

Exegetical Brief: Ephesians 5:10 and 1 Peter 1:7—“Tested and approved”

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Students of New Testament Greek are accustomed to seeing δοκιμάζω and its cognates. The verb appears over 20 times in the New Testament. The Holy Spirit’s writers use its cognates (the nouns δοκιμή, δοκιμιον, and δοκιμασία; the adjective δόκιμος) almost as frequently. The root of the word calls to mind the refining of precious metals. Positioned in a crucible and exposed to scorching heat, gold or silver is put to the test and hopefully identified as pure.

On occasion δοκιμάζω is translated “test; put to the test; try; examine.” Notable New Testament passages where the word has this sense include 1 Th 5:21-22 (“Test, δοκιμάζετε, everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.”) as well as 1 Jn 4:1b (“Test, δοκιμάζετε, the spirits to see whether they are from God.”). In such instances the verb itself gives no hint as to whether the results of the trial are positive or negative. Instead it focuses on the fiery process that must take place.

While New Testament lexicons usually give this as the first meaning of δοκιμάζω, in context the expression “put to the test” often fails to capture the verb’s full meaning. Usually it is not the process itself but the outcome of the process that the writer has in mind. So the exegete will recognize a second meaning of the verb, such as “prove” or “approve.” Likewise he will allow for a second meaning of its noun and adjective counterparts (“proven worth”; “genuine”). This sense of the word is far more common, in fact, than the one usually listed first in the lexicons.

Twice over the next couple of months the preacher who follows the *Christian Worship* pericope may encounter δοκιμάζω or a cognate form. On each occasion the NIV translation leaves something to be desired. A closer look is in order.

On the Third Sunday in Lent (February 24, 2008) the Second Lesson is Eph 5:8-14. It is taken from the second half of the epistle, where St. Paul is repeatedly urging the saints to be who they are in Christ. “For you were once darkness,” he writes, “but now you are light in the Lord” (v 8, NIV). This is followed by a string of imperatives that plays itself out till to the end of the epistle. Those included in this Scripture lesson are somewhat broad: “Live (περιπατεπιτε) as children of light... Have nothing to do with (μὴ συγκοινωνεῖτε) the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose (ἐλέγχετε) them... Wake up (ἔγειρε), O sleeper, rise (ἀνάστα) from the dead...” What an outstanding preaching text for Lent! Basking in the light of God’s unconditional forgiveness, we will announce that the new man in every believer clearly sees the will of his Savior, fully appreciates these encouragements, and joyfully strives to carry them out.

Sandwiched between the first and second of these imperatives is verse 10: δοκιμάζοντες τί ἐστιν εὐάρεστον τῷ κυρίῳ. The NIV aptly treats the participle as an imperative that absorbs the force of the verbs that follow it. The NIV translation of δοκιμάζοντες nevertheless is a head scratcher. After all, we wonder, why would the apostle urge his readers to “find out what pleases the Lord” when he has assured them that they are already “light in the Lord”? For what reason should they “find out” that which pleases Jesus when Paul has been giving Jesus’ instructions about sanctified living for well over a chapter? Such a translation implies that the Lord’s will for upright Christian living is still shrouded in mystery—just the opposite of the prevailing theme of Ephesians.

Recall that the verb δοκιμάζω may focus either on the process of testing or, more commonly, on its outcome. Here the latter is the case. Picture gold that has already been tested in the crucible. All its impurities have been burned away. As the metal cools, it is stamped “24 carat,” the purest gold. In a similar way the enlightened new man sees the holy will of God announced plainly in Scripture. Enlightened by the Spirit he recognizes that “what pleases the Lord” is pristine, glorious, and beautiful. So with his Christian confession and godly living he marks the Lord’s holy will with his own personal stamp of approval.

Consider such a translation for Eph 5:10: “Put your stamp of approval on what pleases the Lord.” The preacher will then direct the saints to validate God’s good and gracious will for the benefit of others and of themselves. He can announce Paul’s “be who you are” encouragements confidently, trusting the Holy Spirit’s power in the daily doings of every enlightened believer.

On the Second Sunday of Easter (March 30, 2008) the *Christian Worship* pericope commences a series of lessons from First Peter. Here in 1 Pt 1:3-9 we read a marvelous doxology to the Father of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. “In his great mercy,” Peter exults, “he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade” (vv 3-4, NIV). You can anticipate a glorious future, Peter continues, throughout the fiery trials of the present. Indeed, in your secure-in-heaven inheritance “you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials” (v 6, NIV).

In 1 Pt 1:7 the apostle’s purpose clause gives the reason for the trials causing his readers so much grief. “These have come so that your faith -- of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire -- may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (NIV). Here Peter uses the noun δοκίμιον, a cognate form of δοκιμάζω. You will notice that the NIV has wisely chosen the more common shade of meaning for δοκίμιον, the words “proved genuine” focusing on the outcome of testing. Yet here the translator will also pay attention to the case of the nouns, since the NIV is misleading. The genitive “your faith” (ὁμῶν τῆς πίστεως) is not the subject of the ἵνα clause. Instead, by making τὸ δοκίμιον the subject of his purpose clause, Peter is pointing his readers to the “tested-and-approved” aspect of their faith.

Perhaps this is clarified by breaking down verse 7.

ἵνα (particle; introduces a clause that shows the purpose of the manifold trials that were causing grief)

τὸ δοκίμιον (nominative; subject of the purpose clause)

ὁμῶν (subjective genitive, carrying out the action of the verbal noun πίστεως)

τῆς πίστεως (objective genitive, receiving the action of the verbal noun δοκίμιον)

πολυτιμέτερον (comparative adjective, modifying δοκίμιον)

χρυσίου (genitive of comparison)

τοῦ ἀπολλυμένου (attributive participle; futuristic present; modifies χρυσίου)

διὰ πυρός (prepositional phrase, showing the instrument by which δοκιμαζομένου occurs)

δὲ (particle that contributes to the concessive shading of the participle that follows it)

δοκιμαζομένου (circumstantial participle; concessive)

εὐρεθῆ (subjunctive in the purpose clause; here equivalent to the verb εἰμί)

εἰς (telic preposition, indicating the goal or, as here, result)

ἔπαινον καὶ δόξαν καὶ τιμὴν (three objects of the preposition εἰς)

ἐν ἀποκαλύψει (prepositional phrase; temporal)

Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (objective genitive, receiving the action of the verbal noun ἀποκαλύψει)

My translation of verse 7: “in order that your faith’s genuine character—more valuable than gold that will perish even though it has been proven by fire—might result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

Faith is certainly a valuable gift, and on the Last Day we will praise the Lord Jesus for granting it by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace. Yet the NIV translation here falls short what St. Peter has actually written. The apostle is encouraging believers who suffer in the crucible of various tests: persecution by their government, hatred from their neighbors, rejection within their own households. He is assuring them that the genuine character of their faith—identified time and again as in the heat of the crucible they trust the Lord’s promises -- will result in “praise and glory and honor” to the Lord Jesus when he returns. That tried-and-true character of the Christian’s faith is precious. It is much more valuable than even fire-tested gold that will nevertheless be destroyed at the last.

This too is our Easter joy. Don’t be discouraged by your trials, we will tell God’s people, for you live by faith. Christ has risen! Recognize then that trials identify a genuineness of faith that relies on Jesus’ victory alone. Praise the Lord for the blessed fact that your faith has been “tested and approved.”