

REFINE US, Part 9

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The Holy Spirit has prompted us to ask Him to refine us, so we're exploring that topic.

Did your entry into faith in Jesus Christ bring about some difficulties you never imagined you would face? God uses trials to "turn up the heat" and refine our hearts.

Have you wondered if you were the only person facing such a trial? Perhaps you've even been reluctant to ask for prayer support because you were embarrassed about the trial.

Today I want to set your mind at ease and release your faith to endure and overcome your tests with grace.

After describing the nature of the fruit that the Holy Spirit produces in those He indwells, Paul urged, "*If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit*" (Galatians 5:25). This new "life in the Spirit" empowers our obedience through grace.

We learned that "grace," in this sense, describes two things: (1) the favor from God that we have not deserved, and (2) power from God that is beyond our nature.

Christians are said to live "under grace," instead of "under law" (Romans 6:14). 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 of God still requires of us.

While living "under the Law," I was dependent on *my flesh*—my own knowledge, wisdom and strength—to attempt to achieve what God required of me by, at best, ritual obedience.

Now living "under grace," I am dependent on *God's Spirit*—His knowledge, wisdom, and strength—to achieve what is required of me.

First Reality

As we began to examine practical Christian living—that is, living according to the Spirit instead of according to the flesh—we found that the first reality of living under grace is this: We walk by faith, not by sight (five senses). You are to trust God and love God *as you are*. Do not wait until you become as you wish you were. Love and trust God today—right now—whatever your condition and circumstance.

If you do not trust Him now, you will not trust Him later either, because trust is built in layers; it does not come all at once.

God wants you to be happy—deeply happy. But you will never know such contentment while you blame God for not giving you more, or fixing what seems broken, or finding what is lost or missing.

And while you may not SAY that God is to blame, you show that you THINK so when you grumble and complain, and are stingy with your thanks and praise, and get preoccupied with yourself and getting what you want, instead of giving your life away.

Trust that God's grace toward you really is sufficient (2 Corinthians 12:9). To demonstrate this, tell the Father that if *not one thing* changes today, you trust Him still—right now, just as things are, and just as you are—and thank Him for His grace.

Here is the conclusion of the matter: Where you put your trust (more than your energy or your time) determines the harvest in your life.

Where You Put Your Trust

Jeremiah 17:5-8

⁵ *This is what the Lord says: "Cursed are those who put their trust in mere humans, who rely on human strength and turn their hearts away from the Lord.*

⁶ *They are like stunted shrubs in the desert, with no hope for the future. They will live in the barren wilderness, in an uninhabited salty land.*

⁷ *"But blessed are those who trust in the Lord and have made the Lord their hope and confidence. ⁸ They are like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water. Such trees are not bothered by (unafraid of) the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green, and they never stop producing fruit.*

Note the contrasts in this passage:

- Cursed – blessed
- Mere humans – the Lord
- No hope – hope and confidence
- Barren - fruitful

Note, also, the results of trusting in the Lord:

- No fear
- No worry

- Perpetual greenness
- Perpetual fruitfulness

Those who put their trust in the Lord are continuously alive, and that is more than superficial: they produce fruit perpetually (in every season, even in drought).

So, also, says the first psalm:

Psalms 1:1-3

¹ *Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join in with mockers.*

² *But they delight in the law of the Lord, meditating on it day and night.* ³ *They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season. Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do.*

Second Reality

The second reality of living under grace is this: You cannot force the will of God to happen in *your* time, even though it is His will. The Holy Spirit chooses both the time and the method.

Psalms 146:3-5

³ *Don't put your confidence in powerful people; there is no help for you there.* ⁴ *When they breathe their last, they return to the earth, and all their plans die with them.*

⁵ *But joyful are those who have the God of Israel as their helper, whose hope is in the Lord their God.*

Zechariah 4:6

"This is what the Lord says to Zerubbabel: 'It is not by force nor by strength, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of Heaven's Armies.'"

The power of the Holy Spirit is not just for "big jobs," but for every task you face. His presence is to be the "air" we breathe and the "water" we drink—the very source and support for our everyday lives.

Rip Current of the Spirit

Galatians 5:16-26

¹⁶ *So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves.*

There is a natural conflict that arises when we try to live life this way, because we live in this peculiar “in between” condition: in between this sinful world and God’s righteous Kingdom, in between eternal condemnation and eternal life, in between the desire of our flesh and the will of God.

God calls those things that are not yet as though they already are, and it is in that calling that we live our days as followers of Jesus Christ. We trust that what God has declared is so, while in fact it is still becoming (and so are we).

For instance, the Bible says that in one sense “we have been saved,” while at the same time “we are being saved,” and yet “we shall be saved.” The natural, linear mind may ask, “Which is it?” But the spirit that knows and trusts God responds, “All of them.” All three are true, all of the time: we have been redeemed, we are being renewed, and ultimately we shall be rescued.

There is a natural oceanic phenomenon, known as a rip current (some incorrectly refer to it as a riptide). As wind and waves push water toward the shore, it must find a way to return to the sea, beyond the breakers. So it flows along the shore until it finds a narrow channel and there creates a strong current that moves perpendicular to the shore to a point beyond the breakers where it dissipates.

When caught in a rip current, some people have died, because they did not understand how it worked. A rip current is strong enough that even an experienced swimmer cannot overcome it. Many people will also panic, fearing it will pull them under the water.

In fact, a rip current is only horizontal, and does not pull downward, and it only lasts until it reaches beyond the breakers, then dissipates.

Since a rip current only flows perpendicular to the shore in a narrow channel, the way to safety is either to float or tread water until it dissipates, or to swim parallel to the shore and break out of its narrow current, and then return to shore.

We who have chosen to follow Jesus Christ are caught in a spiritual rip current. The coming Kingdom of God has created a rip current that pulls believers away from the shore of natural living.

However, if we don’t understand what is happening to us, we will likely fight against this current. We may want to return to the shore, where we hope things will once more be familiar and comfortable, and end up resisting what the Spirit is trying to accomplish in our lives.

Or we may imagine that we know a better or faster way of “getting beyond the breakers” that try us, and depend on our own understanding and strength to get us there, instead of the Spirit’s power and timing.

We will do best in such trials if we don't panic and resort to our old ways. Instead, we should just "float or tread water" by receiving grace to endure the hardship, while we trust in God to deliver us eventually.

In such circumstances, our greatest enemy is not the devil, but our own panic. When we lose spiritual poise or balance (faith), we will begin to thrash about (spiritually), resulting in disorientation, followed by unusual weakness.

We can do better. Listen to Paul's words, as he continues:

¹⁷ The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other (in us), so you are not free to carry out your good intentions.

The flesh and the Spirit want opposite things, so they are in constant conflict. Do you feel at times that there is a war inside of you? Well, you're right! And the result may be that you cannot do even the good that you want to do.

It has been said that "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." That simply means that intent is not enough. What good are intentions, if they are not carried out?

¹⁸ But when you are directed by the Spirit, you are not under obligation to the law ~~of Moses~~.

The translators have taken the literal phrase "under the law" to mean "no longer obligated to follow Moses' law," as if to say the codes of Moses given to the Israelites no longer apply. While I believe that is generally true, I do not agree that this verse expresses that. To take that position incorrectly puts the emphasis of the verse on the phrase "the law of Moses."

It is not the Law which is the focal point of this verse, but our onetime obligation to it. It is not the Law which has changed, but our ritual obligation to it. Our obligation now lies with the direction of the Holy Spirit.

As I have said previously, since the Holy Spirit authored the Law, and the Law is good and holy, this shift does not change the *expected* outcome in our lives. It does, however, alter the motivation and source of power. What we once attempted out of ritual obedience, we now pursue out of loving relationship.

This shift is much more than semantic (just about words). The *actual* outcome is vastly different, as Paul describes:

¹⁹ *When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.*

Before we continue, we must hear clearly that last sentence: *anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.*

“Anyone” means, well, anyone.

“That sort of life” means a lifestyle that is “directed” by the flesh and follows natural, sinful desires, instead of the desires of the Spirit (verse 17).

“Will not” does not mean “might not”; it means will not. It is a foregone conclusion. The end will not be the Kingdom of God. The end will be the kingdom of darkness; it will be hell.

²² *But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!*

And that is just how the Holy Spirit works! He leads us to do those things which naturally achieve the same ends as the Law. He governs our deeds by mastering our motives. When our attitude and motive (purpose) are right, the results will also be right. Not only is there no law to charge us for living in this way, but this way of life fulfills what the Law of God requires.

²⁴ *Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there.*

Jesus’ cross frees us from any *obligation* to our natural passions and desires, wherever they may conflict with the Spirit’s desires. When He died, we died—to the ways of the flesh, so that we might live for God.

²⁵ *Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit’s leading in every part of our lives.*

²⁶ *Let us not become conceited, or provoke one another, or be jealous of one another.*

Practical Steps

Here are two practical conclusions to this teaching.

1. Since it is the Holy Spirit who has given us life—the God-kind of life, which is everlasting—let’s follow His lead, and apply this to every part of our lives. This is the path of a disciple of Christ.

2. Let's separate ourselves from the natural animus that arises between people who are living to please their own flesh—vain conceit (“I’m so impressed with myself!”), irritating competitive comparisons (“So you think you’re *better* than me?”), and resentful envy (“Why does *she* get to have that?!”).

Take a practical step today. Draw closer to the Lord by one or both of these avenues.

Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you in every part of your life. Then identify one or two ways in which you have been ignoring or resisting His lead and repent, inviting the Spirit into that area or those areas, specifically. Now, follow His lead, whether easy or challenging. And remember the wise man’s advice: *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and don’t lean on your own understanding. In all your ways, observe His presence, and He will direct your paths.”* (Proverbs 3:5-6)

If you have recognized in yourself something of that vain conceit, or competitive comparisons, or resentful envy, refuse to let it continue or fester. Cut it off... now. Repent and renounce such thoughts or attitudes. Rejoice that Christ, who is perfect, does not regard you in such ways, and purpose to regard others as He does: with healing grace.

By these means, you will “put to death” the works of your flesh and “keep in step” with the Holy Spirit. What joyous freedom is waiting for you!