

The tension between Old and New Covenants

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[0 : 00] If you do the ministry training course that the Sussex Gospel Partnership operate in Hayward Heath,! You will learn that you should always have in your mind, in your sermon, a theme sentence.

This is advice I very rarely take. A nice snappy theme sentence. This is the best I could do. As God's purposes move forward in the coming Jesus Kingdom, grace sounds a jarring note with the unspiritual supporters of the Old Covenant.

It's really not a snappy sentence at all, is it? But it does describe what's happening here. Because the purposes of God are moving forward.

So we're moving from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. And we're moving from the things which you'd focus on Moses to the things in which you'd focus on Jesus.

[1 : 07] And it's a change. And actually, it's not a comfortable change in many ways. As we've just read, we're moving from the Old Covenant.

And we're moving from the Old Covenant. We end up with a real controversy concerning the supporters of the Old Covenant, as they would see it.

The Pharisees and the scribes. And Jesus. And it really is a jarring note. Because they criticize him for eating with tax collectors and sinners.

And then, as it goes on, in his attitude to the Sabbath, they end up saying, Well, his attitude to the Sabbath is so detrimental and disrespectful that he deserves to be killed.

And did you notice that? Because Jesus in the synagogue says, What are we talking about here on the Sabbath? Saving life or killing? And because they don't go with him on this saving life and enhancing life.

[2 : 20] Instead, they say, Well, we're going to kill you. Now, we're not going to get as far as that bit. We're just going to look at the tax collectors and sinners.

But it does all follow on. So let's do what we can in a hopefully fairly simple way. To look at the bit that is about feasting and fasting.

That seems to be what it's about. Feasting and fasting. So, verse 13. Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him and he began to teach them. And as he walked along, he saw Levi, son of Alphaeus, sitting at the tax collector's booth.

So let's sort out the tax collector's booth. I think it would be something like that. So here are the fishermen bringing in their fish. And as they land the fish, they have to...

I'm speculating on this. I think this is the sort of idea. That they would have to pay tax at the tax collection point.

[3 : 22] Where there are a number of people, perhaps some soldiers, perhaps some rather beefy looking assistants. And it's all done under the supervision of the Roman insignia.

Because it's all going to go to Rome. So you get the point. I mean, in some ways this could be a perfectly legitimate thing. Like collecting VAT. But you can see how easily this could be abused.

So the fisherman brings in his fish and they say, Today, sorry, it's not a 10% tax. It's a 15% tax. So why it was 10% yesterday? Well, today it's 15%.

Do you want to argue about it? And you can see how resentful people could get. And to know that the tax goes to Rome anyway. A tax collector was not a popular person.

So they're going past the tax collection point. And incidentally, I don't think there will be just one person there. I think there will be a number of people there. If you're going to get the picture, it's sort of the tax collection office on site.

[4 : 23] I can almost visualize this. When I was in Manar in Sri Lanka, and there were military personnel patrolling the beach because they didn't want, they didn't want, what did they not want?

People escaping to India, or military stuff coming in from India over the water. So I quite imagine having the beach becomes militarized and a sort of rather hostile place.

Anyway, there we are, the tax collection point. And it says, As he walked along, he saw Levi, son of Alphaeus, sitting at the tax collector's collection point.

And Jesus says to him, Follow me. And Levi got up and followed him. So this is, I believe, the third time that Jesus has said, Follow me.

And people have got up and followed him. There was the fisherman in chapter one. Simon and his brother Andrew, Come follow me.

[5 : 23] And then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, and he called them. I don't think we find him calling anybody as we go on in the gospel.

I think these three examples are the examples of Jesus saying to somebody, Follow me. So, there's Levi.

He might well be Matthew, of Matthew's gospel. And his mates, or his associates, saying, What on earth are you doing? He leaves the money. He leaves his business.

He leaves what he's been doing and follows Jesus. And this leads to the confrontation in verse 15. While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.

And here's the scene with the tax collectors and sinners sitting at the table, feasting, and Jesus there, and his disciples.

[6 : 33] And when the teachers of the law, verse 16, when the teachers of the law, who are Pharisees, saw him eating with sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples, Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?

It's a very disgraceful and wrong thing for Jesus to be doing. Why? Why is he doing it?

Why is he in this place? So, entering the home of somebody who was such a disgrace to Judaism, such a disgrace to decent society.

Why does he enter this place? It's defiling, it's unclean. And why is he sitting with these people who are, you know, well, they're unclean, probably ritually unclean, in the sense that they probably weren't observant, certainly not in the way the Pharisees were, so they wouldn't perhaps have been careful to avoid unclean things ritually, but even more more so, or certainly as well as, morally. they're morally unclean, they're morally dubious people, people who's, who've made their money in dubious ways, people whose lifestyle is dodgy, people who you think, I certainly wouldn't want my son or daughter doing that.

[8 : 17] That sort of person. And, here's the question, why is your, he asks, they ask the, they ask his disciples, why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?

That's the question, and I couldn't, and this, I think, is the way the answer goes. Jesus says, it is the nature of the case that if you're a doctor, you must get close to unhealthy people, because you can't be a doctor otherwise, and the idea, this is a process of healing, so if you have a doctor, they need to be with the unhealthy people in order to produce the healing, and Jesus says, you know, that's a likeness to what Jesus has come to do, he is a saviour, and in the nature of a saviour's work, he must get close to and get involved with sinners for the purpose of forgiveness and new life, and he says, that's what I'm about, that's what I'm doing, that's the nature of this part of

God's purposes, and that's why I called it, I've taken this word grace, it isn't mentioned here as I say, but I think that's a good description, it is God reaching out to people, to bless people who don't deserve it, and perhaps even people who haven't asked for it, and people perhaps who until this moment weren't interested in it, it's grace, it's a ministry of grace, an activity of getting alongside these sinners, winning these sinners, bringing them to forgiveness and new life, and we could say, although when I looked it up I found I couldn't find this exact phrase, the day of grace, the period of time in which God's activity could be put under this single word, grace, what's going on as Jesus walks alongside the lake, grace, and what

God doing since that time up to the time of Jesus' return, it's grace. Paul said it regarding himself, he says this is a saying worthy of full acceptance, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am number one.

That's when it says the worst, it says it's the first. This is what Jesus Christ came to do. And for you and I, we think this is marvellous.

[11 : 16] I think we do, don't we? We think it's marvellous. The Pharisees, do you see, they find this a very jarring note. They find it uncomfortable to the point of being unacceptable.

I suppose we have to get our heads around the fact that what to us is wonderful, if you start off on a different foot, that you think you're very righteous and you don't need to be saved from your sin, you think this is very demeaning, very patronising, it's unacceptable.

And it was, that's what they're saying, why does he do this? What's all this about? This isn't religion, this isn't what it says in the Bible. And of course Jesus is saying, that's what I have come to do.

I've come as a saviour. And if you just had sort of an ounce of real spiritual sense, you'd be saying, give me, give me, give me, give me. So let's just reflect on this, because we live in the same day of grace.

So I put in a comment here, that for Christians, I think it's important that we are consistent with this. We're not meant to live in a Christian bubble, where we only ever meet Christians, where our social life is only meeting Christians, where our time is only meeting Christians, and that's all we do.

[12:50] Because that's not how Jesus did it. He was interested in meeting, getting alongside, speaking to winning sinners.

Please don't misunderstand, it's not saying that Jesus is condoning their sin. Jesus isn't saying, teach me how to sin. Absolutely not.

But the nature of his gracious holiness is to get alongside sinners, to win them to his salvation.

salvation. And he's getting involved with and getting alongside sinners without joining in their sin.

And I put in a little challenge about whether we emulate the Lord Jesus. So Chris has been bringing this very helpful set of little video snippets about having a front line, meaning where the armed forces of the kingdom meet up with the world outside and there's the sort of front line of interaction where we hope the kingdom will progress and win souls.

So I do just point out that Jesus had a front line in the sense that there was an interaction between him and people who were not yet his.

[14:16] he ate with tax collectors and sinners. I know it's a very obvious point to make isn't it? But sometimes it's worth stating the obvious.

You know we might ask ourselves when was the last time that we ever had a meal with tax collectors and sinners? when was the last time that we had in our homes for a meal or a cup of coffee somebody whom we would love to win for the Lord Jesus Christ?

I'd offer that as a thought and then I could be even more challenging and saying as a church would we say that we were a front line church? Would we say that much of our or a significant amount of our activity and interaction and prayer and concern is not just blessing the believers but reaching out winsomely to the world outside?

I think we could say a yes to that. Are we a front line church? But it's a good question to keep asking and to keep on saying well could we expand this front line?

could we put perhaps more resources in it? Are we? Etc. So let's move on the saviour who was like a doctor who made it his business to be with the sick.

[16:00] Let's move to the next point of confrontation. Verse 18. Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting.

So we're talking about fasting here. Some people came and asked Jesus how is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting but yours are not? So here's a little picture of this.

So we've got the disciples of John and they're fasting. Now if they'd taken notice of Jesus' instructions about fasting we wouldn't be able to tell that they were fasting because they would just look perfectly normal.

Do you remember that bit? You know don't Jesus says when you fast don't make yourself look all miserable don't go around with a big sign saying look at me fasting just carry on life as normal.

However I have made it to look a little bit as though they're fasting and the disciples of the Pharisees fast so I don't know whether they look as though they're fasting or not.

[17:01] But the visitors say to Jesus well what about your disciples because there they are loads of food scoffing it down and they're not in the slightest bit troubled by it they seem to be enjoying it actually and the visitors say to Jesus some people came and asked Jesus how is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting but yours are not.

Now it's interesting that in all the Gospels apart from John's Gospel this sequence of questions and answers comes up and I think there's actually quite a lot going on here I'm not convinced that I've got my head around all of it actually but let's see what we can do.

Let's think a little bit about fasting in the Old Testament so the Old Covenant Scriptures is a sign of being sad so in bereavement people would fast.

Do you remember when David heard the news of Saul's death he tore his clothes and fasted. It's a sign of being sad. and from that it can be a sign of being sorry so being sad about sins and from that it can be a sign of being serious.

So that's the sort of area we're in with fasting. It's not to do with losing weight. It's not to do with making time for other things. it's to do with being in that culture it was the way they expressed sadness and sorrow and seriousness and to the best of my homework I found that these were the fasts that were commanded in the Old Testament.

[18 : 58] So the day of atonement once a year. In the time of exile another four fasts were added to the calendar.

and from the time of exile I think this is the feast of Purim so from time in Babylon in Esther we have this one other fast enjoined.

If I may say David Eileen was with us when we did Esther many years ago and I still remember being encouraged by her response because as she went through it she was herself and said wow that's good and amen to that and we together as a group we enjoyed going through the book of Esther some years ago now but I still remember it.

Now if you care to do the arithmetic I think that's six fasts per year. fasts per year. So the old covenant did have those six fasts built into it.

Now if we're to believe the Pharisee whom Jesus quotes in Luke chapter 18 verse 12. Do you remember that he looks down on the tax collector next to him? I thank you God that I am not as other men are.

[20 : 19] Do you remember how many times he says he fasts? Twice a week. Now whether that's really what they would have said or whether Jesus is sort of as he sometimes did exaggerating to make a point but let's take it literally.

So if they fast twice a week how many fasts is that per year? That's what I made it to 104. If you think about it there's quite there's something going on there.

The old covenant actually commanded such and such but in the hands of the Pharisees they've extrapolated they've taken it off in a certain direction they've extended in a certain direction what the old testament said and there I can't do the arithmetic how many times bigger is 104 than 6 a lot bigger they've multiplied hugely the old covenant did say something about being sad and sorry and serious but it said six times a year once every other month but the Pharisees have taken this and said well this is the way God wants us to go 104 times a year twice a week so something's happening there and of course it's something that Jesus' disciples aren't doing at all how come how come they differ with us as to what real spirituality is you know if they're going to be hyper spiritual we're going to be hyper spiritual they seem to have a very different way of doing it so it's interesting to look at

Jesus' answer and as I say I think there's quite there's more going on here than meets the eye and probably more than I've got hold of verse 19 so Jesus answers this in these terms first of all how can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them they cannot so long as they have him with them but the day will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them and on that day they will fast so they will be sad and sorry and serious a day is coming when that will be the order of the day but at this particular moment what we have is this we have the bridegroom we have the bridegroom and presumably you don't have a bridegroom without a bride and we have the friends of the bridegroom it's sort of a little parable and who are the people well presumably the bridegroom must be Jesus he's come and he's the one who makes this state of affairs and so Jesus is the bridegroom and presumably the disciples then are the friends of the bridegroom or the guests of the bridegroom because they're the ones who aren't fasting which is an interesting question is who's the bride the sinners well yes yes

I put a question mark because it's interesting blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the lamb book of revelation blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the lamb so we would say yeah that's us we're invited to the wedding supper of the lamb and we say who's the bride well that's us as well isn't it yes the church is the bride so and I'm just wondering whether we're actually there twice do you see what I mean we're a bit like the friends of the bridegroom and we're also the bride it's sort of well at least we can be confident of this Jesus is saying don't think of the time that I'm here as being a time of lament and oh if only and haven't we

made a mess of things that's not what I want you to be thinking about says Jesus that's not the tone that comes when I come he says

[24 : 37] I want you to think of it as being like a wedding that's why they're tucking in because that's what you do at a wedding isn't it and everybody can understand a wedding it's a very cross-cultural thing I remember preaching in Sri Lanka about the wedding supper of the lamb and of course it translates instantly doesn't it because every culture has got their eye on who might marry who and every culture is delighted when he proposes to her and every culture thinks it's a wonderful day and doesn't she look beautiful and all of these things which is what weddings are about and he says this is how you to think of me coming it brings a note of love and of enrichment and of fulfilment and of leaving and cleaving you know sometimes tears are shed on a wedding day aren't they because something has passed away and something has become new and there's something of that in what Jesus says there's a note of joy and there's hope for the future and all those wonderful things are before us at a wedding and Jesus says that's what it's like at this point in Mark's gospel because I've come it's a brilliant thought isn't it

Jesus says that's that's what I bring that's how it is now I'm here and I I do wonder whether he it's not just a passing answer to a debating question but whether he's saying something really innovative and really profound about the new thing that God is doing the old thing was about going up on the mountain and having two blocks of stone with commands on it I mean that's putting it very brutally but that it's not too far wrong he says the new thing is like the bridegroom coming for his bride and saying to her I take you to be my lawful wedded wife all that I have I give to you all that I am

I am for you we watched what did we watch on Thursday Sense and Sensibility with Hugh which one is it Grant that one and at the very end of it just before the titles come up he says to Eleanor played by Emma Thompson because she thought that he'd got married to somebody else and he says something like my heart is ever only yours titles love wedding Jesus is saying that's what I've come to bring that's the character of my kingdom and if I may say an awful lot comes from that insight so

Romans a lot of the argumentation in Romans comes from union with Christ you know we are in Christ what he has comes over to us what he's done is ours and it's a huge piece of theology it's not just a random little thought and next thought please it's a huge foundational piece of theology and I really wonder whether that is really where we're at in these verses here's a new thing Jesus came to claim his bride and to incorporate to spread the arms of his of his love and of his righteousness and of his bounty and blessing around her and that every Christian could then from then on say I am in Christ don't think of me as being a bachelor or a spinster spiritually speaking think of me as being his

I am in Christ I stand in Christ I am covered in Christ I am enveloped in Christ I am blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing it's a very radical thought so I just offer that and also off the back of this seems to me that our understanding of human marriage focuses in this sort of area I don't think our understanding of human marriage is rooted in its richest form in the Old Testament I think it is a Christian view in that it is when we see Christ and what he comes to do when he brings about this union of two unlike beings the sinless saviour and his obnoxious woman which he so loves and washes and blesses that she becomes his spotless bride that it's that thought that event that blessing which informs our view of marriage and we might say here's an insight that is a

[30 : 53] Christian insight why is it that weddings are so wonderful why is it that there's something almost transcendent about a wedding by which I mean something which almost goes beyond this world into a world to come I'm in heaven I'm in heaven how does it go after that I'm in heaven that's language which is transcendent isn't it it's saying beyond this world I'm in heaven when I see you smile or something like that I've completely lost where I was going with this now yeah the idea of a wedding that's why Christians are so unaccommodatingly uncompromising about what marriage really is it is one man and one woman together forever well in this life at least and that's why Christians won't be shifted to say whatever it is between same sex people whatever you want to call it it isn't marriage you know you call it something for the sake of the law or whatever but the

Christian insight says well it's not what we've seen what Christ has revealed about the real meaning of male and female of this amazing act this amazing relationship that God has given to all humankind you know to all across different cultures anyway I've gone on a bit on that in John chapter 4 in the beginning of John's gospel we don't get this bit about how can the guests of the

bride room fast while he is with them in about the same part of the gospel we get a chapter I know it's a telepathy question anybody got in mind what chapter I'm thinking of I've probably got it up on the screen now haven't I it's not the prayer and fasting

John chapter 4 is what the woman at the well now the woman at the well is a what you would call a type scene it it it has a particular pattern to it in the bible and the pattern is that a bloke comes to the well there's a woman who has trouble getting water out of the well he helps her camels and then what happens after that there's usually some sort of marriage isn't there quite often he would marry her so Moses went to the well and he married the girl didn't he and it's interesting John chapter 4 it doesn't follow through the type well or does it because here is Jesus who comes to the well the woman is having problems with the water and there's a conversation about it he doesn't marry her but what he does do is bring her to faith and she is you know she's got quite a dodgy past hasn't she and the

Lord loves her and brings her to himself and I wonder whether what John is doing is following the same train of thought but he's doing it in a different way here's one thing I want you to understand as we explain who Jesus is he's the bride groom who comes to win his bride from heaven he came and sought her to be his holy bride with his own blood he bought her and for her life he died it's just a thought Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to cleanse her to make her without spot or wrinkle or any such thing let's go on to the next section so Mark chapter 2 I've gone way off course on that but it does make you think so answer number one about the fasting is this whole wedding thing answer number two there is an explosive newness in the kingdom as we go from the old to the new it's not a completely comfortable transition or it may not be completely comfortable for many people and he gives these two illustrations of the clothing he says if you have old clothing and you sew on a patch interestingly

I haven't checked this out but certainly in the NIV it's a gentleman who does the patching isn't it no one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth onto an old garment if he does the new piece will pull away from the old anyway I have to check whether that's borne out in the original but it's interesting in the translation isn't it so he says this is a recipe for disaster really disaster so I've put some trousers there with a patch and then the trousers explode which is a little bit over the top isn't it but he says there's a pulling force if you put new fabric a new patch onto an old garment it pulls away it tears away you can't fit them together incompatibility and he says likewise with the wine skin if it's empty and you top it up with new wine new wine is still fermenting and even when you put it into the wine skin it will be fermenting away and if the wine skin has got old and rigid it will put a new wine in it then it will explode the wine will burst the skin so I put a wine skin bursting there both quite strong pictures aren't they it's not a comfortable thing it's not an easy ride as you go from the old to the new they don't just fit really without tension and I think

[37 : 47] Jesus is saying something here which again I'm not sure that I've got my head around this completely the new covenant fulfills the old covenant yes it does but that's not the only relationship it's in a sense in an explosive tension with the old covenant we move from things that in the old covenant when right and normal and good but if we try and bring them straight over into the new covenant we find an explosive destructive tension and it's a subject worth thinking about quite carefully but just for a moment let's think about what the new testament says about justification by faith alone listen to the tension in Galatians 6 verses 12 to 16 and I'm really just touching on this and leaving a lot of loose threads

I'm afraid but Galatians that wasn't meant to be a pun Galatians 6 Galatians is in many ways about the old testament and new testament and let's put it this way there was a time when encouraging spiritually minded people spiritually minded blokes to be circumcised was exactly the right thing to do if you want to be a Jew if you want to become a Jew from a Gentile background then you need to undergo circumcision that's the right thing to do but there came a time after the newness of the gospel had come in where if you say to somebody you want to follow God you want to draw close to God you should be circumcised if you say that to them you are leading them up the garden path you are destroying their spiritual life you are putting such a burden on them and you are leading them away from Christ and it's interesting isn't it what was the right thing in such and such a year however many years later is very definitely the wrong thing you can't fit the two together it just and see how Paul is sort of exploding inside when he talks about it

Galatians 6 verse 12 those who want to make a good impression in the flesh are trying to compel you to be circumcised the only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of

Christ for not even those who are circumcised obey the law yet they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh may I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world neither circumcision or uncircumcision means anything what counts is a new creation peace and mercy to all who follow this rule that's to say the real Israel the Israel of God and no one calls me trouble for I bear in my body not the marks of circumcision the marks of Jesus he says the cross really does explode a lot of what previously was commendable and I think we'll stop at that point of what means to a lot of what a lot of what a lot of what means a lot means a lot of what