

Ears that Turn Conversations Toward Grace and Never Burn

"He (Jesus) shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit, **and with fire.**" (Matthew 3:11)

In our series *The Face of Grace*, we have examined the mind of grace, the mouth of grace, the eyes of grace, and the ears of grace. We are called to publicize our Savior's mindset and to proclaim our Savior's message. Jesus Christ is "*the God of all grace*" (1 Peter 5:10) who is "*full of grace and truth*" (John 1:14). In our text, John the Baptist says, "*Jesus will baptize us with the Holy Spirit, and with fire*" (Matt. 3:11). The Spirit is "*the Spirit of grace*" (Heb. 10:29) and "*the Spirit of grace and supplication*" (Zech. 12:10). You and I are in every way *immersed* in grace; the Spirit of grace surrounds us, fills us, and it is He who moves us. As such, we're called by the Spirit to have ears that turn every conversation toward grace and never burn. We all understand what it means to be "baptized with the Holy Spirit." But what is "baptism with fire?"

I. There are three kinds of fire mentioned in Matthew 3:10, 11, 12.

- A. The first fire receives *the rotten tree* which "is cast into the fire" of judgment (v. 10)
- B. The second fire receives *the empty chaff* which "is burned with unquenchable fire" (v. 12)
Both these fires speak of rotten, empty things (people) that will one day face the judgment of God.
- C. But there is another fire, which is a "blessing to rotten, empty things (people)" (v. 11).
"He shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit, **and with fire.**" This fire is set in contrast to the two fires.

II. This fire of blessing is a symbol of the presence of Yahweh (God).

This fire in Matt. 3:11 is a symbol of the Divine Spirit's influence. Just as water is the symbol of the cleansing influences of the Spirit, so fire *a symbol of the cleansing and sanctifying work of grace.*

- A. "I am come to send fire upon the earth, and how I wish it was already kindled" (Luke 12:49).
- B. On the day of Pentecost, "the fire" of the Spirit came into the disciples (Acts 2:3).
- C. So, "the fire" into which you are baptized is the cleansing work of the Divine Spirit of grace.

III. The fire of God in your life (grace) transforms your environment.

If the Scripture is true, then when you begin to follow Jesus, He baptizes you with the Spirit and fire.

- A. **This fire gives life.** That seems a paradox but put your hands or your lips on the cheek of the beloved corpse, and you know the shock of icy coldness. Heat is life; death is cold. The symbol of "fire" conveys "life-giver." Though fire can destroy, there is a warmth in God's fire that vivifies.
- B. **This fire creates longings.** Religion is worth nothing unless it is warm. There is nothing more irrational than people believing the truths of Christianity and feeling nothing towards them. Isaiah says, "The Lord's fire is in Zion, and His furnace in Jerusalem" (Isaiah 31:9). The great glory of the Gospel is to cleanse men's hearts by raising their temperature, making them pure because they are made warm. It is this fire that separates them from their evils. It is slow work to take mallet and chisel and try to chip off the rust (the Law), but pitch the whole thing into the furnace, and the work will be done. A sinner must submit himself to the cleansing fire of the Divine Spirit.
- C. **This fire kindles men's love.** We all know the common use of that metaphor in language. We speak about *ardent* desires, *warm* feelings, *fervid* emotions, *burning* love, and the like. The great gift which Christ brings to is the heightening and hallowing of our emotions. Ancient moralists did not know what to do with them. They tried to suppress them (stoics) and tried to cast them as inferior to reason and to will. Jesus Christ puts holy fire into the emotions, and heightens and sanctifies them, and makes love - *which the world regards as a weakness and handles so as to make it a sin* - the basis of all goodness, and the productive soil in which everything good grows.

Nine Diagnostic Questions to Discern If It's Gossip or Grace

Below are nine diagnostic questions to help us discern whether, in talking or listening to others about another person with whom we're struggling, we're gossiping or turning people toward grace.

1. **If you're involved in conflict with another person, are you talking to others only about that person's sin and never about your own?** If so, it's probably gossip, not grace.
2. **Is your conversation with friends *about* this other person intended to prepare you for a productive conversation *with* the person?** If not, it's probably gossip, not grace.
3. **If you're seeking counsel from others about how to deal wisely with this person, do you keep the person's identity secret except when necessary?** If not, it's probably gossip, not grace.
4. **Do you *enjoy* sharing this information with your friends?** If so, it's probably gossip, not grace. Gossip may be "a tasty morsel" (Prov. 18:8) but being patient and seeking counsel is healthier.
5. **What's the tone of your voice and the tenor of your heart?** Grace is gentle, gossip is not.
6. **Are you meek, humble, and broken-hearted when you share this other person's sin, or do you feel angry and righteous by comparison?** The former is grace, the latter is not.
7. **Are you talking to God about this person as much as you're talking to your friends?** If not, it's probably gossip.
8. **Are you limiting the number of friends you speak to?** If not, it's probably gossip. Gossip seeks to spread communication widely, but Jesus restricts it narrowly (Matthew 18:15-17).
9. **Do think of those with whom you're sharing sensitive information as passive recipients or involved participants?** Jesus's goal for us in speaking to others is never merely to vent. Those who receive information must be prepared to go with us to the person we need to speak to, in order to serve as witnesses (Matthew 18:16).

As Christians baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire, we are called to be people who turn every conversation toward grace and to refrain from reveling in the downfall and judgment of others.