

September 30, 2018

"He who has ears, let him hear..."

"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. 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." Matthew 9:16-17

These are among the parables of Jesus that we struggle a bit to understand. The two everyday activities are common and sewing an unshrunk patch on an old garment still doesn't work. The wineskins picture is a little harder because we no longer ferment wine in skins.

Now days wine is aged in barrels, but in Jesus' day new wine, wine that has not yet finished fermenting was poured into the cleaned skin of a sheep with the holes sewed closed. This was done so that as the wine aged the carbon dioxide being released would swell the skin until the process was finished. They the CO2 would be released leaving drinkable wine.

Once a wineskin had been used once it would loose its elasticity and if new wine were again introduced it would burst the skin. These parables, however, are not about the wine-making process. Instead these parables address the new covenant that Jesus is bringing to the world.

Under the old Law of Moses God's people were expected to keep a whole list of commandments and rules. These rules are summarized in the Ten Commandments, but the Ten are by no means all of the rules and regulations that God gave his people under the Law of Moses.

The problem with a relationship based on our perfectly keeping rules and regulations is that we are not good at it. We tend to break the rules every day in some way. Thus James, the brother of Jesus, will tell us, ***"For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in just one point is guilty of breaking all of it"*** (James 2:10) So, under the old law all of us are lost because we cannot and do not keep it perfectly. In these short parables Jesus is showing us that the old ways, this old relationship based on our perfectly keeping rules and regulations cannot be intermingled with the new covenant that we now enjoy through the grace of God poured out in Jesus.

Among the first century believers especially those from the churches of Galatia, this was a serious problem. The Apostle Paul wrote to them, ***"All who rely on the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith."*** (Galatians 3:10-14)

So, when we receive the grace of God through our life changing belief or faith we are saved, not by what we do, but by what God has already done. When we then turn back to the old ways of trying to live by perfectly keeping a set of rules and regulations we are trying to fit a whole new covenant into an old, tired form. They do not go together. They cannot. One will destroy the other.

Our relationship with God is, and must be grace-based. His work in Jesus death on the cross satisfies the requirement of the ***"law of sin and death"*** and we are saved through our faith in that death. The Apostle will tell the Ephesian believers, ***"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not of yourselves, is is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."*** (Ephesians 2:8-10)

You and I are saved by God's freely given grace through our life changing faith. In response to this wonderful salvation we live a selfless life of service; a life that more and more reflects the life of Jesus. Trying to mix the old covenant with the new covenant is not possible. We can be saved by grace or we can be lost by seeking salvation through personal perfection. We cannot be saved by both. Which will you choose?

