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## GOODBYE TAPE MEASURE Luke 5:33-39

### INTRODUCTION

In his book, *Daring To Dance With God*, Jeff Walling tells the story of a friend of his who grew up in a place I'm familiar with, Bakersfield. His story caught my attention because his friend's name was Rick. Rick from Bakersfield. It sounds awfully close to home, but it was not me. Rick played the trumpet, and in his early teen years was pleased and proud when he was chosen to be in the all-city jazz band. The man who led this band was a super cool jazz musician named Mr. Milner. He was able to bring amazing music out of these young all star musicians. Rick was a little intimidated to be among such terrific musicians when he went to his first practice, but also very excited.

One song the band was to do had some places in the music for the trumpet where all it said was "ad lib." The band would play and when it came to that place the trumpet would take the lead and improvise as jazz musicians do. When they came to that song in the practice Mr. Milner counted off the start and the band took off playing. When they came to the "ad lib" part of the music Mr. Milner point to the first chair trumpet who began playing a solo. What he did was amazing, such cool music. Seeing nothing on the written music Rick asked the guy next to him, "where is he getting this?" The guy said, "He's just making it up. It's in his head." Everyone was nodding, grooving to the jazz the guy played. He finished and the band took off again. Once again it came to the trumpet solo place and the second chair took over. He too was able to rip off some hot riffs with his trumpet. Again the band took up the lead, but now it was heading to a third break, and this time it would be Rick's turn. Rick was exceedingly nervous. He had never improvised like that in his life. He was sweating bullets, feeling the pressure, his nerves completely taking over. The break came and the director pointed at Rick. He blew on his trumpet and all that came out were three pathetic little blurps and one high bleep. It was awful. The director just shook his head. Humiliated, Rick quietly packed up his trumpet and left. He never went back.

Rick felt ashamed. He was ashamed because he didn't measure up and he knew it. It was impossible to deny. He left because he couldn't deal with the humiliation. Can you feel the pain of that young teenager? We hate being humiliated. How awful to be looked down on by others. It is miserable to know that you are substandard, you don't even come close to making the grade.

Most of us, maybe all of us, have sympathy for Jeff's friend, Rick. We empathize with him because we feel in some way, somewhere in our lives, we've been him. We've been the one who didn't measure up, who is humiliated. We may be the only ones who know it because it was something we saw inside us and we hide that with all our might, but we know that feeling.

Back about 30 years ago there was a show on television that Laurie and I enjoyed, one that only lasted one season, called *Tales of the Gold Monkey*. Our kids enjoyed a show about 20 years ago called *Duck Tales*. I'm going to rip off that theme to begin a new series of sermons I call *Jesus Tales*. We'll be looking at the stories Jesus told, his parables, from the book of Luke. This morning we will begin by taking a look at Luke 5:33-39 and discover there is an answer for our humiliation. It is an answer that is nothing short of a miracle. It is revolutionary.

### JESUS BROUGHT JOY

This passage is directly tied to its immediate context. Note that verse 33 says, "They said to him." Who said to him? It's the same people referred to in verse 31 refers to the same people when it says, "Jesus answered them." That turns out to be the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who we see in verse 30 objecting to the fact that Jesus was eating and drinking with "tax collectors and sinners."

The Pharisees and their colleagues objected that John's disciples and theirs fast and pray but that Jesus' disciples were eating and drinking instead of fasting. The implication was that the followers of John and of the Pharisees were holier than Jesus' disciples because his disciples were partying instead of fasting and praying. This statement is intended as a criticism of Jesus.

This criticism was provoked by what happened in verses 27-32. Jesus invited Levi, also known by his Greek name Matthew, to be one of his disciples. He would have been hard pressed to make a more unpopular choice. Levi was a tax-collector for the Romans. He was an extortionist and a traitor who got rich by preying on his own people. Most of the people of Israel loathed people like him. Some ancient Jewish writings described men like him as "licensed robbers" and "beasts in human shape." The ancient rabbis believed there was no hope for them. Their money was seen as tainted and anyone who received money from them was considered defiled by it. For Jesus to invite Levi to be one of his key disciples might be equated with making the same offer today to a murderous head of a Mexican drug cartel, or maybe even an Oakland Raiders fan. Can't you see some of Jesus' own disciples thinking, "Oh, that's just awesome. Jesus has identified

himself and our whole movement with that piece of lobster excrement, and now I have to pal around with him.”

Then Jesus exacerbated the problem by attending a banquet at Levi’s house. Levi had exactly zero friends who could be even remotely considered respectable. The only people he hung with were the absolute bottom crust of society. In their best moments they might aspire to become part of a biker gang. Levi threw a bash and invited all his low-life friends because he wanted to celebrate his new status as a disciple of Jesus. So there was Jesus and all of his disciples enjoying a great party with the most despised people in all of Israel.

Now we can understand the problem this created. Imagine what might happen if say, Tim Keller, the well-known pastor and author from New York City, were invited to a big bash held by some key organized crime leaders, a bash at which there were mafia dons and lots of women of clearly questionable moral quality. Such a thing almost certainly would make the tabloids.

But in Jesus’ day it went farther than that. The act of taking a meal together had major social significance. It was symbolic of friendship and acceptance. When you ate with someone you were saying that you valued and accepted that person and wanted a friendship with him. By eating with the scum of his society Jesus was saying he accepted them rather than judging and totally rejecting them as did the “respectable” people of his culture.

In verse 30 the Pharisees attacked Jesus for his association with unacceptable people. He answered brilliantly in verse 31 “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.” Now in our day we have negated that. Obamacare mandates that healthy people see doctors. It guarantees free cancer screenings as preventative care. I recently was an example of this as, though I am healthy, I was sent to a doctor to have a colonoscopy. This requires something resembling your mechanic power flushing the cooling system of your car. My point is that while we send healthy people to see doctors, in general we know what Jesus is saying. Who do you find in hospitals? Sick people. It’s common sense.

However, that statement was quite radical in Jesus’ day because it said something about God. While the Pharisees just wanted to reject those people Jesus wanted to save them. And he was claiming that they had value in God’s eyes, so much that he wanted to make a way for those benighted, despised people to be included in his kingdom. Wouldn’t you expect this of a God who is compassionate and by his own

admission abundant in lovingkindness? Wouldn't it be reasonable that such a God would want to heal those sick souls?

Jesus' response was brilliant, popular and it made the Pharisees look bad. Our passage begins with the Pharisees trying to save face after Jesus had answered them so adeptly. They try to get back at Jesus and prove they're better than him by bringing up his lack of fasting.

I recently saw on TV once again some of the movie *A Few Good Men*. There's a scene in which Lieutenant Kaffee, the lawyer played by Tom Cruise, is told by the prosecuting attorney Lieutenant Jack Ross, played by Kevin Bacon, that he has an impossible case and that though Jack wishes it weren't so Kaffee's clients were going down. Kaffee can't argue because he knows Ross is right. As Ross leaves the bar they were in Kaffee yells out to him, "You're a lousy softball player, Jack." What does that have to do with anything? Nothing, it was just Kaffee, frustrated, trying to get back at him somehow.

This argument by the Pharisees has that sort of feel to it. Jesus had made them look bad, so they have to say something. They come up with fasting. The Pharisees made a big deal out of fasting. Though the Law of Moses only required that ancient Jews fast one day a year on the Day of Atonement, the Pharisees fasted twice a week, every week. And they made sure everyone knew it. In Matthew 6:16 Jesus said, "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting." They made a big show of it because in their worldview fasting was something meritorious. They were earning God's favor by their fasting. They were better than other people because of their diligent fasting.

This is a significant point, because it has to do with the theological system the Pharisees operated. They thought they earned righteousness points by fasting. God's system was a grading system. If you're going to pass his class you have to amass enough points, and you do that through all sorts of activities. You have to be circumcised, you have to observe the Sabbath rigorously, you have to observe all the feasts, you have to make the sacrifices, you have to stay away from any unclean food, you have to avoid unclean people like Gentiles and such, you have to say your prayers, and so the list goes. Of course one item on that list is that you have to fast. That gets you lots of points with God.

The obvious slam on Jesus is that while the Pharisees were always fasting and even John's disciples fasted, Jesus and his followers were partying it up. And not only

were they not fasting, they were partying with the worst people in their nation. Anyone could see that Jesus could talk all he wanted about saving people but he wasn't doing a very good job with his followers. The logic is clear. If fasting is a measure of how holy you are and how much God likes you, Jesus and his disciples got a big fat "F" from God.

You can almost see the smug looks on the faces of Jesus' opponents at this point. Some of the lesser ones are nodding in agreement with their leaders and getting smirks on their faces knowing that Jesus has no answer for this obvious and embarrassing reality. Speaking of old Tom Cruise movies, there's a line in *Top Gun* when Jester says to Maverick, "that was some of the best flying I've seen yet, right up to the part where you got killed." That's kind of like what happens to the Pharisees. "That is one of the best criticisms of Jesus I've heard yet, right up to the part where he blows you away."

Jesus responds and says, "Can you make the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them?" Even today we understand that nobody fasts at a wedding. What do you do at a wedding? You celebrate! You have a party. The closer it can come to a real feast the better. I can personally attest to the fact that even people who don't have more money than Bill Gates spend thousands of dollars to have a huge party at weddings. Anna and Toby gave us a photo book of their wedding for Christmas. It's a great gift. When you look at it there is no hint of fasting. There's no sorrow, no phony religious mourning in evidence. There are huge smiles and joy all around. History tells us that as profligate as weddings often are today we are pikers compared to the first century Jews. Their wedding parties sometimes lasted an entire week. I won't comment on the rumor that the reason the Jews were conquered by the Romans was they couldn't pay their army because all their money went to pay for wedding feasts.

Uh, I don't get it. How is this an answer? It has to do with fasting's point. Fasting was an expression of sorrow, repentance over sin and a plea for God to act. It was a plea for God to show up to bring forgiveness and to save. Do you understand what Jesus is saying now? He's saying, "this is the wedding day!" God has heard and he has shown up. He has acted and come to save his people. He had come in the form of Jesus. So it's time to party like it's a wedding. Bring on the food, go cut the cake, get the D.J. to start the dancing. We should be celebrating like because God has shown up, and he has come in the person of Jesus. He has brought life and hope, even for the people on the bottom rung of society. You don't need to fast because God has done what you are asking when you fast!

Laurie and I over the past years have done some big time praying for our daughter, Carissa. We knew that her deep desire is to share life with a man who would love her, to have a family. We have prayed and been dismayed by the fact that years have passed and God has not answered this prayer. When we have shared requests for prayer at the Anchorman breakfast I have often asked that the men pray for Carissa that God would bring a godly man to her. God has answered the prayer! He has given her Michael Townsend, a wonderful man we greatly admire. It's not time to fast. It's time to celebrate! Let's party!

The Pharisees didn't get that. A big reason they didn't get it is that they didn't want it. They didn't want it because it would seriously undercut their power base. The poor, the outcasts, the rejects, those looked down on by the respectable people, the disciples of Jesus all got it. They understood that God had shown up. They didn't comprehend the whole picture yet, but they got the message that in Jesus God had come to save them. It wasn't time to mourn and ask God to act. It was time to celebrate the incredible truth that he had acted, he had shown up and was saving them! How was this possible? Jesus told a couple of parables to explain it.

### JESUS BROUGHT SOMETHING BRAND NEW

In verses 36-38 Jesus gave two illustrations of the same idea. The first one is an example of his sense of humor, which you will see a lot in his teaching if you pay attention. In the first illustration Jesus suggests that a person has an old article of clothing. Let's say it is an old shirt. This shirt has gotten so old that it now has a hole in it. Clearly the owner of the shirt in question had to be a man. Who gets obsessed with an old worn out shirt with holes in it? A woman wouldn't be caught dead wearing an old rag like that. She wants what is new, shiny and fashionable. I know this because my wife at times has issues with my desire to wear some old shirts. I have an old Aloha shirt that was the first one I ever owned. It is old and faded but I still love it. I don't wear it much because of the dirty looks I would get from Laurie if I tried. But it has sentimental value for me. So this guy wants to patch his favorite old shirt because he loves it and it has sentimental value.

So now our hero realizes his wife just bought him a brand new shirt at Nordstrom that is the exact color of his favorite old shirt. Obvious solution! Cut a piece out of the new shirt and sew it onto the old one. Problem solved, no more hole in shirt. At this point the audience is rolling in the aisles. What could be more absurd?

What's going to happen? The first time he washes his old patched shirt the new fabric will shrink, causing the shirt to either rip again or at best to be very weirdly wrinkled. And oh by the way, the brand new shirt now also has a hole in it! So by

taking the patch from the new shirt all he has done is ruin both the old and the new shirts! What is Jesus' point? It is that the Pharisees had an old system that everyone was used to, but Jesus had brought an entirely new system. By their reasoning in regard to fasting they were trying to patch him and his new system onto their old system. Guess what happened? It didn't work. The two simply can't go together.

Jesus' second picture makes the same point. It is old and new again. You don't put new wine into old wineskins. In that day they did not have glass bottles and containers. That new technology was about to explode onto the scene, but in Jesus' day to hold fluids like wine they used animal skins that they sewed into a shape sort of like a bottle. Of course as the grape juice that becomes wine ferments it both expands and produces gases. That was no problem in a new wineskin for it could stretch and contain the wine. But an old wineskin, which was still useful, was stretched out and had lost its elasticity. It had become brittle. If you put new wine in it as the contents expanded the old wineskin would burst. So you would have ruined the wineskin and lost the wine as well.

Jesus brought new wine, the Pharisees and their old system were an old wineskin. Now the point is obvious. The Pharisees and their system simply couldn't contain Jesus and his new system. If you tried to fit Jesus into their system you would blow the thing apart.

What is this new system Jesus brought? You could see it in the previous incident when he brought hope and life to hopeless outcasts. Why would the Pharisees and their ilk not eat meals with such people? Was it because they simply had nothing in common with Raider fans? They just didn't hit it off with those people?

No, it was bigger than that. Their disdain for and rejection of those people was a theological statement. It was all about their system. In today's world a good symbol for the system of the Pharisees might be a tape measure. I remember in junior high they had a competition for track and field events. When I was that age in Bakersfield they didn't have sports competitions between junior high schools except for one track meet. The only competition we had was within our own school, in my case Compton Junior High. But they had this one opportunity to compete against other schools. All the boys, of course, tried to gain spots on the team in most of the events. I remember the long jump as one of them I thought I could do pretty well. I didn't really understand at that time how far from being a good athlete I was. I figured I'd make the team just because...well ...because I should. So my turn came to do the long jump. I ran down the runway, on my last step I planted my foot and launched into the sky, straining to soar as high and as

far as I could. It was a prodigious jump, so high and far it was a wonder that I didn't break the bonds of earth's gravity and sail off into orbit. After I had returned to earth the powers that be did a shocking thing. They brought out a tape measure and measured how far I had jumped. It was a visible way of saying, "we'll see how good you are. We'll find out whether you make the grade." You who know me also know how this story ends. I wasn't good enough. There was no prejudice. The tape proved it. It was objective and undeniable.

At the core of the Pharisees' system was a tape measure. We are going to measure to see how good you are. Levi and his friends barely registered a mark on the tape measure at the bottom. Peter and the other fishermen were higher up, but frankly they were rather less than making the grade themselves. The Pharisees, wow, they stretched out that tape measure as far as it would go. Their religious system was all about that tape measure. It was all about getting what you deserve.

What is the symbol for Jesus' system? Jesus hadn't told the people yet. The plan had not yet been accomplished. But what he did do was give glimpses of the new system and told them there was hope for them. He told the rejects that they were the ones who would gain the kingdom of God, that it was their humility, their admission that they didn't come close to measuring up, their admission of their need of help that would open the door for them into God's eternal kingdom.

The astounding part of Jesus' new system was this: it required that one admit he doesn't measure up and that he then look to God to give him mercy and grace. It was about trusting that God is so good and merciful that somehow he would make up for their lack. They didn't know it at the time because it hadn't happened yet but the symbol of Jesus' new system is a cross. The cross is kind of like if Jesus had said, "I'm going to do the long jump in your place," and then jumped from Bakersfield to New York. There, do you think that jump will be long enough? In other words, this system is about getting what he deserves, not what you deserve.

Here's the point of this whole passage. You have two systems, a tape measure and a cross. You can't combine them. They are two totally different ways of thinking that are incompatible. Perhaps you could think of it as being like the difference between a digital camera and...wait, is there any other kind? Us older folks remember when you had to put film in a camera. The rolls of film would have 24 or 36 exposures on them, and after you used them you had to put in a new roll of film. Then you would take you exposed film to a store where they developed prints of the pictures you had taken. You'd get them back later and discover that you hadn't taken a single good picture. Digital cameras are great. You can see



immediately that you've taken an awful picture so you can delete it and take another terrible picture. But here's the thing: you can't put film in a digital camera. It is either/or. You can't have part digital and part film, it's one or the other. The cross is an utterly different system than the tape measure. You can't combine them. The Pharisees were trying to judge Jesus and his followers by their old tape measure system and Jesus was telling them it wouldn't work. The Pharisees could not comprehend Jesus at all because they could only see a tape measure world, and in that world Jesus and his system made no sense.

Verse 39 says, "No one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, 'the old is better.'" I'm not a wine drinker, but I understand the concept that aged wine is better than brand new. If you ask "what's the vintage of that wine?" and the answer is "December," you shouldn't have very high expectations. But if old wine is better than new then isn't Jesus saying the old system is better than the new?

No, that's not his point. He's saying that the person who has drunk the old wine is going to like it better. He's not focusing on the relative merits of the wines but on the opinion of the one who has drunk the old wine. Who had drunk the old wine? It was the Pharisees. In our vernacular Jesus is saying, "The Pharisees have drunk the Kool Aid of the old system. They're not going to like the new system at all."

For the most part it was the people who hadn't drunk the old system's wine, the people who didn't do well by that system's tape measure thus found it to taste bitter, who would find the new wine appealing.

## IMPLICATIONS

### THIS IS A TAPE MEASURE WORLD

I was talking to Nate Smith last Sunday. He is coaching his son's youth baseball team. The day before they had tryouts. Kids who wish to play come out and are observed as they field balls at various positions and they hit off a tee. The coaches evaluate them. Essentially the coaches have their tape measures out seeing who is good who is not so much. This week Toby will take the MCAT, the Medical College Aptitude Test. It is another application of the tape to see how he measures up. He will be measured to see if he's good enough to get into med school, and if so how good a med school he can get into.

I may be going to a pastor's conference later this year. I guarantee you that if I do and if I meet some other pastors and get into conversation with them someone will ask me, "how big is your church?" That's another application of the tape. Where do you land on the scale?

We always operate by the system. It makes sense to us. It is like second nature to us because we have operated by that system since we were in our cradles. And it certainly comes into play in our theological thinking. It makes sense that one should get what he deserves. A lot of people these days are enamored with eastern religions. One of the foundational concepts of a lot of those religions is karma. Have you ever encountered a more tape measure concept than karma? It is total bondage to the idea that you get what you deserve. If you're suffering it's because of bad karma. It's because you deserve it.

### WE MUST NOT TRY TO MIX SYSTEMS

Oh how difficult it is for us to wrap our heads around Jesus' new system, the system of the cross, the system of grace. We have been drinking the old wine since we were infants now comes this new wine. We've been using film all our lives and now comes digital. The two don't mix. We have to choose between the two, but we keep trying to put film in our digital cameras. It cannot work.

Religion basically is based on the system of the tape measure. But system hurts people. It causes guilt, shame, pain and most of all, pretense and hypocrisy. It excludes people. The system of the cross, Jesus' new wine, is the end of religion.

No longer do we need to ask, "how much more do I need to pray to get God to like me? How much more money do I need to give away? How many worship services do I have to attend? How much better do I need to get in order to finally measure up?" Jesus threw away the tape measure! In his system it is not Jesus and the cross plus more piety, more prayer, more giving, more religious activity. It is Jesus and the cross alone. Romans 3:21 says there is now a new righteousness from God. Verse 22 says, "this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe." In Colossians 2:16-17 Paul wrote, "do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a new moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ." No matter who you are or what you may have done, Christ is enough. He has thrown away the tape measure.

Yes, we know that, that's why we are in a Christian church. Yes, we know it, but we have a lamentable and deadly tendency to keep trying to put a new patch on an old shirt. That shows up in at least two ways: We live with this nagging sense of guilt, this sense that we're not doing enough, that God really doesn't think very much of us and maybe doesn't really even accept us. Sometimes it is vague, sometimes it is acute. We exhaust ourselves, we get ground down by guilt because

we know we don't measure up and we have to keep trying to somehow do better. That is not what Jesus Christ came to give us. His new system is not faith in Jesus plus more piety, more prayer, more giving, more anything. His system is faith in the cross plus nothing else, so be at rest.

The second way that we tip our hand in regard to our tendency to mix the old and new systems is the way we think of and treat other people. Our whole life we have applied the tape measure to other people. It's simply how we do things in this world. If we are going to truly live in the new system we're going to have to throw away the tape measure when we look at other people. Like Jesus we're going to have to offer them hope and see them through the lens of the cross.

A number of years ago we were out of town on vacation. It so happened that our vacation overlapped a couple of days with some friends who happened to be staying about a half hour away from where we were. We agreed it would be fun to have dinner together so we made a plan. Laurie and I would drive to the condo where they were staying and pick them up then we'd all go out to eat. They gave us directions to the condo and our friend said he would wait out by the street at the appointed time so we didn't have to wander around looking for their unit. We followed the directions and found the place and there was our friend standing by the street. Only he wasn't alone. He was talking to a man who looked pretty much like a street person. I knew immediately what was going on. I've had this happen on more than one occasion in that vacation spot. Somehow the street people always find me and want to hit me up for some money. They always have a story to tell. Now my street person magnet seemed to be exerting its power on my friend. They had found him. We got out of the car, he finished his conversation with the guy and came over to greet us. I said, "That guy want some money from you?" He said, "No, he's a brother in the Lord who's walking to a Bible study. He saw me standing out here alone and stopped to talk. He wanted to tell me about Jesus." Ouch. I had used my measuring tape and got it completely wrong.

### LET'S HAVE A FEAST!

Religion so often seems to be a thing of striving, sacrifice, seriousness and sorrow. The Pharisees provide a good picture. They are dour, have those serious faces on, always measuring people with their tape measures, and always quick to frown on anyone having a good time. One of the big criticisms of Jesus was he and his followers seemed to enjoy a party too much. He wasn't serious enough. He and his followers had too much fun. Former pastor Bob Deffinbaugh said, "joy should be the dominant characteristic of the Christian...the Christian life will include sorrow, suffering and sacrifice, but these are not the melody line of our life...these are the

harmony line.” Dr. Gerritt Scott Dawson says, “Theology that doesn’t make us sing has failed in its mission.”

God has acted! He has come in answer to prayers and he has saved us. He has thrown away the measuring tape and set us free. If your faith does not produce joy, it isn’t what Jesus came to bring. Focus back on the fact that the tape measure is gone. You are free forever. Put your tape measure away and let’s celebrate.