

## ON ZEAL

John Wesley — Sermon 92

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***“To be zealous is admirable, if it’s for a good purpose.”*** Galatians 4:18.

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Without zeal it is impossible to make progress in either religion or service to our neighbor. And yet nothing has done more disservice to religion, or more mischief in general than misunderstanding zeal. In all parts of the world, pride, covetousness, ambition, revenge have slain their thousands; but zeal its ten thousands. An eminent German writer has taken immense pains to search the records in order to gain knowledge of the blood shed since the Reformation, and computes that, by private persecution and religious wars, in the course of forty years, beginning in 1590, more than forty million people have been destroyed! [Note: How do you measure the people destroyed in the last 40 years by individual hate crimes, induced and continued wars, persistent occupation, genocide, and revolution?]

2. It is possible to distinguish right zeal, but it is difficult; such is the deceit of the human heart; so skillfully do passions justify themselves.

3. Sixty years ago there seemed to be no religious zeal left in the nation. People were cool and undisturbed about *that trifle, religion*. But since then it is easy to observe, there has been a very considerable change. Many thousands in every part of the nation, have felt a real desire to save their souls. And I am persuaded there is at this day more religious zeal than in the past century.

4. But has this zeal been of the right or the wrong kind? Probably both the one and the other. Let us see if we can separate these, that we may avoid the wrong, and affirm the right. In order to this, first ask,

### **I. What is the nature of true Christian zeal?**

1. “Zeal” first meant “Heat”, like boiling water. When applied to the mind, it means any warm emotion or affection. Sometimes it is taken for

envy. Acts 5:17 reads, “The High Priest, and all that were with him, were filled with jealousy,” — ἐπληοθησαν ζήλου although it might as well be rendered, *were filled with zeal*. Sometimes it is translated as anger, indignation, or vehement desire. Religious zeal is when a religious passion is engaged for anything understood as good or against anything we conceive to be evil.

2. But not all religious zeal is worthy of that name. It is not properly religious if it is not joined with charity or love. True zeal is not just mostly charitable, but wholly so if we take charity, in St. Paul’s sense, for love; the love of God and our Neighbor. Love is the nature, the inmost essence, of zeal.

### **II. What are the properties of zeal?**

1. One of the chief properties of love is humility. They rise and fall together.

2. Love is meekness: Consequently it is one of the properties of zeal. Before this sacred flame all turbulent passions melt away, and leave the soul unruffled and serene.

3. Unwearied patience arms the soul with agree with Divine Providence. It enables us, in whatever situation, to be content and in everything to give thanks.

4. A Fourth property of Christian zeal, deserves to be particularly considered. This we learn from the very words of the Apostle; “It is good to be zealously affected always” (not to have transient touches of zeal, but a steady, rooted disposition) “in a good thing:” In that which is good; for the proper object of zeal is, good in general.

5. But what is good in the sight of God? Positive divinity, many have some knowledge of. But few know anything of comparative divinity.

In a Christian believer *love* sits upon the throne erected in the inmost soul; namely, love of God and Neighbor, which fills the whole heart. In a circle near the throne are all *holy tempers*, ways of living together — long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, fidelity, temperance.

In an adjoining circle are all the *works of mercy* to the souls and bodies of Neighbors. By these we exercise all holy tempers; by these we continually improve them, so that all these are real means of grace.

Next to these are what is usually termed *works of piety*; — reading and hearing the word, public, family, private prayer, receiving the Lord's Supper, fasting or abstinence.

That his followers may more effectively provoke one another to love, holy tempers, and good works, our blessed Lord has united them together in one body, the *Church*, dispersed all over the earth. Every particular congregation is a little emblem of the Church universal

6. This is the religion our Lord established ever since the day of Pentecost. This is the entire, connected system of Christianity: And thus the several parts of it rise one above another, from that lowest point, the assembling ourselves together, to the highest, — love enthroned in the heart. Here we learn that zeal is always exercised *εν καλω*, *in that which is good*, so it is always *related* to that good.

7. For example. Every Christian is to be zealous for the Church universal, bearing a strong affection to it, and earnestly desiring its prosperity and increase — praying for it continually. This is especially the case for the congregation or society where they are a member.

8. But a Christian is to be even more zealous for the ordinances of Christ than for the Church itself; for prayer in public and private; for the Lord's Supper; for reading, hearing, and meditating on his scripture; and for the much neglected duty of fasting. These are to be affirmed by example, advice, conversation, persuasion, and exhortation as often as occasion presents.

9. But even more than works of piety a Christian is zealous for works of mercy; seeing "God will have mercy and not sacrifice". When in conflict of time and energy works of mercy are to be preferred. Even reading, hearing, prayer, are to be omitted, or to be postponed, "at love's almighty call", when we are called to relieve a distress of our Neighbor's body or soul.

10. Beyond good works, Christians are still more zealous for holy tempers a way of living God, of "perfection". We are to plant and nourish lowliness of mind, meekness, gentleness, long-suffering, contentedness, agreement with the will of God. We are to weed out envy, anger, and the rest. This is how we are truly alive to God in our own souls and engagement with the world. For evidences and fruits of living faith we cannot be too zealous. We are to "talk of them as we sit in our house," and "when we walk by the way," and "when we lie down," and "when we rise up." We are to make them a continual source of prayer; as being far more excellent than any outward works whatever: Seeing works will fail when the body drops off, but these methods of living accompany us into eternity.

11. Note well, our choicest zeal should be reserved for love itself, — the end of the commandment, the fulfilling of the law. The Church, the ordinances, outward works of every kind, indeed, all holy living, are inferior to this, and rise in value only as they approach nearer and nearer to it. Here then is the great object of Christian zeal. Let every true believer in Christ apply, with all fervency of spirit, a heart more and more enlarged in love to God and to all people.

### III. Some practical observations.

1. Christian zeal is the flame of love. Every kind and degree of *hatred*, *bitterness*, *prejudice*, *jealousy*, *evil-surmising*, and, above all, *persecution*, are totally inconsistent with it. Do not let these unholy tempers disguise themselves as *love*. Reveal their nature and shape that they not deceive the unwary.

2. Lowliness is a property of zeal. Pride is inconsistent with it. Pride cannot reign, nor retain power, where fervent love is found.

3. Meekness is indispensable to zeal. Anger pretending to be zeal is a deluded lie. Zeal and anger pass for equivalent terms in most places and few can tell there is any difference between them. It is common to hear, "See how zealous or enthusiastic they are!" No. They are passionate without light or insight!

Consider a little further. Imagine a religious person vehemently angry at his neighbor. Perhaps calling them a Fool, or worse. There is much such false zeal as this. When someone brings a railing accusation against another and if you mildly admonish this behavior, they respond, "It is my zeal! I am doing this out of love for them", say "No: this anger is your sin, and, unless repented, it will sink you lower than the grave."

4. Patience, contentedness, and agreement, are properties of zeal. Murmuring, fretfulness, discontent, and impatience are wholly inconsistent with zeal. And yet how we ignore this! How often do we see people fretting at those they see as ungodly, or saying they are *out of patience* with one thing or another, and naming all this as their zeal! Spare no pains to undeceive them! If they are open, show them what zeal is by your own patience with them. Witness that all murmuring, or fretting at sin, is itself a kind of sin, and is not connected with the true zeal of the gospel.

5. The object of zeal is "good". Zeal cannot have enthusiasm for any *evil thing* or remain passive in the face of evil being done. Consider *idolatry*, even worshipping of angels, saints, images, the cross. Anyone attached to a religious tennet who would even "give his body to be burned," rather than change could be termed a bigot or superstitious, but not zealous.

Consider further that fighting over *indifferent details* is not Christian zeal. But how common is this mistake! History of all ages shows this. Who was smarter than Bishop Ridley and Bishop Hooper? And how they argued about *wearing vestments*! This argument was

generational and lasted almost a hundred years! They might as well have disputed about a straw or a barley-corn! This is not zeal, wisdom, or holiness.

6. Most particularly an enthusiasm for *opinions* is not Christian zeal. But how few are sensible of this! The mischief caused by this false zeal has been much and great. How many thousand lives have been cast away by those who were zealous for one religious opinion or another! How many of God's children have been cut off by zealots stubbornly refusing to consider their opinion may be too small? To a clear eye, this making of temporary opinion into eternal doctrine is not zeal but active prejudice. What kind of Christian zeal would lead us to cut one another's throat? This would be hell on earth, not God's will done on earth as it is in heaven.

7. Finally. Zeal is proportional to the degree of goodness, which is its object that rises higher and higher. Consider this:

Those who love God will be zealous for the *Church*; both for the universal Church and for that part of it where they are located. This is God's way to see it is good for people to be connected. The whole body of God's people are to be "knit together, and strengthened, by that which every part brings to the whole."

At the same time they become more zealous for the *ordinances* of God; for public and private prayer, for hearing and reading the word of God, and for fastings, and the Lord's Supper.

Even further, they are even more zealous for *works of mercy*, than even for works of piety.

Amazingly, they continue to be more zealous still for all *holy temperaments*, lowliness, meekness, resignation.

Finally zeal will lead to the sum and the perfection of religion, the *love* of God and Neighbor.

8. It remains for us to make a close and honest application of these things to our own souls. We all know the general truth, that "it is good to be always zealous in a good thing." Let us now, every one of us, apply it to their own soul in particular.

9. Those without a vision of the possibility of becoming whole as God is whole cannot thus increase in zeal and grace. Drunkenness, Sabbath breaking, or profane swearing have nothing to do with zeal. That which breaks one's integrity and community makes it folly and impertinence to talk of zeal for God, much less God and Neighbor. But if you have settled it in your heart to give thanks to God in all things then be not lukewarm; be zealous for God.

You may begin at the lowest step. Be zealous for *the Church*; more especially for that particular branch thereof wherein your lot is cast. Study the welfare of this, and carefully observe all the rules of it, for conscience' sake.

But, in the mean time, take heed that you do not neglect any of the *ordinances* of God through which the Church itself was constituted. It would be highly absurd to talk of zeal for the Church, if you were not more zealous for its ways.

But be more zealous for *works of mercy*, than even for works of piety. Follow the example of your God, and prefer mercy even before sacrifice. Use all diligence in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting them that are sick and in prison. Above all use every means in your power to save souls from death.

As you have time, "do good unto all," though "especially to them that are of the household of faith," your zeal for the Church is pleasing to God. Without being "careful to maintain good works," you are not of the Church even if you are in church. The compassion you show will be returned to you. The compassion you withhold will be kept from you.

10. It is not healthy to split apart what God has joined. Do not separate works of piety from works of mercy. Be uniformly zealous of both. In this you walk acceptably with God. Continually bear in mind, that God "searches minds and hearts", that "God is a Spirit, and they that worship God must worship in spirit and in truth." Therefore, no outward work is acceptable to God, unless it springs from *holy tempers*, without which no one may assist in bringing the presence of Christ and God to earth.

11. Of all holy tempers, and above all others, be most zealous for *love*. Count all things loss in

comparison of this — the love of God and all Creation. It is most sure, that if you give all your goods to feed the poor and your body to be burned, and have not humble, gentle, patient love, it will profit you nothing. Let this be deeply engraved upon your heart: "All is nothing without love!"

12. Take the whole of religion together, just as God reveals it; and be uniformly zealous for every part of it, according to its degree of excellence, grounding all our zeal on the one foundation, — Jesus Christ: beloved, crucified, and raised from death. Hold fast this one principle, — The life I now live, I live by faith in the Child of God who claims me as beloved.

Proportion your zeal to the value of its object. First, be calmly zealous for the *Church*; "the whole of Christ's Church here on earth" and that branch where you are more immediately connected. Second, be more zealous for all those "*ordinances* which our God and Christ have offered to you and continue with them to the end of the world. Third, be more zealous for those *works of mercy*, those "offerings with which God is well pleased," every act of hospitality and inclusion by which Jesus recognizes his sisters and brothers. Fourth, be more zealous still for fruits of the Spirit, the *holy temperaments* of joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control for they have no limit and there is no law against them. And, Fifth, be most zealous of all for love, the queen of all graces, the highest perfection in earth or heaven, the very image of the invisible God, as in you below, so in angels above. For as God is love; and you live in love, live in God, and God in you.