

# REFINE US, Part 7

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Has God ever made you a promise? Maybe you were reading the Scriptures, when you came across a promise in the Word that suddenly seemed tailor-made for you. Or, perhaps you were praying when the Holy Spirit seemed to whisper to you a word of promise. Is that you?

A promise will raise your hopes. You'll begin expecting a change, expecting the promise to be fulfilled.

I'm sure you've also experienced the disappointment of meeting a circumstance that was NOT what you expected. Haven't you been there?

Expectations are potent! Whether they are our expectations, or the expectations others have for us.

Thinking of the expectations of our Creator and Redeemer, we have learned two things: His promises are God's expectations *for* us; God's 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 through *loving obedience*.

## **Raising the Bar**

Jesus raised the bar from *ritual* to *relationship*. He neither removed nor changed God's commands. In fact, He underscored them with His teachings. But He addressed something deeper than external ritual obedience. He asked us to think about our actions in different terms. Christ examines our thoughts and motives, and invites us to practice obedience in conversation (active relationship) with God.

Let God command your life in ways that are deeper than mere outward appearances. To do this is to accomplish God's purpose, to please Him.

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 humankind.

It is the ritual practice of the Law that has passed, not the Law's underlying purpose. Ritual obedience is to be replaced by Spirit-led, loving obedience to our Heavenly Father.

Do your words and deeds express an active relational faith in God?

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.

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.

Obedience is simply our return of love to the Father. It is guided by the Lord Jesus Christ. It is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The New and Everlasting Life is not in the words of Scripture, but *through* the words—in the One to whom they point, whom they describe, and whom they quote—that is, Jesus Christ.

## **The Gift of the Spirit**

Everyone must come to Jesus to find this Life. To those who do, He gives His Spirit.

As Peter preached about Jesus—His death and His resurrection (Acts 2)—many in the crowd asked, “Brothers, what should we do?”

*Acts 2:38* Peter replied, “Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <sup>39</sup> This promise is to you, to your children, and to those far away—all who have been called by the Lord our God.”

The Spirit of God—our Regulator—takes up residence in our hearts through the new birth. This is the Spirit *in us*.

In Jesus' physical absence, the Holy Spirit acts as a surrogate, a substitute, revealing and representing Jesus. Then He begins to write the Law of God on our hearts, in our conscience.

However, He has not come to us temporarily, but permanently and eternally. When we shall be in the physical presence of Jesus in Heaven, the Holy Spirit shall still dwell in us, expressing Christ through us.

## **Life in the Spirit**

After describing the nature of the fruit that the Holy Spirit produces in those He indwells, Paul urges, “*If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit*” (Galatians 5:25). In other words, if

the Spirit has given us life, let us align ourselves with Him and let our conduct be controlled by Him.

This new “life in the Spirit” empowers our obedience through grace.

In this sense, “grace” describes two things: (1) the unmerited favor of God, and (2) the supernatural power of God.

### **Favor Without Merit**

Most of us are familiar with the concept of the “unmerited favor of God,” which refers to the grace that saves our souls, not on the basis of our conformity to outward rules or appearances. God offers salvation to every person, no matter what external circumstances, such as socioeconomic status or nationality or reputation, might apply to him or her.

*Acts 10:34 Then Peter replied, “I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism.*

*<sup>35</sup> In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right.*

The Greek word translated “favoritism” in Acts 10:34 is *prosopolemptes*, a word that refers to a judge who looks at a man’s face instead of at the facts of the case, and makes a decision based on whether or not he knows or likes what he sees. For instance, God sent the prophet Samuel to the family of Jesse to anoint one of his sons as king, to shepherd the people of Israel:

*<sup>1</sup> Samuel 6:6 When [the sons of Jesse] arrived, Samuel took one look at Eliab and thought, “Surely this is the LORD’s anointed!”*

*<sup>7</sup> But the LORD said to Samuel, “Don’t judge by his appearance or height, for I have rejected him. The LORD doesn’t see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”*

God’s grace ensures that every person, whatever their ethnic background or their socioeconomic status, may be saved. This is God’s impartiality.

God judges not on the assumption that we all have access to the same amount of truth, but that we all have *the truth we need* to be held accountable, and we will be judged by our response to what we do have, not what we don't have.

However, God’s impartiality with respect to salvation does not keep Him from choosing individuals and nations of people to accomplish His specific purposes. God has exercised (and still does) a great deal of selectivity in His work.

Furthermore, God blesses people in different ways. God's impartiality does not mean that everyone will have exactly the same amount of money, exactly the same amount of influence, exactly the same number of children, exactly the same conditions of health, or exactly the same number of years upon the Earth. And this has been true since Adam met Eve.

Therefore, God may show, whether by His own choice or in answer to our prayer, *favor* in our circumstances, though we have not merited it. When we pray for favor, we are asking God for an extraordinary gift—a gift we have no right to demand, for it is unmerited, and one we have no right to expect, for it is not promised. But we may ask. For God often delights to bless His children in such ways.

Favor, without merit, is a characteristic expression of God's abundant love.

God's grace not only provides for us, it also empowers us.

### **Power Beyond Nature**

This is especially meaningful and hopeful for us who have received a new birth from the Spirit of Jesus. This grace is the source of our spiritual formation as followers of Jesus.

If we should attempt to live "according to the Law"—whether the Law of God, or the law of our own conscience—then we must keep its requirements in every instance, "*for the person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as a person who has broken all of God's laws.*" (James 2:10)

Those words are embedded in a letter from James that emphasizes that the value of one's faith will be found in the actions it produces, and not in our expressed theology or beliefs.

So, Christians are said to live "under grace" instead of "under law." This does not describe a change of *outcome* (as if the Law of God had been abandoned in favor of personal preferences), but a change of *motivation*, a fresh source of power for accomplishing what the Law still requires.

Under the Law, I was dependent on *my flesh*—my own knowledge, wisdom and strength—to achieve what was required of me.

Under grace, I am dependent on *the Spirit*—His knowledge, wisdom, and strength—to achieve what is required of me.

Next time, we will begin right here to examine practical Christian living—according to the flesh versus according to the Spirit.