

Zeal

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10-8-06

Introduction.

- A. When we consider the denominational world around us, one of the things that most strikes us is the way that so many denominations rely on emotionalism. They are much more concerned with what they subjectively feel is right than they are with what the Bible says. Because of this failure to connect with the word, they pour their hearts out in what the Bible tells us is worship that is vain, and for this we rightly critique them.
- B. However, brethren, just because our relationship with God must be founded on understanding of the Scriptures rather than emotion does not mean that emotion has no place in our spiritual lives. Sadly, this is a mistake that we in the church often make. Sometimes, we become so concerned with doing things right that we regard any display of emotion in worship as vaguely unscriptural, and we assume that if we allow emotion to motivate us, we're playing into the devil's hands. If we follow this line of reasoning to its logical conclusion, we almost inevitably end up going through the motions of serving God without the passion that He demands.
- C. Because this is true, we must pay the same attention to the emotional state of our relationship with God as we do to our actions, and we must nurture those emotions which are pleasing to God. Now, it seems strange to speak of causing ourselves to feel a certain way, yet that is precisely what we see urged upon us by Scripture. There are many such emotions that must be a part of the the Christian's spiritual makeup, but let's begin this morning by looking at our emotional commitment to serving God. Let's begin by looking at zeal.

I. Its Meaning.

- A. Naturally, the first step of this examination must be learning what the meaning of zeal is. It's one of those words that we understand in a general way, but have a hard time pinning down. In dictionary-speak, zeal is "impassioned eagerness, especially in favor of a person or a cause; active enthusiastic interest amounting to fervor." So says *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, at least.
- B. Now, folks don't normally talk like that, but there are some important words in this we should zero in on:
 1. First, this definition tells us that zeal is *impassioned*. Zeal feels passionately about its object. This means that as Christians, we can't be indifferent to God and the church. We can't even treat our faith as a hobby. Instead, we have to be deeply emotionally involved in being a Christian.
 2. Second, zeal is filled with *eagerness*. We must be people who are excited about serving God, who willingly put our other interests aside to do His will, not because we have to, but because we want to.
 3. Lastly, zeal is *active*. There are lots of folks out there who talk a good spiritual game, but the truly zealous aren't like that. We need to be people who don't just think about what we might do, but go out and do it.

II. Its Sources.

- A. When we look at zeal in this light, we're probably going to see at least some areas in our lives where we don't have this Biblical attitude toward serving God. Now, obviously, if we want to go to heaven, we have to do something about it, and our actions must begin with understanding the sources of zeal.
- B. Scripturally speaking, zeal can come from a number of different places, and the first of these is **GODLY SORROW**. Consider Paul's description of the Corinthian church in 2 Corinthians 7:11. Here's what had happened: during Paul's last visit to Corinth, the church had treated him in an ungodly way, but once Paul wrote to them about it, they realized that they had done wrong and were grieved by it. This godly sorrow created zeal in them, zeal to get right again with Paul and with God. It makes sense that godly sorrow in our lives should also create zeal. Let me give you an example, albeit a non-spiritual one. Grade-wise, the second semester of my first year of law school was the worst semester I ever had in college. I'd slacked a little bit in my studying, and when I got my grades, boy, did I get clobbered! I was really upset about that, and so when my second year started, I hit the books much harder than I had before. My sorrow produced zeal.
- C. In our spiritual lives, our sorrow for sin should produce the same kind of zeal. Let me tell you: Christianity is a WHOLE lot more important than law school, and we need to take our failures seriously. When we let God down, we should find that unacceptable. However, as so often happens, we shouldn't let our sorrow paralyze us. Instead, we need to take our sin for a challenge and resolve that next time, we will not be defeated.
- D. In addition, our righteous zeal should also come from **KNOWLEDGE**. Let's look at Paul's critique of the Jews in Romans 10:2. Paul describes the Jews in this way because even though they wanted to serve God, they weren't serving Him as He had commanded. Today, this passage also describes many in the denominational world. They are on fire for the Lord, but they don't have the foggiest idea of what He really wants. Beyond this, though, the passage also highlights the importance of zeal that IS according to knowledge.
- E. This is the kind of zeal that God wants: zeal that comes from understanding His word. Brethren, when we read the Bible, it should motivate us powerfully to work for God. It presents God as a being worthy of our

- work and worship, who loves us and has done so much for us, and has given us a wonderful way of living that we can share with others. The Bible is so beautiful, and the better we know it, the more we want to follow it.
- F. Furthermore, zeal also comes from **IGNORANCE**. This sounds strange at first, but ignorance can be very inspirational—not necessarily our ignorance, but the ignorance of those around us. David discusses this in Psalm 119:138-139. Sadly, the world in which we live is a spiritually ignorant one. Fifty or a hundred years ago, most people might not have been right with God, but at least they knew something about the Bible. Today, the typical American doesn't know the Bible from a hole in the ground. Even those who claim to be religious have usually been immersed not in the word, but in the most horrifying false doctrine. For instance, my wife was chatting with a couple of women at Curves the other day about colds and whether it did any good to take cold medicine, and one of the other women replied, "Antihistamines, antibiotics, antidepressants, anti-everything—it's all Anti-CHRIST!" She went on to say that our illnesses are given to us by God for a reason, and we need to listen to His message rather than trying to get better on our own.
 - G. Friends, that's preposterous! There is NOTHING in the Bible that says anything remotely like that. It's false teaching that's so bad that it's not just spiritually deadly, it's physically deadly too! And you know what? There are literally millions of people out there who either believe stuff like that or don't know enough to believe anything at all. They're being lost because they don't know the Lord. If that realization doesn't move us to save souls, nothing will. When we see ignorance, it should set us on fire to preach the gospel.
 - H. The last source of zeal we're going to look at is **RELATIONSHIP**, particularly our relationship with others. Let's spend a moment with Paul's description of Epaphras in Colossians 4:12-13. Even though Epaphras has moved on to another location, he still remembers the brethren in Colossae, the faith they displayed, and the fellowship he had with them in serving Christ. As a result, he still feels connected to them and zealously works to help them in the only way that he still can—through prayer. His relationship with them led to zeal for them.
 - I. This too is something that we as Christians today need to develop. Our relationships, of course, are not with the Colossians of the first century, but the connections we form with our brethren today are still a crucial source of zeal. We should be moved by the friendship we have with them and the love we have for them to act for their good. On the other hand, if we have nothing to do with the people we go to church with, how can they possibly stir us up to serve God? Let's remember that and form relationships that stir up our zeal.

III. Its Results.

- A. Once zeal has been created, there are several results that it should have, ways that zeal should be displayed in our lives. One of the first of these is **REPENTANCE**. This is what Jesus commands the Laodiceans to do in Revelation 3:19. Once again, this makes sense. If we are entangled in some sin, why should we stop sinning if we don't care about God? That's why apathy and lack of zeal is so deadly. By contrast, when we are passionately committed to God and filled with desire to serve Him, it will inevitably lead us to hate sin.
- B. According to Scripture, it is also true that godly zeal for the welfare of others will provoke in us expressions of **LOVE** for others. This is what we see illustrated in the conduct of Onesiphorus in 2 Timothy 1:16-18. Here's what we see in this passage: Paul here is at the end of his life. He is imprisoned in Rome, and he knows that during this trial, he will be martyred for his faith in Christ. Now, helping Paul was not a safe thing to do. After all, the Romans gladly would have killed other Christians too. But this didn't deter Onesiphorus. Apparently, despite the risk it posed to his life, his zeal for God and for God's children was such that he traveled all the way from Ephesus precisely so that he could have the chance to minister to Paul in his imprisonment.
- C. Friends, zeal in our lives should produce similar results. Now, compared to Onesiphorus, we have it easy. The only obstacles we face to showing love for one another are the obstacles that we throw up ourselves: at bottom, our refusal to make time for God. Instead, we need to make the time to help one another and care for one another. If any of us ever feel like we're at the point where we're useless and nobody cares about us, we should just visit with a shut-in. Brethren, our shut-ins are so happy to see Lauren and me when we visit that they will talk to us until they're exhausted and then STILL not want us to leave. Of course, even the rest of us need our brethren too. It could be anything from a hand moving furniture to just a kind word, but all of us can help. There is always room for our zeal for our brethren to express itself in acts of love.
- D. Beyond this, our zeal should show itself in **GOOD WORKS** of all kinds. Paul makes this point in Titus 2:14. God remade us as Christians precisely so that we would be on fire to do good. Friends, God doesn't just want us to avoid sin. That's just the first step. Instead, He wants us to actively embrace righteousness. We need to be constantly looking for concrete ways to express kindness, gentleness, generosity, love, and faith. We need to live lives that are different from the world's lives, and we need to use that difference to bring others to Christ. Indeed, this continual labor in the service of God is a critical expression of Christian zeal.
- E. Finally, though, our zeal should reveal itself not just in doing these things, but in **EXCELLENCE** in doing these things. In its purest form, zeal leads to a life that is not just different, but dramatically different, a life lived by God's rules, not by the rules of men. Look, for instance, at the zeal of Jesus described in John 2:13-17. Jesus here is doing something that looked insane to the Pharisees, but was an expression of the zeal God wanted.

Conclusion. If you recognize that you have not been living a zealous life for God, return to Him now.