

REFINE US, part 3

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Our heavenly Father has made many promises, recorded in the Bible. Bill Bright referred to God's promises as "checks" written on Heaven's account, which we may "cash" through prayer. Charles Stanley identifies three questions (I suggest you write these down) that are useful in evaluating whether a divine promise may apply to your own situation:

- 1. Is this promise limited to a specific person or circumstance, or does it apply to all believers?** For example, the pledge made to Abraham and Sarah about giving birth to a child ("*I will return to you about this time next year, and your wife, Sarah, will have a son!*" Genesis 18:10) was personal and restricted to them, whereas Hebrews 13:5 ("*I will never fail you. I will never abandon you.*") offers a universal guarantee to all Christians that Jesus will be with us forever.
- 2. Are we asking the Lord to meet a need or a desire?** A need is something that we *must have* in order for God to complete His work in our lives. A desire is something we *want* for personal satisfaction or enjoyment. If we lose our job, then an essential need—an incoming wage—has gone missing. But if we want a new position for personal reasons, it's a desire.
- 3. Before fulfilling a promise, does the Lord require some action on our part?** Proverbs 3:5-6 ("*Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take.*") is a *conditional promise*, which pledges God's direction on the basis of our whole-hearted trust in Him and our attentive pursuit of Him. On the other hand, Jesus' assurance of His presence with believers ("*I will never fail you. I will never abandon you.*" Hebrews 13:5) is *unconditional*; it contains no "ifs" and requires no standard of behavior. It does not depend on anything we do.

By evaluating Scripture on the basis of these questions, we may know which promises apply to our situation. Then, what confidence we may have in asking our Lord to fulfill them in our lives!

Conditional Promises

Most of God's promises are conditional; which means, there is a condition that activates the promise. Without meeting the condition, the promise remains fruitless.

The most common condition required is faith in God or, specifically, in Jesus Christ. However, faith can only be expressed by some action on our part—therefore, "*faith without works is dead*"—maybe a declaration, maybe a change in behavior, maybe a risk taken in faith. Remember, it is not the action that wins God's heart, but the faith behind it.

For instance, God told Isaiah to address the evil condition of His people Israel with fearlessness. It was not that they were doing such wicked things, but that the good things they were doing lacked heart, lacked faith—they were just going through the motions, imagining that was all God was concerned with. Listen...

Isaiah 58:1 “Shout with the voice of a trumpet blast.

Shout aloud! Don’t be timid.

Tell my people Israel of their sins!

² *Yet they act so pious!*

*They come to the Temple every day
and seem delighted to learn all about me.*

*They act like a righteous nation
that would never abandon the laws of its God.*

*They ask me to take action on their behalf,
pretending they want to be near me.*

³ *‘We have fasted before you!’ they say.*

‘Why aren’t you impressed?’

*We have been very hard on ourselves,
and you don’t even notice it!’*

“I will tell you why!” I respond.

“It’s because you are fasting to please yourselves.

*Even while you fast,
you keep oppressing your workers.*

⁴ *What good is fasting
when you keep on fighting and quarreling?*

*This kind of fasting
will never get you anywhere with me.*

⁵ *You humble yourselves
by going through the motions of penance,*

*bowing your heads
like reeds bending in the wind.*

*You dress in burlap
and cover yourselves with ashes.*

Is this what you call fasting?

Do you really think this will please the Lord?

Did you notice the phrase, buried in the middle of this passage, that says, *“They ask me to take action on their behalf, pretending they want to be near me”*?

Pretense means that their heart was not truly in it. They were *doing the things* that a truly penitent person would have done, but they were not penitent. They did not modify their behavior generally, they simply stopped eating food. This kind of fasting will never get you anywhere with God. This kind of praying will never get you any closer to God. This kind of Bible

reading will never get you ahead with God. You must put your heart into it! That is the act of faith that gives the deed its value.

Divine Expectations

So, the conditions attached to God's promises may be regarded as commandments, since they are necessary for the desired results.

We may refer to God's promises more often than to His commandments, but both express God's expectations—promises are His expectations *for us*; commands are His expectations *from us*.

If we misunderstand His expectations, we will find life most confusing. Consider with me one of Jesus' most profound teachings:

Matthew 5:17 "Don't misunderstand why I have come. (Evidently, we *could* do so, and may be *likely* to do so.)

I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose. (I'm going to speak to you about what that means.)

¹⁸ *I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not even the smallest detail of God's law will disappear until its purpose is achieved. (God's law has not gone away and is not going away until its purpose has been fulfilled.)*

¹⁹ *So if you ignore the least commandment and teach others to do the same, you will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. (Do you ignore any of God's commandments, or encourage others to do so?)*

But anyone who obeys God's laws and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. (Notice, the Kingdom of Heaven, Christ's Kingdom, values and honors the law of God.)

²⁰ *"But I warn you—unless your righteousness is better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven! (Christian law-keeping must be better—of a better nature, a higher quality—than religious rule-keeping.)*

What Jesus expects from us is a kind of righteousness that is *better* than that of the religious teachers and Pharisees of His day. Remember, they were both meticulous and pragmatic, and no one could doubt either their sincerity or discipline. How can we improve on that?

Let me share with you a vital distinction between the First Covenant and the Second. The First Covenant required faith to be expressed in ritual obedience—that is the elementary school level of faith. That is where we all begin our walk with God: we stop behaving in ways that displease Him and start behaving in ways that please Him. Initially, even if difficult, the change is liberating.

But before long, we tend to codify our new behavior—we turn it into a religious rule. We continue to behave those ways long after we've forgotten who we did it for in the first place. What once was a response to the gentle prompting of the Holy Spirit, becomes mere ritual

obedience. Then, we begin to insist that others also adhere to our “rules” in order to please God. And we tell people *that* is Christianity.

No matter how appropriate those behaviors may be, *that* is *not* Christianity. It may look like Christianity to the casual observer, it may feel like Christianity to the faithless religionist, but it lacks a living faith in Christ; therefore, it is certainly *not* the Christianity that Jesus envisioned.

To sum up this point, faith expressed in ritual obedience has an inherent danger: ritual may supplant (replace) faith.

Now to balance this point, let me add: ritual obedience is not bad. Most of us would be improved followers of Christ if we included more ritual obedience in our lives... for the right reasons. More frequent prayer and intercession. More frequent Bible reading. More frequent meditation on the Word of God. More consistent thanksgiving and praise. But not simply as ritual; instead, as an expression of our faith in Jesus Christ.

The Second Covenant requires something better. First, as I’ve said, God expects a *heartfelt* lifestyle. A lifestyle of vital relationship with God, where our thoughts, words, decisions, and actions flow from our interface with Him. Ultimately, New Covenant faith expresses itself in acts of love—that is the college level of faith. (Once again, the acts are not necessarily different, but the motivations are.)

Jesus was very clear about raising the bar from ritual to relationship, as the deeper motive of Christianity (and the reason the Holy Spirit had to come to us). This transition was the core message of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21-48). As we read it, take note of the key transitional phrase, repeated six times, “*You have heard... but I say*”:

Teaching about Anger

²¹ “**You have heard** that our ancestors were told, ‘You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.’ ²² **But I say**, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell.

²³ “So if you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, ²⁴ leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God.

²⁵ “When you are on the way to court with your adversary, settle your differences quickly. Otherwise, your accuser may hand you over to the judge, who will hand you over to an officer, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶ And if that happens, you surely won’t be free again until you have paid the last penny.

Teaching about Adultery

²⁷ “**You have heard** the commandment that says, ‘You must not commit adultery.’ ²⁸ **But I say**, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ So if your eye—even your good eye—causes you to lust, gouge it out and throw it

away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your hand—even your stronger hand—causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

Teaching about Divorce

³¹ **“You have heard** the law that says, ‘A man can divorce his wife by merely giving her a written notice of divorce.’ ³² **But I say** that a man who divorces his wife, unless she has been unfaithful, causes her to commit adultery. And anyone who marries a divorced woman also commits adultery.

Teaching about Vows

³³ **“You have also heard** that our ancestors were told, ‘You must not break your vows; you must carry out the vows you make to the Lord.’ ³⁴ **But I say**, do not make any vows! Do not say, ‘By heaven!’ because heaven is God’s throne. ³⁵ And do not say, ‘By the earth!’ because the earth is his footstool. And do not say, ‘By Jerusalem!’ for Jerusalem is the city of the great King. ³⁶ Do not even say, ‘By my head!’ for you can’t turn one hair white or black. ³⁷ Just say a simple, ‘Yes, I will,’ or ‘No, I won’t.’ Anything beyond this is from the evil one.

Teaching about Revenge

³⁸ **“You have heard** the law that says the punishment must match the injury: ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹ **But I say**, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also. ⁴⁰ If you are sued in court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too. ⁴¹ If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles. ⁴² Give to those who ask, and don’t turn away from those who want to borrow.

Teaching about Love for Enemies

⁴³ **“You have heard** the law that says, ‘Love your neighbor’ and hate your enemy. ⁴⁴ **But I say**, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! ⁴⁵ In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. ⁴⁶ If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. ⁴⁷ If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. ⁴⁸ But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.

The law governs our words and our deeds. That’s where the Pharisees stopped. But Jesus taught that the law also governs our thoughts and our motives. That’s where the Holy Spirit leads us. This keeps our hearts clean and clear for the Holy Spirit to use. This is Kingdom of Heaven living.

“You have heard... but I say.” Did Jesus abolish God’s law concerning murder, or adultery, or divorce? No. Did He alter its intention? No. He neither removed nor changed God’s commands. He addressed our motivations for keeping them.

God has not changed, and His expectations have not changed. I will simply tell you, the problem is not with God's commands or expectations. The problem is with how we respond to them.

We may reject them.

We may ignore them.

We may go through the motions of keeping them without faith.

Or, we may practice them in conversation with God. *This* is His desire.

Are you in an ongoing conversation with God? This is the context for real Christian living.