

Real Zeal

Last week, we saw in David's life an all-consuming zeal for the name of the Lord.

Today, three of our hymns spoke of zeal for God:

*May Thy rich grace impart
strength to my fainting heart, my zeal inspire;*

*2 Where is the blessedness I knew, when first I sought the Lord?, Where is the soul-refreshing view,
of Jesus and His Word?
What peaceful hours I once enjoyed! How sweet their mem'ry still! But they have left an aching
void the world can never fill.*

*Come, Holy Spirit, heav'nly Dove, with all Thy quickening powers; kindle a flame of sacred love in
these cold hearts of ours.*

These hymns speak of something every true Christian wants to have: zeal for God. Every believer wishes he or she had more ardour, more enthusiasm, more desire for the things of God. Every believer remembers the initial enthusiasm he or she had at the beginning of the Christian life and wishes it were still so.

And this is a desire which God has for us, too. God wants to have a zealous people. To the church at Laodicea, Christ said they were not hot, nor cold, they were lukewarm in their zeal for God. That's why Jesus counsels them in verse 19: "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent." (Rev 3:19)

Christ said to the church at Ephesus: "Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love." (Rev 2:4)

Paul says in Titus 2:14: "Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify [for] himself a peculiar[people for his own possession] people, [who are] zealous of good works." (Tit 2:14)

God is displeased with a slothful, apathetic people. The Israelites in Malachi, who began saying, Mal 1:13 You also say, 'Oh, what a weariness! And you sneer at it,' Says the LORD of hosts. "And you bring the stolen, the lame, and the sick; Thus you bring an offering! Should I accept this from your hand?" Says the LORD.

The Bible makes it clear that zeal is conditional to truly know and experience God. :
"And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart. (Jer 29:13) In fact, the great commandment of the Bible is in many ways, a call to zeal: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might". Jesus, when quoting this verse, added the words, 'with all your strength'.

We look at characters like David, we see the Scriptural commands, we sing these hymns, and we know that believers should be zealous for God.

But as you know, when we begin talking about zeal and enthusiasm, we enter a minefield of potential problems and false teachings. Plenty of people are telling us about their technique to get excited for Jesus, and what they mean looks very different from what the Bible means by zeal. And then we have the overreactions to the hysterical Christians, people who become cold and stoical

about their Christianity, accepting their grim and sombre religion as somehow faithful to the idea of being zealous for Christ. There is so much confusion of emotions and feelings both in the world and in the Christian church, we sometimes don't know what to feel, if we should feel, how much we feel? We have happy clappies on one side and the frozen chosen on the other. Sentimentalism on the one side and stoicism on the other.

How do we understand what real zeal for God is? What is it not? And what are the ways we grow real zeal for God?

To understand this, we'll start by understanding the unreal zeal: the phoney substitute. We then consider the real zeal Scripture calls for.

I. The Unreal Zeal

Not all zeal is zeal that pleases God.

Paul said the unbelieving Jews had "... a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge." (Rom 10:2) They were zealous for their own religion, but it lacked the righteousness of God.

Of himself, Paul said, "Concerning zeal, persecuting the church;" (Phi 3:6) Paul had zealously, enthusiastically been persecuting and killing Christians. Many false religions today exemplify zeal: even zeal to death, in defence of, and to spread their false ideas.

Even two of the apostles had misdirected zeal. James and John, the sons of Zebedee were called the sons of thunder. They had zeal, but sometimes it was misdirected. When some Samaritans did not receive Christ, they said, "Lord, should we call down fire upon them?" Jesus said, "You don't know what spirit you are of. I did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them."

It is possible to be enthusiastic or fired up for some cause outside the will of God, and that is not the zeal God wants for us. It is possible to push forward boldly and zealously in some course of action without prayer or forethought or counsel, and that is not the zeal God calls for. You can crusade for some cause, without really having full knowledge of the facts, or the issues, and become this great fighter for the faith, but really not be possessed of biblical zeal.

The Puritan Thomas Brooks said, "Zeal is like fire; in the chimney it is one of the best servants; but out of the chimney it is one of the worst masters."

Zeal is also not the rise and fall of our bodily feelings. C. S. Lewis calls this the law of undulation, which is a word related to the Latin word for wave. Undulation means there are peaks and troughs. Because we are creatures who live in time, and who live with bodies, we experience our own moods as a series of ups and downs. Lewis calls this "The repeated return to a level from which [we] repeatedly fall back, a series of troughs and peaks...this undulation [is] in every department of [a Christian's] life—his interest in his work, his affection for his friends, his physical appetites, all go up and down. As long as he lives on earth periods of emotional and bodily richness and liveliness will alternate with periods of numbness and poverty."

Now Lewis goes on to point out that there are two wrong responses to this natural undulation. One is to panic and become perpetually miserable that we are not always in a state of high excitement and ongoing joy, and feel there must be something wrong with us. Life becomes one long feeling of guilt for having lost that loving feeling of your first days of conversion. This is the Christian who is always looking for some revival shot-in-the-arm to instantly return him to ecstatic heights of joy, and living in morose guilt when he doesn't have that.

If you grew up in revivalist circles then this was always a concern. We heard every week about the

need to be “on fire for God” and “people being excited about the things of God” At the end of every sermon, there was an altar call, which was usually your opportunity to come forward, get right with God, so you could be revived and charged up for God for the next week. Unfortunately, often at least by the next Sunday, the spiritual air had leaked out of the tires of even those who went forward, and so they needed a second altar call. And as any cheerleader knows, there is nothing as hard as trying to get those whose spirits are sinking to act as if their spirits are rising.

This kind of artificial pumping up of emotions and propping up of artificial glee is actually exhausting, and usually inwardly discouraging to everyone. Often when we see this kind of manipulation, we shy away from it altogether.

But then the opposite danger is to become content with little to no enthusiasm for the things of God, to do our Christian duty with a minimum of relish, to save our enthusiasm for other things, and feel content. We can become content to be mostly bored by spiritual things, to give God the mere leftovers of our interest or joy or desire. We can drag our feet to church, and drag our lips to our daily devotions. Soon this low state becomes the new normal, and if it goes on, you even doubt if the greater zeal you once had wasn't all just in your head.

But both of those wrong responses are allowing your body's moods to control your whole understanding of zeal. In opposite ways, they are tying a spiritual quality, zeal, something which even God has, to the up and down state of your body.

Zeal is not misdirected passion. Zeal is not following the highs and lows of your body's moods.

II. The Zeal That Is Real

What is true zeal? The one clear command comes in Romans 12. Rom 12:11 says: “Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord;

“Fervent in spirit” translates a word which means “to be stirred up, to be boiling”. It means to have eagerness, to have enthusiasm.

Jonathan Edwards: That religion which God requires, and will accept, does not consist in weak, dull, and lifeless wishes, raising us but a little above a state of indifference. God, in his word, greatly insists upon it, that we be in good earnest, *fervent in spirit*, and our hearts vigorously engaged in religion...If we be not in good earnest in religion, and our wills and inclinations be not strongly exercised, we are nothing. The things of religion are so great, that there can be no suitableness in the exercises of our hearts, to their nature and importance, unless they be lively and powerful. In nothing is vigour in the actings of our inclinations so requisite, as in religion; and in nothing is lukewarmness so odious.

Gal 4:18 But it is good to be zealous in a good thing always, and not only when I am present with you.

We get closer to understanding what zeal is when we read that zeal is something God Himself has.

God is a zealous God. God is not apathetic, indifferent or cold. God is not listless, bored or disinterested. God is not halfhearted or lukewarm in what He does. We read in the Old Testament: “The zeal of the Lord of hosts shall perform this”. In Isaiah 59:17 God speaks of Himself: “For he put on righteousness as a breastplate, ... and was clad with zeal as a cloke.”

When God commended Phinehas for judging sin in the camp of Israel, he said,

11 "Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the children of Israel, because he was zealous with My zeal among them, so that I did not consume the children of Israel in My zeal. (Num. 25:11)

God is zealous. When God was amongst us as a man, what did He do when He was in the Temple? His zeal overthrew tables, and cast out money-changers. Then His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up." (Jn. 2:17)

It is not simply enthusiasm, because we have seen a kind of enthusiasm God condemns. It is not merely your bodily feelings or moods, since this is something which God, who is a spirit, has. If we take the meaning of the original word, and we combine it with the contexts in which we find it promoted, zeal means an intense desire and interest in God's glory. The great men and women of God were zealous, filled with zeal for God's name.

Think of Moses, so filled with righteous anger that he broke the tablets on which the Ten Commandments had been written. Or think of the zeal of Joshua for God's name – 'as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord'. Samuel, who was clothed with zeal for God, and wept when Saul fell, and hewed Agag in pieces. David, the only one zealous enough to face Goliath, also wrote, "Because zeal for Your house has eaten me up, And the reproaches of those who reproach You have fallen on me. (Ps. 69:9).

Elijah, who says, "I have been very jealous for the name of the LORD". Isaiah, Jeremiah – who said the word of God was like fire in his bones when he tried to keep silent. Or what about Nehemiah – who plucked the beards out of men who had violated God's Word and sometimes beat them! In the New Testament, we see the zeal of Peter, the zeal of Paul, and of Apollos.

These people were not simply feeling excited. They weren't following their feelings. In some cases, their zeal helped them *overcome* the way they were feeling: which might have been fearful, downhearted, discouraged, tired, weak. Zeal is an affection, not an emotion or a feeling.

An affection is a desire shaped by truth. An emotion or feeling is a mood or bodily state shaped by sleep, diet, hormones, health, and temperament.

Our emotions act upon us, but an affection is something through which we act.

The affection of zeal often is accompanied by enthusiasm and joy, but it can be there even when that isn't present.

What is zeal? It is strong desire for the glory of God, an ardent desire to please God, see God honoured, magnified. It's a desire that acts sometimes with, and sometimes in spite of our feelings. Often zeal is excited, but it can also be very controlled, very determined.

A.W. Tozer: "The truth is that though all godly persons are zealous, not all zealous people are godly. The zeal that accompanies sanctity is rarely boisterous and noisy. So great was the zeal of our Lord that it was said to have eaten Him up, yet Isaiah said of Him: "He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out."

So now we come to the practical question. What kills or cultivates holy zeal? If our zeal is burning low, how do we ignite it? We don't believe in the manipulative techniques of revivalism. We don't

believe in the shot-in-the-arm quick fixes of modern evangelicalism. So where does this real, strong desire for God come from?

III. Quenching or Kindling Real Zeal

The Greek word for zeal suggests a fire, and Paul in two places speaks of what we can do with the fiery work of grace in our hearts.

Do not quench the Spirit. (1 Thess. 5:19) When Paul tells us not to quench the Spirit, he is using the image of fire and heat. To quench a fire is to throw cold water on it. There are things we can do which quench the Spirit's work of zeal.

2 Timothy 1:6 And for this reason I remind you to kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

Those words *kindle afresh* are translated *keep ablaze* (CSB) and *fan into flame* (ESV). There are things we can do that kindle and fan into flame and stir up afresh the zeal.

What sort of things quench our zeal?

The Sin of Sloth and Apathy

Laziness is the very opposite of zeal. Laziness insists on a minimum application of effort to achieve often, the very basic minimum of returns. To be spiritually slothful is to throw water on the work of the Spirit in your life.

God has given us various means of knowing Him and seeing Him. God has given us the Word and prayer. He has given us the service of others in our families, in the church, and in the world. He has given us the task of becoming more like Him.

When we approach them in a slack, casual, indifferent, half-hearted way, they malfunction. When we are casual towards the Scriptures, toward Sanctification, and toward Service, they do not perform their designed ends: to reveal God. It is as if God has designed them to be activated only at a certain minimum temperature of the heart. There must be a minimum of diligence and desire for them to work.

19 The way of the lazy *man* is like a hedge of thorns, But the way of the upright *is* a highway. (Prov. 15:19)

If we are half-hearted, indifferent, uninterested, slothful, we cannot expect zeal to ignite in our hearts. In the Christian life, as in all of life, a simple law pertains: if you act a certain way, feelings will follow. Act with apathy and listlessness, and you are sure to keep feeling that way about spiritual matters. You are quenching the Spirit by acting towards those things He loves with coldness.

The Sin of Distraction and Dissipation

We are now awash in possible forms of online diversion and distraction. These are usually just forms of escape, forms of diversion from life. This can be okay, if it is limited, and if what you are watching or listening to is not morally harmful.

But if huge amounts of your time are spent on pure diversion, then zeal for God will not thrive. You

can't focus on God, because you're only half-here, always distracted, always looking forward to their next trip into the entertainment world, and in fact, often dreaming about it even when they are not there.

The results of this are not concentration of zeal, but a dissipation of desire. You come out of that not with your soul restored and refreshed, but feeling spiritually numb, a little emptier, like something in you actually drained away. You simply have to ask the question: is this thing something the Spirit would be pleased to use to grow my desire for God?

23 All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. (1 Cor. 10:23)

There are plenty of Christians who live their lives slothful toward spiritual things, and then immersing themselves in distraction and diversion, and wonder why the work of the Spirit seems quenched.

Conversely, if we wish to kindle our zeal, what should we do?

The Virtue of Definite Direction

I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 3:14)

Zeal comes from having a definite spiritual goal. Paul said exactly that.

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain *it*. (1 Cor. 9:24)

Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as *one who* beats the air. (1 Cor. 9:26)

Without a goal, we lose zeal. 12 Hope deferred makes the heart sick, But when the desire comes, it is a tree of life. (Prov. 13:12)

Many Christians have no spiritual goals: no goals regarding God's Word, regarding knowledge, regarding character change, regarding service in the church, regarding family worship or discipleship, regarding the spiritual development of their children, regarding future ministry.

Consequently, they have no zeal, because they are not trying for anything.

Set yourself spiritual goals. Decide what are the biblical goals for a Christian, and what may be God's particular goals for your life. Set out a goal, and you will soon have a plan and a method to get there, and the desire will follow.

The Virtue of Diligent Devotion

“Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.. “ (Ecc 9:10)

“And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men;”(Col 3:23)

That means avoiding the procrastination, lateness, excessive sleep, never finishing what we start, seeking shortcuts and making excuses not to work. Whatever area of life we are in, we must work heartily. The resulting diligence will not only give us that sense of accomplishment, but the energy generated in being diligent will provide momentum to be diligent in other areas.

God has given us various things by which He will reveal Himself to us. He has given us the Word and prayer. He has given us our families and our local churches whom we can serve. He has given us a place in this world to serve them by sharing the Gospel. But God will give grace proportional to our strain. “Whereunto I also labour, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily.”(Col 1:29)

This is what C. S. Lewis called “Good pretending”. He wrote; “When you are not feeling particularly friendly but know you ought to be, the best thing you can do, very often, is to put on a friendly manner and behave as if you were a nicer person than you actually are. And in a few minutes, as we have all noticed, you will be really feeling friendlier than you were. Very often the only way to get a quality in reality is to start behaving as if you already had it. (C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity Book 4, Chapter 7)

This is how it is with diligence and zeal. Approach the Word and prayer and church and service as if you were diligent and in earnest, and soon you will find the Spirit blessing you with accompanying feelings.

It’s very simple: to what God has ignited, add heat, and it will get hotter.

Without zeal, our Christian lives will fall short of God’s standard. We don’t need to fake our zeal. We don’t need what one man called “glandular religion”. We need a true, ardent desire for God’s name, stirred up by God’s Spirit. You can either quench His work, or help kindle it. You quench it with slothfulness and endless worldly distraction. You kindle it with definite direction and diligent devotion.