

(T) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this teaching series, you will have the opportunity to learn how to understand and teach the parables of Jesus Christ. By using *the guidelines for interpreting parables*, two teachers will study **the parables of the bridegroom, the patched garment and the wineskins** in Matthew 9:14-17, Mark 2:18-22 and Luke 5:33-39. Remember that this parable was told in the context of parables about God's kingdom. These are parables concerning PRAYER AND FASTING IN GOD'S KINGDOM. As you listen to this programme, make notes in a notebook or record the programme. Please read Matthew 9:14-17.

(S) In Matthew 9:15-17, Jesus uses three very short parables to teach Christians about the relationship between prayer and fasting:

One. The parable of the bridegroom: "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast."

Two. The parable of the patched garment: "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse."

Three. The parable of the wineskins: "Neither do men 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." Luke 5:39 adds, "And no-one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, 'The old is better'."

(T) **POINT 1. UNDERSTAND THE NATURAL STORY OF THE PARABLE.**

What are the true-to-life elements of these stories?

In the first parable, a bridegroom and his guests are a common reality everywhere in the world.

In the second parable, all people who make clothes know that when a patch of unshrunk cloth is put on a hole in an old, badly worn garment, it will shrink and tear the garment.

In the third parable, a wineskin was usually made of the skin of a goat or a sheep. The hide was removed from the animal and then tanned. The hair was cut very short and then the hide was turned inside out. The openings of the four feet and tail were closed with cords and the neck opening became the mouth of the container. New wine always ferments. Therefore, if new wine is poured into an old wineskin, the pressure of the fermentation will burst the wineskin, resulting in the loss of both the wineskin and the new wine.

(S) **POINT 2. EXAMINE THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT AND DETERMINE THE ELEMENTS OF THE PARABLE.**

What is the context of these parables? The setting of these parables is contained in Matthew 9:9-14. These parables are told immediately after the calling of Matthew in all three Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. If there was a temporal connection between these two incidents, then the contrast between the old and the new is dramatically heightened. At the very time when Jesus and his disciples were *feasting* with many tax collectors and sinners in Matthew's home, the disciples of John the Baptist and the disciples of the Pharisees were *fasting*!

But even if there was no chronological connection between these two incidents, there definitely is a logical connection. The fact is that Jesus and his disciples more than on one occasion had fellowship with tax collectors and sinners. But the disciples of John the Baptist and the disciples of the Pharisees abstained from such jovial festivities and even practised a measure of austerity. This contrast was sooner or later bound to lead to the question of fasting.

The stories of these parables are contained in Matthew 9:15-17.

The explanations or applications of these parables are not given. It must be deduced from the stories and the setting.

(T) **POINT 3. IDENTIFY THE RELEVANT AND IRRELEVANT DETAILS OF THE PARABLE.**

Let us take turns to explain which of the details in these parables are really essential or relevant

Jesus does not give any of the details in these parables any particular meaning. The relevance of the details follow from the meaning of these words in other parts of the Bible and from the context.

(S) First. The meaning of the bridegroom. The Bible often compares the relationship between God and his people, or that of Christ and the Church, with the bond of love between a bridegroom and a bride. According to

2 Corinthians 11:2 and Ephesians 5:32, *the bridegroom* represents Jesus Christ and *the bride* represents the Christian Church. Jesus compares his own presence on earth with a wedding feast. The question, “How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them?” is so phrased that the answer must be “No, they cannot.”

(T) Second. The meaning of the guests of the bridegroom. They signify *the bridegroom’s attendants*, that group of the wedding guests who stood the closest to the groom and played an essential part in the wedding ceremony. They did everything possible to promote the success of the festivities. They represent the Christians.

(S) Third. The meaning of the patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Jesus does not give these details any specific meaning. But from the context it is clear that *the old garment* represents the *old order of man-ordained things*, for example, the old system of fasting as well as the other practical applications deduced by the Pharisees from the Old Testament ceremonial law. And *the patch of unshrunk cloth* represents *the new order of God-ordained things*; especially God’s salvation in Jesus Christ. The message is that the new order of things cannot be fitted into the old order of things, or else both will be ruined!

(T) Fourth. The meaning of the old wine and old wineskins. Jesus does not explain these details. But from the context it is clear that *the old wine* represents the legalistic and joyless mourning and fasting of the disciples of John and the Pharisees. *The old wineskins* represent the fasting days and fasting practises of the Jews. By extension, it also represents the other legalistic and human ordained practices of the Jews fitted into an inflexible traditional system of religion.

(S) Fifth. The meaning of the new wine and the new wineskins. Likewise, from the context it is clear that *the new wine* represents the salvation and blessings that Christ brings to everyone who is willing to accept them. And *the new wineskins* represent the new way of gratitude and joy in which Christians relate to God and the free and spontaneous way in which they serve and worship God. It is not correct to say that *the old wine* symbolises salvation by good works of the law and *the new wine* represents salvation by grace. The contrast is rather between *the old order of things*, which were often purely human institutions, and *the new order of things*, which Jesus Christ introduced. The contrast is between purely human institutions and the divine ordinances; between *human traditions* and *divine teachings*. While there was continuity between the teaching in the Old Testament (Dt 6:5; Lev 19:18; Mk 12:30-31) and the teaching of Jesus in the New Testament, the Pharisees had buried the true teaching of the Old Testament beneath their man-made traditions. The contrast Jesus makes is between *the inflexible traditionalism of the Pharisees* and *the true teaching of the Bible*. While the old way of fasting excluded joy completely, the joy of salvation introduces the new way of relating to God and serving God!

(T) Sixth. After drinking the old wine, no one wants the new wine, because he says, “The old is better.” In fact, the new order which Jesus Christ introduced is in the best sense of the word old, because it restored the very essence of the Old Testament teaching! However, *the old wine* here refers to *the tradition of the elders*, to the religion of the Pharisees. Thus, this sentence is a commentary on the ultra-conservatism and the ingrained and inflexible traditionalism of the Pharisees and their followers. They held on to their own opinions and decisions, while rejecting God’s word as taught in the Old Testament and by Jesus Christ. They preferred stuffiness to fresh air.

(S) **POINT 4. IDENTIFY THE MAIN MESSAGE OF THE PARABLE.**

The parables of the bridegroom, the patched garment and the wineskins teach about *prayer and fasting in God’s kingdom*.

The main message of these parables is the following. “The new order of things, which Jesus Christ introduced at his First Coming, does not fit into the old order of things, which consisted of man-made institutions and traditions, like for example the mould of man-ordained fasting.”

The old order of things was determined by *the tradition of the elders*. The tradition of the elders included very much fasting, ostensibly as an expression of mourning over one’s sins, but in reality it had become a pretence and a showing-off of piety (Mt 6:16). The disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees fasted twice every week (Lk 18:12). The new order of things is summarised in Matthew 11:4-5 and Luke 4:18-19: The new order of things are things like: the healing of the sick, the restoration of the handicapped, the setting free of the demon-possessed, the raising of the dead, the preaching of the good news to the poor, the proclamation of God’s favour and the salvation from sin. The joy of salvation in all its forms does not go together with mourning and fasting, as if the coming of Jesus Christ to this world should be viewed as a great calamity that had descended upon the people of the world.

The joy of salvation is a fundamental characteristic of God’s kingdom! The people of God’s kingdom do not mourn and fast like the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees did, but they rejoice in the presence of Jesus Christ and because of the reality of their salvation. While the old way of fasting excluded joy completely, the joy of salvation introduced the new way of relating to God and serving God!

Of course, this does not mean that there is no room for Christians to grieve about the suffering in the world, to experience distress in their troubles or to mourn over their own sin or loss of a beloved. Jesus is not speaking against genuine sorrow and mourning, but against *the outward religious practices* of the people of Israel. The contrast is between purely human institutions and the divine ordinances.

(T) **POINT 5. COMPARE THE PARABLE WITH PARALLEL AND CONTRASTING PASSAGES.**

Let us take turns to teach important facts about fasting in the Bible.

First. What is fasting? Fasting is the voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes. Fasting is different than a hunger-strike, the purpose of which is to attract attention to a particular cause, usually a political cause. Fasting is also different than dieting, the purpose of which is to promote physical health. The normal way of fasting involved only the abstinence from food, not from water, and for one day only, not for long periods of time.

(S) Second. The purposes of fasting. One purpose of fasting during the Old Testament days was *to express humiliation, during which a person grieved for his sin and confessed his sin*. It was often accompanied by wearing sackcloth and dust or ashes on the head. For example, in Nehemiah 9:1-3, the Israelites confessed their sins and the wickedness of their forefathers during fasting.

A second purpose of fasting during the Old Testament days was *to express lamentation, during which people grieved their losses or feared coming threats*. This was sometimes accompanied by the tearing of their clothes and weeping. For example, in 2 Samuel 1:11-12, king David and his men mourned the death of king Saul and many Israelite soldiers. And in 2 Chronicles 20:2-4, king Jehoshaphat proclaimed a national fast in order to avert a threat of war.

A third purpose of fasting was *to promote concentration on an important religious act or event*. This was always in connection with prayer or meeting God for a special purpose. According to Deuteronomy 9:9,18 and 1 Kings 19:8, Moses and Elijah fasted for forty days and nights when God called them for a special task. According to Matthew 4:2, the purpose of Christ's fasting was to concentrate on his preparation for the task to which God the Father called him and to be tested by temptation as an apprenticeship before he undertook his difficult but exalted task. According to Acts 13:2-3 and 14:23, the Church leaders fasted in connection with the sending of missionaries and in connection with the appointment of elders in the church. This could indicate that the Christians were especially sensitive to the communications of the Holy Spirit during fasting. *These passages describe what Christ and Christian leaders did, but they do not teach what Christians must do*. Christians may therefore fast if they feel that it would help them to meet God in prayer, to seek God's counsel or to prepare themselves for their God-given tasks, but they may not require other Christians to fast.

(T) Third. The kind of fasting that pleases God. In Isaiah 58:3-12, God says, "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter - when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?" Thus, God teaches that *true biblical fasting* on the one hand *is to make a clean break with sin and injustice* and on the other hand *is to share one's food and clothes with the needy in the world*.

God promises that when his people *fast* like this, then he will answer their prayers and bless their lives. He says, "Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I."

(S) Fourth. Voluntary fasting should be done inconspicuously. In the New Testament, in Matthew 6:16-18 Jesus Christ teaches, "When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." Jesus speaks of *the fast as an expression of humiliation*. He condemned the act the Pharisees were putting up, when they covered their faces with ashes and wanted all people to notice their piety. *Jesus does not command his disciples to fast, neither does he forbid them to fast*. If they wanted to fast, they may, but should do it as inconspicuously as possible.

(T) Fifth. The Old Testament requirement of fasting has been abolished. After the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, things have changed. In Colossians 2:14 is written that by his death, Jesus Christ *cancelled the requirements of the Ceremonial Law, which included fasting, sacrificing animals, bringing harvest offerings and tithes, eating only clean foods and circumcision*. He took these requirements away from Christians!

And in Ephesians 2:15 is written that by his death, Jesus Christ *destroyed the Ceremonial Law that brought separation* between Jews and Gentiles, and *abolished it forever from the Christian Church!* Fasting is no longer a religious requirement for Christians and it may not be reintroduced as a religious requirement into the Church!

(S) **POINT 6. SUMMARISE THE MAIN TEACHINGS OF THE PARABLE.**

Let us take turns to summarise the main teachings or messages of the parable.

First. The main message of the parable is that “The new order of things, which Jesus Christ introduced at his First Coming, does not fit into the old order of things, which consisted of man-made institutions and traditions, like for example the mould of man-ordained fasting.”

God is not pleased with the people’s traditional ways of mourning and fasting. With the First Coming of Christ the new order begins! The new order of things is expressed by “God with us” and “God within us”. This new order of things will awaken in every Christian a great joy. God delights in the joy of the Christian over his salvation. God delights in the new way Christians serve him, that is, in sharing their lives and possessions with the needy.

(T) Second. All legalistic and joyless fasting as well as the other aspects of the inflexible traditionalism of the Pharisees must give way to the salvation that Jesus Christ brings. We may privately fast for good reasons, if we wish, but we may not require fasting of other Christians. The kingdom of God is not characterised by mourning and fasting, but by joy unspeakable and full of glory. The *new wine* of salvation together with all the blessings of salvation must be poured into *the new wineskins* of gratitude, freedom, and spontaneous service to the glory of God!

(S) **ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK**

First. Preach, teach or study this parable together with another person or group of people. Next week we will study the parable of the interceding friend. As preparation, please read Luke 11:1-13.

Second. See the workbooks “Go and preach God’s Kingdom and www.dota.net

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to “Discipleship training on the air”.