

October 30, 2016

Romans 2:25-29  
Philippians 3:1-3  
Ephesians 2:11-18  
Galatians 5:2-12

## ARE YOU CIRCUMCISED?

One of the most familiar parables we have: If we pour new wine into old wineskins, the fermenting process is too dynamic for skins that are old and brittle. The skins will burst, and the wine will pour out onto the ground and be lost. In short, we lose both the wine and the old wineskins. (Luke 5:37-39)

Do we ever get too “wooden” – too literal – with the parables? We do with everything else; why should the parables be immune? In any case, all parables are imagery that reflects real life, but the imagery is always flawed if we try to get too literal. A sower went out to sow, and the seed falls on four different kinds of soil, with of course various results. But almost everyone listening to this parable realizes pretty quickly that he or she has been *all four* kinds of soil, and we have experienced all four of the results at different times. Not only that, but the parable implies that we can change the kind of soil we are; otherwise there is no point in telling the parable. Such things do not keep us from learning from this parable – if we really want to.

Am I an “old wineskin”? Yes, and I have been for as far back as I can remember. That is, I have a set of attitudes, opinions, prejudices, and beliefs that make me resistant to changing my mind about things. These opinions have not come from out of nowhere. Some I picked up from the environment I was born into, or from my parents and the church I grew up in. Some have come from experiences that have shaped me; some from study; some from discussions and arguments with friends. Lots of the differing opinions that people try to pour into my old wineskin are not nearly as well thought-through as my own, and most of them do not come from “authority” as high as the authority I am already trusting. I assume most of you feel this way too. So I am not ashamed that I like my “old wine” better than a lot of the “new wine” that various groups or individuals are trying to sell me. Some of you notice that I often have considerable patience and understanding when you do not instantly accept some of the new wine I try to offer to you. I expect the resistance.

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On the other hand, not infrequently the Holy Spirit tries to pour some new wine into my old wineskin. Sometimes while studying the Bible, sometimes in conversation with one of you, sometimes in the challenges of an experience or a situation I am trying to deal with, the Holy Spirit gets my attention with something I have forgotten or neglected or never really knew to begin with. Then of course I hope the parable is *not* rigid – not unalterably accurate. I am an old wineskin, but at such a time I need the Spirit to help me become a new wineskin so I can deal with the turmoil and readjustment of new wine making changes in my old opinions and behaviors. The biblical word is “repent”: turn and head in a new direction. When was the last time you actually changed an opinion or a behavior because you felt the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord was calling you to some new awareness or to some new assignment? If that seldom happens to us, we are not on the Christian Path or WAY; we are merely stuck in the mud.

A good parable undoes its own truth. Does that make the parable false? No; just effective. In this parable about new and old wineskins, we have options that a literal old wineskin does not have. With free will and with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can find ways to be receptive enough and flexible enough to take in the new wine of Jesus’ Message and presence with us. Then, however imperfectly, we may manage to adjust and rejoice fast enough to keep from bursting. Thus the parable may awaken us fast enough to prevent the very conclusion it is warning us against. (Almost all the parables are like that: if we listen carefully, we do not get the end that they are warning us about.) On the other hand, if we do not take the power and dynamism of the new wine seriously enough, it will indeed burst our old frameworks and patterns and mind-sets to smithereens. The only alternative is to never allow any of the Message or the new relationship with God to get into our system to begin with. That is definitely the easiest and safest way. And that is what Jesus expected from most of us. He ends the parable saying, *“They will not want the new wine; they will say that the old wine is better.”*

This kind of fermenting process was rampant in the early church. The Crucifixion/Resurrection/Pentecost events had shaken the foundations and expectations of all traditional religious beliefs. We are still trying to recover and get our bearings in the light of all that has been revealed to us. The presence of our Risen Lord does not often let us get very stodgy or set in our opinions. We have too much to learn and too much to incorporate into our lives to get complacent. Being pilgrims is more than a historical reference for us.

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The upheaval of new wine always has a way of working its way down into the details of our habits and customs. Sometimes we resent that; sometimes we rejoice in it. Yet the principles operate whether we complain or rejoice. If I get a new awareness of how much forgiveness and grace I am receiving from Jesus, that will have increasing impact on all the relationships in my life. It will even make some of them worse for a while. But it will leave none of them untouched. We try to keep truth contained and compartmentalized to keep from being shaken apart, but in the long run, our borders are insufficient for the task. We get lifted into new awareness and into new joy, no matter how hard we try to play it safe.

In the life of the New Testament church, three areas of this kind of ferment are fairly easy to identify. Of course, there are far more than three, and some of them – especially the daily relationship with the Holy Spirit – are far more important. But these three were causing huge confusion and, for some, considerable delight. We do not have to read very much between the lines to notice the turmoil. By the way, not all the Christians were agreeing about what the truth was or what to do about it. I do not know if that is comforting to anybody. For me, I like it better when we do not try to pretend that “love” makes everything easy.

The three areas I am referring to are:

1.) **DIETARY LAWS.** Are we still kosher, or can we now eat with Gentiles? So simple at first blush. If yes to the latter, then can we extend a full welcome into the fellowship of the Christian church to all who want to come in? Did I phrase that carefully enough? All are *not* welcome – because some refuse to be and do not want to be. Others would like to come in – as long as they can persuade us to take Jesus out of the equations.

The dietary laws have huge repercussions on how we behave in real life and on a daily basis. The impact is far greater than we at first imagine. But I do not want to talk about that today. I’m just mentioning that when the grace and love of God sift down to this level, the trauma and drama are far beyond what the neophytes and the careless at first imagine.

2.) **THE DAY OF WORSHIP.** Do we go on worshipping on the Sabbath – the seventh day of the week – as has been commanded by Moses and assumed to be the will of God (even built into the Ten Commandments) for a thousand generations? Or do we switch

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to Sunday as our day of worship, in honor of the Resurrection? Of course, it ended up a test: Do we trust the authority of Jesus – do we trust His authority in claiming and proclaiming the grace of God? And it gets even more specific than that: Do I trust the authority of Jesus *enough* to risk the well-being of my soul by defying the Laws of Moses? Most of you sit here today with no awareness of the risk you are taking. This was never true for any of the early Christians. Worshipping on Sunday was a proclamation of freedom from the Old Covenant. You took your life into your own hands and decided whether or not to trust Jesus enough to pour all your hopes into new wineskins. If you were wrong, you would lose both the wine and the wineskins – both the old *and* the new.

Do we remember that part of the parable? This is not an idle or insignificant choice. If we choose wrongly, we lose both the new and the old. I am quite sure that many people tried to worship on both Sunday and the Sabbath – for a while. Why do I think this, though I was not even there? I think this because I watch you (and me too, of course). We love to straddle fences when we think we can manage it. Has human nature changed all that much? Why make a commitment as long as we think we can look good to everybody? Jesus had a bad habit of cutting through all such pretense. But I do not want to talk about the proper day of worship today either.

3.) ARE YOU CIRCUMCISED? The third issue of great consternation in the early church was the issue of circumcision. This probably is not even on the radar of most modern Christians. But you have already noticed from the Scripture readings (and there are a whole lot more where those came from) that this was a huge and major issue for the early Christians.

Some Christians were still getting circumcised because other Christians were telling them they had to do this if they were sincere converts. Many Christians thought you had to be a good Jew before moving on into being a true Christian. Many thought that the New Covenant was the next stage beyond the Old Covenant, but not a departure from it.

One of Paul's biggest mistakes was to have Timothy circumcised. *“Paul went on to Derbe and then to Lystra, where he found a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish Christian mother and a gentile father, well spoken of by the Christians at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted to take him with him when he left, so he had him circumcised*

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*out of consideration for the Jews who lived in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Gentile.” (Acts 16:1-3)*

But later Paul will write back to these very same churches, as we just heard: *“Mark my words: I, Paul, say to you that if you get yourself circumcised, Christ will benefit you no more. I impress on you once again that every man who accepts circumcision is under obligation to keep the entire law. When you seek to be justified by way of law, you are cut off from Christ: you have put yourselves outside God’s grace. For it is by the Spirit and through faith that we hope to attain that righteousness which we eagerly await. If we are in union with Christ Jesus, circumcision makes no difference at all, nor does the lack of it; the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”* (Galatians 5:2-6)

How embarrassing for Paul to look back and see himself as so dead wrong in his choices and influence regarding Timothy. Of course, he did not realize it at the time. He loved Timothy and was only trying to do the best he could for the mission. But he had not thought it through or prayed it through yet. And what about Timothy? Did Timothy ever chide Paul at all? “Hey, for you this was just a point of doctrine – and one in which you were mistaken. But for me this was a week of painful recovery. I don’t object that you changed your mind, but couldn’t you have changed it just a little bit sooner?”

Well, “live and learn,” we say. But sometimes we live quite a bit without doing much learning. In any case, Paul ends up making a very big issue about true circumcision. He thinks that a physical mark on a physical body cannot be the deep or true significance of circumcision. I wonder if you all agree.

Circumcision had become the profound mark and sign of faithfulness to God. Trimming the foreskin of the penis had become the true sign and seal of obedience and submission to God. It meant you were sworn to keep the commandments. It meant you were dedicated, from the eighth day after your birth, to belong to Israel – to the people of God. There was no rite or ritual in Judaism which was more sacred or sacrosanct than circumcision. And we have no need to minimize it. We are physical creatures, and making a mark in such an intimate and personal way was pure genius. Impact beyond description.

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Yet Paul comes to see it as a distraction. It cannot contain the spiritual power or the dynamism of the true purpose of Jesus. So increasingly, Paul urges us to trade all our old concepts of circumcision for a higher form of circumcision. Because Paul is so versed in both the Old and New Covenants, he goes from the core of an outward physical obedience ... to the core of an inner, spiritual relationship with the Holy Spirit. This new “circumcision” included everyone – Greek, Hebrew, pagan, men, women – all who wanted the new, intimate connection between us and the Holy Spirit of Jesus.

That is not where most of Christendom was heading. It still is not. The Second Coming was the focus for many. World domination was soon the goal for others. Creating a huge outer church structure that would draw all the people of the earth into it became the dream and hope for still others. That comment about “making disciples of all nations” has had only one interpretation for much of our history: signing up church members to swell the ranks. But what if Jesus was talking about *real* disciples – *followers* of His WAY. That takes longer and requires genuine relationships. It gets both messy and beautiful, with real love-bonds involved.

Anyway, you heard a few of Paul’s comments: *“The real Jew is one who is inwardly a Jew, and his circumcision is of the heart, spiritual not literal; he receives his commendation not from men but from God.”* (Romans 2:29) *“We are the circumcision [can you imagine the boldness for Paul to say such a thing?], we who worship by the Spirit of God, whose pride is in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the physical.”* (Philippians 3:3)

Paul is wanting us to trade an outer physical mark for an inward spiritual awareness. He is substituting Pentecost for the old circumcision. He is claiming that in the New Covenant with Christ Jesus, a true relationship with the Holy Spirit is what counts – not an outward, physical rite. I wonder if we all agree – even still. If Paul could get the message of true circumcision clear and accepted and understood by the Christian church, he knew it would also clarify many things: the true purpose of Jesus’ coming; the real difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant; the endless excitement and adventure of a living relationship between the Holy Spirit and each and every sincere follower of Jesus. And I just named things that from my perspective are not very clear to Christendom even yet.

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This is one of the biggest switches – one of the most profound concept changes – that Christians have ever contemplated. We might also wonder if it ever really “took” – if it has ever really been claimed by the Christian church. I just told you that I do not think so. *“We are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, whose pride is in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the physical.”*

Some of you may be thinking about the dual realms we live in: the physical realm that we see and feel all around us, and the spiritual realm that is apprehended in different ways but which nonetheless runs along beside the physical realm, intersecting it in many ways and at many times. It is no easy thing for Jesus or for Paul or for *any* of us to claim and keep faithful to the spiritual realm that is also true and alive all around us. It is no easy thing for Paul to lift up the truth of real circumcision and keep it clear enough and powerful enough that the whole consciousness of the Christian community will switch from the awareness of a physical rite to the realities of a spiritual relationship. Nevertheless, it was a huge issue and item and argument in the early church.

But if Paul cannot help us to make that switch – if we cannot see it, understand it, believe it – what is left of the Christian church or its purpose or its Message?

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Indulge me for a minute, will you? What if an Angel of the Lord comes to you – one powerful enough and clothed in light enough that you have no doubt whatsoever of where it comes from or any qualms about its true authority – and the Angel says to you:

You have 48 hours to make a choice.

You can choose to bet your entire future – all of your eternal life – on the good character you have developed, on the good deeds you do, on the essential rightness of your moral choices, on how hard you try, on how much you really want to be good.

– OR –

You can bet everything on the mercy and grace of God. If you choose to rely on the mercy and grace of God, all your merit will be taken away. None of your efforts to be helpful or loving or right or good will count for anything at all – not ever again. You remember the phrase in the old hymn? “Nothing in my hand I bring – only to thy Cross I cling.”

So that’s the choice. Think carefully and ponder deeply. In 48 hours I shall return, and you can make your choice. Once made, it can never be changed or rescinded.

And the Angel closes with one further comment:

Please do not think this is a simple choice. Nearly all humans try to straddle this choice. I hear all the time ways in which you are still proud of your goodness and aware of your good intentions. And I also know the remorse you feel when you try to do good and it does not work out as you had hoped. But never mind all that. All the double-mindedness will be gone after you make your choice. Either you will rely on your good intentions and good efforts, or you will rely on the grace and mercy of God. And this is one vote – one choice – from which you cannot abstain.

You have 48 hours. Then I shall return.

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Some of you do not think Paul was much of an angel. Nonetheless, this was the choice Paul tried earnestly and continually to set before the Christian church. Law or Gospel? Make up your mind.

Are you circumcised? And circumcised in the true sense of circumcision: totally relying on the guidance and grace of the Holy Spirit?

If we put no confidence in the flesh, what is left to be circumcised? Our hearts, according to Paul. And indeed, they do need to be trimmed and dedicated and devoted to Christ Jesus our Lord.