

January 8, 2017

“Something Truly New”

Matthew 9:14-17

FCF: Confusing the gospel with every other religion
PROPOSITION: (magnet) Jesus brings something truly new.
 (anchor) We must not treat it as anything else.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Online shopping can be a great thing. It’s hard to beat the convenience. But it can be dangerous. I placed a few orders in one sitting last month. So several items arrived in one box. It was only as I was breaking the box down for recycling that I saw I had almost thrown an item away. So you have to be careful. You don’t want to confuse your trash with your treasure.

My point? It’s possible to do the same with the gospel and all other competing messages.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Matthew 9:9-17](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Some of you may have seen the news last week about radio signals from deep space. That stirred up a series of story lines. “Are scientists baffled by radio signals from deep space?” “Are technologically advanced aliens trying to contact Earth?” “Do scientists finally have proof that extraterrestrial life really exists?” Could it be? “Is E. T. really phoning home?”

The answer is, “No.” A team of astronomers has looked at the data and concluded that the signals are likely from a young pulsar or magnetar. That is, it’s a natural phenomenon. However much it may raise the hopes of some, the fact is that these signals simply do not bear the marks of an intelligent source. And so they ought not to be treated as though they did.

In Matthew 9:9-13, we read of the calling of Matthew. In 9:14-17, we read of a question about fasting. Put another way, with the first passage, we have questions from the Pharisees. With the second, we have questions from some disciples of John the Baptist. The pressing issue? The Christian gospel is unique. It stands out among all other faiths or approaches to spirituality.

It is something like if our telescopes and satellites did pick up something different. That should get our attention. That would be worth sitting up and taking notice. It would stand out. It would be new. Well, Jesus brings something truly new. We must not treat it as anything else.

How is the gospel something truly new? How does our text speak to this? In three ways. First, in how the gospel fuels an abundant joy. Second, in how the gospel creates a gaping chasm. And, third, in how the gospel demands continual reminders. Let’s look at these in turn.

I. FUELS AN ABUNDANT JOY

First, the gospel is truly new in how it fuels an abundant joy ([READ Matthew 9:14-15](#))

A) Background

Let’s start with some background to a few practices with which we may not be familiar.

1. Fasting

Fasting obviously involved an abstention from food. But, in that culture, it also meant a time of humbling yourself through prayer, mourning, and sometimes even the wearing of sackcloth.

2. Wedding

That stands in contrast to a wedding. Jewish weddings were open house celebrations lasting a week. They were times of rejoicing and hospitality, of dancing and fun, such as might rarely come into the lives of poorer people. And it was free to all, paid for by the bridegroom's family. Such an event was a picture of the coming of the kingdom (**READ Isaiah 62:5; Hosea 2:19-20**).

B) Significance

So what are the implications and significance of all this? How was it understood?

1. Jesus' identity

With Jesus, the kingdom of God had come. And He is the king. He is the messianic bridegroom.

2. The right response

So, if the groom is present, if it's a wedding, what then is the right response? It means this can't be a time to mourn but a time to rejoice. It can't be a time for fasting but a time for feasting.

The newness of the gospel then is such that it fuels abundant joy.

Application:

But is Jesus speaking against fasting? A couple of things are worth noting. First, we need to remember the words we have already seen by this point (**READ Matthew 6:1, 16-18**). Note that Jesus does not say "if" but "when" you fast. He assumes that they will but is pressing on the motive. And we should add that He himself fasted so it is not something He is ruling out.

That said, ultimately, following Jesus is a call to joy. Not a call to turn a blind eye to the curse but to see with eyes of faith the reality of His work - past, present, and future. And as that settles in, we learn to weep without despair. We can be disappointed without disillusionment. We can be bruised without being utterly broken. We can feel the deep ache without losing hope.

Jesus brings something truly new. And this then fuels an abundant joy.

II. CREATES A GAPING CHASM

But the newness of what Jesus brings also creates something of a gaping chasm.

A) Background

And, again, it's worth thinking about the background to common things of that time.

1. Patching of cloth

First, we have the patching of cloth (**READ Matthew 9:16**). What's going on here? A piece of unshrunk cloth sewed as a patch to old and shrunk clothing will inevitably cause a bigger tear.

2. Pouring of wine

Then we have the pouring of wine (**READ Matthew 9:17**). Fluid containers in those days were made from animal skins. But, in time, such skins became hard and brittle. And if new wine that was still fermenting was put into such a skin, the buildup of the gases within would split the

bottle and ruin the wine. Which meant that new wine had to go into what? New wineskins. The reason being that new skins would be pliable and able to stretch as the pressure grew inside.

B) Significance

So what are the implications and significance of all this? How was this understood?

1. The fulfillment of the law

Let's look back at something else Jesus said (**READ Matthew 5:17**). Jesus is the fulfillment of the law. Now think of this. He is the goal to which it points - all the prophecies, the sacrificial system, the key persons and major events. Jesus is the completion and culmination of it all.

2. No going back

So the law is fulfilled. And now there's no going back. Jesus is saying that you can't patch the new clothe onto the old. You can't pour the new wine into the old skins. It simply won't work.

The newness of the gospel then is that it creates a gaping chasm between the old and new.

Illustration:

Tim Keller is fond of relaying this story to make a similar point (**READ quote**):

In a sermon Dick Lucas once preached, he recounted an imaginary conversation between an early Christian and her neighbor in Rome.

"Ah," the neighbor says. "I hear you are religious! Great! Religion is a good thing. Where is your temple or holy place?"

"We don't have a temple," replies the Christian. "**Jesus is our temple.**"

"No temple? But where do your priests work and do their ritual?"

"We don't have priests to mediate the presence of God," replies the Christian. "**Jesus is our priest.**"

"No priests? But where do you offer your sacrifices to acquire the favor of your God?"

"We don't need a sacrifice," replies the Christian. "**Jesus is our sacrifice.**"

"What kind of religion *is* this?" sputters the pagan neighbor.

And the answer is, it's no kind of religion at all.

Application:

These disciples of John are asking, "Why don't you do these things like us? Like every other religion does?" And the answer is because the gospel is simply unlike any other religion.

Every religion has this in common - what we do to reach God. Every one of them except one, Christianity, which speaks to what God does to reach us. It's the difference between good advice and good news. Every other one is, in essence, earth reaching to heaven. Yet, with Christianity, in how unlike the others it is, it's as though heaven has reached down to earth.

Why is this important? For starters, it gives cause all the more to give the gospel a hearing. And then it tells us something more about the nature of the message we're hearing.

Jesus brings something truly new. So much so that it creates this gaping chasm.

III. DEMANDS CONTINUAL REMINDERS

But there's one more thing - and I've hinted at it already - really a sobering warning. Along with everything else, the newness of what Jesus brings demands continual reminders.

A) Identity of the Questioners

Here it's vital we consider the identity of the questioners (**READ Matthew 9:14**). Keep in mind these men are not overtly hostile to Jesus at all. At the very least, they are sympathetic.

1. John the Baptist

After all, their leader, John the Baptist, had served as the God-appointed herald of Jesus. He had been bold and courageous. So much so that he had been arrested, locked up, and imprisoned.

2. His followers

Yet these followers of his were now identifying themselves with the Pharisees in their practice and in their self-description. And that identification was a clear indication of serious trouble.

B) Reason for the Question

Which takes us from the identity of the questioners to the reason for the question.

1. Loss of their leader

For starters, for all practical purposes, they'd lost their leader. Some commentators note in this exchange a hint of jealousy and rivalry on their part - something that was never seen with John.

2. Loss of their focus

So with the loss of their leader they had lost their focus. They were not just failing to see Jesus as the fulfillment of the law but were insisting on relying on their piety and righteousness - their fasting and other spiritual works. All right things but needing to be done for the right reasons. That is, not to win God's favor and approval but as a response to His favor and approval.

The lesson? The newness of the gospel is such that it demands continual reminders.

Illustration:

There is a story told of Martin Luther (I'm not sure of the source). Luther had just finished preaching and a few of his parishioners approached him. "Brother Martin," they said. "That was a fine message. But we were wondering. Why is it that you preach the same message week after week about the grace of God?" Clearly implying they wanted something more.

To which Luther replied, "I preach the same message week after week about the grace of God because week after week you come into this place looking as you do. Until that changes, you can be assured that I will continue to preach of His grace. For that is what you need."

Application:

My friends, we are no different. As the example of John's disciples shows us, we are in dire need of preaching the gospel to ourselves daily. Every one of us, without any exception at all. We must see the danger of slipping back. And then lay hold of the Lord's grace every day.

Which is to say that we must lay hold of the means of His grace, the ways He applies that to our hearts, and not think ourselves somehow above it. If I may press in here, this means that in that very moment when you are saying to yourself, "I don't need to read my Bible. I don't feel like spending time in prayer. I'd rather sleep in than attend the worship service. I'm not up to giving time to my community group." Those are the very times you most desperately need to.

Jesus brings something truly new. So much so that it demands continual reminders.

CONCLUSION:

This past Friday was a Christian holiday few Americans know anything about - Epiphany. As you might imagine, the word comes from the Greek, meaning “manifestation.” It’s a day meant to mark and celebrate the visitation of the Magi to Jesus and his parents in Bethlehem.

Have you thought about why the Magi came? They saw the star. Then they made the connections between the signs and the ancient prophecies. These were priest-sages, specialists in astronomy, astrology, divination, magic, medicine, and spirituality. They were likely of Persia, known in those days for its high religious and intellectual attainments. They were well educated. They had studied the world religions. Yet this event triggered something for them. Amidst everything else they had been trained and schooled in, all that they knew, there was something about these events that stood out like that star in the night sky. So it drew them. And they came.

There is something truly new about the Christian gospel, new in its uniqueness and its power. People are still, all these years later, drawn by it. And so they come. What about you?

Jesus brings something truly new. So much so that we must not treat it as anything else. It fuels an abundant joy. It creates a gaping chasm. And it demands continual reminders.

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