

Abandoning the good for the best. Luke 5:36-6:16

“The Old is Good” Lk. 5:39

Why would you ever leave, give up, what you think is good, what has been working for you, for something new?

Not talking washing powder, or breakfast cereal

But the commitments that inform your choices and judgements – that have given you the way of life you have.

Why would you ever leave, give up, what you think is good, what has been working for you, for something new?

That is the question confronting the serious religious people, the pharisees and scribes of New Testament times, in their dealings with Jesus.

They’ve noticed Jesus. His activity and teaching have got their attention. His healings and casting out of demons were hard to miss.

But he’s not always attracted their attention in a good way. They’ve noticed he does things they think are a bit off, like mixing with disreputable people, people pulling down their community, like tax collectors and sinners, and he says things that they think no-one should ever say – like pronouncing sins forgiven

And they have taken up with him why he doesn’t seem to be promoting amongst his followers the kind of religious practices – like prayer and fasting – they are into.

As you heard, Jesus’ response has been that such practices are inappropriate for his followers while he is around

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.”

But he says more.

Their practices, their pattern of life informed by their understanding of God’s law, was incompatible with what Jesus was teaching and bringing.

³⁶ He 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

His way and their way couldn’t, and shouldn’t be mixed, and the attempt to do so would be destructive of both.

It was one or the other, the new or the old

But then Jesus acknowledges it’s not a choice they, or anyone, would naturally make

³⁹ And no one, after drinking old wine, wants new, because he says, ‘The old is better.’”

The word translated ‘better’ there is not a comparative – it is just ‘good’ [cf. ESV]. Jesus is not suggesting people have tried both and made a considered choice.

Jesus is saying that those who have drunk old wine say ‘the old is good, is pleasant, is fine’. It suits me.

Having drunk the old wine they have no reason to abandon it for the new, no reason to want to change.

Having a life that works for them, people see no reason to give it up for something else.

And so that is the question the dealings of these religious people with Jesus raises.

Why would they or anyone give up what they have found good, that works for them, to embrace the new Jesus brings?

That is the question their dealings with Jesus raises, and it is the question their dealings with Jesus over the two sabbaths recorded in Luke 6 will answer.

We will see firstly that their old is inadequate, unable to deal with reality, with the reality of Jesus' greatness – and so leading to fundamental misjudgements

And secondly, that a commitment to stick with their old will put them on a path to misery and death, in the end be self-destructive and dangerous By causing them to reject the new of Jesus that is good and life giving, not just for them but for all – including you and I

But first, what was the old that was good for them? What is our old that makes us reluctant to taste the new wine of Jesus?

The Pharisee's old wine was a way of life founded on an exacting commitment to the Old Testament law and their tradition of interpretation of the law.

In our individualistic culture our default is to think that living by an external law, an external authority, would be oppressive, but it was working for them

It ordered their lives, told them how to live and how to expect others to live

It governed their relationships with others – who they should associate with, spend time with, and who they should avoid - helpful

It gave them a sense of identity and community respect – looked up to in their society for their seriousness, for being true Jews

Even gave them some hope – for they were living this way and encouraging others to live this way because when Israel conformed its life to the law they believed God would send the all conquering Messiah and restore their land and peace to them

A way of life, identity, respect, a hope – their old was working for them

And it worked psychologically - Assured them that they were people on God's side – holding back the godless, good people or at least better, superior to, those compromising with idolaters like those tax collectors [Luke 18:11]

The pharisee in Jesus' parable could pray *'God, I thank you that I'm not like other people—greedy, unrighteous, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.*

It worked psychologically, for it is always good to be able to feel good about yourself

Their old wine was good.

They weren't racked with guilt or self doubt. They felt they had it together, were even, dare I say it, on the right side of history

Sometimes it seems that Christians are surprised that people don't recognise how miserable their life is without Jesus, are not tormented by guilt and anxious about death – and just waiting to be told about Jesus

We can give the impression that we are puzzled when others are just cheerfully getting on with their lives

Some are conscious of their need, but many have an old wine they think is good – some commitment around which they order their lives, from which they get a sense of identity, that satisfies them and reinforces their sense that they are good people

It might be to sport and involvement with the club, organising our lives around the team, and individual and shared achievement

It might be to an inherited or adopted faith – Bhuddism or Islam – that brings with a way of life, a sense that we are keeping the rules

It might be commitment to family

For many it might be a commitment to our own autonomy – to organising our lives to please ourselves, to maximise our pleasure, or wealth, or power, or knowledge, to live by our own rules

Commitments that give us a way of life that while not perfect – bring their occasional disappointments, kind of work for us

An old that is good, and incompatible with the new of Jesus

And so many in their dealings with Jesus, perhaps you, have the same question as the Pharisees “Why would we give up what we have found good, that works for us, to embrace the new Jesus brings?”

And you, if you are a believer, might also be questioning in your heart, as you think of your happy and together not yet Christian colleagues and friends and family – “Why would I want them, expect them, to give up their good life to embrace the new Jesus brings?”

Give it up, and never go back to it, never try and mix the old with following Jesus.

To answer these why questions

Let’s look at what happens when the Pharisees are determined to stick with their old in their dealings with Jesus

The ‘Old is good’ – but it leads to a fundamental misjudgement 6:1-5

6 *On a Sabbath, he passed through the grainfields. His disciples were picking heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands, and eating them. ² But some of the Pharisees said, “Why are you doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?”*

³ *Jesus answered them, “Haven’t you read what David and those who were with him did when he was hungry—
⁴ how he entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat? He even gave some to those who were with him.” ⁵ Then he told them, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”*

The issue for the Pharisees is not grain theft – the disciples eating grain someone else had grown.

The law allowed that

Deut. 23 ²⁵ When you enter your neighbour’s standing grain, you may pluck heads of grain with your hand, but do not put a sickle to your neighbour’s grain.

The problem for the pharisees was that they were doing it on the Sabbath, the day of rest God had given to the Jewish people as a sign of belonging to Him. In their eyes the disciples were doing a lot of work that was forbidden on the Sabbath – reaping, threshing, winnowing and preparing food. They had abandoned themselves to wanton law breaking.

Now most of us, I suspect, are not so scrupulous about keeping laws – [any children, block your ears] who has never crossed against a little red man when no cars are visible?

And we are probably thinking – get real, this is so trivial

But that is not the way Jesus responds to their question. He doesn't say – get a life, learn to flex a little.

He says instead that their old, their understanding of relating to God, being God's person, by rule keeping, is inadequate for testing or judging Him because of who He is.

First He says that in condemning Him they haven't applied the Scriptures properly

He refers them to the incident we heard from 1 Samuel

³ *Jesus answered them, "Haven't you read what David and those who were with him did when he was hungry—
⁴ how he entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat? He even gave some to those who were with him."*

David clearly violated the law in taking the bread of the presence for Himself and His men. The law allowed only the priests to eat it. [Lev. 24:8-9]

But Scripture, God's word, does not condemn David – why? because of who HE is, the Lord's anointed

So if God in His word does not condemn David's law breaking because of who He is, the Pharisees condemning Jesus, the LORD's anointed going about the Lord's work, is wrong, unless they want to go against God and condemn David as well, to do what God in His word never does.

Their condemnation shows they haven't got the full picture, fully understand what they so confidently rely on

But then He makes an even greater claim

⁵ *Then he told them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."*

The Sabbath was given to Israel, to the Jewish people, by God, but Jesus is saying He, as the promised Son of Man who is given an eternal rule over all [Daniel 7:13-14], is the Lord, the boss, of the Sabbath.

It serves Him and is subject to His rule, and as its Lord people are accountable to Him for how they use it, not the other way around.

He is not subject to their judgements about how He should use the Sabbath, but they are to His.

Theirs is a serious misjudgement

Takes your breath away.

The Sabbath command was God's command, one of the big ten – but Jesus says He has the authority to administer its observance and judge whether people are keeping it as God intended

In effect Jesus is saying that what is God's, is His.

And the judgement of God is His to administer.

If Jesus is right about Himself, the Pharisees way of viewing the world and forming their judgements is inadequate – for it doesn't recognise, allow for, Jesus' greatness

Their good old will always misjudge, for in making decisions it excludes what is central to reality – who Jesus is, the glorious Son of Man, ruler and judge of all, the one by whom and for whom all things were made

In fact sticking to their old and judging Jesus by their standards, thinking they are equipped to judge Jesus, will prevent them from seeing Jesus' reality

And that will be true about our old as well before we are believers, no matter how good we find our way of life. It also doesn't allow for Jesus' greatness

If we are committed to our autonomy, to living a self-directed life – we have no place for Jesus being Lord, and will find fault with Jesus' expectation that He can command us,

If we are committed to another religion, we will be offended by Jesus' insistence that He is not just another prophet, but the Son of God and that you cannot be right with the Creator unless you are believing in Him

If we organise our lives around our families, we will not welcome Jesus' insistence that love of Him must come before love of our families

If a commitment to the club and achieving sporting success is what we organise our life around, we will not want to hear Jesus say our lives, how we spend our time, ought to be ordered around believing in Him

If Jesus is right about Himself, our old without Jesus, that way of life we find good, will always be inadequate, for it excludes the central truth of the universe – that we and all creation find our purpose in Jesus' rule

And it will leave us biased to making misjudgements about Jesus, misunderstanding His actions, discounting His words

If Jesus is right about Himself – that was the big if for the Pharisees, and is the big if for us, but Jesus has already given signs of His greatness that should have made them pause.

He has already raised the paralytic, cleansed the leper, cast out demons.

Whatever your old is your judgements will always be challenged by Jesus' view of himself

And A determination to stick with the old will give you a vested interest in finding fault with Jesus, giving yourself reasons not to listen to Him

And that is what we see in the next Sabbath incident

The Pharisees determination to stick with their old commits them to finding fault with Jesus, and opens them up to misery and danger

The 'Old is good' – but persevered with puts you on a path to misery and death. Luke 6:6-11

⁶On another Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. A man was there whose right hand was shrivelled. ⁷The scribes and Pharisees were watching him closely, to see if he would heal on the Sabbath, so that they could find a charge against him. ⁸But he knew their thoughts and told the man with the shrivelled hand, "Get up and stand here." So he got up and stood there. ⁹Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you: Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?" ¹⁰After looking around at them all, he told him, "Stretch out your hand." He did, and his hand was restored. ¹¹They, however, were filled with rage and started discussing with one another what they might do to Jesus.

There in the synagogue is a man with a withered hand. For whatever reason – traumatic nerve injury, stroke, problems with the blood supply, the muscles of his hand have atrophied and it is useless.

Grievous and impoverishing – but plainly not an acute problem. It's a chronic, non-life-threatening condition, and as far as the Pharisees are concerned that meant that he could easily, with no harm done, wait for the next day to be healed.

Their rules allowed intervention if someone was in mortal danger, but it was breaking the Sabbath, unlawful work, to treat a chronic condition on the Sabbath.

And so now they are watching Jesus – not to learn from Him, or understand what He is on about – but to find fault with Him, find a reason they could reckon him a bad man, a law breaker, a reason why they wouldn't have to listen to Him

And Jesus could have easily made an appointment to see this man the next day.

Instead, conscious of their intent watching and what they were thinking v. 8 he deliberately confronts them and their beliefs. HE calls the man forward – where everyone could see

And he asks the question that both shows what He brings with His new and will expose their hearts. In this question he is giving them an opportunity to pause and see where their commitment to their old is leading them.

⁹ Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you: Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?"

Jesus can ask at times some pretty tricky questions – but this one is straightforward, and the answer is in the question.

It is always right, lawful, to do good, to save life – because the law commands us to love our neighbour as ourselves, and the Sabbath is given by the good God who does good and is for life, not death. You do not honour Him by doing evil.

But they don't answer, because they are committed to their old that suits them, to their way of seeing and living in the world, that leaves them like Adam and Eve after they had eaten the fruit as the judges of right and wrong.

In their silence they are choosing evil and the destruction of life.

But Jesus does not need their approval or support to bring the new

¹⁰ After looking around at them all, he told him, "Stretch out your hand." He did, and his hand was restored.

Pause and think what a great work that is.

Sometimes when a hand has lost its function you can restore some by tendon transfers and releasing contractures – and then months of physio and retraining.

But where there is muscular atrophy and longstanding contractures – really hard if not impossible.

But Jesus does it, with a word.

He does good, fearlessly.

He saves a life, makes the man whole, restores him to productive work, to full participation in life

It is Jesus who does what is lawful, who fulfils the law in loving this man, not delaying his healing out of fear of disapproval

And plainly God is at work through Jesus, vindicating Jesus, for God does not listen to sinners.

That healing should give them pause for thought

But it says

¹¹ They, however, were filled with rage and started discussing with one another what they might do to Jesus.

There is no joy at his healing, just rage

They would rather he continue in his crippled and impoverished state for another day or two, have him suffer rather than know wholeness, for the sake of their old, the way of living and relating to God that suited them, that gave them identity and let them feel good about themselves.

And that is miserable, isn't it – when you cannot rejoice at good done to another

Their persevering with their old, and their insistence Jesus live within it, means firstly they embrace evil, not good – for there is no love of neighbour in their response, just as there will be no love in recruiting false witnesses for Jesus' trial, or the threats of exclusion from the synagogue, from community life, they will make against Jesus' followers

And their persevering with their old means they are on their way to killing, for those discussions about what they will do with a Jesus who won't let himself be incorporated into their old, who says you have to choose between the old and his new, will crystallize into a determination to kill him.

In the gospel story we know where that rage against Jesus will end.

It will end in Jesus' crucifixion, in their killing Jesus to defend and maintain their old good, that way of life that worked for them

But the gospel also tells us in killing Jesus they endangered themselves, made certain the judgement of God upon a Jerusalem that rejected His Son – for God made it clear that the Jesus they crucified is who He says He is.

You cannot get a more decisive vindication of your claim to be Son of God, the Son of Man to whom eternal and universal rule is given, than resurrection.

That is something only the living God, the God whom Jesus claimed had sent Him into the world, can do.

Only God can raise the dead, give life – undying life, to a corpse

And in the body in which He died Jesus appeared to His followers to convince them He was alive – being seen by them, eating with them, talking with them, walking with them, showing them His wounds – alive.

Jesus is alive, and having once experienced human judgement He now has the authority to judge all, and to forgive

No matter how good your old is, if it makes you determined to find fault with Jesus, to give you reasons to exclude and not listen to Jesus, it is endangering you eternally.

For you are committing yourself to a rebellion that is already lost, even if you only recognise that on the last day.

You can't win against someone you can't kill, you can't vindicate your truth against someone whose word is already established in His resurrection as truth. His word will prevail

And staying in your good is impoverishing – For Jesus is good and does good, and He saves – He, as we see in His life, brings wholeness and life that the Pharisees' old could never bring

And as the risen Lord He still brings wholeness and life to all who believe in Him that your old, your autonomy, your inherited religion, your sport or family, can never bring

Forgiveness of God, the judge of all

The new life of the Spirit, that can change us to live lives of love and peace and joy

*Titus 3:*³ *For we too were once foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved by various passions and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, detesting one another.*

⁴ *But when the kindness of God our Savior and his love for mankind appeared, ⁵ he saved us—not by works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy—through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit.*

The undying life of the resurrection

A place in the new heaven and earth

At the beginning I asked you, if you are not yet a believer, to ask this question “Why would you give up what you have found good, the life that works for you, to embrace the new Jesus brings?”

The answer, no matter how good you find your present life, is Jesus.

He is glorious. He is the One who reigns at God’s right Hand, with all authority. He is the judge of the last day.

He is good. We see that here – he courted condemnation and hostility to do that man good, to transform his life for the better.

He endured humiliation and death to bring forgiveness and peace and life to those, to you and I when we were living ignoring God, disobeying Him, rejecting His good rule

Any attempt to live life without reckoning with him is out of touch with reality

And insisting on sticking to your old, that wants to conform Jesus to your way of seeing the world and organising life, will just mean you will grow to resent Jesus as He insists on His greatness and living by His standards, his understanding of what is good – lead you further into misery and ultimately death as you move away from Him.

Whatever your old – sport, family, an inherited religion, a determined autonomy, change from your good to what is genuinely best.

Leave the old for the new

Jesus’ critics and would be judges had two opportunities to change their mind and attitude to Jesus

Firstly when Jesus asked the question – they could have engaged with it, with Jesus’ word as it is, and not ignored it as a threat to their being in charge.

And secondly as they saw that hand restored they could have admitted they were wrong, and that God was with Jesus

You have those same opportunities

The gospel word brings you Jesus’ words to engage with – and we will hear more of them next week –

And it brings you the eyewitness reports not just of Jesus’ mighty works, but of His resurrection, reason to say that God is with Jesus and you are wrong in dismissing Him and not listening to Him

Trust Him, and embrace the new He brings

Or if you are not ready to do that – find out more

And believers, at the beginning I asked you, as you think of your happy and together not yet Christian colleagues and friends and family, this question – “Why would I want them to give up their good life to embrace the new Jesus brings?”

Again, the answer is Jesus

We are not telling people the gospel because their lives are miserable – though they may be

We are not telling people the gospel because following the Lord Jesus will make their life better – though it will, with trials

We tell people the gospel and urge them to believe because Jesus is Lord – He is the glorious Son of Man, and He will judge all,

As Paul says, God commands all people to repent, because He has set a day when HE is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man He has appointed, and he has provided proof of this to everyone by raising Him from the dead. [Acts 17:30-31]

And He is also the Son who does good and who alone can save eternally

So Don't acquiesce in their self assessment, their judgement that they don't need to bother about Jesus

Pray they would cease to say the old is good

Persevere with the truth of Jesus

It is Jesus who is great, and who will show their judgement of Him to be a misjudgement

It is Jesus who is good, whose goodness is a mirror in which we can see our own failings and need

Persevere with the truth of Jesus

Confident that Jesus wants them, and all people, to hear. That is what we see in Jesus' choice of the 12.

The New is for all 6:12-16

¹² During those days he went out to the mountain to pray and spent all night in prayer to God. ¹³ When daylight came, he summoned his disciples, and he chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: ¹⁴ Simon, whom he also named Peter, and Andrew his brother; James and John; Philip and Bartholomew; ¹⁵ Matthew and Thomas; James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon called the Zealot; ¹⁶ Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

Jesus is very deliberate about calling the 12 – an important number in Israel's history,

But I don't want to focus on the number, but the name – apostles.

Apostle means messenger, a sent one, and the rabbis of the day said “The one sent by the man is as the man Himself.”

The Old Covenant had priests and prophets, but Jesus is creating a new order of ministry to be the foundation of His new covenant community.

A new order characterised by their task – to carry the message of Jesus, to bring in their capacity as His commissioned messengers the word of Jesus Himself, so that people listening to them are listening to Jesus

And he is not just deliberate in their appointment, he is also careful in their preparation

Read on in the gospel and you will see He will train them

He will equip them with His Spirit

He will authorise them to take His gospel to all

Luke 24:⁴⁶ He also said to them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead the third day,⁴⁷ and repentance for forgiveness of sins will be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ And look, I am sending you what my Father promised. As for you, stay in the city until you are empowered from on high.”

Why apostles? Why messengers as the foundation?

Because Jesus knows who HE is.

He is the Son of Man who will rule over all,

He knows what He alone can do – save life

And He knows that it is by hearing and believing His word, the word we hear as we hear the gospel He gave to His apostles to preach, that all and any can come to find peace with Him, come to know forgiveness for our rebellion and be included amongst His people.

Whether they are happy or feeling their need, struggling or have got it all together, Jesus wants your friends and family, and the world, to hear

And bringing that message is doing good, and bringing life, to all who will believe