

# (New Wine in New Wineskins) 5. the Spirit of the New Covenant

by Zac Poonen

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*The new covenant is based on love and fellowship with God, and living by the spirit of the new covenant requires desiring fellowship with God and living by the leading of the Holy Spirit.*

**Scripture:** Hebrews 4:9

**Topics:** "New Covenant", "Spiritual Growth"

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## Description

Zac Poonen delves into the difference between the old and new covenants using the analogy of the Hebrew slave in Exodus 21, highlighting the transition from legalistic service to serving out of love. He emphasizes the importance of motives in keeping God's commandments, warning against living by legalistic principles even in the new covenant era. Poonen stresses the significance of cleansing not only the external life but also the spirit, exposing the dangers of seeking honor from men and the Pharisaical spirit of self-righteousness. He challenges believers to seek fellowship with God like Jesus did, desiring closeness with the Father above all rewards or positions.

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## Transcript

In the Old Testament, just after the giving of the ten commandments (Exodus 20), comes a beautiful ordinance that God gave to the Israelites that aptly describes the difference between the old and the new covenants. There, in Exodus 21:1-6, we read of the Hebrew slave who served six years because he was a slave and was compelled to serve; and who then served his master on a different basis - because he loved to do so (Exodus 21:5). This was God's postscript to the law, prophetically portraying the spirit of the coming new covenant.

The 6 years of compulsory slavery corresponds to serving God legally. The 7th year onwards corresponds to the 'Sabbath rest' that God has ordained for His people (Hebrews 4:9). Under the law, the people could rest on the seventh day only after working for six days. But when God created Adam, He gave him a day of rest first and then six days of work (for God's seventh day was Adam's first day of existence). This was to teach that all man's labour for the Lord was to come out of a relationship of love and fellowship with Him. Otherwise it would be legalistic and worthless.

The fact that we live in the new covenant age does not mean that we live by the new covenant spirit. It is possible to have understood the message of 'victory over sin' and yet to live by legalistic principles. In

Romans 7:1-6, we see that even the man who has come through Romans 6 (the chapter that presents the gospel of victory) can still be in bondage to legalism. In practice too, we find this to be true. Many who have come to an upright and good moral life are yet living by the principles of the law.

It is possible to live an externally righteous life - from wrong motives. Under the old covenant, the Israelites had to keep the law, but the motive with which they kept it could not be judged by the law. Most people kept the law out of fear of judgment. Others kept it out of hope of reward. Both these motives are however inconsistent with the spirit of the new covenant. In the new covenant, the spirit matters more than the letter (Romans 7:6). It is possible to keep all the commandments and for the Lord to rebuke us saying, "I have something against you. You are no longer keeping My commandments out of love for Me, as you did at first. Therefore repent" (Revelation 2:4 - Paraphrase). When love was not the motive, it was not a crime under the law. But under the new covenant, this is so serious, that the leader in Ephesus was in danger of losing his anointing, if he did not repent. Do we realise that it is not enough to keep the commandments if our motive in keeping them is not right?

When we cleanse ourselves from the filthiness of the flesh, we get a good testimony before men. But it is only when we cleanse ourselves from the filthiness of the spirit as well, that God bears testimony about us. This is the way of perfecting holiness, as 2 Corinthians 7:1 makes plain. There is 'iniquity in our holy things' (Exodus 28:38). What is this iniquity but the wrongness of our motives in our pursuit of righteousness?

Beneath this iniquity lies the far more serious evil of seeking the honour of men. It is when we seek the honour of others (particularly in the church) that we are careful to keep our external life in order. This is the evil that we must be quick to detect behind our legalism, or else it will destroy us.

In the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), it is clear that none of them were 'harlots'. They were all virgins. They had all cleansed themselves from the filthiness of the flesh. Therefore they had a good testimony before men. Their lamps were burning and men saw their good works and praised them (cf. Matthew 5:16). Little did men know that some of these virgins had no inner life. Although all ten appeared spiritual in the eyes of undiscerning unbelievers, yet God could see that only five of them had truth (reality) in their innermost being (Psalm 51:6). The other five were legalistic, keeping the letter of the law, content with their testimony before men. Little did they realise that they would be left behind in the rapture. The Bridegroom said to them, "I do not know you". He did not call them 'workers of iniquity', as He called another group (Matthew 7:23), for these five were not workers of iniquity. Yet, they had not partaken of the spirit of Christ in their inner life. The Lord told them (as it were), "I do not have any fellowship with your spirit. Your spirit is the spirit of legalism, even though your external life is upright. You are the Pharisees of the new covenant". This is the implication behind the words, "I do not know you".

It is possible to keep the letter of the New Testament commandments and yet not to radiate the spirit of Christ. For example, when another has done us some evil, we can obey the word that says that we are to repay evil with good. And we can go to that man, perhaps, even with an expensive gift, to show our love to him, and to do him good, according to the commandment. Yet our spirit, in our approach to him, may be saying these unspoken words, "Here I am, the great saint, coming to do good to you, an evil sinner". In such a situation, even though we may have spent much money buying that gift, and gone to much pains to do that 'good' act, yet our offering is not a fragrant aroma to God, for our 'self' has not been sacrificed (See Ephesians 5:2).

Consider another situation. A brother may sit quietly, without opening his mouth, at a time when his wife is upset and angry with him. It may appear to an undiscerning outsider there, that the husband is the 'saint' and the wife the 'sinner'. Yet God who weighs the spirits of men may have an altogether different opinion about both of them. For the unspoken words of the husband's spirit, even while his mouth is shut, may be, "Lord, I thank Thee that I have victory over anger, unlike my wife". He may not realise, that his defeated wife may be more acceptable to God than he, the self-righteous Pharisee. Truly, the harlots and thieves will get into the kingdom before the Pharisees. Losing one's temper is certainly unbecoming of a Christian. But so is Phariseeism. What we must do is to cleanse our spirit from the filthiness of the Pharisee that it can be polluted with, in such situations. This is the way of salvation.

In the parable of the prodigal son, we have the attitudes of Christ and of the Pharisee, clearly portrayed in the persons of the father and the elder son. The father was delighted to see his younger son repent and come back, even though the lad may not have got victory over his sins yet. The Pharisaical older son, however, could not welcome his younger brother in the same way. If he had had his way, he would have put his younger brother in the servants' quarters for at least a year to test whether his repentance was genuine or not.

This Pharisaical spirit in our flesh is most evident, in our attitude towards those who have harmed us in some way. Even when they apologise for their error, we can still 'put them in the servants' quarters' for a while, to test their repentance. Yet Jesus told us that even if a person sinned against us every two hours in a 12 hour day, and came back each time saying that he had repented, we were to forgive him, without questioning the genuineness of his repentance (Luke 17:4). We were to accept his words at their face value. He may not be genuine perhaps. But that is for God to judge - not us. We can only see the outward appearance. God sees the heart.

In the day of judgment we shall discover that why we did something was far more important than what we did (1 Corinthians 4:5). The elder brother had "never disobeyed a single commandment" of his father's (Luke 15:29). Yet we find him at the end of the story outside the father's house (the church), because his spirit was the spirit of legalism. He was a virgin, but he had no oil in his vessel. His motivation was finally exposed. He had served for reward. He tells his father, "Even though I obeyed all your commandments, yet you never rewarded me"!

Jesus warned His disciples against this attitude, when Peter asked Him (after the rich young ruler had turned away from Him), "What shall we get, who have forsaken everything (unlike the rich young ruler)?" (Matthew 19:27). Jesus replied with the parable of the landowner, hiring labourers. Five sets of labourers were hired by this landowner. Four of them were hired on the basis of a specific contract. The last group alone came without any contract (Matthew 20:1-16). This is the point of the parable. The first group worked for the specific wage of one denarius (verses 2). The second, third and the fourth groups also worked for reward, although the amount was not specified (verses 3-5). These four groups of labourers are all symbolic of those who keep the commandments or who serve God or make external sacrifices for Him - but who are secretly hoping for some reward for it all - perhaps the carnal joy of sitting on a throne in the millennium, or of wearing a 'crown' on their heads; or perhaps, what looks like a 'spiritual' desire, of being in the bride of Christ. All such Christians are working for a reward. And that is the spirit of the old covenant.

The only reward that a truly spiritual man desires is the reward of partaking more of God's holy and loving nature and of a closer fellowship with Him. This is the 'crown' that he is looking forward to; and this is the

reward that Jesus is coming with (Revelation 22:12). And this reward will be in exact proportion to the faithfulness with which a man has worked out his salvation, cleansing himself, not only of the filthiness of the flesh, but also of the filthiness of the spirit - particularly the filthiness of the Phariseeism in his spirit. This is why the degree of our glory, when we are resurrected, will be as different from each other's as the brightness of the various stars (1 Corinthians 15:41, 42). For a righteous God will reward each 'virgin' righteously - according to what He saw, and not what men saw (2 Corinthians 5:10).

In the above parable, only the last group of labourers came to work, without any contract and without any promise or hope of reward (Matthew 20:7). They came in the spirit of the new covenant. Therefore they were rewarded first - and received (proportionately speaking) far more than all the others (See Matthew 20:16). The first group of labourers, on the other hand, were exactly like the Pharisaical older brother of the prodigal son - self-righteous and legalistic and expecting to be rewarded.

Jesus is our Example and Forerunner, in this new covenant. And He certainly did not keep His Father's commandments in order to gain some reward or some position or honour - either now or in eternity. Much less did He keep the commandments, because He was afraid of being punished by His Father. We read that He endured the cross, only because He thought of the joy that was set before Him - that supreme joy of fellowship with the Father. In the Father's presence alone is there fullness of joy (Psalm 16:11). Fellowship with His Father was what Jesus desired all the days of His life. Therefore He cried with loud cries and tears that He might be saved from 'death' - that is, from a break of fellowship with His Father (Hebrews 5:7). For 33 years on earth, He had preserved Himself from 'death'. Finally, in Gethsemane, when He saw that His fellowship with His Father would still be broken on the cross for 3 hours (when He would have to suffer the pain of being forsaken by God for our sins), He cried out again, seeking to find if there was some other way. But there was no other. And in love for us, having counted the cost, He went to the cross and paid the greatest price that He could ever pay.

It is only when we partake of this spirit of Christ that eagerly desires fellowship with the Father, that we can be freed from legalism. Freedom from legalism - from straining at gnats and swallowing camels - can never be attained by any techniques or by any method. There is only one way. That is the way described in 2 Corinthians 3:18. There, Paul, after contrasting the old and the new covenants in the whole chapter (verses 6-17), finally states that the Holy Spirit has come to show us the glory of Jesus in the mirror of God's word, and then to transform us into that same likeness.

The Holy Spirit desires, first of all, to show us how Jesus lived on this earth. He was born under the law (Galatians 4:4). Yet, when Jesus meditated on those commandments in the law, He saw more in those commandments than any Israelite before Him had ever seen. As we considered in the last chapter, Jesus saw that the command not to commit adultery also meant that one should not lust after a woman in one's heart, and the command not to commit murder also meant not to be angry in one's heart, etc. There was a great desire in Jesus' soul, when He was on earth, to obey the Father perfectly, and not just according to the letter of the law. Thus, although He was born under the law (Galatians 4:4), He inaugurated a new covenant. This is the One whom the Holy Spirit shows us from the pages of Scripture.

To follow Jesus in this way means to meditate on the Scriptures as He meditated on them. Then we shall find more in God's commandments than others find in them.

The words that Jesus spoke were spirit and life (John 6:63). This is why many could not understand Him when He was on earth and this is also why many cannot understand Him today. God gives light only to

those who love the truth. He allows all others to be deceived. This is the plain meaning of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. When we meditate on God's word, with a wholehearted love for the truth, we shall no longer congratulate ourselves for keeping the letter of the law, but judge ourselves often, for not having kept it in the right spirit.

In the ten commandments, it was possible for man to keep nine of them, but impossible to keep the tenth - for the tenth commandment dealt with covetousness, which was an inward matter. The law could never discover whether a man coveted in his heart, and could not therefore punish a man even if he did. This is why Paul, even though he said he was blameless according to the righteousness of the law, yet acknowledged that he could not keep the tenth commandment (Compare Philippians 3:6 with Romans 7:7-10). He was one of the few who were honest enough to acknowledge this. Thus God could lead him further into the new covenant.

The tenth commandment was placed there by God to test man's honesty. Those who were honest enough to acknowledge having failed in this, would be led on. Only to such would the law become a 'school master' to lead them to Christ and the new covenant (Galatians 3:24). The rest, who concealed their inward sin, would remain under the old covenant. This is the main reason why many Christians remain defeated today. They are not honest enough to acknowledge their inward failures. They remain content with the honour of men. They do not love the truth about themselves. Thus God allows them to be deceived.

It was never God's intention that man should live by rules and regulations. The law was not given to lead man to life, but only to show man's impotence and to test his honesty (as we have just seen). Therefore after Christ came, the Law was set aside and a new covenant was ushered in (Hebrews 8:7, 8, 13).

When God placed Adam in Eden, He told him not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. In other words, man was not to live by a rule book of 'good and evil', avoiding all that was evil, and doing all that was good. This is where true Christianity differs from false Christianity and also from all other religions.

God intended man to live by the tree of life - by the leading of God's Holy Spirit who would tell him what was pleasing to God and what was not (See 1 Corinthians 6:12 & 10:13). To live by the knowledge of good and evil is to live by the law. This can only bring us into bondage, without understanding the spirit behind the Law.

We can come to a righteous life externally ('become virgins'), by keeping the commandments externally. But the only way that we can get oil in our vessels is by cleansing ourselves of the filthiness of the spirit, which no man can see.

Paul, when writing new-covenant truths to the Christians in Ephesus, knew that his words could not give them revelation. So he prayed that their eyes should be opened by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:17, 18).

This is what we need to pray for ourselves too.

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