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ESF, Lord's Day service message

Change for New Blessings

Matthew 9:14-17

¹⁴ Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?"

¹⁵ Jesus answered, "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.

¹⁶ "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. 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."

An American company opened a new plant in a village of Central America because the labor was plentiful and inexpensive. The company hired people in the village and ran the company as it would do in America. Everything went well until the villagers received their first payment; afterward, they did not return to work. Several days later the American manager went down to the chief of the village and asked him, "Why do the villagers not come to work?" The chief responded "Why should they work? With the money the company paid, people have bought everything they can buy. They already have everything they need."

The plant stood idle for two months until someone came up with a new idea to make the villagers come out to work again. It is to send a mail-order catalog to every villager. When they received the catalog, they saw many new things. They wanted to buy them. Then all of them came back to the company to work again. There has never been an employment problem since! To be able to run the company in that village, the American company needed to change the way they treat employees.

Usually, we prefer something old which we have gotten used to and are familiar with. Because we feel comfortable with it. Also, because we don't like to risk adopting new ideas. Of course, there are many good things of the old we get used to. But to improve our lives, and to receive God's new blessings, we must constantly change the way we live to adopt new things.

The Bible frequently speaks about changing lives through newness and new things (Isaiah 43:19; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 11:19-20; Ezekiel 36:26; Luke 22:20; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Rev. 21:5).

In this story, Jesus teaches us how to keep receiving new blessings by changing ourselves.

Background of the story

Jesus never pushed his disciples to fast during his ministry, and that made many religious people wonder or get upset. Because in those days fasting was one of the important religious traditions. They believed that regular fasting was an essential practice which could enable them to be more spiritual and to please God more.

So, when they saw Jesus and His disciples not fasting, they were unable to understand. Some of them even got angry at Jesus because they thought that Jesus ignored their important tradition.

That is why they came to Jesus and asked the question: "*How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?*"

Then Jesus told them three stories to answer their question. Through these stories Jesus challenged them to keep changing the way they practiced their faith to keep receiving new blessings.

The story of the wedding

Here Jesus compared his ministry and teachings to a wedding celebration. Jesus described himself as the bridegroom and his

disciples as the friends of the groom. During the marriage festival of a bridegroom, his friends and guests rejoice. It is a joyfully celebrating time.

Jesus' presence as the bridegroom brought joy to all who recognized him as the groom. His presence is what makes a difference in life. If he is present, there is no reason to fast. Because he brings joy to life.

But Jesus did not deny the necessity of fasting. He said that there's a time for fasting. A time would come when his presence would be removed. Then his disciples would mourn and fast. The absence of his presence would be a cause for mourning and fasting.

The believer's joy or sorrow is determined by the Lord's presence. When we are aware of the bridegroom's presence and walking close to him, there is not much need to fast. It is a time of praise, and rejoicing. But when the bridegroom seems to be far away and we are not so conscious of his presence and are not walking as closely as we should, we need to fast and seek his presence.

The story of the new cloth

Jesus illustrated himself as a new cloth and rigid religious tradition as an old garment.

Nobody patches a new cloth on an old garment. When you sew a patch of new cloth on an old garment, the problem is not really resolved. Because the new patch is stronger than the old garment, the patch will pull the old garment so that the old garment will be torn.

God sent Jesus as the new cloth. Jesus came not to add another religious ritual to the old religious rituals. He came with power to accomplish God's salvation which no ritual could accomplish.

If Jesus attached the new power of God's salvation to the old religious rituals, the new power would not add anything good to the old rituals. Because the system of the old rituals is too rigid to accept the new power. So, Jesus was not going to be a new patch on the garment of old religious tradition. Jesus was bringing in a whole new way of faith.

The story of new wine

Jesus compared himself to new wine and the rigid religious tradition to old wineskins. In ancient Palestine, wine was the most common drink. However, there was no bottling company that could process and package drinks. So, people used pouches made of leak-resistant animal skins to contain wine. Wineskins were processed and treated to be able to expand and stretch along with the new wine as it fermented. As the new wine fermented and expanded, it would stretch the new wineskins.

Old wineskins become brittle and rigid with age. When new wine is put in these, gases build up--produce pressure and Bang! The new wine and the old wineskin would be ruined together.

The meaning of new wine is that the teaching and ministry of Jesus was something new which might be too radical for old religious tradition to accept. Jesus did not pour his new ministry into old religion which refused to be flexible and open to the new movement of God's Spirit.

Their religion had become inflexible due to the accumulation of centuries of traditions. Jesus could not be confined within such inflexible and rigid old religion.

The key lessons of these stories

1. Keep renewing your heart.

The religious people in Jesus' time focused on rituals more than loving God with their hearts. Also, they emphasized following the

rules and regulations of their religious traditions more than obeying the word of God. While they were doing that, they neglected to see what was going on in their hearts (Matthew 15:1-9).

Jesus came to teach the people to honor God's word more than their traditions. Jesus' ministry focused on the condition of man's heart rather than outside behaviors. Jesus encouraged people to repent from the sins in their hearts and to receive the blessing of God's forgiveness (Matthew 15:10-20).

Jesus brought a new way of joy through forgiveness of sins, and through liberating men from the power of Satan. It is a new way of faith and life that supersedes the habitual and external rituals and ceremonies of religion. Jesus' ministry brings not another lifeless ritual but God's living presence to man.

Jesus is not into patchwork. He doesn't want to "patch-up" your old lifestyle. He wants to start with the core of the problem. He wants to deal with the root cause, which is the sin of man's heart.

If you are going to follow Jesus, he expects to be your whole new wardrobe, not just a patch. How? By cleansing and renewing your heart. He wants to give you a brand-new lifestyle!

Jesus came to cleanse our hearts and to outfit us in a whole new lifestyle that would testify of his great grace. Ephesians 4:22-23 says, *"You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds."*

Mitsuo Fuchida was a Japanese fighter pilot commander. On Dec. 7, 1941, he bombed Pearl Harbor with a squadron of 360 specially selected pilots. He became the one most hated persons by the American forces. That included Jacob DeShazer, a young B-25

bomber pilot. DeShazer became a part of the first bombing raids over Japan. But after dropping his bombs on the city of Nagoya, DeShazer lost his way in the heavy fog and his plane ran out of fuel. He was quickly taken prisoner. For almost two years, DeShazer suffered from hunger, cold, dysentery, watching his fellow prisoners die. His hatred of the Japanese grew deep, and he became more miserable.

Then, in 1944, someone gave DeShazer a Bible. He started reading Genesis and read through the Bible. And by the time he had come to the Book of Romans he had surrendered his heart to Jesus as his Savior and his Lord. Immediately Jesus' word in Matthew 5:44 changed his heart, "*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*" His attitude toward his Japanese guards began to change. His hostility disappeared and every morning he greeted them warmly. He prayed for them and witnessed Christ to them. Slowly their attitude toward him also changed and some of them even began bringing him extra food and supplies.

After the war was over, DeShazer returned home. He studied for the ministry and returned to Japan as a missionary. After establishing a church in Nagoya, the very city he had bombed, he wrote a pamphlet entitled, "I Was a Prisoner of the Japanese." Thousands of Japanese came to see and hear the man who could forgive and love his enemies. One day Fuchida heard about DeShazer. He came to meet him and heard the gospel of forgiveness preached by DeShazer. His heart was convicted by the word Jesus spoken on the cross, "*Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*" (Luke 23:34). Then he and DeShazer who once were bitter enemies, became the best of friends and brothers in Christ. And Fuchida also became a great evangelist in Japan.

To keep receiving God's new blessings, we must keep repenting of the sins in our hearts and keep receiving Jesus' power of cleansing and renewing of our hearts.

Do you want to keep receiving God's new blessings? Always honor God's word more than man's traditions. Always focus on who Jesus is and what Jesus does rather than religious traditions. Keep renewing your heart by repenting of your sins and receiving the cleansing grace of Jesus.

#2. Be flexible to follow the movement of the Spirit.

God dispenses His new blessings through the movement of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit moves freely. The Spirit of God is the Spirit of freedom. 2 Cor. 3:17 says: *Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.*

So, the Spirit does not and cannot be confined by man's tradition or man's familiarities. The Spirit never changes in his essence. But the Spirit keeps changing the way of doing ministries. The way the Spirit works is limitless.

That is why we need to be flexible to follow the movement of the Spirit.

We can see a good example in the book of Acts chapter 10. Although Peter was an apostle of Jesus, he was a Jewish man. As a Jew, in the beginning stage of his ministry, he was strongly attached to an old dietary tradition of the Jewish religion.

But to use him as an effective minister in a new generation, the Holy Spirit disciplined him to be flexible to adopt new ways of movement by the Spirit.

One day while he was praying the Spirit showed him a vision. The vision was that something like a large sheet was coming down from heaven. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, reptiles, and birds. According to the Jewish religious tradition, those animals and birds were unclean and should not be eaten.

But the Spirit told Peter to kill and eat them. Peter refused to do so because his conviction of the Jewish tradition never allowed him to eat such animals and birds.

However, the Spirit insisted, showing him the vision three times. Finally, he realized that the Spirit was leading him to a new way of applying God's word regarding dietary. He learned to be flexible to obey the new movement of the Spirit. He gave up his own religious tradition and accepted the new way of the Holy Spirit. Then the Spirit used him to reach out to an important gentile, a Roman centurion Cornelius. When Peter became flexible to follow the new movement of the Spirit, the Spirit used him to save the man and his entire family. Through the event, the Holy Spirit moved the entire believers of the Jerusalem church. The Spirit opened their hearts to reach out to the Gentiles beyond their religious traditions (Acts 11:1-18).

Do you want to keep receiving God's new blessings given through the Holy Spirit? Always be flexible to follow the new movement of the Spirit. Pray always, "Lord help me to follow your Spirit of freedom. Make me flexible to be led by your Spirit." Then whenever the Holy Spirit convicts your heart with God's word, surrender your thought and reason to the word even if you can't understand why. The Lord will pour his new blessings on your life.