

Becoming a New Wineskin

If we read Mark's account of Jesus' "Come & Follow Me" 9-month training tier (Mark 1:15-3:12), the disciples Jesus called came out of a hyper-religious upbringing. As a whole, their culture responded with a narrowminded, provincial mindset, prejudicial against those who were different. They falsely focused on law-keeping and the "traditions of the elders" to measure God's favor.

From the get-go, Jesus possessed His Father's heart to bless the nations with the light of the Father's presence. All the world was on Jesus' heart because His Father has always been the mobile missionary God (Matthew 28:18-20). Jesus' intention focused on raising up and training followers to be a blessing to the ends of the world by connecting them with the Father's heart.

Such a rag-tag group from a background of *legalism* settled in a small niche of the world would **not** be credible witnesses to Gentiles, especially not to diverse cultures around the world. Yet His previously rigid followers later walked with such a resilient and compelling faith that they became world-changers as credible witnesses of the resurrection life of Jesus to the ends of the world.

*How did Jesus work with His early followers to effect such a radical change from rigid law-keepers to those who walked in the adaptable and flexible **freedom** available in the life of Christ?*

Jesus began almost three years before He released them into their global ministry after His resurrection. Jesus called a few to come and follow Him so He could prepare them "to fish for men," to win the lost back to His Father's heart. Follow Jesus' early training tier through the biography by Mark.

I see three great pathways of discipleship. Jesus modeled so He could take these provincial fishermen and train them to become world-changers, one person after another. Jesus taps into these channels and models them for His followers.

- The *upward*-edged response of **worship** as He rested in His Father's presence (Mark 1:35).
- The *inward*-edged response of **Family** or **community** where maturity and mutual ministry happened (Mark 1:16-20).
- The *outward*-edged response of the **Kingdom** in **mission** to restore people to the Father's heart.
- All this flows into them out of us as individual followers or disciples as we *mature* personally and take responsibility to partner with God to *make* and to *multiply* disciples (note the center of the diagram).



Perhaps the diagram to the right may help as a graphic display. In this training tier, the greatest need Jesus saw was to jump-start their heart for the world. He modeled a flexible, adaptable, fruitful way to connect with the lost world in any culture at any time. Jesus' inner life aligned with His Father's. Out of this compelling *walk* in His Father's presence, Jesus shared the *word* with *works* of compassion and power when the Father released these (John 5:19). Rapidly read Mark's description of this training tier in Mark 1:15-3:12. Focus one time only on **how** Jesus

impacted people. He communicated His Father's heart with *words* and supported this with *works* of compassion and of power, just like He calls us to.

What a powerful, flexible model. Yet if His followers remained as inflexible *old wineskins*, they could **not** be *credible witnesses* (Mark 2:22). This would diminish their impact. Where did Jesus begin?

Every disciple has unique arenas that are "minimum" factors in their current life.

By that I mean, that area of the greatest *essential* weakness. An *essential* weakness like judgmentalism, bitterness, fear, shame, inflexibility, law-keeping, then colors all our responses and pulls us down. If the new convert comes from a **non**-religious background, their *essential* weakness probably lies with self-indulgent addictions (Galatians 5:13-15). This *license* ("anything goes" mentality) robs them of appropriate **freedom** in Christ.

Jesus' disciples came out of a hyper-religious environment of following the "*traditions of the elders*" to develop life. This *essential* weakness breeds *legalism* that stifles **freedom** in Christ, so they are less credible as witnesses (Galatians 5:1-2). Jesus sought to free them from this stiff and rigid belief system during this training tier by transforming their **hearts**. In Scripture, our heart soars beyond the Hollywood definition. Our heart includes our **mind** with its thoughts, our **affections** with its feelings, and our **wills** with its choices.

Jesus' aim was to take these provincial, hyper-religious fishermen and transform their hearts so they would in turn train up an army to go and make other disciples to the ends of the world. These disciples needed this to "*mature and to multiply disciples*," Jesus' call on all our lives in some way (Matthew 28:18-20). Notice how this rests prominently in the center of our diagram above.

A "*disciple*" means one who has learned from another, not just information, but formation of character. This means that the accumulation of Biblical knowledge does not define a disciple of Jesus. Certainly, knowing the Word is preparatory, but change comes through **doing** the Word. Jesus systematically began to dismantle their encrusted views of how they followed God. He sought to remove the inflexibility that stifled their growth so they would not grow to be "*Bonsai tree*" Christians with a truncated root system.

Jesus grasped the crucial need for a significant mental-shift in His disciples *from* a contractual response of law-keeping *into* the relational response forged by **freedom**. When challenged regarding religious traditions (Mark 2:18), Jesus illustrates with the intimacy of a groom/bride relationship. Our life in Christ is not a contractual agreement to follow a list or certain practices. What we do flows out of the **freedom** of walking in intimate relationship like a **Bride**.

Jesus follows this up with two graphic contrasts between the **old** (their manmade traditions) and **His** new way (**freedom** in relationship). **Freedom** only flows out of inward relationship while the *legalism* of trusting in manmade practices focuses on the outward.

The first parable is the futility and fruitlessness of patching old cloth with new cloth of a different makeup. This not only fails to repair the old to make it new. It also rips the old material, ruining both (Mark 2:21). They are incompatible.

Similarly, if we try to pour the "new wine" of Jesus into the old wineskin of the OT law-keeping and the practices arising over time from these, the inflexible old wineskin will rupture from the effervescent life in the new wine, ruining both (Mark 2:22). An old wineskin is not blendable with the new wine Jesus brings. Anytime we bring anything outdated into the new, both are ruined. Law-keeping and following the practices of others without discernment can never bring **freedom** in Christ. **Freedom** comes from intimate relationship.

Three times in this initial training tier, Jesus deliberately violates their manmade, extra-Biblical rules and traditions about the Sabbath (extra-Biblical practices but He did not violate the Sabbath, Mark 1:21; 2:23-28; 3:1-6). He must expose this danger to His followers because He intends to send us to the ends of the world. *Legalism* does not mix with Jesus' message of **freedom**. To clarify, Jesus **never** violated Scripture although those caught in the *legalism* of the day falsely accused Him (Matthew 5:17, Jesus "fulfilled" the Law).

Some months later in Mark 7:5-13, Jesus sharply warns the religious leaders in the hearing of His 1st century disciples about the dangers of unexamined religious traditions. The traditions from the law-keeping of *legalism* cause them to "let go of," set aside" and even "nullify" the **word of God!**

Stop and reflect on how extreme what Jesus says is. Over time, traditional religious practices from our upbringing tend to replace values and manmade rules replace a living relationship and fresh insight into God's Word.

What does this have to do with us today? Very much!

Have you asked the Father for discernment recently how credible your life is as a witness of who Jesus really is to those in your "garden plots, no matter how small or large"? Take inventory. This is a crucial aspect of your Christian life to build stability and to gain insight.

I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ (Philemon 6).

If you come out of a religious background, this *legalism* can seep in unexpectedly. If you have been a Christian for a few years, check to see what practices you have taken on and cannot personally support from Scripture. How can you better prepare yourself to become a more credible witness? Practices handed down from others can be like a virus, destructive though largely unnoticed. Or temporary spiritual practices can be a powerful way for us to set healthy, flexible boundaries in this season to intentionally rest in the presence of our Family-of-Three.

How flexible are we?

I received a graphic lesson in this some years back. I was in a movement that considered itself cutting edge (and the leader was!) The pastor called some young adults up and asked what we practice. They were spot on in cataloging our values and practices. Then the pastor asked each one: "**Why** do you practice these? Support your beliefs from Scripture." **Not one could.** In a cutting-edge movement, they were practicing the traditions of the elders and for them it set aside the Word of God in their lives.

If we have settled for less than God intends, we may also need such a religious reboot. Ongoing renewal keeps our focus on God's presence and provision to walk as flexible, adaptable *new wineskins*.