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The Corrosive Effects Of A Fretful Spirit

The Holy Spirit in Psalm 37:1 admonishes us to beware of irritation in our religious lives:

Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity.

The word "fret" comes to us from the Anglo Saxon, and carries with it such a variety of meanings as bring a rather pained smile to our faces.

Notice how they expose us and locate us behind our disguises. The primary meaning of the word is to *eat*, and from there it has been extended with rare honesty to cover most of the manifestations of an irritable disposition. "To eat away; to gnaw; to chafe; to gall; to vex; to worry; to agitate; to wear away"; so says Webster, and all who have felt the exhausting, corrosive effects of fretfulness know how accurately the description fits the facts.

Now, the grace of God in the human heart works to calm the

agitation that normally accompanies life in such a world as ours. The Holy Spirit acts as a lubricant to reduce the friction to a minimum and to stop the fretting and chafing in their grosser phases. But for most of us the problem is not as simple as that. Fretfulness may be trimmed down to the ground and its roots remain alive deep within the soul, there growing and extending themselves all unsuspected, sending up their old poisonous shoots under other names and other appearances.

It was not to the unregenerate that the words "Fret not thyself" were spoken, but to God-fearing persons capable of understanding spiritual things. We Christians need to watch and pray lest we fall into this temptation and spoil our Christian testimony by an irritable spirit under the stress and strain of life. It requires great care and a true knowledge of ourselves to distinguish a spiritual burden from religious irritation. We cannot close our minds to everything that is happening around us. We dare

not rest at ease in Zion when the church is so desperately in need of spiritually sensitive men and women who can see her faults and try to call her back to the path of righteousness. The prophets and apostles of Bible times carried in their hearts such crushing burdens for God's wayward people that they could say, "My tears have been my meat day and night" (Psalm 42:3), and "Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!" (Jeremiah 9:1). These men were heavy with a true burden. What they felt was not vexation but acute concern for the honor of God and the souls of men. By nature some persons fret easily. They have difficulty separating their personal antipathies from the burden of the Spirit. When they are grieved they can hardly say

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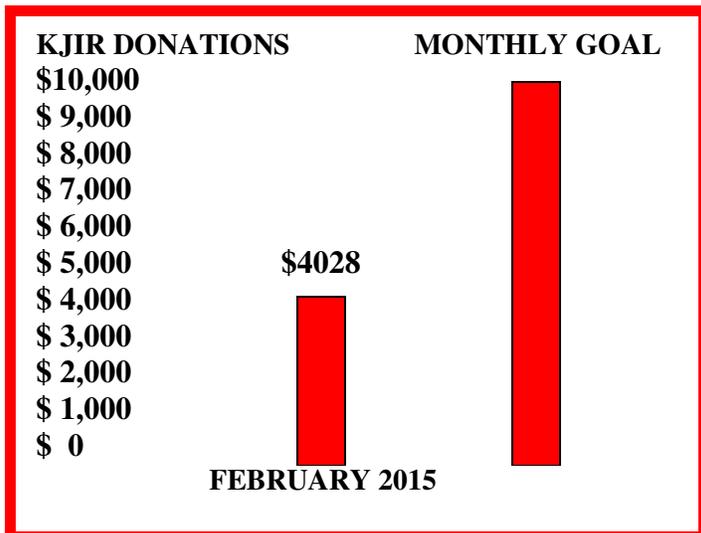
whether it is a pure and charitable thing or merely irritation set up by other Christians having opinions different from their own.

Of one thing we may be sure; we can never escape the external stimuli that cause vexation. The world is full of them and though we were to retreat to a cave and live the remainder of our days alone, we still could not lose them. The rough floor of our cave would chafe us, the weather would irritate us and the very silence would cause us to fret. Deliverance from a fretting spirit may be by blood and fire, by humility, self-abnegation and a patient carrying of the cross. There will always be “evildoers” and “workers of iniquity,” and for the most part they will appear to succeed while the forces of righteousness will seem to fail. The wicked will always have the money and the talent and the publicity and the numbers, while the righteous will be few and poor and unknown. The prayerless Christian will surely misread the signs and fret against the circumstances. That is what the Spirit warns us against.

Let us look out calmly upon the world; or better yet, let us look down upon it from above where Christ is seated and we are seated in Him. Though the wicked spread himself like “a green bay tree” (Psalm 37:35), it is only for a moment. Soon he passes away and is not. “But the salvation of the righteous is of the LORD: He is their strength in the time of trouble” (verse 39). This knowledge should cure the fretting spirit.

A.W. TOZER

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THE ROLE OF FAITH

It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.

1 Corinthians 1:30

All self-efforts to overcome sin are utterly futile and unscriptural. Believers are said to have “purified their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:9). Acts 26:18 affirms that saints are sanctified by faith in Christ. Romans 9: 31-32 affirms that the Jews did not attain righteousness “because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works.” The biblical doctrine is that Christ saves His people from sin through faith; that Christ’s Spirit is received by faith to dwell in the heart. It is faith that works by love. Love is wrought and sustained by faith. By faith believers overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil; quench the fiery darts of the enemy; and keep the flesh and carnal desires subdued. By faith we fight the good fight, not by resolution. It is simply by faith that we receive the Spirit of Christ to work in us to will and to do God’s good pleasure. He sheds abroad His own love in our hearts, and thereby enkindles ours. Only the life and energy of the Spirit of Christ within us can save us from sin, and trust is the universal condition of its working within us.

How long shall this fact be mistaught? How deeply rooted in the heart of man is self-righteousness and self-dependence? So deeply that one of the hardest lessons for the human heart is to renounce self-dependence and trust wholly in Christ. When we open the door by implicit trust, He enters and takes up His dwelling with us and in us. By shedding abroad His love He quickens our whole souls into sympathy with Himself and purifies our hearts through faith. He sustains our will in the attitude of devotion. He quickens and regulates our affections, desire, appetites, and passions, and becomes our sanctification.

The Bible teaches that by trusting in Christ we receive an inward influence that stimulates and directs our activity; that by faith we receive His purifying influence into the very center of our being; that through and by His truth revealed directly to the soul He gives life to our whole inward being into the attitude of loving obedience; and this is the way, and the only practical way, to overcome sin.

Charles Finney