

REFINE US, part 4

By Rev. Will Nelken

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We're tackling a big subject this month: Why and how God refines His people. Have you been listening?

If you haven't been here to hear the sermons, have you been catching up online, through our website?

Let's quickly review the most salient points so far.

Jesus said, *"Don't misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose."* (Matthew 5:17)

When we think of the expectations of our Creator and Redeemer, we learn two things: Promises are God's expectations *for* us; commands are His expectations *from* us.

These expectations have been conveyed to us in two covenants. The First Covenant (the Old Testament) required faith to be expressed in ritual obedience; however, New Covenant faith ultimately expresses itself instead in acts of love.

Jesus raised the bar from ritual to relationship. He neither removed nor changed God's commands. In fact, He underscored them. But He addressed something deeper than external ritual obedience: He asked us to think about our actions in different terms. He examined our thoughts and motives.

For instance, He asked, "Are you faithful to your spouse outwardly, but inwardly wish you could be with other persons?"

Or, "You may never have killed another person, but have you wished them dead many times?"

Or, "Have you forgiven people what they owed you, but never given away what is yours to help meet someone's need?"

Or, "Are you kind only to those who have shown kindness to you?" How loving are 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 any dependence on God.

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

What happens when we reject God's commands? Jonah is one example. Things didn't go right. Circumstances pressed him toward surrender.

What happens when we ignore God's commands? Ahab is an example. He scoffed at God's commands and led the people to worship the images of Baal instead. He died without honor in battle by an arrow randomly shot into the air.

What happens when we simply go through the motions of keeping God's commands? Israel's fasting is an example. God is not impressed.

In contrast, what will happen when we engage in a continuous conversation with God that delights in His promises and respects His commands? I think you can imagine!

God's promises confront the circumstances of your life. When we mix them with faith, they overcome and transform our circumstances and release the blessings of God.

God's commands have been given to order our steps and firmly establish our lives in the ways of the Lord, under the canopy of His gracious blessings.

As we follow Jesus Christ, we are not leaving behind the God of the Old Covenant (because He hasn't changed), and we should not leave behind the words of the Old Covenant (which is why our Bible contains both), but we must change the way we demonstrate our faith in Him, going deeper, if you will, into the spirit of God's commands. Or, to put it another way, let God command your life in ways that are deeper than mere outward appearances. To do this is to understand why Jesus came and, as a result, to accomplish God's purpose.

Legalism or Love

The Bible is not a rule book, but a revelation. A revelation of God's character, majesty, and beauty.

His laws, His commands are not a threat to our freedom, but the means of finding and keeping it.

Consider Psalm 119! 176 verses in length, divided into 22 stanzas. Its singular theme is the wisdom and beauty of God's commands.

While King David was known as a man "after God's heart" and the sweet singer of Israel, who introduced and established musical thanksgiving and worship as a perpetual element of the life of Israel, He was also a man who loved God's law.

Some people may think that the commands of God's law and the experience of His presence in worship are mutually exclusive, but I say they are not!

While we have not generally rejected God's law, I believe the modern church is in danger of ignoring it—to our own peril.

Isaiah declared, *"The Lord was pleased, for His righteousness' sake, to magnify His law and make it glorious."* (Isaiah 42:21).

Therefore, I, too, want to magnify His law and make it glorious!

And why does God do this? He does it *"for His righteousness' sake."* The law of God is not a mere list of rules, but a revelation of His righteousness. A revelation of His justice. A revelation of His rightness. A revelation of His heart for mankind.

First, we need to properly understand the Law. It is a picture of His righteousness at work, in spirit and in society.

Second, we need to properly practice the Law. At the heart level. At the head level. At the mouth level. As well as the hands and feet.

Practicing the Law at the level of the hands and feet only is modern-day Phariseeism. God's words must also command our words and thoughts and motives.

Words and Intentions

As David prayed, *"May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to You, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer."* (Psalm 19:14)

Is your speech under the command of God's Law? That is, do you speak only those things that please the Lord?

For instance, have you given up cursing? It is an unthinking, unnecessary, and often violent and vulgar exaggeration of speech. It conveys a feeling, but lacks meaning.

Are your words considerate and kind? Or do your feeling break through and erase godly kindness and respect?

And what about the "meditations of [your] heart"? The things you whisper to yourself under your breath or behind closed doors. If your thoughts were projected on a screen or announced through a loudspeaker, would you be embarrassed or ashamed? How would they reveal your actual motives?

Under Obligation

A commandment implies an obligation. Obedience is the intended result, as Jesus described:

Matthew 21:28 "A man with two sons told the older boy, 'Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.'²⁹ The son answered, 'No, I won't go,' but later he changed his mind and went anyway.³⁰ Then the father told the other son, 'You go,' and he said, 'Yes, sir, I will.' But he didn't go.³¹ "Which of the two obeyed his father?"

You and I may have three possible responses to the Law of God:

- Lawlessness (obedience rejected)
- Legalism (obedience imposed)
- Love (obedience embraced)

Which do you think God wants?

Then, if we want what He wants, we must intentionally and energetically reject the other two. We must embrace obedience intentionally.

From the Heart

Through the prophet Jeremiah, God made this declaration:

Jeremiah 31:33 "But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel on that day," says the LORD. "I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."

Clearly, this statement does not eliminate God's law; instead, it embeds it in our conscience, so we may be readily identified as the people of God. We are so identified as we embrace obedience to His commands.

They are the same commands, but in a different (internalized) form.

The commands have the same objective, but it is achieved by a different means!

Jesus told us, "Not even the smallest detail of God's law will disappear until its purpose is achieved." It is the ritual practice that passes, not the underlying purpose.

Ritual obedience is to be replaced by Spirit-led, loving obedience to our Heavenly Father.

Will you commit yourself to this change? Will you search out the "mere rituals" in your life and find a way to shift to listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit, and obeying what He tells you?

Start now! Identify one thing that you have been doing as a “mere ritual.” You’ll recognize it because it is no longer a source of life, you’re just going through the motions.

Tell the Lord that you want to shift from a ritual response to a relational response. Invite the Holy Spirit to remind you what it is He wants you to do, and then tell Him you will do that, out of love for Him.

Now, each time you’re about to make that response, remind the Lord that you’re going to do so because you love Him. It’s a conversation. It’s a dance. It’s a loving relationship.

It’s doing life with Jesus.