

## **‘Zealless’ or Zealous?**

Our world is seeing the slow but steady death of something – zeal. Even in the unsaved, it is becoming obvious that zeal, enthusiasm, passion is becoming a rare thing. To find someone who is truly passionate about something draws attention. People remark, “He’s really an enthusiast” or “He’s remarkably keen on that” or “He’s a fanatic”. It’s more the norm for people to be disinterested, dispassionate. The apathetic group of the world’s population far outweighs the zealous group. The half-hearted, cynical, pessimistic man is in the majority. In fact, the word ‘bored’ really only entered the English dictionary in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. But being bored, having little zeal and zest for life is a chronic problem today. Oh sure, people do get excited about things – the next sporting event, a new love interest in their lives, a new possession they can buy, more money – but soon, even these things lose their lustre and sparkle, and man waits for the next pick-me-up to try and revive his bored soul.

One clear commentary on how little zeal modern man has is the relatively new and lucrative existence of the motivational speaker. This is someone you hire to come and state the obvious in creative and enthusiastic ways, to get you to go and do what you could have done anyway. The fact that we need men to prance up and down a stage to try and get us excited about living speaks volumes.

One striking proof of how chronically bored our culture is, is the presence of extreme sports. Sports as they are, are beginning to bore people, so there is a need for breakneck speed, the possibility of serious injury as the latest extreme sport arrives – cycling off a cliff with a parachute with a hole in it.

Adventure sports hope to puncture through the deadness of soul in so many people. Reality TV shows are another example. Man has become bored with stories, so now it has to be real life exploits of people to be more interesting. So now, real people in their living rooms sit and watch people on TV, who are, in reality, sitting in their living rooms watching TV. Amazingly, so shallow have the souls of modern people become, that this is interesting and something people use to try and add interest and zeal to their lives. People pursue affairs out of marriage, illicit relationships and try deviant forms of sexuality to try and bring some life, some spark back into their souls. And as they do these things, the darkness grows darker, and the coldness grows colder.

But sadly, this lack of zeal and enthusiasm is in the lives of many Christians as well. Christians who have the truth and have the power to live with what matters, are too often also identified with the throng of listless, bored and depressed people of the world.

This was always a problem for God’s people. The Israelites grew cold on God, and did not teach their children the things of God. Christ said to the church at Ephesus:

*“Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.” (Rev 2:4)*

This church had cooled in its love for Christ. To the church at Laodicea, Christ said:

*“I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth.” (Rev 3:15-16)*

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)*

Is zeal really important for a Christian? Or is it something that those few really committed Christians can be, and everyone else can be somewhat disinterested? Zeal is supposed to be part of a Christian’s life. The Bible commands us to be zealous.

*Rom 12:11 says: “Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord; “Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. (ESV) (Rom 12:11)*

Paul says that those who have the gift of leadership in the church are to do it with zeal (Rom 12:8). In fact, the great commandment of the Bible is in many ways a call to zeal:

*“Love the Lord your God with all you heart, all your soul, and all your might”. Jesus, when quoting this verse, added the words, ‘with all your strength’. 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)*

In fact, the Bible makes it clear that zeal is conditional to truly know and experience God. :

*“But if from thence thou shalt seek the LORD thy God, thou shalt find him, if thou seek him with all thy heart and with all thy soul.” (Deu 4:29)*  
*“And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart. (Jer 29:13)*

So zeal is absolutely crucial in a Christian’s life. And looking into Scripture, it is not hard to see that 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’*. Think of the zeal of the different judges, who were clearly desirous to see great victories for God’s name. Samuel, who was clothed with zeal for God, and wept when Saul fell, and hewed Agag in pieces. David, whose Psalms are filled with passion for God. The prophets – Elijah, who says, *“I have been very jealous the name of the LORD’*. Isaiah and Jeremiah who said the word of God was like fire in his bones when he tried to keep silent. Some of the godly kings – Hezekiah, Josiah – kings who were enthusiastic for God’s name. 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. When people are close to God – they are zealous for Him. Here's the reason – God Himself is zealous. God is a zealous God. God is not apathetic, indifferent or cold. God is not listless, bored or disinterested. Do you know that everything God does, He does with all of His heart, soul and mind? God is not half-hearted 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 an helmet of salvation upon his head; and he put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, and was clad with zeal as a cloak.”*  
(Isa 59:17)

God wears zeal. And 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. He said:

*“Jesus saith unto them, My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work.”* (Joh 4:34)

God is passionate about His glory. He is zealous and enthusiastic and diligent about performing His will and accomplishing His purpose. If God is this way, then His children need to be the same way.

What is zeal? Does it mean to just be excited, or to be optimistic? Well, zeal certainly can't be less than enthusiastic and optimistic, but that doesn't really describe it. I think zeal is an **appropriately energetic response**. I say it is a response, because zeal is not something that begins with us. It must be something we are led to see the value of and respond to. I cannot just have zeal as an end in itself. I cannot just begin with zeal and then try to direct it and anything and everything. Zeal is a response.

I say appropriately, because not the always same amount of zeal is called for. The amount of zeal I show for my meals must be different than the zeal I have for my salvation. The zeal I have for Mrs Matilda's quilt collection will be different from the zeal I have for my wife. The zeal must match the nature of what you are zealous about. The better something is, the more beautiful, honourable and wonderful, the more zeal we ought to have. And on the other hand, zeal can be misdirected. Zeal is not an end in itself. 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, he 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.”*

We can have zeal for the wrong things. Zeal is an appropriate response but I have also defined it as an appropriately *energetic* response. Zeal is so often connected with fire, with heat, with burning, with boiling. These are metaphors of energy. Whenever energy is used, heat is expended. So zeal is expending energy - emotional energy, mental energy, and physical energy. And the greater the object, the more energy should be expended. So as you can imagine, the response to God’s glory should be the greatest expense of energy we can muster.

Now if zeal is simply an appropriate response, why aren’t Christians responding with greater zeal? The problem is not simply one thing. I want to suggest a few zeal killers.

### Zeal Killers:

**Senselessness:** Where there is no vision, no goal, no aim, people lose zeal - nothing to aim for, nothing to live for, leads to hopelessness and despair. People who have nothing to live for cannot be zealous about being aimless. If you have nowhere to direct your energy, eventually you stop requiring it altogether. Furthermore, when people aim for the wrong thing, and it is frustrated, they lose hope. They begin to despair. Many a Christian aims for the wrong thing, and now they are bitter, cynical, pessimistic people, with little zeal for anything.

**Sin:** Sin itself is the great zeal killer. Many sins like bitterness, unforgiveness, hatred, murmuring, discontentment, envy, sap the life out of zeal. It is interesting that people tend to think our desires are too strong. In actual fact, sin tends to sap desire. We sometimes call the results of sin – dissipation. If something dissipates – it fades away. That’s exactly what sin does – it disappoints, robs, and shrinks the heart. Sin causes blindness to God’s glory and a hardness of heart. It causes a shallow, selfish focus, which no one can honestly be zealous about. Sin also brings guilt. Guilt is the great zeal quencher. Someone under the load of guilt is seldom excited about life. Their accusing conscience spoils every attempt at joy. Guilt causes people to try and minimise the weight of their own sin. “It’s not that bad” or “Everyone else is doing it” or “I’m not as bad as so-and-so” When they do that, they are not only minimising the greatness of their sin – they are minimising the greatness of God, and eternity and reality. So guilt almost causes a soundproof barrier to grow over the heart to dull the sound of the accusing conscience, and life becomes grey, lukewarm and shallow. A guilty man is seldom a zealous man.

Sinful Frailty, one of the effects of the fall, is that we are weak. Our hearts have grown colder and smaller. We lose enthusiasm easily. We grow tired, bored, and disinterested. We are actually unable to respond with the kind of energy appropriate for seeing God. That is precisely why the psalmist said:

*“I will run the way of thy commandments, when thou shalt enlarge my heart.” (Psa 119:32)*

**Slothfulness:** Laziness is the very opposite of zeal. Laziness insists on a minimum application of effort to achieve often the very basic minimum of returns. Lazy people are seldom ambitious, and even if they are, they are quick to relinquish, or surrender their ambitions should the effort seem too much. Slothfulness in one area of life will usually bleed into other areas. There is something about laziness that anaesthetises a man to the joy of life. It is like adding cold water to a glass of hot water. If you add the cold water of laziness in one area of your life – you are sure to cool your passions for other areas of life, in the long term. Proverbs has much to say about the lazy man, but one thing is clear, laziness tends to dry up all passion after a while.

Another extreme is to burn the midnight oil – exhausting toil in the wrong place. Physical energies are exhausted, and a lack of zeal follows. Ironically though, the over-worker takes longer to lose zeal than the lazy man.

**Sidetrack:** I believe this is a real problem that the modern man faces. Modern man has more free time on his hands than any other culture before us. And with that free time, man instead of thinking about what is real and focusing our attention like a laser beam on God, escapes into fantasy worlds of TV, DVDs, videos, computer games, music and music videos, gossip magazines, romance novels and thrillers.

The modern Christian most often uses entertainment, not to refresh himself, but to distract himself. Entertainment, as the modern man will tell you ‘helps me take my mind off the pressures of life.’ That oft-repeated phrase is very revealing. By and large, musical or visual entertainment in pop culture is not used to enhance, grow or develop a person. It is used to help them *escape*. It is a form of fantasy, of vicariously living in another world as presented by the music, the TV, or the film. In other words, much modern culture encourages people to simply make their money in this world, so they can escape from it in entertainment.

The Bible never condones the practice of escaping life to live in a fantasy world. It never sanctions diverting your attention from real life, distracting yourself from reality simply to ‘unwind’. Entertainment of this kind does not restore your soul, renew your mind or revive your heart. It, in fact, makes you restless when living in the real world, anxious to return to the netherworld of make-believe. People who perpetually live like this never experience zeal for the things of God, because they are only half-here. They are always distracted, always looking forward to their next trip into entertainment world, and in fact, often dreaming about it even when they are not there. This is how Satan has made the world into an army of zombies, not quite awake anymore.

Whatever pains they experience in real life are soothed and daubed by delving into the dream-world of pop culture’s many entertainment offerings. They inevitably become shallow and cold within. They are out of touch with reality. Fantasy becomes the world they can create and participate in without the real-world situations of frustration, change and adaptation. Fantasy is about control. In a fantasy situation you remain the autonomous master of your fate. In real life you must submit to God, repent of sins, face suffering, seek to change, and endure the pain of a fallen world. It is not that we must not ever rest and relax. But a lawful use of entertainment relaxes, restores and refreshes you to more usefulness, to more zeal, not less. Using

entertainment as a distraction is using it like a pain-killer, like an anti-depressant. We never really face life.

**Slackness...** towards God's appointed means of seeing and knowing Him. God has given us various means of knowing Him and seeing Him, so that we can respond to Him energetically. The Holy Spirit will reveal God to us when we use these means. However, all of the means God gives us are to be approached with vigour, with diligence, with wholehearted effort. When we approach them in a slack, casual, indifferent, half-hearted way, they malfunction. 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 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 - anything less than that, and they remain frozen.

So, people lack zeal because there is often a senselessness – a lack of purpose. They lack zeal because of sin, with its deadening and guilt-producing effects. They lack zeal because of slothfulness, which cools down the entire life's zeal. They lack zeal because of allowing themselves to be continually sidetracked with entertainment. They lack zeal because of slackness towards the things of God. The solution is going to be to reverse these things. The causes of a lack of zeal are numerous, and if we want that fellowship with God; if we want that enjoyable passion for His glory, we will need to change and replace the zeal-killing influences in our lives.

### **Zeal Givers**

**Direction** – We must know our goal. Our goal is nothing less than to glorify God by loving Him. Our goal is not to please man, or to gain favour, or to be successful, or to be respected, or even to be a good parent, or a good wife or husband. Our goal is not even to be a godly Christian. All those things must come back to the final goal – to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind. Isn't it good how the greatest goal has a built in reminder to be zealous. So, we can't miss it if we start here – we will see every day, all day, my goal is to love God. In so doing, we offset the aimlessness, the pointlessness, and the resulting hopelessness.

**Diligence** – we must give diligence to all our duties in life. Slothfulness in one area will certainly bleed into others. People zealous about their work and their families, tend to have zeal for other things as well:

*“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.

**Develop**, don't divert. Use entertainment to relax your mind and body, not to run away from life. In other words, see entertainment as means to help you be more focused. Yes, there is a time to use stories and things like that to cheer our hearts, and unwind the mind. But when we prefer the fantasy world to that of the real world, that is when entertainment is distracting us, not developing us. When the things we use as entertainment move us in opposite directions from God, when they become a refuge from life itself – that is when we have a problem. Paul said:

*“Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.” (1Co 10:31)*

So we can do even our recreation to the Lord. Let your recreation be in harmony with your main aim – to love God. Let it restore your soul and mind, not be a whole other world you live in.

### **Devotion**

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 which we can serve. He has given us a place in this world to serve them by sharing the Gospel. But here is the apparent paradox. These things are both ways of expressing and gaining zeal. In other words – we must come to the Bible with zeal, in order to gain zeal. We saw this in Proverbs 2. If you seek wisdom like silver and hid treasures – then you will understand the fear of the Lord. We must come to prayer with zeal, in order to gain zeal. James 5:16 says:

*“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”*

You pray fervently, or zealously and you see results, which gives you more zeal. You love others – in your family, in your local church zealously, and God will work through you so as to cause more zeal:

*“And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins.” (1Pe 4:8)*

If we love the unsaved with zeal by sharing the Gospel with them and ministering to them, God will bless us with more zeal. If we approach our own sanctification, putting off the zeal-killing sin and its guilt with diligence, God will give us sanctifying grace, which will make us more zealous for holiness.

The best way I understand this is like starting a fire by rubbing two sticks together. A certain amount of friction has to occur before the spark comes. I believe God puts it in our heart to want to love Him. But then He expects us to come with energy, with friction. As we do that, He provides the spark.

It is as if, the Spirit does not reveal Christ to us in the Word, in prayer, in service or in sanctification, until there is a certain minimum temperature, as it were a certain amount of energy.

*“Wherefore I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up the gift of God, which is in thee by the putting on of my hands.” “For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands,” (ESV)(2Ti 1:6)*

That sounds exactly like we are saying that God gives the initial energy, but we must fan that into a flame, which He will give. When we respond to the spark He has placed in our hearts and diligently fan it, the Holy Spirit responds by causing that spark to grow into a clear revealing of God to our spiritual eyes. And once God is clear to us, we will have an energetic response, appropriate to whom He is – in other words – more zeal.

*“Whereunto I also labour, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily.”(Col 1:29)*

Zeal comes from God – but zeal must be fanned into a flame.

*“And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live. (Deu 30:6)*

*“Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked.”(Deu 10:16)*

There is no contradiction. Zeal is a gift of God, but zeal must be encouraged and sought. And here is where so many Christians short-circuit the whole process. They approach the Word with slackness or indifference. There is no illumination, so they feel less inclined to read the Word again. They skip church attendance, are indifferent toward loving other Christians, so the love for other Christians grows cold in their heart, and they then feel further justified in staying away. They pray with little passion, and therefore see little of God during and after their prayers, and so conclude it’s not worth praying. They put no zeal into witnessing and therefore remain disinterested in witnessing. When we do things like this, we are making a commentary to ourselves about what response we think is appropriate to God. We are responding to God with lukewarmness, slackness, laziness. And the results are not going to be a revival of zeal.

Others go to the Word with Expectant Zeal, they pray with expectant passion, they love other believer sin church with zeal, and come to as many services as possible with expectant zeal, they share the Gospel with zeal, and God rewards their faith with more God-given zeal. 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. Nothing is worse than contrived, phony zeal. Tozer said: “Some churches train their greeters and ushers to smile, showing as many teeth as possible. But I can sense that kind of display—and when I am greeted by a man who is smiling because he has been trained to smile, I know I am shaking the flipper of a trained seal.” We don’t need that. We need genuine zeal. A genuine appropriate energetic response to who God is.

It starts with direction. The aim is always to love God. Then there’s diligence – putting in a consistently hard-working attitude to all my responsibilities. Then there’s

development. Even in entertainment our goal is to restore ourselves so we can keep growing, not distract ourselves from life. And then, most importantly, there is devotion. We must approach the means God has given to reveal Himself to us with devotion. Approach the Word, prayer, the local church, our sanctification, evangelism and serving others with zeal, and behold as the spark is fanned into a flame. That will be because as we use zeal; the Holy Spirit will reveal God to us, and we will then respond with appropriate energy to the great and glorious God.