

REFINE US, part 6

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Letha Marchetti has recently completed a book called “Dragons & Daisies,” which I enjoyed reading last week. The book aims to coach preschool teachers to respond more effectively to children who “lose it” in various ways—withdrawal, acting out, tantrums, and so on—and aid their psycho-social development.

Letha recognizes that young children are still developing self-awareness and self-control, a process which we, as parents or teachers, can choose to support or to interfere with. She writes:

“What teacher [or parent] wants to hear that his or her children need regulation? It sounds oppressive, bringing to mind a list of [rigid] requirements. Yet in its simplest form, regulation is having self-control. The beautiful thing about regulation, or being in control, is that it’s the neurological state in which we are able to learn. I call it the learning zone. Children are miserable when they are out of control. They much prefer learning and its associated sense of accomplishment.” (Letha Marchetti, “Dragons & Daisies: Keys to Resolve Baffling Behavior in Early Childhood Education”)

This passage caught my attention because it relates so well to this month’s reflection on the Ten Commandments. Young or old, some things don’t change. Something in every one of us resists regulation by anyone or anything outside of ourselves. “Don’t tell me I can’t!” “Don’t tell me what I have to do!”

This, after all, is the root of every person’s problem with God: He is God and we are not. He sets the rules. We would prefer sound advice, instead of sound doctrine. We would prefer Ten Suggestions, instead of Ten Commandments.

But proper regulation is actually a preferred condition (though we seldom realize it), for it is our alignment with our Creator’s design—it is the center of God’s perfect will.

Proper regulation provides a place of contentment (free from worry and fear), a space of freedom (to explore and discover), and an arena for learning and gifted expression. Proper regulation is a spiritual and neurological state of health and fruitfulness.

Obey with Understanding

In relation to the commands of God, we need two things. First, we need to properly understand the Law. Second, we need to properly practice the Law, from the inside out.

As to the need of understanding, the Law is more than a rule book; it is a picture of God's righteousness at work, in spirit and in society.

Like the painted line or the curb or the guardrail along the side of the road, God's Law identifies safety and danger along our journey. Guardrails are not placed along the road to threaten or scare us, but to guide us in safety. So, also, God's Law guides us safely through life.

Of course, not every path has a guardrail. Some paths are little more than a narrow ledge along the side of a mountain. And some people are destined to ascend those routes. At those times, God gives us a personal Guide (the Holy Spirit), who paints for our imagination the missing fence. He is our Regulator. Isaiah described it this way:

Isaiah 30:21 (HCSB)

Whenever you [veer] to the right or to the left, your ears will hear this command behind you: "This is the way. Walk in it."

The Holy Spirit tries to keep us on the straight and narrow road, whatever the weather. He knows where we're going. All He asks of us is that we listen to Him and follow Him. That is obedience with understanding.

God's Law is also a revealer of our deviation from God's standard. It tells us the path God has prepared for us and it shows us where we have gone wrong, and convicts us of our errors. The Law encourages us to get going again and teaches us how to do that. And it instructs us about making the changes that will last—in thought, word, and deed. This was discussed last week, in Part 5 of this series.

Yet, there is another way in which the Law spotlights our deviance. The Law of God is the tool sin uses to foil and destroy us. The Law is good—an expression of God's righteousness—but we are not.

"Sin" does not describe a bad decision we may make (like, "I'll have a second helping of ice cream!"). Sin is at work *before* that decision is made.

Sin is not the desire to have more ice cream. Sin appears in an inner battle—which may occur without notice, in just a fraction of a second—in the moment my conscience considers whether I *should* have more ice cream.

In that split second, multiple thoughts or feelings may occur to inform that question:

"Don't be a glutton!"

"Haven't you had enough sugar today?"

"My stomach is already full."

"One more bowl won't hurt!"

"People will think you're a pig."

“What will Martha think?”
“Will I be able to sleep?”
“How will I feel in the morning?”
“Don’t I need more calcium in my diet?”
“And I looove vanilla!”
“You said you were going to eat less!”
“I can handle a little guilt.”
“Hey! You’ve only got one life. Live it!”

Before I made my decision, sin was already at work: dodging every rule, arguing every reason, preferring image over health.

Sin is that part of me that hates the rules, breaks the rules, makes its own rules, wants to rule over others. Sin is the essence of my soul’s argument against God. Sin wants to be god.

Have you ever wondered how the ten commands that God gave to Moses grew to 613 commands for the Hebrew people? It’s because they argued with every one of the original ten:

“Well, what about *this* case?”
“Would *that* be considered worship?”
“Does that rule apply to *everyone* I know?”
“How do you define ‘work’?”
“Can’t I honor my parents and still hate them?”
“How many times must I forgive?”

In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve lived in ignorant bliss. They had everything they needed, and more. They fellowshipped with God, their Creator and Sustainer, every day.

They knew no sickness, no pain, and they would never die. And they had only *one* commandment (not ten): “*You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden—except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die.*” (Genesis 2:16-17)

They had all the fruit they could possibly need. Was that enough? No.

They had only one commandment. Could they keep it? No.

And why did they violate it? “[*The woman*] saw that the tree was beautiful and its fruit looked delicious, and she wanted the wisdom it would give her. So she took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it, too.” (Genesis 3:6)

Only one commandment and they couldn’t keep it. All the world today has only ten commandments and we cannot keep them. What’s more, we don’t even want them. “Don’t display them!” “Don’t quote them!” “They offend me!”

It's a function of sin, using the law as its springboard. Hear it from the Apostle Paul:

Romans 7:5-11 (HCSB)

⁵ *For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions operated through the law in every part of us and bore fruit for death.*

⁶ *But now we have been released from the law, since we have died to what held us, so that we may serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old letter of the law.*

⁷ *What should we say then? Is the law sin? Absolutely not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin if it were not for the law. For example, I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, Do not covet.*

⁸ *And sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind. For apart from the law sin is dead.*

⁹ *Once I was alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life*

¹⁰ *and I died. The commandment that was meant for life resulted in death for me.*

¹¹ *For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me.*

Can you now see, from this brief presentation, that *more* law is not the real answer? The New Covenant that Jesus Christ bought for us with His blood is not new laws or more laws. It is the unveiling of the heart of the old laws—the Ten Commandments—and the provision of the power to keep them.

Understand with Obedience

As I have said, the second thing we need concerning God's commands is to properly practice the Law, *from the inside out*. At the heart level. At the head level. At the mouth level. As well as with our hands and feet.

Most people who are familiar with the Ten Commandments know them as two-dimensional rules—hollow, dissociated instructions—which we must “determine to practice” in order to please God.

Jesus came to reveal the third dimension of God's commands—that which makes them “alive, powerful, and sharper than a double-edged blade.” He came to unveil the “Spirit of the Law.”

2 Corinthians 3:6 (HCSB)

⁶ *He has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit produces life.*

If we lean on the letter of the law, sin will take advantage to trip us up and destroy us. But if we discover and live by the Spirit of the law, we will live a full and fruitful life—a well-regulated life.

The Spirit of the Law is its reason for being, its purpose and intent, its heart. God gave the commandments to us because He loves us. Their origin is love, and their aim is love—love to God and love to one another.

To build a concrete foundation for a house, we must first prepare the forms. The forms are usually built of wood, providing the framework for the foundation. But the wood is not the foundation. In fact, when the concrete has been poured into the forms and has cured (hardened), the wooden forms are removed and discarded.

The words of the Ten Commandments are like those wooden forms. They are not the truth; they *contain* the truth. Once the truth of God's words is established in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, then the forms are no longer needed.

Do not imagine that I am suggesting we can do away with the Bible. If we were not sinful, and not forgetful, perhaps; but we are both, and shall be both as long as we live. However, there is coming a day, as Paul described...

1 Corinthians 13:10-12 (NLT)

¹⁰ *When full understanding comes, these partial things will become useless.*

¹¹ *When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child. But when I grew up, I put away childish things.*

¹² *Now we see things imperfectly as in a cloudy mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely.*

The Law Within

Thousands of years ago, God declared His purpose through Jeremiah, the prophet (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.

This transition has already begun! God's Kingdom—His ways, His government—is seeping into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, since the day we received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and were born of the Spirit.

You and I are identified as the people of God when we turn from sin to embrace whole-hearted obedience to God's commands.

They are the same good commands today, but in a new (internalized) form. The commands have the same glorious objective, but it is achieved by a new and different means!

Over the centuries, people have tried to internalize God and His message by studying and memorizing the Scriptures. Those are good tools for building forms (structuring our thoughts and understanding), but not for filling them. Therefore, Jesus cautioned the Jewish leaders:

John 5:38-40 (NLT)

³⁸ *You do not have [the Father's] message in your hearts, because you do not believe me—the one he sent to you.*

³⁹ *"You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me!*

⁴⁰ *Yet you refuse to come to me to receive this life.*

The life is not *in* the words, but *through* the words—in the One to whom they point, whom they describe, and whom they quote.

Everyone must come to Jesus to find this Life. To those who do, He gives His Spirit. The Spirit of God—our Regulator—takes up residence in our hearts through the new birth. Then He begins to write the Law of God on our hearts, in our conscience.

The old forms are filled with truth and a solid foundation is laid for an obedient life. Then the forms must be discarded, so we can continue to build on the real foundation. Mere ritual obedience (the form) must be replaced by Spirit-led, loving obedience to our Heavenly Father (that's the true foundation).

Seeing it, and agreeing to it, are only the beginning. This is not an easy transition—it's a process that will take the rest of your life—from letter to Spirit, from death to life.

We will return to this point after Easter, to talk about this life in the Spirit—grace *and* obedience.