



Old Wineskins

Matthew 9:17

Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.

Have you ever felt like the old wineskins?

During the time that Jesus taught, bottles or flasks were made of animal skin, usually goat, sheep or ox. Wine or grape juice was stored in these flasks. The juice or wine was full of wild yeasts and natural sugars that fermented over time. They produced alcohol and carbon dioxide during the fermentation process. As the carbon dioxide was released during fermentation, the flasks would expand and stretch. Flasks that were made of newer skin retained their elasticity and would stretch easily to hold the fermented wine. As flasks aged, they grew more brittle and "dry". They were not suitable for storing wine as it fermented because the lack of elasticity would cause the skins to split open during fermentation and spill the wine inside.

In Biblical times, water was a scarcity in many regions, and wine was a part of day-to-day life. It was used with daily meals. It was poured out in sacrifice. It was shared in celebration. In the Bible, wine often symbolizes sustenance, life, covenant and blessing. In Jesus's parable, the wineskins or vessels, both old and new, are symbolic of us - God's people. (2 Timothy 2:21)

So who are the old wineskins? After all, they are the ones who are unfit to hold new wine, wasting the very thing they are meant to preserve. Are old wineskins veterans in ministry? People who have been doing the same thing for such a long time it becomes almost repetitive? Are they people who never quite made it to the next level? Are old wineskins people who are resistant to change and the new thing God is doing? Are they the previous generation of believer who ushered in the previous move of God? They certainly can be.

And the new wineskins - are they the next generation? The people who God is going to bring to the forefront of the church? Are they new converts? Possibly. These are assumptions that I, along with many others, have made in the past. But recently God began to change my thinking on this simple parable in Matthew.

The Elders

Modern American culture is heavily focused on the newest, latest and greatest. The



preoccupation with agelessness is apparent in the surgeries and cosmetic adjustments that attempt to simulate youth as we grow older. I myself have plucked and moisturized, dyed and spackled in the pursuit of beauty. But when wrinkles begin to form and bald patches begin to grow, where does that obsession with youth leave us? Feeling irrelevant and abandoned. Past our prime. Overlooked. Old.

There is a drive within the Church to be on the cutting edge of what God is doing. That is as it should be! We should constantly be in communication with the Holy Spirit, eager to be an active part of what He is doing in the earth. However, one thing we have to be guard ourselves against as we experience the new thing God is doing (Isaiah 43:19) is a mentality of "out with the old and in with the new."

The secular culture's passion for progress has carried over into the church, but one of the detriments brought along with it is the loss of honor and respect for elders. Instead of seeing the value of the previous generation's wisdom, we are in danger of seeing simply dated traditions and old school mindsets. Old age does not equal old wineskin. In fact, Jesus Himself placed an importance on the elders. In James 5:14-15 He says "*Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.*" Although He referred to them as elders, this was not necessarily an indicator that He meant elderly.

Just as in the natural we see people of the same physical age with varying levels of maturity, there are varying levels of maturity within the church. This is not determined by length of time spent as a believer or by physical age but by the progress of spiritual growth. The elders of the church were the veterans of the faith. People who had both wisdom and experience spiritually.

Sadducees and Pharisees - The Spirit of Religion

The honor and respect that Jesus taught toward the elders of the church was in stark contrast with how He viewed the Sadducees and the Pharisees. The Sadducees and the Pharisees held most of the positions in the ruling class and Jewish court system known as the Sanhedrin. The Great Sanhedrin was the supreme religious body, comprised by 71 sages, that met in the city of Jerusalem in the Temple. There were also smaller religious Sanhedrins with 23 to 71 members in every town in Israel.

The Sadducees were the aristocrats of Israel. They were usually wealthy and held power, often the positions of chief priests and high priests. Since Israel was under the reign of Rome at the time, they were often more concerned with politics than religion in their attempts to keep peace. Since they were wealthy and accommodating to Rome, they



were not as favored by the common man as the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were held in higher esteem because they were mostly comprised of middle-class businessmen. They were also part of the ruling class of Israel, and although they held fewer positions in the Sanhedrin and as priests, they were in control of decision making in the Sanhedrin because they had the support of the people. Unlike the Sadducees, the Pharisees were focused on religion over politics.

The Sadducees and Pharisees were rebuked numerous times throughout scripture by Jesus. (Matthew 23:2-9, 13, 23-24) Remember, they were the chief and high priests in the church at the time and their lives revolved around God and religion. However, their single-mindedness in their pursuit of the Law blinded them to their recognition of the Messiah and prevented their acceptance of God's grace and mercy. The relationship that God wants with His people was reduced to a legalistic list of rituals and rules. Their misguided loyalty to their traditions and doctrines made them the most bitter and deadly opponent of the very Messiah they were waiting for.

Jesus said that He came not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. (Matthew 5:17) He taught that our standard is not the letter of the Law, but the perfection of God. In fact, Jesus called for an even stricter adherence to the spirit of the Law than was seen in the Law's most fervent followers! (Matthew 5:20-48) The key part of the Law that Jesus wanted to teach God's people was that relationship and love was imperative. Obedience to the Laws set by God was meant to be obtained through loving Him and others. (Matthew 22:34-40) By obeying His commandments to love God and love our neighbors, His people would be following His Law as a natural byproduct.

The Sadducees and Pharisees tried to please God by simply following a list of rules instead of obeying Him because of the love for Him that they built through relationship. They saw salvation as a prize that they could win through their adherence to rituals, social standards and rules. They saw righteousness as something they could earn. This is the core of the "spirit of religion."

The spirit of religion is the identifying difference between the Elders and the Sadducees and Pharisees. Trying to attain righteousness through adherence to the dictates of the Law written in stone is an impossible task. (Romans 2:12-16) Instead, we are called by Jesus to live according to the Law of God which is written on our hearts. (Hebrews 10:16) Our relationship with God should be less about what we do than who we are. When we walk in intimacy with God and who He says we are, the things we do become a natural reflection of our relationship with Him. It is only through the righteousness and grace of Jesus that we are saved. (Acts 4:12) Our attitude and actions should reflect the law of love, not a love of the law.

Traditions are meant not to be given the same authority as Scripture, but they are meant to be respected. It is ironic that we are able to respect the moves of God we read about in our Bibles, but are able to discard what God has done within our own lifetimes because it is "dated." We should never, even for a moment, look with scornful eyes on what God has done in the past. Whether it be hymns sung accompanied by an organ or flag banners waving as people are slain in the spirit - God was doing something in His church. Some things that God has done in the past may have been intended for simply that time and place, but that doesn't mean they weren't valid then. Just because something was done in the past doesn't exclude God from moving in that way again. We don't determine the move of God. We are simply the vessel, not the wine.

Renewal

At one point in my life, I was very irritated by the importance that was being placed on God doing a new thing. Why is the old thing not good enough any more? It worked just fine in the past! God was quick to correct me in my thinking. If God is doing something new as He states repeatedly in the Bible and proves throughout history, I'd better not be resistant to it! But I ended up feeling a measure of sorrow and loss because I then labeled myself as an old wineskin. After all, I had been a Christian for a long time. I had participated in the church in "that" move of God and ministered during "that" outpouring of His Spirit, but now it must be time for me to step out of the way so that the next-generation, new wineskins could do the new thing.

This skewed way of thinking was exactly what prevented the wine of God's Spirit from being able to work in me the way He wanted. By abandoning God's way of thinking and labeling myself as irrelevant, I prevented Him from working in me. I *was* an old wineskin... but only because I chose to be. I allowed a spirit of religion to color my way of thinking. I lost my way because I forgot that God's laws are not man's laws. I forgot that God can make old things new again.

Revelation 21:5

And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." And He said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true."

Throughout the Bible there is story after story of people who were past what they perceived to be the prime of their life and God renewed them and began a new work in them. Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 21:2), Moses and Aaron (Exodus 7:7), Joshua and Caleb (Joshua 24:29, 14:6-11), Daniel (Daniel 1:21) and Paul (Philemon 9:9). At a point in life where reason and circumstances would dictate that they should be declining in ability and ministry, many of them were just beginning! Although the Bible likens believers to the branches of a vine (John 15:1-5), we are not meant to follow a cycle that



allows for our fruitfulness to dwindle once we have reached maturity. Instead, we are supposed to grow, reaching maturity, and through our connection to the vine, be constantly receiving life.

Psalm 92:12-15 says The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree, He shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Those who are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bear fruit in old age; they shall be fresh and flourishing, to declare that the Lord is upright; He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him.

We serve a God who is a giver of Life. The Source of all life. (Psalm 36:9) Like wine being poured into a flask, He is continually pouring life into His children. When we walk in relationship and obedience to Him, He renews us. His Word over you declares that the righteous will walk in a state of fruitfulness, reaching peak maturity and continuing in their fruitfulness. In waiting on the Lord, His life is placed into us and literally makes us new again. (Isaiah 40:31)

Our right-standing with God enables us to be fit vessels for the wine of His Spirit in us. Seeking Him with a clean heart immediately stops the growth of the spirit of religion in us. Communication with the Holy Spirit and love for God prevents us from becoming old and stale spiritually. In fact, it removes the dry, uncompromising nature of the old wineskins and renews us. When God renews us, we are not just perked up a little bit, looking just a bit fresher and livelier. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says that when we belong to Christ, we are literally a new creation. You are constantly being given His brand-new life.

The New Wine

No matter where you are in life, there is a place for you in the kingdom of God. No matter your age, experience, or background, God says that you are a vessel for His spirit in the earth. The signs and wonders, miracles and life-changing power that Jesus said would accompany believers (Mark 16:17-18) were not an exclusive privilege awarded to the elite. Jesus said that they were an identifying mark. Believers in Him will, without exception, show and experience these miracles! This is because the fruitfulness, miracles and power are not because of us, they are because of what we carry inside of us. The limitless power of God is contained within us! What a revelation! Imagine the new levels of ministry and relationship we might begin to walk in when we fully realize the power that God has not only allowed us to carry, but deemed us worthy of!

Love comes through having a relationship. I encourage you to look at your life in a new way. Set aside any preconceived ideas of what it means to be a Christian or to follow Jesus. Start at step one. Ask God to show you how to love Him. As you pursue a



relationship with God, He will begin to change your way of thinking. He will change the attitudes of your heart. Ask Him to teach you to love others the way He does. His Word promises that living your life according to this Law of love will ensure that any other relevant rules or stipulations will be met.

We need to be in constant pursuit of God. The amazing thing is that when we pursue Him, He promises that He will be found. Although the laws of time say that everything ages as time passes, you don't ever have to become an old wineskin. God's way says that you are meant to live ageless. In the end, the wineskin is just a container for what really matters: the wine.

We are only responsible for our condition as vessels. There is no pressure on you as a believer to perform! When you walk according to the law of love, you will be a fit vessel for His spirit. Your productivity in ministry, the fruit of the Spirit in your life, miracles and signs - these are all natural results of God living in us. When we concern ourselves simply with the state of our own hearts, obedience and relationship with God, there is no need to worry about those things. They can only be created and manifested by God. When we carry Him within us, they will be present, because He is the source.

God has given you the ability to live a life rich with spiritual encounters and manifestations. You can see God's hand at work with your own eyes. You have the opportunity to witness first-hand the power and strength of God. Live your life dedicated to being a new wineskin for Him. He is the wine and not only does He never leave you, He is within you.

~Dana Smith

