

The Appeal of Zeal

Upon entering the temple, He came to a boil, and it may have freaked out His disciples. At least it stuck in their memory. Looking around, He saw the vendors of 'sanctified goods' and proceeded to whip them out. Such behavior in this holy place was not at all the norm. In fact, the 'head hogs at the trough' so to speak were certainly going to come down on this with a heavy hand. Jesus was behaving as an 'extremist'; John writes, "And his disciples remembered that it was written, *The zeal of Your house has eaten me up.*" (John 2:17)

In contrast, listen to the message that is being given to us today – "extremists are to blame for the bloodshed and terror around the world." Islamic extremists are murdering Jews and Christians by the 1000s. Christian extremists are supposedly stirring up hatred against Muslims. The president and his cabinet members are chastising the 'religious right' and appealing to the 'moderate Islamic' community. The whole force of governmental, media and even religious voices are cautioning everyone to avoid the zeal, to embrace the mainstream, to be sane and restrained if you would.

Now, while the logic of this message appeals to our common sense, it also poses the greatest danger the church has seen in centuries. By lumping the 'extreme' elements of all endeavors into one pot, Satan seeks to neutralize the message of the only one that really matters – the church's. Jesus

himself said, "I came not to bring peace but a sword." (Mat 10:34)

Now lest you misunderstand, He was NOT advocating what Islam has done historically – i.e. converting by the sword. He was not saying that we are to slay the infidels – on the contrary, we are to love the infidels. However, He was making clear that the message of the gospel is radical, and those who will truly live it out are likewise radical – they are zealous for God. But, much of the church today is sadly 'room temperature'.

Ministries depend on budgets; callings are just jobs; sermons are designed to entertain. There's no room for zeal – from the pulpit, it scares the flock; from the flock, it scares the pulpit. And so we've nurtured environments that won't offend in the course of either worship or witness. Consequently, we're not changing the world around us to the extent we could – more and more, it's changing us.

You may say, "Speak for yourself, John." Trust me, I do! But to do justice to the issue, let me explain what zeal is, why the Lord desires it and its fruit.

In the Old Testament, zeal is literally the attitude and action spurred by jealousy. This is fascinating because it implies by definition an intimate relationship. A man or woman can be jealous over their spouse, and it results in perhaps the most intense responses we are capable of as people.

The New Testament word for zeal means to be brought to a boil, to be very hot, and of course, this compliments the OT concept. God desires us to have zeal for Him

because frankly it indicates a powerful, passionate relationship with Him. The Laodicean church of Revelation chapter three which to many typifies the church of the last days is rebuked for being neither hot nor cold. That is, there was no zeal or enmity, only a toned down, affluent body of people who had learned to fit in.

God is zealous (see Isaiah 9:7, 37:32; Ez 5:13). Jesus is zealous (see John 2:17). The early church was zealous (see 2 Cor 7:11, 9:2). And Christ tells the Laodiceans to "be zealous therefore, and repent" (see Rev 3:19). So, what intense response are we to have to our God? Does He want us to nuke Mecca or to wear 'angry Christian' T-shirts?? NO!

Paul wrote, "But [it is] good to be **zealously** affected always in [a] good [thing]..." (Gal 4:18) and that Christ "gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, **zealous of good works.**" (Tit 2:14) He also spoke of the Jews that "...they have a **zeal of God, but not according to knowledge.**" (Rom 10:2) and of himself that "...concerning **zeal**, [before his conversion he was] *persecuting the church...*" (Phil 3:6) So clearly, zeal can be right or wrong in its motive and outcome.

The zeal God wants is rooted in a passionate love for Him and in the knowledge of the gospel of Christ. Apart from this, zeal is misdirected and tragic. But without zeal, Christianity is dead, dead at room temperature. God asks us, "How zealously do you love Me and your family in Christ? How zealous are

you to do good even when good is reviled and you are persecuted for it? How zealously forgiving are you knowing that you are forgiven much more? How zealous are you to give what you cannot keep to gain what you cannot lose? How zealously trusting are you of God in the midst of hot times?"

You see, God makes His "ministers a flame of fire" (Psa 104:4). They are red hot, zealous of their relationship with Him. Christ was as zealous on the cross when He cried out, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do" as He was when He drove the merchants out of the temple. He was zealous when He said, "come unto Me all you who are weary and heavy laden," as well as when He said, "whosoever among you who forsakes not all that he has cannot be my disciple."

The zeal God looks for in our lives is not wide-eyed, out of control fanaticism fueled by unrighteous indignation. His zeal is the 'real deal' (pardon the play on words). And it is blatantly obvious to the world around. To the rebellious, it's frightening; to the child of God (both lost or found) it's awesomely appealing. It's not 'worked up' by some 'holy cheerleader'; it's manifested by a heart that's entirely wrapped up in God.

I'm reminded of a man who knocked on my front door one morning. Upon answering it, we found him meekly poised, asking to come in and to speak with us. At first, I didn't recognize him, but he quickly explained that he

resided just a few doors down the street.

“Oh, of course. Come in.” I replied.

“You know, I should have been here sooner, but... well, let me explain.”

His demeanor made it clear that whatever he had to say was terribly important. As a consequence, we listened somewhat apprehensive.

“You see, about nine months ago, we moved in down the street. I’d gotten a great job with the [sporting goods company] and my wife and two daughters were excited about being here.”

“But after only a few months, we found out that [his wife] was terminally ill with cancer. In only a couple of months, she died.”

“As you can imagine, I was devastated, but even more so were my daughters. The older one became so bitter and rebellious that she got involved with a gang and started using drugs and... well...”

“Anyway, the younger one just recoiled. She isolated herself and became the brunt of every cruel joke at school. She seemed to hate herself more and more and ...”

“I retreated to my work. It became my hiding place from grief. I had no faith to speak of but only a broken... no, a shattered heart that I felt I had to protect.”

“Well, I didn’t see it coming. One day, I came home and found my older daughter with a man much older than her. When I surprised them at my entry, she just erupted at me and they left the house in haste. Later she called and said that she was going to marry this guy whether I liked it or not and ... well, goodbye.”

“I freaked. She was so young and was making a huge mistake. I knew she had been distraught, but I never expected this.”

“A few days later, she went to the police and claimed that I had sexually abused her. Of course, this was completely unfounded and I later found out that her new acquaintance had put her up to it.”

“Anyway, the authorities believed her and took away my other little girl to ‘protect her’. Shortly afterward, the [local newspaper] printed the story such that I looked very guilty.”

“I remember that!” I said. “That was you?”

“Yes. But it didn’t stop there. In a couple of days, I was let go from my job because the company didn’t want the bad publicity. Then, after I spent all I had in a legal dispute over the girls, I fell behind on the mortgage and the bank gave notice of foreclosure.”

“Wow. Just snow-balled, huh?”

“Yeah. But then, this guy who had taken my older daughter came back to the house while I was out. He must have had her key. Well, I came in and found him literally destroying the place with a pick axe. He’d chopped up the furniture, the walls, the TV, even the last pictures I had of [his wife and kids]. I honestly couldn’t believe my eyes.”

“He threatened me with the ax and laughed hideously. He mocked that my daughter was his now and that if I knew what was good for her, I’d vacate the house immediately. I later found out he wanted to use it as a place to make and sell drugs. Then he left, breaking several more windows on the way.”

My mouth was agape listening to this incredible tale.

“So...I’d lost it all. My dear wife, my daughters, my job, my house, even the last mementos of happier times. I was broke and really broken. I had nowhere to turn, no friends, no family. So I pawned some stuff and bought a pistol.”

“I drove out of town headed north and pulled over on the side of the road to just end it. I took the gun and pointed it at my head. It was shaking so hard...”

“But then, the most miraculous thing happened. In the deepest part of this pit, this dark, dark hole I was in,...for some reason, I saw this picture,... this picture that was so vivid. I couldn’t shake it. And that’s why I’m here.”

“All I could see was the joyful countenance of your little girl. (She was 12 then.) You see, she and [his younger daughter] played together a lot and she was always sharing with her about Jesus. I mean it was natural, so natural. And she was obviously so in love with Christ. She just wanted to help my little one and she really did.”

“But I’d rejected it. At least, I thought so. I was too strong and ‘sane’ for that nonsense – or so I thought. But there in my car, with this gun to my head, I realized I was wrong. Her shining face seemed to say, ‘Come home. God loves you and He will help.’”

“So I put the gun down and drove back into town. I saw [the church on the north side of town] and pulled in. To my relief, the pastor was there and I sat down and talked with him for a long time.”

“There and then, I gave my heart to Jesus Christ and was born again. And I just can’t tell you how that changed me!”

“And the next day, the next day, the authorities contacted me and said that [his older daughter] confessed that her accusation was a lie and that they were returning her as well as my younger girl into my care. Shortly afterward, the paper printed a great article. Then, I even got my job back with a raise. My house is still mine and it’s fixed back up.”

“And we’re totally in love with Jesus! He’s given us new hope and a real faith, more real than anything I see with my eyes! Your little girl’s faith...how thankful I am for that now.”

Yes, zealous Christians are the only ones who make a difference in this world. They are the real salt and light Jesus spoke of. They bear the fruit of the Spirit in abundance. May we all forsake the rags of timidity, the lies of worldly conformity and a spiritually tepid lifestyle.

While the world is vilifying ‘religious extremism’ let us not confuse this with the passionate zeal we need to have for our God. We must be extreme! -- extreme in love, extreme in forgiveness, extreme in sharing and sacrifice, extreme in faith and trust, extreme in the pursuit of our Father’s desire!

It’s this kind of extreme Christianity that’s alive – it’s not just room temperature. It’s truly appealing to God for He is Himself a consuming fire! (Heb 12:29)