

MORRIS VENDEN

Wonderful
Words of Life

New pictures of grace
in the parables of Jesus



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New Wine, Old Bottles

About a hundred years ago I went off to study at La Sierra College to be a minister, a cowboy, or a jazz drummer. They were offering only one of the three so I took that one. My father said, “It costs me \$25 a month to keep you at home, so I’ll send that to you and you can work for the rest of it.” Attending La Sierra cost a thousand dollars a year at that time. Someone told me the other day that it is now about \$18,000. Ouch!

Well, I tried hard to make it, including trying to stay within the guys’ minimum food charge per month, which was \$20. One month I stayed within the girls’ minimum, \$16. They said, “You might as well come down to the cafeteria and get something to make up the difference.” So I went down and came back to the room with four gallon jugs of cider—new cider. It became very popular down at my end of the hall, especially after a few days had gone by and we began to discover the difference between new cider and old cider.

Jesus told a story about new wine and old bottles. I've wanted to write about this story for a long time, but I've always hesitated. I never felt ready. I still don't feel ready. But I thought I might as well go for it—maybe I could learn something in the process.

The story is found in Luke 5:36-39:

He told them this parable: “No one tears a patch from a new garment and sews it on an old one. If he does, he will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, ‘The old is better.’ ”

What is Jesus saying here? I propose that there are some great treasures all through this parable that need to be found. And we need the Holy Spirit to guide us.

Three of the four Gospel writers included this parable in their books. Each adds a little different dimension to it. One of the main points that Matthew and Mark brought up but Luke didn't is that if you put new cloth on an old garment, the tear is made worse. This suggests that the old garment already has a tear in it—a rent, a fault, a problem. Another point is that if you put new wine into old wineskins, the wine will burst the wineskins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined; they will perish (see Matthew 9:16, 17; Mark 2:21, 22). And in Luke 5, the passage we started with, the new does not agree with the old. New wine must be put in new bottles so they both are preserved. Then Luke makes this little addition: He says that some people say the old is better, “Don't give us the new.”

What does the wine in this parable represent?

Keith Miller wrote a book several years ago called *The Taste of New Wine*. It became a bestseller. He also wrote a book called *The Second Touch*. That book deeply impressed H. M. S. Richards; he preached about it at camp meetings. Keith Miller was trying to reveal very honestly and openly his own experience in being a so-so Christian and then discovering the new wine. The new wine is the message of Jesus, the gospel in *all* its aspects. This new wine, the gospel, centers on the Cross, which suggests the blood of Jesus: “a fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel’s veins, and sinners plunged beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stains.”

So, the new wine—let us underscore this right at the start—is the gospel. May I remind you that it is the full gospel, not just half the gospel or part of the gospel. And it centers on Jesus and the Cross and His blood, which is able to free us not only from the guilt of sin but also from the power of sin. This is the new wine.

What about the old bottles? Well, let’s go back to the introduction to this parable (which was a takeoff from what John the Baptist had said in introducing Jesus; see John 3:29):

They said to him [Jesus], “John’s disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking.” Jesus answered, “Can you make the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast” (Luke 5:33-35).

What, then, is the setting? These people were questioning Jesus as a prophet. And perhaps one of the things they were questioning was that He was happy.

Do you think Jesus was happy? Or was He always sad? If Jesus was always sad, why would little children crowd around Him? The last I checked, Jesus was happy. And John the Baptist was happy. Do you know what he said when he introduced Jesus? The people asked him if he was the Christ or if he was the prophet. He said, "I'm not the Christ. I'm sent before Him." And then he said, "The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete" (John 3:29).

So, John the Baptist, who is considered a shouting, pulpit-pounding preacher who got after people for their sins, was also a joyful man. And Jesus apparently demonstrated that you can have joyful holiness. April Ousler, in her book on the parables of Jesus, says that the fact that Jesus was joyful was one of the things that caused the Pharisees and the other somber leaders of those days to be upset.

What else had happened just before Jesus talked about the wine and the bottles? Well, just before this, the paralytic had been let down through the roof there in Capernaum, and he went rejoicing on his way. Jesus had already healed many, many people. Then He made the mistake of calling Matthew from the publican's chair to follow Him. At this juncture Jesus had already chosen four disciples: Andrew, Peter, James, and John. Then came number five, Matthew. This was a big mistake. The minute Jesus said, "Follow Me," Matthew left his publican's booth and followed Jesus. As a result he was so joyful that he threw a party. He had a feast. And guess who was there? Jesus and His first four disciples. Guess who else was there? Scribes and Pharisees and those who were in the spy ring already looking to get Him. They said, basically, "Elijah and John the Baptist didn't go to parties. Your disciples

aren't fasting. Is this the way to be holy?" Then Jesus came in with the bridegroom pitch and demonstrated, in spite of their concern, that it is possible to be holy and joyful at the same time. Maybe that is one of the reasons we enjoy having a music celebration. The angels apparently enjoy singing His praises as well. So, this is the setting.

TOO PROUD TO ACCEPT THE GIFT

This parable was first brought up to my attention in 1988 when Debbie Anfenson-Vance wrote an article for the Review and Herald during that centennial year of the momentous 1888 General Conference session. The basic thrust of her article—which became a classic, at least in my book—is that our problem is that we are too proud to accept the gift. Accepting the gift, for proud people, is like trying to take new wine and put it into old bottles. We can't stretch far enough. We have trouble accepting gifts. We have trouble accepting the fact that salvation is totally a gift.

To begin with, we have trouble accepting the fact that the forgiveness of our sin is totally a gift—that we don't have to do anything in terms of penance or trying to make up for our sins, that we can accept His forgiveness totally as a gift. And then we have trouble accepting that His *power* is totally a gift. We keep hanging on to this old idea that you've got to do something yourself. "God helps those who help themselves." Try hard, and God will help you with what you can't do. "*Cooperation*"! We keep sounding that from the housetop. "*Cooperation*" . . . No, the only cooperation that God wants from us is to let Him do it.

So, we have trouble accepting all of the gifts that God offers. And we think that we are good anyway. We don't see the significance of giving up on ourselves and becoming new bottles or new wineskins or new garments so the wine and the bottles and the

cloth and the patches will be compatible. We don't realize that we are lost among the ninety and nine. We don't realize that we are the prodigal son's brother. We don't realize that we are chronically late to our full-time jobs in the vineyard even though we work the twelve-hour day, or almost. We don't realize that we need the gift of salvation just as much as the lost sheep, just as much as the prodigal son, and just as much as the twelve-hour or the one-hour workers. This was the thrust of Debbie's article. It caused some of us to pause and think.

When I began to search around for help on this parable I discovered that the great preachers have done very little on it. It seems to be almost ignored. Charles Spurgeon had nothing to say on it. I've got fifty-five thick volumes of Spurgeon, so I said, "C'mon, Spurge, why don't you deal with this one?" Then I went to the Bible commentaries that our church published several years ago. Basically there is one page: Volume 5, page 1088. What's the thrust there? That Jesus, when He was looking for followers, when He was looking for disciples, kicked the dust off of His feet at Jerusalem. He did try the temple first. It didn't work. So He went to the seashore, the smelly seashore, where He could find new bottles for His new wine. In other words, it's very difficult to present the gospel to people who are hardened in traditional religion.

Have times changed much? Bill Hybels realized that they haven't. When he set about starting a church, he determined that he would not start with old bottles. He would not begin with old garments. He would start brand new—fresh.

Hybels knocked on people's doors and asked, "Do you go to church?"

"Yes."

"Wonderful, thank you. Have a nice day." On to the next door.

“Do you go to church?”

“No.”

“Do you mind telling me why?”

Hybels kept a record of the whys. After hundreds of visits he compiled the records and found out the reasons why people don't go to church. “The church is always asking for money.” “There's a trap in the foyer; they're going to get you.” “The church is not relevant to our needs.” “The church is sloppy in its programming.” And so he started a little church—a small group of people way out of Chicago—based upon trying to meet the objections of these people who said they didn't go to church. The basic point is that he started from scratch. And people began to come and listen. He tried to talk to their needs. He planned the programs a year in advance, including what the people on the program were going to wear. He had it planned down to the second—a challenge to the media, if you please. He wasn't going to let the media upstage the good news of salvation in terms of careful presentation and all the rest of it.

There has been many a modern approach to the needs of our country based on this same idea. Go to a dark county. Go to a place where they haven't heard. Why should anyone hear the gospel twice before everyone has heard it once? Find some new bottles. Find some new garments. Find some smelly disciples down by the lake who are not too proud to accept the gift, who won't think that they are good and who will accept the salvation offered.

Well, I tried looking around a little more and discovered that we should remember that what was called new wine was not new wine. It was old wine—old in the sense that it had been heard before and it was true before. It is the same story that we heard twenty-five years ago. It's an old, old story. But it looks new. It looks new when you compare it with traditional religion, when

you compare it with forms and ceremonies and routine. The relationship approach looks new when people are hooked on the behavior approach in religion and are hooked on going through the ceremonies and trying to save themselves by their own merit and their own works. It's like new wine in old bottles. The interesting thing is that in the symbolism the new wine bursts the old bottles. They're stretched out of shape. The wine is lost, spilled. And that's scary. Study it, neighbor. Take a look at it.

STEVEN'S STORY

I'll never forget a story I read about Steven. He lived in St. Louis. His twenty-one years had been hard on him. His arms were scarred from the needle, and his wrist scarred from the knife. His pride was his fist and his weakness was his girl.

Steven's initial response to love was beautiful. As the story of Jesus was unfolded before him, his hardened face would soften and his dark eyes would dance. He wanted to change. But his girlfriend would have none of it. Oh, she would listen politely and would be very sweet. But her heart was gripped by darkness. Any changes Steven made would be quickly squelched as she maneuvered him back into his old habits. She was the last thing standing between him and the kingdom. Those witnessing to him begged him to leave her. He was trying to put new wine into an old wineskin. He wrestled for days, trying to decide what to do. Finally, he reached the conclusion: He couldn't leave her. The last time those who were working with Steven saw him, he wept uncontrollably. They held big, tough, macho Steven in their arms and wept with him. The prophecy of Jesus was true. When His new wine was put into an old wineskin, it was lost.

Do you have any wineskins that need to be thrown out? Look closely in your closet. These skins come in all sizes. Maybe yours is

an old indulgence: food, clothes, sex, gossip, profanity, or possibly, like Steven, an old relationship. No friendship or romance is worth your soul. Repentance means change, and change is needed because you cannot put new life into an old lifestyle.

These things Jesus was talking about are scary things. As I read this encounter with someone who apparently wanted the new way, I thought about how impossible it is to understand the kingdom of heaven until we are born again. Jesus said it: Unless you are born again, you cannot see the kingdom of God (see John 3:3-8). We usually think that the “kingdom of God” means heaven. Well, yes. But the word *see* also includes being able to understand the kingdom of heaven.

So, the new wine, the gospel, is not going to go very deep or very far until the new birth has taken place. Let me suggest that new birth is one of the greatest needs in the church today.

The new wine can be applied in terms of the individual, the one-soul audience—Nicodemus or Steven. The new wine and the old wineskins, or the old bottles, can also be applied to the family. What happens when new wine pours into a family that has been mediocre in terms of God and faith and spiritual things? Something begins to stretch. Something begins to burst. So you have one member of the family drinking the new wine of the gospel, and the other member of the family, like Steven’s girlfriend, fighting, resisting, and going the other direction. There are families today that have experienced divorce because the shaking time has arrived and two lukewarm people go opposite directions: One becomes cold and the other hot. In fact, this splitting of families because of the shaking is on the rise, and before this shaking is over it will have made a great impact within the church. If you are in unity in your home in terms of the new wine, then thank the Lord and praise His name.

You can also have the new wine in the old bottles in terms of the church. Watch it when the great message of the gospel is presented to a church that is steeped in tradition or is a victim of form and ceremony or that is used to pop psychology and current issues and trying to deal with each other's "authentic selfhoods." Watch it! Something begins to stretch. Sometimes something bursts. And like some of us were told years ago, if you really get into the gospel, there will be battle scars. Yes, let's remember that Jesus wasn't referring to the world. He wasn't referring to the heathen—the Romans or the Greeks. He was referring to the church, the chosen people, when He spoke about wine bottles bursting.

What about the denomination? What happens when the new wine comes into a denomination? Not a bad thing to investigate or even take a look at history. In fact, I would like to take a look at history right now for a moment—case histories of new wine and old bottles. Let's start with Moses and the Exodus. We could go back a lot further than that. We could go back to Cain and Abel. But let's take a look at some of the great movements in which people were victims of the do-it-yourself, depending-on-your-own-resources religion. Again and again God tried to teach those people lessons of faith and of dependence upon Him.

Moses had new wine, and the old bottles were stretched and broken again and again. And patiently, God went through the process of trying to deal with these people year after year, decade after decade, century after century. His patience was awesome as He tried to teach them to be new bottles that could hold the new wine.

Come to the time of Jesus. His basic message was too much for the old wineskins. They couldn't handle it. In the end, the wineskins burst. Jesus had to walk away from those people and say, "Your house is left to you desolate" (Matthew 23:38).

Of course, the difference between the old and the new is demonstrated among His own followers too. Take a look at the great Reformation. What happened there? Luther bombed a gigantic system of ceremonies, rituals, penance, and merit. His message shook the system to its very foundations. It was new wine, and things began to burst in every direction. And some of the followers of Luther and millions of martyrs proved that when the new wine and the old bottles meet, the bottles burst and the wine is lost. The wine was spilled as the blood of thousands of martyrs was spilled.

NEW WINE IN OUR DAY

Coming down to our own day: We have within our own church history some classic examples of the new wine and the old bottles meeting. In 1888 the church resisted Jones and Waggoner and a few other voices. The *church* rebelled. Some of our church historians don't seem to agree. But during that period the church went into the wilderness to wander with the people of old. Those who were presenting the new wine left. The wine was spilled. The wine was wasted, and so it goes to this very day.

In 1958, which was seventy years later, some of us became interested in this "new wine" and began to try to teach it and to preach it. It seemed like we had been in captivity and seventy years was long enough. We began to consult with some of the old bottles and some of the old garments. I remember one of our world leaders telling me, after I explained to him my understanding of the gospel and righteousness by faith, "That's right. It's the truth, but don't preach it. You'll get into trouble."

One of my classmates at school had come out from spiritualism. At one time he had his own private devil in his house, and he and his wife would communicate with the spirits on a regular ba-

sis. One night he came to a series of meetings that my father was holding in Fresno. It was the first meeting he attended, and it happened to be called “The Mark of the Beast.” He was startled. He cornered my father after the meeting and said, “I want to know more about this.” My dad recognized that he was new and tried to be delicate with him. But this young man said to him, “You don’t have to beat around the bush with me. Tell it to me straight.” So, my father told him, and he was baptized.

He came to La Sierra and studied to be a minister. He was an older student, but he was sharp. Our major professor, Dr. Heppenstahl, told us one day that he was the sharpest one in the class. He said he had never seen anyone who could grasp the points and get the message so quickly and so thoroughly. Thank you very much, Dr. Heppenstahl; that really made our day!

Later, this young man began his ministry. He visited people who were victims of the old garments and the old bottles, people who were in trouble, whose lives were falling apart. And he asked them, “How long has it been since you’ve read your Bible?”

“Well, I used to, but I don’t anymore.”

“Have you ever read the book *The Desire of Ages*?”

“Well, no, I haven’t.”

“What about *Steps to Christ*? Have you looked at that?”

“No, I haven’t.”

And this young man, who was the sharpest of them all, got discouraged very quickly and left the ministry—because, he said, “These people aren’t real. They’re not serious with God. I’m not going to waste my time talking with people like these. They’re fakes.”

Old bottles. Old garments. Going through the motions. Second-, third-, fourth-generation church members, victims of religiosity. We have battle scars in the church. Glacier View is one

of them. Someone had challenged some of our teachings. He happened to be an expert on presenting the gospel of justification. Some of us learned a lot about justification from him. The problem was he had only half the gospel. But he had that half, and he presented it. The church tried to deal with it. But in the process the bottles burst. The wine was spilled, and the voice was heard no more within our church. This has happened again and again.

So, what does this parable mean to us today?

First of all, by way of conclusion, I would like to remind you what this parable does *not* mean in terms of applications that some people have made from it. This parable does not mean that we should go out and get drunk with the drunkard. Jesus went out and ate with winebibbers and sinners, but He did not go out and get drunk with the drunkard. He did not go out to be like them. He went out to fellowship with them, to show them heaven's love, and to try and win them. There's a big difference.

This parable does not mean that we should go out and throw all our beliefs, our doctrines, our rules and standards and regulations, to the wind and say we are only interested in the new wine. Not at all. This parable does not allow for several different kinds of Adventists, for instance.

I would like to remind you that there are only two kinds of Adventists. There are only two kinds of Baptists, only two kinds of Methodists, only two kinds of people anywhere in the world: those who know Jesus and those who don't. That's it. And the only Adventist who will be saved, and the only Baptist who will be saved, and the only Methodist who will be saved, is the one who knows Jesus. We don't have different levels and different kinds of bottles and garments and wineskins, all of whom are going to be saved. There is only one gospel, and there is only one experience with

Jesus. It's very interesting to note that the experience with Jesus makes people pretty much the same the world over in terms of what they look like and how they act.

This parable does not mean that we can scrap the twenty-seven points of doctrine in favor of the new wine. Not at all. There are those among us today who champion that cause. "Oh, let's get rid of these rusty old twenty-seven points of doctrine." What we are way overdue on is seeing the new wine in *every* doctrine; seeing how the new wine, the full gospel, fits in every doctrine—not doing away with those doctrines, as some would have us do.

The other day someone noticed that I am concerned about the future of this church—and I am. How could I not be concerned that some would lead this church down the road to its own death? Yes, I am concerned. Some of us are praying diligently that God will help in the leadership of this church.

You ask, "Who are they? Give us some names." I'm not interested in telling you who they are. But I will tell what they are and what they do. People who tell jokes about the end time could lead this church to its death. People who talk more against the church than they do about Jesus will lead this church to its death. People who are leaders in our church and who are loose on Sabbath keeping could lead this church to its death. People who are leaders and who can easily take the Lord's name in vain could lead this church to its death. People who want a nondoctrinal witness of nothing more than "love everybody" could lead this church to its death. People who are soft on the inspired writings, the greatest gift to our church in these last hundred years, could lead this church to its death. People who make fun of vegetarianism, which was God's idea in the first place, could lead this church to its death. People who think that dress and adornment are not important

issues could lead this church to its death. People whose standards and lifestyle are influenced by the crowd could lead this church to its death.

“Oh,” you say, “aren’t you nitpicking?” No, because these are symptoms. These are symptoms of those who are not serious with God. If I can easily take the Lord’s name in vain in my slang language, I’m not serious with God or I’m not thinking. I have forgotten the third commandment: “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain” (Exodus 20:7, KJV).

So, we’re not looking at an array of nitpicking, legalistic points. What we’re saying is that church leaders who are not converted and are demonstrating the unconverted life could lead this church to its death. Please pray, please pray, that God will help us as families, as a local church, as a denomination, to be new bottles and new garments, so that as the new wine continues to flow from Immanuel’s veins, it will not be wasted.