

## “Sanctification in the Refiner’s Fire”

**Date:** March 11, 2018 **Place:** Lakewood UMC **Occasion:** A Disciples Heart series, Lent 4  
**Texts:** John 14:9-11;15-17; Malachi 3:1-4  
**Themes:** Sanctification, grace, reconstruction

During the season of Lent we are engaged in a series called “A Disciple’s Heart.” We’re looking at the Wesleyan understanding of salvation. Last week we learned that our salvation is an ongoing process: past, present and future. We’ve also talked about the three movements of grace – prevenient grace, justifying grace and sanctifying grace.

Here’s the point, God loves us wherever we are. But he loves us too much to leave us where he finds us. God’s Holy Spirit is constantly at work in every human life to reconcile that human heart with God’s heart. Today we want to talk about the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit to refine every heart – bringing it more and more in line with the heart of God.

We call that process *sanctification*, or becoming holy. Even after we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we can all admit that we are not perfect as Christ himself was perfect. And yet, that is the goal – that we become more like Jesus in every way.

There are several ways that we can talk about this. Malachi talks about the refiner’s fire. When a worker in fine metals receives the raw ore from the earth, all of the impurities need to be burned away before the pure silver or gold is formed. Before that, there is a bunch of other dirt and minerals and junk that we refer to as impurities.

The molten metal is heated to very high temperatures and the impurities are burned off, till all you have left is pure gold, or pure silver. Malachi says, “God is like a refiner’s fire.” (3:2) The journey toward perfection always leads through the fire. Not the fires of eternal hell, but the fire of God’s refining love. Not flames on the other side of death, but

the purifying flames of God's grace in the present. Not a fire in some distant Hades, but the fire of the Spirit that ignites a fiery passion in our hearts.

*Sanctification* is the theological word we use to name the refining process by which the Spirit of God purifies our intentions, purges our hearts of anything that gets in the way of God's highest and best will for us, and prepares us to offer ourselves as the agents of God's love.

Don't miss the purpose of the refining fire, Malachi 3:3: "That they may offer to the Lord an offering of righteousness." The refining fire of the Spirit prepares us to offer our lives as the gift of God's love to the world.

Sometimes the refining fire goes through our hearts in deeply personal ways as we wrestle with the subtle imperfections and impurities in our lives. I am personally reminded of the seven deadly sins, that I continue to wrestle with in my own life: pride, envy, anger, sloth, greed, lust and gluttony. Anyone else struggle with any of these?

Sometimes the refining fire purifies us through the accountability of other disciples, through people who love us enough to tell us the truth we may not want to hear. People who love us enough to help us see the impurities that get in the way of God's work in our lives.

Sometimes the refining fires does its work as we face the changing circumstances of life – events that test our integrity, push up against our deepest values, and challenge our most deeply held assumptions.

So, what will it look like for the refining fire to go through your heart? No one can answer that question for you. All I can say is that along the way to Christian perfection, each of us will go through the fire *not once*, but many times, as the Spirit uncovers the dross of bitter attitudes, corrupted values, buried hurts, nagging habits, and plain old selfishness.

And the promise from God is this, that when we go through the fire, we will discover, as did Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did – that there is one in the fire with us who “is like the Son of God.” (Daniel 3:25)

Wesleyan discipleship is an invitation to enter into the spiritual disciplines, by which the Holy Spirit does in and through us that which we could never do for or by ourselves. It is the Holy Spirit that transforms our hearts and shapes us into the image of Christ.

The apostle Paul describes this work in our hearts as nothing less than a total renovation project in which the Holy Spirit moves in to reinforce that which is good and to restore that which is damaged. The holy life is a seeking nothing less than a total redesign of our desires and a remodeling of our ambitions from the inside out.

You see, our hearts and lives are like an old building that has been damaged by abuse, neglect and sin. Our neglect of the spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible study and worship has left rotting foundations that need repaired. Our lives are cluttered with debris of destructive habits, painful memories, damaged emotions and bitter hurts from the past.

We have secret closets of greed that need to be opened to the needs of others. We board up windows, lock the doors and put up fences around the property so that our lives are protected from the pain, suffering and injustice of the world around us. Our heart, the center room of our personality, is under the control of a self-centered, self-serving form of sin.

The Holy Spirit comes to do the inner work of heart renovation that prepares a place for Christ to come, not as a visitor or passing acquaintance, but as the One who fills our whole being with the life, love and power that are alive in the Trinity.

Are you ready for this renovation project of your life? The first step is

to recognize our need. The project begins with ruthless honesty as we acknowledge to God and to ourselves our desperate need for God to begin a transforming work in our lives. Michael Jackson wrote a song a number of years ago that makes this point, “If you want to change the world, begin by looking at the man in the mirror.”

The second step is to allow the Holy Spirit to enter into our lives and do the work that only the Spirit can do. We claim the promise of the Risen Christ, who says: “Look! I’m standing at the door and knocking. If any hear my voice and open the door, I will come in.” (Revelation 3:20)

The third and most difficult step goes on for a lifetime, as we learn to surrender – to relinquish control of our lives so that the Spirit can shape, direct and saturate every part of our existence with the love of God.

Are you ready to relinquish control of your life and future to God? Here is an imaginative way to help you experience the inner renovation of the Spirit of God. My hope is that you will experience the inner reinforcement of the Holy Spirit, as you allow the Risen Christ to meet you in each of these places. Close your eyes, if you will. I invite you to:

- Imagine your heart as a house that is customized just for you. Each of our imaginary houses will be very different from the people around us. Picture your house as clearly as you can.
- Imagine that you hear a knock on the door. You recognize the person to be Jesus, and you open the door to let Him in.
- Imagine that Jesus begins to walk through your house, asking you to give him the key to each of the doors.
- He asks for the key to the living room, the public place where you relate to other people, so that his love will flow through you to every person you meet.

- He asks for the key to the study, the room of your intellect, so that his truth can invigorate everything you see, think or imagine.
- He asks for the key to your storage room, the place where you protect your wealth and treasure, so that he can use what you have in ways that fulfill the vision of the kingdom.
- He asks for the key to your kitchen and dining room, so that he can guide the stewardship of your body and give you compassion for a hungry world.
- He asks for the key to your bedroom, so that his love can permeate your human loves and passions and be present in the most intimate relationships of your life.
- He asks for the key to that private little closet, the one where you hide the things you don't want anyone else to see – the inner sanctum or mission control center – so that his will takes control of everything you think, say or do.
- Imagine that as you relinquish control of your life, you begin to experience the inexhaustible resources of the Spirit of God at work within your heart, until you are *filled* with the fullness of God's love.
- May it be so in each of our lives. Amen

This sermon borrows heavily from the daily workbook *A Disciple's Heart: Growing in Love and Grace*, by James A. Harnish with Justin Larosa. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015, pp. 58-59; and the book by the same title and authors, pages 33-40.