

On Zeal

by John Wesley

True Christian zeal is the flame of love, which is fervent love for God and man, and it is characterized by humility, meekness, and unwearied patience.

Scripture: Matthew 5:16, Romans 12:9-10, 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, Galatians 4:18, Ephesians 4:2-3, Colossians 3:14, 1 Thessalonians 5:15, James 3:17, 1 Peter 4:8, 1 John 4:8

Topics: "Love in Action", "Christian Zeal"

Description

John Wesley emphasizes the critical importance of true Christian zeal, distinguishing it from the destructive zeal that has historically caused harm in the name of religion. He argues that genuine zeal is rooted in love and humility, and it should be directed towards good works, particularly those that benefit others. Wesley warns against the counterfeit forms of zeal that lead to anger, pride, and division, urging believers to focus on love as the highest expression of their faith. He encourages a balanced approach to zeal, prioritizing works of mercy and holy tempers over mere religious observance. Ultimately, Wesley calls for a fervent love for God and neighbor as the essence of true Christian zeal.

Transcript

"It is good to be always zealously affected in a good thing." Gal. 4:18.

1. There are few subjects in the whole compass of religion, that are of greater importance than this. For without zeal it is impossible, either to make any considerable progress in religion ourselves, or to do any considerable service to our neighbour, whether in temporal or spiritual things. And yet nothing has done more disservice to religion, or more mischief to mankind, than a sort of zeal which has for several ages prevailed, both in Pagan, Mahometan, and Christian nations. Insomuch that it may truly be said, pride, covetousness, ambition, revenge, have in all parts of the world slain their thousands; but zeal its ten thousands. Terrible instances of this have occurred in ancient times, in the most civilized heathen nations. To this chiefly were owing the inhuman persecutions of the primitive Christians; and, in later ages, the no less inhuman persecutions of the Protestants by the Church of Rome. It was zeal that kindled fires in our nation during the reign of bloody Queen Mary. It was zeal that soon after made so many provinces of France a field of blood. It was zeal that murdered so many thousand unresisting Protestants, in the never-to-be-forgotten massacre of Paris. It was zeal that occasioned the still more horrid massacre in Ireland -- the like whereof, both with regard to the number of the murdered, and the shocking circumstances wherewith many of those murders were perpetrated, I verily believe never occurred before

since the world began. As to the other parts of Europe, an eminent German writer has taken immense pains to search both the records in various places and the most authentic histories, in order to gain some competent knowledge of the blood which has been shed since the Reformation, and computes that, partly by private persecution, partly by religious wars, in the course of forty years, reckoning from the year 1520, above forty millions of persons have been destroyed!

2. But is it not possible to distinguish right zeal from wrong? Undoubtedly it is possible. But it is difficult; such is the deceitfulness of the human heart; so skilfully do the passions justify themselves. And there are exceeding few treatises on the subject; at least, in the English language. To this day I have seen or heard of only one sermon; and that was wrote above a hundred years ago, by Dr. Sprat, then Bishop of Rochester; so that it is now exceeding scarce.

3. I would gladly cast in my mite, by God's assistance toward the clearing up this important question, in order to enable well-meaning men, who are desirous of pleasing God, to distinguish true Christian zeal from its various counterfeits. And this is more necessary at this time than it has been for many years. Sixty years ago there seemed to be scarce any such thing as religious zeal left in the nation. People in general were wonderfully cool and undisturbed about that trifle, religion. But since then, it is easy to observe, there has been a very considerable alteration. Many thousands, almost 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 in England, than there has been for a century past.

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 cannot separate these, that we may avoid the latter, and cleave to the former. In order to this. I would first inquire,

I. What is the nature of true Christian zeal?

II. What are the properties of it? And,

III. Draw some practical inferences.

I. And, First, What is the nature of zeal in general, and of true Christian zeal in particular?

1. The original word, in its primary signification, means heat; such as the heat of boiling water. When it is figuratively applied to the mind, it means any warm emotion or affection. Sometimes it is taken for envy. So we render it, Acts 5:17, where we read, "The High Priest, and all that were with him, were filled with envy," --eplEsthEsan zElou_, although it might as well be rendered, were filled with zeal. Sometimes, it is taken for anger and indignation; sometimes, for vehement desire. And when any of our passions are strongly moved on a religious account, whether for any thing good, or against any thing which we conceive to be evil, this we term religious zeal.

2. But it is not all that is called religious zeal which is worthy of that name. It is not properly religious or Christian zeal, if it be not joined with charity. A fine writer (Bishop Sprat) carries the matter farther still. "It has been affirmed," says that great man, "no zeal is right, which is not charitable, but is mostly so. Charity, or love, is not only one ingredient, but the chief ingredient in its composition." May we not go further still? May we not say, that true zeal is not mostly charitable, but wholly so? that is, if we take charity, in St. Paul's sense, for love; the love of God and our neighbour. For it is a certain truth, (although little understood in the world,) that Christian zeal is all love. It is nothing else. The love of God and man fills up

its whole nature.

3. Yet it is not every degree of that love to which this appellation is given. There may be some love, a small degree of it, where there is no zeal. But it is, properly, love in a higher degree. It is fervent love. True Christian zeal is no other than the flame of love. This is the nature, the inmost essence, of it.

II. 1. From hence it follows, that the properties of love are the properties of zeal also. Now, one of the chief properties of love is humility: "Love is not puffed up." Accordingly, this is a property of true zeal: humility is inseparable from it. As is the degree of zeal, such is the degree of humility: they must rise and fall together. The same love which fills a man with zeal for God, makes him little, and poor, and vile in his own eyes.

2. Another of the properties of love is meekness: consequently, it is one of the properties of zeal. It teaches us to be meek, as well as lowly; to be equally superior to anger or pride. Like as the wax melteth at the fire, so before this sacred flame all turbulent passions melt away, and leave the soul unruffled and serene.

3. Yet another property of love, and consequently of zeal, is unwearied patience: for "love endureth all things." It arms the soul with entire resignation to all the disposals of divine Providence, and teaches us to say, in every occurrence, "It is the Lord; let him do what seemeth him good." It enables us, in whatever state, therewith to be content; to repine at nothing, to murmur at nothing, "but in every thing to give thanks."

4. There is a Fourth property of Christian zeal, which deserves to be more particularly considered. This we learn from the very words of the Apostle, "It is good to be jealously 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; that is, everything that is good, really such, in the sight of God.

5. But what is good in the sight of God? What is that religion, wherewith God is always well pleased? How do the parts of this rise one above another? and what is the comparative value of them?

This is a point exceeding little considered, and therefore little understood. Positive divinity, many have some knowledge of. But few know anything of comparative divinity. I never saw but one tract upon this head; a sketch of which it may be of use to subjoin.

In a Christian believer love sits upon the throne which is erected in the inmost soul; namely, love of God and man, which fills the whole heart, and reigns without a rival. In a circle near the throne are all holy tempers; - longsuffering, gentleness, meekness, fidelity, temperance; and if any other were comprised in "the mind which was in Christ Jesus." In an exterior circle are all the works of mercy, whether to the souls or bodies of men. By these we exercise all holy tempers- by these we continually improve them, so that all these are real means of grace, although this is not commonly adverted to. Next to these are those that are usually termed works of piety - reading and hearing the word, public, family, private prayer, receiving the Lord's supper, fasting or abstinence. Lastly, that his followers may the more effectually 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- a little emblem of which, of the church universal, we have in every particular Christian congregation.

6. This is that religion which our Lord has established upon earth, ever since the descent of the Holy Ghost on 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. And hence it is easy to learn the comparative value of every branch of religion. Hence also we learn a Fifth property of true zeal. That as it is always exercised *_en kalOi_*, in that which is good, so it is always proportioned to that good, to the degree of goodness that is in its object.

7. For example. Every Christian ought, undoubtedly, to be zealous for the church, bearing a strong affection to it, and earnestly desiring its prosperity and increase. He ought to be thus zealous, as for the church universal, praying for it continually, so especially for that particular church or Christian society whereof he himself is a member. For this he ought to wrestle with God in prayer; meantime using every means in his power to enlarge its borders, and to strengthen his brethren, that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour.

8. But he should be 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 word; and for the much-neglected duty of fasting. These he should earnestly recommend; first, by his example; and then by advice, by argument, persuasion, and exhortation, as often as occasion offers.

9. Thus should he show his zeal for works of piety; but much more for works of mercy; seeing "God will have mercy and not sacrifice," that is, rather than sacrifice. Whenever, therefore, one interferes with the other, works of mercy are to be preferred. Even reading, hearing, prayer are to be omitted, or to be postponed, "at charity's almighty call;" when we are called to relieve the distress of our neighbour, whether in body or soul.

10. But as zealous as we are for all good works, we should still be more zealous for holy tempers; for planting and promoting, both in our own souls, and in all we have any intercourse with, lowliness of mind, meekness, gentleness, longsuffering, contentedness, resignation unto the will of God, deadness to the world and the things of the world, as the only means of being truly alive to God. For these proofs and fruits of living faith we cannot be too zealous. We should "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 should make them continual matter of prayer; as being far more excellent than any outward works whatever: seeing those will fail when the body drops off; but these will accompany us into eternity.

11. But 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, yea, all other holy tempers, 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, to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that his heart may be more and more enlarged in love to God and to all mankind. This one thing let him do: let him "press on to this prize of our high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

III. It remains only to draw some practical inferences from the preceding observations.

1. And, First, if zeal, true Christian zeal, be nothing but the flame of love, then hatred, in every kind and degree, then every sort of bitterness toward them that oppose us, is so far from deserving the name of zeal, that it is directly opposite to it. If zeal be only fervent love, then it stands at the utmost distance from prejudice, jealousy, evil surmising; seeing "love thinketh no evil." Then bigotry of every sort, and, above all, the spirit of persecution, are totally inconsistent with it. Let not, therefore, any of these unholy tempers

screen themselves under that sacred name. As all these are the works of the devil, let them appear in their own shape, and no longer under that specious disguise deceive the unwary children of God.

2. Secondly. If lowliness be a property of zeal, then pride is inconsistent with it. It is true, some degree of pride may remain after the love of God is shed abroad in the heart; as this is one of the last evils that is rooted out, when God creates all things new; but it cannot reign, nor retain any considerable power, where fervent love is found. Yea, were we to give way to it but a little, it would damp that holy fervour, and, if we did not immediately fly back to Christ. would utterly quench the Spirit.

3. Thirdly. If meekness be an inseparable property of zeal, what shall we say of those who call their anger by that name? Why, that they mistake the truth totally; that they, in the fullest sense, put darkness for light, and light for darkness. We cannot be too watchful against this delusion, because it spreads over the whole Christian world. Almost in all places, zeal and anger pass for equivalent terms; and exceeding few persons are convinced, that there is any difference between them. How commonly do we hear it said, "See how zealous the man is!" Nay, he cannot be zealous; that is impossible, for he is in a passion; and passion is as inconsistent with zeal, as light with darkness, or heaven with hell!

It were well that this point were thoroughly understood. Let us consider it a little farther. We frequently observe one that bears the character of a religious man vehemently angry at his neighbour. Perhaps he calls his brother Raca, or Thou fool. He brings a railing accusation against him. You mildly admonish him of his warmth. He answers, "It is my zeal!" No: it is your sin, and, unless you repent of it, will sink you lower than the grave. There is much such zeal as this in the bottomless pit. Thence all zeal of this kind comes; and thither it will go, and you with it, unless you are saved from it before you go hence!

4. Fourthly. If patience, contentedness, and resignation are the properties of zeal, then murmuring, fretfulness, discontent, impatience are wholly inconsistent with it. And yet how ignorant are mankind of this! How often do we see men fretting at the ungodly, or telling you they are out of patience with such or such things, and terming all this their zeal! O spare no pains to undeceive them! If it be possible, show them what zeal is; and convince them that all murmuring, or fretting at sin, is a species of sin, and has no resemblance of, or connexion with, the true zeal of the Gospel.

5. Fifthly. If the object of zeal be that which is good, then fervour for any evil thing is not Christian zeal. I instance in idolatry, worshipping of angels, saints, images, the cross. Although, therefore, a man were so earnestly attached to any kind of idolatrous worship, that he would even "give his body to be burned," rather than refrain from it, call this bigotry or superstition, if you please, but call it not zeal; that is quite another thing.

From the same premises it follows, that fervour for indifferent things is not Christian zeal. But how exceedingly common is this mistake too! Indeed one would think that men of understanding could not be capable of such weakness. But, alas! the history of all ages proves the contrary. Who were men of stronger understandings than Bishop Ridley and Bishop Hooper? And how warmly did these, and other great men of that age, dispute about the sacerdotal vestments! How eager was the contention for almost a hundred years, for and against wearing a surplice! O shame to man! I would as soon have disputed about a straw or a barley-corn. And this, indeed, shall be called zeal! And why was it not rather called wisdom or holiness?

6. It follows also, from the same premises, that fervour for opinions is not Christian zeal. But how few are sensible of this! And how innumerable are the mischiefs which even this species of false zeal has

occasioned in the Christian world! How many thousand lives have been cast away by those who were zealous for the Romish opinions! How many of the excellent ones of the earth have been cut off by zealots, for the senseless opinion of transubstantiation! But does not every unprejudiced person see, that this zeal is `earthly, sensual, devilish;" and that it stands at the utmost contrariety to that zeal which is here recommended by the Apostle?

What an excess of charity is it then which our great poet expresses, in his "Poem on the Last Day," where he talks of meeting in heaven -

Those who by mutual wounds expired,

By zeal for their distinct persuasions fired! Zeal indeed! What manner of zeal was this, which led them to cut one another's throats? Those who were fired with this spirit, and died therein, will undoubtedly have their portion, not in heaven, (only love is there,) but in the "fire that never shall be quenched."

7. Lastly. If true zeal be always proportioned to the degree of goodness which is in its object, then should it rise higher and higher according to the scale mentioned above; according to the comparative value of the several parts of religion. For instance, all that truly fear God should be zealous for the Church; both for the catholic or universal church, and for that part of it whereof they are members. This is not the appointment of men, but of God. He saw it was "not good for men to be alone," even in this sense. but that the whole body of his children should be "knit together, and strengthened, by that which every joint supplieth." At the same time they should be more zealous for the ordinances of God; for public and private prayer, for hearing and reading the word of God, and for fasting and the Lord's supper. But they should be more zealous for works of mercy, than even for works of piety. Yet ought they to be more zealous still for all holy tempers, lowliness, meekness, resignation: but most zealous of all, for that which is the sum and the perfection of religion, the love of God and man.

8. It remains only 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 zealously affected in a good thing." Let us now, every one of us, apply it to his own soul in particular.

9. Those, indeed, who are still dead in trespasses and sins have neither part nor lot in this matter; nor those that live in any open sin, such as drunkenness, Sabbath-breaking, or profane swearing. These have nothing to do with zeal; they have no business at all even to take the word in their mouth. It is utter folly and impertinence for any to talk of zeal for God, while he is doing the works of the devil. But if you have renounced the devil and all his works, and have settled it in your heart, I will "worship the Lord my God, and him only will I serve," then beware of being neither cold nor hot; then 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; for the sake of which, in a great measure, the church itself was constituted: so that it would be highly absurd to talk of zeal for the church, if you were not more zealous for them. But are you more zealous for works of mercy, than even for works of piety? Do you follow the example of your Lord, and prefer mercy even before sacrifice? Do you use all diligence in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting them that are sick and in prison? And, above all, do you use every means in your power to save souls from death? If, as you have time, "you do good unto all men," though "especially to them that are of the household of faith," your zeal for the church is pleasing to God: but if not, if you are not "careful to maintain good works," what have

you to do with the church? If you have not "compassion on your fellow-servants," neither will your Lord have pity on you. "Bring no more vain oblations." All your service is "an abomination to the Lord."

10. Are you better instructed than to put asunder what God has joined? than to separate works of piety from works of mercy? Are you uniformly zealous of both? So far you walk acceptably to God; that is, if you continually bear in mind, that God "searcheth the heart and reins;" that "he is a Spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth;" that, consequently, no outward works are acceptable to him, unless they spring from holy tempers, without which no man can have a place in the kingdom of Christ and God.

11. But of all holy tempers, and above all others, see that you be most zealous for love. Count all things loss in comparison of this, - the love of God and all mankind. It is most sure, that if you give all your goods to feed the poor, yea, and your body to be burned, and have not humble, gentle, patient love, it profiteth you nothing. O let this be deep engraved upon your heart: "All is nothing without love!"

12. Take then the whole of religion together, just as God has revealed it in his word; and be uniformly zealous for every part of it, according to its degree of excellence. Grounding all your zeal on the one foundation, "Jesus Christ and him crucified;" holding fast this one principle, "The life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved ME, and gave himself for ME;" proportion your zeal to the value of its object. Be calmly zealous, therefore, first, for the Church; "the whole state of Christ's Church militant here on earth:" and in particular for that branch thereof with which you are more immediately connected. Be more zealous for all those ordinances which our blessed Lord hath appointed, to continue therein to the end of the world. Be more zealous for those works of mercy, those "sacrifices wherewith God is well pleased," those marks whereby the Shepherd of Israel will know his sheep at the last day. Be more zealous still for holy tempers, for long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, lowliness, and resignation; but 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 men below, so in angels above. For "God is love; and he that dwelleth in love, dwelleth in God, and God in him."

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