and festivity. Consider the wedding in Cana where Jesus performed his first miracle, turning water into the best wine.

All this background seems to put Jesus’ statement today in Matthew 9 in perspective about new wine. Wine is not bad in the story; it’s a good thing. But don’t be distracted. The issue is the container, not the item to be contained.

(For other ‘new wine’ references, consider this. Job’s 3 friends had spoken for 30 chapters, and finally in chapter 32, the 4th friend, the young Elihu is ready, seriously ready to address the issues and says, “I am full of words; The spirit within me constrains me. Behold, my belly is like unvented wine, Like new wineskins it is about to burst. Let me speak that I may get relief; Let me open my lips and answer.” (32.18-20))

In fact there are 33 references in the Older Testament using the phrase “new wine.” But only in this story, repeated in both Mark and Luke, do we see the phrase “new wine” used in the Newer Testament. At issue then for me, is not the item, but the container. That seems to be what Jesus is highlighting.

Let me tell you a Talmudic story. It’s recorded in Nedarim 50b. “The Emperor’s daughter said to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananiah: ‘What beautiful Torah in an ugly vessel.’ He replied, ‘Learn from the house of your father. In what is the wine stored?’ ‘In jars of clay,’ she answered. ‘But all the common people store their wine in jars of clay! You use them too? You should keep your wine in jars of gold and silver!’ She went and had the wine placed in vessels of gold and silver, and it turned sour. ‘Thus,’ he said to her, ‘It is the same with Torah!’ She asked, ‘But are there not handsome people who are learned?’ He replied, ‘If they were ugly they would be even more learned!’ ”

Now I’m not exactly sure about the application the rabbis wanted the Jewish people to make in the 5th century, but I can tell you for sure that the phrase ‘jars of clay’ is. Listen to this passage from the Apostle Paul, “God is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves;” (2 Corinthians 4.6-7) The earthen vessels, the jars of clay, are you and me. We are ordinary people, and it’s the glory of God to hide a matter, even in us! It’s the common thing, the available and common jar, the ordinary bowl, the Melmac, not the good Wedgewood China, with which God wants to adorn his house, this house.

How do I know this? By reading the double symbolism in our story today. We see that in the reading of the story of the used old garment and the allegory of the wineskins. The story is about people.

Here’s the reading, again, in the four verses:

Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. But no one puts a patch of un-shrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results. Nor do men put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out, and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved.” (Matthew 9.14-17)

Simply put, the new wineskin is his disciples, it's people. I'll get to that soon. For now, imagine the scene. People are eating together, we learn later in Matthew's house. He's a tax collector. Outside the house are some of John's followers and some Pharisees who are sorting out the issues associated with Jesus. They wonder aloud why Jesus eats with sinners. Especially a tax man like Matthew. So they ask him about eating and fasting. A reasonable question. And Jesus doesn't really answer it except to say, there will be time later to fast. It's as if he's saying, “For now, they are learning. Real disciples are hanging out with me. Real disciples are enjoying my presence. There will be time for sorrow and fasting and other such activity, but for now, it's a good time.” And I wonder if he didn't then ask, “Do you guys get that? Do you understand what I'm saying? Do you have ears to hear?”

Now I know that most Bible expositors interpret this passage to be talking about the end of Judaism and the beginning of the Kingdom of God in the Church. It's so binary and so easy. And it's close, but it's not on. There was no church that Jesus could have invited others to join; there was no Baptist or Lutheran or Charismatic place like the Mustard Seed... there were Jewish and only Jewish places to attend. So the either/or nature of most commentators sounds an alarm to me in their supercessionist conclusions.

In the parallel Gospel in which the double word picture is repeated, Luke relates how Jesus chose his disciples. All of chapters 5 and 6 string together several stories which deal with the calling and selection of the disciples. Luke records the story of the miraculous catch of fish during which Jesus invites James, John, Peter (and by inference Andrew) to become his disciples. (Luke 5:1-11) The section concludes with the fishermen leaving their boats, their nets and the miraculous catch to follow Jesus alone. (5.11) The story returns to the calling of the disciples with the call of Matthew (Luke 5:27-28). Like the fishermen, Matthew the tax collector, leaves everything and follows Jesus. You will hear more about the call of Matthew next week when Barry Foster speaks. Then the disciples have the dinner at which we saw the conversation.

Following our double word picture, Luke six begins with a short story (Luke 6:1-5) where the Pharisees challenge Jesus on Sabbath issues, but it is in fact the disciples' behavior that the Pharisees criticize, not the behavior of Jesus. They accused the disciples of breaking the Sabbath by picking the heads of grain and winnowing them

in their hands. Luke closes the section with the choice of the Twelve apostles(Luke 6:12-16).

There is another Talmudic tale (Pirkei Avot 4.20) which sounds similar. I don't have time to repeat it here (but reproduce it at the end for those online) but suffice it to say some of the Pharisees might have known what Jesus meant.

Like the larger Gospel context of our story, the Talmudic passage is comparing different types of teachers, disciples and teachings. That is, the vessels for containing wine are not institutions, religious movements or teachings. The vessels containing the wine are individuals. The wine is the teaching that the individual consumes or contains. Thus:

The new garment is previously uneducated students, while the old garment are the previously educated students, whom we usually call the Jewish leadership. The patch is the teaching. In the other story, the new wineskins are previously uneducated students, that is, the apostles, and you and me, while the old wineskins are previously educated students. The new wine is new teaching, based on Jesus' instruction while the old wine is previous teaching with rabbinic interpretation. Thus, the Judaic Meaning: New teaching requires previously uneducated students in order to be received. Or you might be more familiar with what Jesus said, again and again, "He that has an ear, let him hear." This way of looking at this does not pit Jesus against Judaism nor does it imagine a conflict between New Covenant Grace and Old Covenant Torah. Instead, it pits Jesus's choice of disciples against the Pharisees' choice of disciples. And get this, it allows for you and for me to be a part. We can be part of God's Kingdom now. Welcomed by His love.

The Gospel demonstrates the apparently wrong choices Jesus made in disciples. They are fishermen, tax collectors and "sinners." They are feasting and drinking instead of fasting and praying. They appear to be bungling Sabbath observance to feed their stomachs. They are not the pious types. They have not been educated with the sages. In this regard, they are like a clean slate, a fresh, piece of paper for Jesus to write on. The double image is not a polemic against Judaism; it is simply an explanation of his choice of disciples. In essence, Jesus was saying to the Pharisees, "Look, You can't teach an old dog new tricks."

I used to teach a lesson here from Acts chapter 4. I love that story. It's when the Sanhedrin questions Peter and John and Peter is filled with the Spirit and answers very well about there being only one way to be saved. In Acts 4:13 Luke records, "Now as [the Sanhedrin] observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus." On that day, when two poorly educated fishermen stood before the Sanhedrin, they demonstrated the full caliber of their education under Jesus and vindicated his choice of disciples. New garments, new wineskins, new life and new students.

Application

Friends at the Mustard Seed Church, and those watching and listening via the internet and CDs and mp3s, God wants you to join his family. He wants you to work together with those who are already in his family. He wants us to see others in the

Body of Christ as disciples, and brothers and sisters in this healed family. We were sick; the Great Physician came to us. We were not the previous disciples; we are the new ones. And the needy ones. And the need-one-another ones.

That's what I remember about the Mustard Seed. Nick and Ineke staying up late at night to pray with broken people. I was over at a commune house on 15th and Tennessee where wayward wanderers and hurting folks could find repair and find a meal and find others who were equally hungry to find eternity in the Great Physician. Some of you were among those early disciples.

You have been learning and considering how to become new wineskins. Don't be fooled into thinking that means we cannot meet in a church building or use tambourines. It does not mean we have to write new songs each week or never repeat a sermon from the past. 'New wineskins' does not mean chasing after wind. **Story of the pigs and the farmer.**

Pieter wrote me a couple months ago: "We are going to be looking for ways to practically serve our community and show them the love of Christ. The theme for this year is God enabling us to become a new wineskin that will be able to contain His new wine."

Here's the real issue. Will you, will each of you, be a disciple? Will you learn and keep learning? Will you attend classes? Will you read and study when no one is watching, and when you have nothing you have to present? Will you sit at Jesus' feet in prayer and enjoy him each day or at least regularly? Will you bring others into that fellowship and relationship? That's the work of a disciple. Being taught and teaching others. Loved and loving. And here's as good a place as any to do so.

May God comfort our sister Lynne Pell who is here, in the loss of her beloved son Philip last month. May God give us friends and companions who walk with us in this new wineskin each day.

Thank you Pieter for letting me come back. Thank you friends who partner with Jews for Jesus, some each month, some once a year, some once every while, who help me to stay out on the fields, sharing Messiah with Jewish people in Australia and New Zealand. And we share with anyone and everyone, through our Gospel tract ministry, through our book shop in Sydney's Jewish center in Bondi, and in one-to-one visits with inquirers throughout the country via Skype and in their homes. We are ever looking for new students. We are not ashamed. And no, the floods in Australia didn't directly affect Patty and me. We are hundreds of miles from them, but our food prices will go up dramatically in the weeks to come. Still, thank you for wondering. And caring and praying. I appreciate you...all!

My last words today, Be taught and look for students to teach. Thanks and shalom!

Bob Mendelsohn is the national director of Jews for Jesus in Sydney Australia. He ministers internationally regularly in Singapore and the US and in other countries. He is married to Patty, and they have three adult children. Contact him on bob.mendelsohn@gmail.com or visit the website jewsforjesus.org.au

Text for sermon: Matthew 9.9-26

Matt. 9.9 ¶ And as Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man, called Matthew, sitting in the tax office; and He said to him, "Follow Me!" And he rose, and followed Him.

Matt. 9.10 ¶ And it happened that as He was reclining at the table in the house, behold many tax-gatherers and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples.

Matt. 9.11 And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, "Why is your Teacher eating with the tax-gatherers and sinners?"

Matt. 9.12 But when He heard this, He said, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick.

Matt. 9.13 "But go and learn what this means, 'I desire compassion, and not sacrifice,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Matt. 9.14 ¶ Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?"

Matt. 9.15 And Jesus said to them, "The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.

Matt. 9.16 "But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results.

Matt. 9.17 "Nor do men put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out, and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved."

Matt. 9.18 ¶ While He was saying these things to them, behold, there came a synagogue official, and bowed down before Him, saying, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay Your hand on her, and she will live."

Matt. 9.19 And Jesus rose and began to follow him, and so did His disciples.

Matt. 9.20 And behold, a woman who had been suffering from a hemorrhage for twelve years, came up behind Him and touched the fringe of His cloak;

Matt. 9.21 for she was saying to herself, "If I only touch His garment, I shall get well."

Matt. 9.22 But Jesus turning and seeing her said, "Daughter, take courage; your faith has made you well." And at once the woman was made well.

Matt. 9.23 And when Jesus came into the official's house, and saw the flute-players, and the crowd in noisy disorder,

Matt. 9.24 He began to say, "Depart; for the girl has not died, but is asleep." And they began laughing at Him.

Matt. 9.25 But when the crowd had been put out, He entered and took her by the hand; and the girl arose.

Matt. 9.26 And this news went out into all that land.

Endnotes:

Pirkei Avot 4:20

Elisha ben Avuyah said: "He who studies as a child, unto what can he be compared? He can be compared to ink written upon a fresh [new] sheet of paper. But he who studies as an adult, unto what can he be compared? He can be compared to ink written on a smudged [previously used and erased] sheet of paper. Rabbi Yose ben Yehudah of the city of Babylon said, "He who learns from the young, unto what can he be compared? He can be compared to one who eats unripe grapes, and drinks unfermented wine from his vat. But he who learns from the old, unto what can he be compared? He can be compared to one who eats ripe grapes, and drinks old wine. Rabbi (Meir) said: Do not pay attention to the container but pay attention to that which is in it. There is a new container full of old wine, and here is an old container which does not even contain new wine.

Wikipedia:

The parables follow the recruitment of Matthew as a disciple of Jesus, and appear to be part of a discussion at a banquet held by him (Luke 5:29).[2]

The metaphors in the two parables were drawn from contemporary culture.[3] New cloth had not yet shrunk, so that using new cloth to patch older clothing would result in a tear as it began to shrink.[4] Similarly, old wineskins had been "stretched to the limit"[4] or become brittle[3] as wine had fermented inside them; using them again therefore risked bursting them.[4]
