



## **18: SPREAD LOVE, NOT MULLET (Luke 5:33-39)**

In one of the Churches I worked in we were attempting what is called a “Church replant”. It was a Church community that had declined down to twenty or so people, mostly senior citizens. The community had lost its relevance to the city it was in. They were low on money. They were on the verge of having to shut their doors and sell the property. They were a wonderful group of Christ followers for sure, but many of the people were too old to relate to younger folks and people outside of the Church. They knew that was true. The music they did was old school. They knew that was true. The decor they had in their Church building felt like a time warp. They knew that was true. They needed a new name, a new vibe, a new approach, and an updated facility. Most of all, they needed to have a change of heart and desire to reach out to the community they were in. They knew that was true also.

But then, it came time to make the changes. The name of the Church was changed from “The White Mountain Chapel” to “Journey Church”. People complained that the name sounded like a New Age Cult. I was tasked with helping to change the worship culture of the Church. Some of the people I initially worked with refused to play anything but hymns, in an old style, and no matter how much I met them in the middle, willing to

play all that they loved as well as introduce some middle of the road new material, some people balked.

And my favorite memory of all. They had this oil painting of a caucasian-ized, blue-eyed Jesus hanging right above the pulpit in the front of the church sanctuary, just glaring at everyone with his piercing eyes as they came in. It had been painted by one of the founding members of the Church, which was planted in 1959, and that painter had passed away. We told the people that the painting had to come down, be stored, be sold, or be given away. The people were extremely upset about it and couldn't bear to allow the change. The pastor and I joked that one of us should put the oil painting up in our bedroom. 😬

Change is hard. It's hard for all of us.

Some of us are very visionary minded and embrace change at a fast pace. We move too fast because we're literally driven by the enjoyment of change, sometimes to the detriment of the sanity of those around us. We can struggle to be or appear to be flaky, unpredictable, and loose cannons. Those of us who grew up in unpredictable, chaotic environments are particularly accustomed to change. That's certainly how I'm wired. It's a big part of my story, who I am, and have become. And as time has gone on I've learned more and more about my flaws and sins, as well as the strengths of how the Lord has crafted my trajectory in life.

Some of us are alright with change but we want to make sure we know details of how the change is going to shake down. We're visionary enough to see possibilities in the future, but we need to know the steps to get there and have them proven before we're willing to move into change. Those of us who are this way are gifted in the realm of the pragmatic and tangible. However, we can get caught in the middle between the future and the here and now, shifting between being paralyzed to move forward and being stuck in the past.

And obviously, those who are "change-addicts" move too fast. Those who are more careful balance out the "change addicts" and their fast paced and wild approach! Both are needed! Fast-paced Tiggers need thoughtful Pooh Bears and vice-versa!

And there are some who don't like change at all. Some are addicted to stability and predictability. People in this group can be extremely helpful at painting "worst case scenarios", and are great at risk assessment, and all the minutiae and "little details". They're wildly gifted at being thorough. People like this can also get caught in the

weeds. They can become stubborn and unrelenting, they can impede progress. At worst, they'll actually work against progress.

Wherever we find ourselves on the "change spectrum", we can all agree that some change is hard.

And we need to understand how radical the change was that Jesus brought to His context. People were baffled by Him. People were blown away. They were shocked. They couldn't believe the things He was doing. He broke so many of their rules while simultaneously perfectly keeping all the vital laws and principles of God.

So with all that in mind, we'll jump into Luke 5, verse 33, where Jesus, the radical change-maker, had a run in with the Pharisees, who were completely resistant to the changes He was bringing!

*33 Then they said to him, "John's disciples fast often and say prayers, and those of the Pharisees do the same, but yours eat and drink." 34 Jesus said to them, "You can't make the wedding guests fast while the groom is with them, can you? 35 But the time will come when the groom will be taken away from them—then they will fast in those days." (Luke 5:33-35)*

Again, Jesus did things differently from customary practice. Luke 5:33 - 35 discussed one example: his disciples did not fast. Fasting in Judaism was a major rite of piety. Highly regarded as an act of worship, it took place at major events, like the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29, 31). A four-day fast accompanied a commemoration of the fall of Jerusalem (Zech. 7:3, 5; 8:19). Fasts usually involved penitence, mourning, or a plea for deliverance. Pharisees fasted twice a week (Luke 8:12). Usually fasting was a one-day affair. However, a fast could run three days or even three weeks (Est. 4:16; Dan. 10:2 - 3). In the Judaism of Jesus' time, fasting was regarded as a virtue (Testament of Joseph 3:4 - 5; 1 Enoch 108:7 - 9). The failure of Jesus' disciples to fast could be read as reflecting a lack of respect for God, and a severe absence of piety.<sup>1</sup>

Two thousand years after Jesus's death, in the American, over-consumptive, individualistic, hedonistic sort of culture we live in, fasting has become obsolete in our spiritual practices. This passage certainly isn't meant to discount the value of fasting. In Matthew 6:16-18 Jesus taught His disciples how to fast, and assumed that they would, and this applies to us now.

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In fact, just last week, I was entering into a difficult meeting where a group of people had been experiencing major disunity, infighting, and toxicity to the point of some of them being dramatically affected. I fasted and prayed leading into this situation. I emailed others in the situation to do the same and no one responded. I was nervous all that day in prayer. I went to the meeting. It was uneventful and normal as if nothing bad had happened before. Someone who was the most affected by all that was happening spoke to me after, and told me that they hadn't had that much peace in one of those meetings for years as they had in that specific one. He told me that the fasting must have done something!

And I'm not saying that somehow our obedience "wins God over". But I know that the Lord, in His will, at times asks us to do things, and when we do them, we see Him move. Fasting and prayer are powerful tools in the heavenly realms! They are more powerful than we could imagine that they are!

Back to the text. To get to the point and context of the scenario, Jesus's disciples weren't following the religious protocol of the day. That's where the religious leaders were, as usual, trying to catch Jesus and His disciples in some sort of "ungodly slip-up".

Luke's account also assumes that those who ask Jesus about fasting were the same as those who grumbled about his associations in 5:30. They were asking an important question; "Given the Jewish respect for fasting, why did his disciples not fast?"

Jesus not only explained why He did not fast, he also explained the deep significance of the refusal. The picture he used was a wedding — a symbol often used to describe God's relationship with his people (Isa. 54:5 - 6; 62:4 - 5; Jer. 2:2; Ezek. 16). Since the groom was now present and the wedding was taking place, there was no need to mourn or seek deliverance. But in the future, the groom would be taken from them; then fasting will be appropriate.

I couldn't imagine my wife deciding to fast on our wedding day. We were in love. We were celebrating. We were having a feast and inviting others to celebrate with us. Fasting in our marital context wouldn't make an ounce of sense either, just like it didn't in Jesus' context, making Christ's words to the Pharisees even more poignant!

There is also a hint of Jesus' approaching suffering here. It is no accident that Jesus made this point as the opposition was arising. When the groom was gone, then God's people would long for the completion of redemption (Rom. 8:17 - 30; 1 Cor. 15:20 - 28).<sup>2</sup>

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To be in the presence of Jesus is something to celebrate. Just think of it for a moment! Jesus' disciples got to be with Jesus, ***in the flesh!*** They got to walk with Him, talk with Him, learn from Him, eat with Him, and have crazy adventures with Him on mission, with a front row seat to all His miracles! It had to be crazy and amazing! Why would they fast in that kind of electric environment in the presence of the Messiah Himself, unless Jesus had asked them to fast?

So also, when we worship Jesus now in His exalted state in heaven, we celebrate! We're lifting up the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords! The One who has paid our ransom, bought our eternal salvation, who sanctifies and prunes us, allows us to suffer for Him, and lets His very Spirit dwell within us! This is the coming Ruler and Savior who will return on the clouds of heaven to judge the quick, the dead and the sons of mankind! This is the One who will throw satan down into the abyss forever! HE IS WORTHY OF ALL OUR PRAISE!!!!

And on the flip side- whenever in this life we find ourselves not in the presence of Jesus, or struggling to seek or find His presence, then we should fast! We don't ever ***have*** to fast, but if the Lord puts in on our hearts to fast, then we should, because it means that we're also about to see Him move in a unique and powerful way! When things get tough, discouraging or confusing, it makes sense to fast and seek the Spirit on a deeper level.

If you don't experience dark seconds, minutes, hours, nights, days, weeks, months, or seasons of the soul, I'm telling you right now, you are lying. Everyone who follows Jesus goes through moments, both short and prolonged, of feeling the absence of God.

And in these situations, we should fast.

When we have a difficult situation coming up, we should enter it by fasting. Conflicted situations, volatile situations, complex situations, lamentful situations, hurtful situations, and confusing situations!

When we have a difficult decision coming up, we should enter it by fasting. A job change decision, a location change decision, a life change decision, and more!

Fasting is mentioned over 70 times throughout Scripture.<sup>3</sup> Jesus was all about it. He fasted forty days and nights in the wilderness while being tempted by satan. He just

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.biblestudytools.com/topical-verses/bible-verses-about-fasting/>

wasn't about doing it for religious show, or mere religious observance. It had to be connected to chasing after the heart and mind of God!

Jesus went on to speak further about the new thing, the new change, that He was bringing;

*36 (Jesus) also told them a parable: "No one tears a patch from a new garment and puts it on an old garment. Otherwise, not only will he tear the new, but also the piece from the new garment will not match the old. 37 And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins, it will spill, and the skins will be ruined. 38 No, new wine is put into fresh wineskins. 39 And no one, after drinking old wine, wants new, because he says, 'The old is better.'"* (Luke 5:36-39)

Jesus didn't only answer the question about why He and His disciples weren't currently fasting; he developed his reply in three pictures, each using "no one" to make the point (vv. 36, 37, 39). A new era with new perspectives had arrived. (1) The time Jesus brought was like a new piece of cloth. One did not take such cloth and sew it onto an old garment. That was not a good use of what is new. Jesus knew that if one made such a mismatch, the new cloth would shrink on washing while the old cloth would not, resulting in a tear and rendering both fabrics useless. Jesus' point was simple, but so hard to swallow for those resistant to change: One could not mix what Jesus brought with the old ways without creating a destructive mix. His new way needed new ways of doing things.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus' era was also like wineskins that were usually made from sheepskin or goatskin. The neck of the animal became the neck of the wineskin. Once the hide was stripped of hair and cured, it could be used to store wine. Like the new and old cloth, new wine put in old wineskins was another tragic error in judgment no one would make in this context. Since the new wine was still fermenting, the old wineskin couldn't expand with the fermentation. Its age and brittle quality caused it to rip, and the wine was lost. The story was told with a "what a waste" feeling. The point again was that the new era would bring new ways, which must therefore have new containers. Jesus was more than a reformer of Judaism; he had come to refashion it into something fresh, more obedient, more merciful, and more powerfully effective.<sup>5</sup>

I always talk about this because it's so important to the history of popular music. Plus it had a definite impact on me as a young man who was such a fan of music.

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In the summer of 1991 I turned ten years old. I was younger than my peers with a July birthday and heading into 5th grade. Up until that point I had accumulated a collection of cassette tapes that included songs from bands like Poison, Warrant and Motley Crue, who were “hair metal bands” that wore spandex, teased out and dyed their hair, put on massive concerts with insanely expensive pyrotechnics, lighting, and stage tricks, and composed and recorded very basic, very poppy, at times extremely cheesy hard rock guitar songs (as well as corny, acoustic power ballads) about womanizing, having sex with groupies, getting high and drunk, driving expensive cars, living in huge houses, and blowing tens of thousands of dollars on a lavish lifestyle. This was all portrayed intensely in all of their music videos on MTV.

Then, right as my fifth grade year started, Aug. 27th, 1991 brought the release of Pearl Jam’s album “Ten”. All of a sudden those of us religiously watching MTV on actual TVs in living rooms before live streaming and smart phones were seeing these extravagant hair metal bands contrasted with Eddie Vedder, singing introspectively over beautiful, melodic, guitar driven compositions of a higher musicality. He sang about being grateful to be alive, about kids being bullied, suicide, homelessness, about heartbreak, and about radical, intellectual politics. All of a sudden instead of merely having my adolescent hedonistic, sensual fantasies catered to, I was being provoked to think, to be sad, and even to be moved by beauty or to cry. It was jarring. It was amazing. I bought that album on cassette tape and played it over and over and over on my yellow Sony Walkman with poofy headphones.

Sept. 24th, 1991 rolled around and Nirvana’s album “Nevermind” hit the cassette and CD shelves. All of a sudden those of us habitually watching MTV saw Kurt Cobain, who appeared unkempt and unshowered, wearing thrift store clothes, and singing wildly metaphorical, poetic lyrics about teenage angst and social estrangement. And this was laid on top of gritty guitar, bass and drums that seemingly infused the melodic pop sensibility of the Beatles, the muddy attack of Black Sabbath, and the out of box approach of Sonic Youth. It was jarring. It was wonderful. It changed culture. It changed the way people dressed, styled their hair, and spoke. It changed what people found interesting. It brought the underground to the foreground. It made substance and depth “cool”.

Jesus was Pearl Jam and Nirvana to the glam rock religious establishment of His day. What Jesus did flipped the status quo out! It was a new cloth, a new wineskin! It was revolutionary! People who thought they were ousted from God and His people were all of a sudden invited in with open arms. Those who appeared to have it all together for God were being called out for hypocrisy and fakeness. It was jarring! It was wonderful! It

was life changing and life transforming for so so many, and unlike grunge, which fizzled out in a matter of months, it continues to revolutionize people's lives today.

And new cloth and new wineskins are always needed. New expressions of ministry and the Church are constantly needed. We're missionaries to a constantly changing context with constantly shifting philosophies, styles, and interests. I'm not saying we need to be people pleasers for the world. I am saying that we need to be both biblically faithful, bold, truthful, and relevant all at the same time.

This is the exact reason why we utilize hip hop in our worship gatherings as a Church. It's the most popular form of music in the world. It's extremely popular in the Kenmore Neighborhood of urban Akron Ohio that we're in and its popular in the city as a whole. We use hip hop to try and reach people who wouldn't normally want to be a part of a Church. We're being missionaries with new wineskins and new cloth!

This is why we throw cookouts with food and spread the word to our neighborhood, without coming off all Churchy. People in our neighborhood often go a long time without the money or the drive to get a good meal. We provide that. It's a need. We're being missionaries to our culture.

Back to the text. Jesus also used a common proverb. Those who liked old wine did not try the new, for their minds were already made up: "The old is good." So Jesus expected many not to respond to his new way. They were comfortable with life and piety as it was. Jesus' remark was both a description and a warning. John the Baptist came to tell the people that a new era and change was coming, but Jesus knew that some did not want change.<sup>6</sup>

By the mid nineties, when you saw a dude with a leather jacket, tight leather pants, and a mullet, it was weird! Those who held on to hair metal after grunge had taken its effect on culture stood out like sore thumbs.

Nobody wants to be the weird one with the weird out of style haircut! More than that, nobody wants to get God wrong either.

And even the most astute missional Christians have been notorious for always being culturally ten years behind. There's no good reason for that. We should be engaged with our culture and the lives of those who don't follow Jesus as much as we're engaged in studying scripture and pursuing a life of prayer. And from there, we should be innovating

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and trying expressions out to invite new people into discipleship. We should never be stuck in a rut, saying “the old is good”, when it’s no longer working! I’ve heard people say, in Churches “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it!” When really, what they’re talking about has cracks, is melting, and is dysfunctional, and they’re just too stubborn to see it.

It’s interesting to think about the trajectory of Judaism after Christ also. A secular article I found speaks to the matter of how the Israelite/Jewish religion unfolded beyond the death, burial, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. It reads as follows:

We cannot verify the numbers, but apparently, some Jews accepted the claim that Jesus was their messiah, while the majority did not. There are many reasons why most Jews did not join this movement:

1. There were various views on the messiah, including his function and his role in God’s plan. The opinions ranged from a warrior-king like David, the embodiment of wisdom, to a pre-existent angelic being in charge of judgment in the final days (e.g. “the son of man” in the Enoch literature).
2. The party of the Pharisees had promoted a belief in the resurrection of all the dead, but it would take place in the final days as part of a total scenario. One man emerging from a tomb did not indicate that the times had been fulfilled.
3. Many Jews who did look for deliverance from a messiah figure, assumed that this would include the destruction of the current oppressor (Rome), but this did not happen.
4. Language involving ‘kingdom’ was politically dangerous. While Rome was tolerant of various native cults, anything that aroused the crowds for another kingdom was treasonous. Jews had long ago worked out ways in which to co-exist with the Roman government wherever they lived. An edict by Julius Caesar (100-44 BCE) had granted the Jewish community permission to follow the customs of their ancestors, an exemption from the state cults. Implicit in the edict was that Jews would not proselytize (seek converts). Jesus had died by crucifixion, the Roman punishment for treason. As Paul the Apostle had written, this was a “stumbling block”, and a scandal for both Jews and Gentiles.
5. At an early date, to explain the suffering and death of Jesus, Christians turned to the “suffering servant” passages in Isaiah. This servant (symbolic of the nation of Israel at the time) was tortured and killed for the sins of the nation. He was then resurrected by God to share his throne. Christians claimed that the suffering servant was a prediction of Jesus. In Paul’s missions, he taught that this servant was a manifestation of God himself in the form of the earthly Jesus. Christians began to worship Jesus (now deemed the “Christ”, (*Christos* in Greek for the

Hebrew "messiah") as equivalent to God. Most Jews rejected this deification of Christ.<sup>7</sup>

Big lesson from the history of Judaism beyond Christ? Any of us choose what is safe, predictable, and traditional over what is right. That's what happened in the decades following the death and resurrection of Jesus. Those who rejected Him wanted Him stamped out from history, and even wanted false rumors spread about the miraculous things witnessed by so many. Just read Matthew 28:11-15!

Maybe in the eyes of culture those who rejected the new covenant, forgiveness laden cloth and wineskins of Jesus weren't figuratively "sporting mullets". Christianity was totally out of style for the first 300 years of the early Church! Really, one was a weirdo for following Jesus, and not for **not** following Him.

But in the eyes of heaven, those Israelites and Gentiles alike who didn't receive the new covenant, forgiveness laden cloth and wineskins of Jesus had metaphorical, funky 1995 mullets! They had missed an important shift in the heavenly realm! They had missed what God was doing in their time!

Don't miss what God is doing! Don't miss the thread of what He has been doing for all of time, and how it all intersects with the **now**. God is **still** moving powerfully in 2023. God is **still** moving powerfully in Akron, Ohio. God is **still** moving powerfully in America. God is **still** moving powerfully in the world. Don't miss it!

Let's continue to be innovative traditionalists! We want to keep to the ortho**doxy** of scripture and of Christ on all the primary issues of basic faith. We want to be constantly adapting, and constantly innovating our ortho**praxy** to reach new disciples of Jesus, and keep current disciples of Jesus engaged in mission!

The marks of Jesus' followers would not be Sabbath observance, fasting and prayers, and avoidance of outcasts, but would be joy like that at a wedding (5:33-35) and an overriding concern for human needs, both spiritual (5:29-32) and physical (6:1-11). Such a way of life had the authority of Jesus behind it. The apostle Paul captured this spirit when he wrote to the Romans: 'The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Rom 14:17).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1785/the-separation-of-christianity-from-judaism/>

<sup>8</sup> Africa Bible Commentary Africa Bible Commentary, Tokunboh Adeyemo, General Editor. Copyright © 2006, 2010, and 2022 by ABC Editorial Board.

May we soberly party for Jesus in celebration and worship like singer, songwriter, and musical icon Prince was going to party in 1999! May Christ give us such an overriding concern for human needs that the needs of others always take priority in our lives! May we meet spiritual needs by sharing the gospel, and tangible, physical needs as we go on building the Kingdom of God! Living for Christ isn't about dead, stagnant, religious observance! It's about spreading love, spreading joy, spreading forgiveness, spreading truth, spreading righteousness, spreading holiness, spreading goodness, spreading hope, spreading eternity, spreading grace, spreading peace, spreading unity, spreading reconciliation, ***it's all spreading Christ! It's all about spreading Christ by Christ's power in us!*** May we continue to spread Him on others around us by the power of His Word and the power of His love!