

Christian Zeal

by J.C. Ryle

J.C. Ryle's sermon emphasizes the significance of true Christian zeal as a passionate commitment to please God and advance His glory.

Scripture: Psalm 69:9, John 4:34, Acts 26:24, 1 Corinthians 9:27, 2 Corinthians 9:2, Galatians 4:18, Philippians 3:13-14, Titus 2:14, 1 Peter 2:21, Revelation 3:19

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Christian Zeal"

Description

J.C. Ryle emphasizes the significance of Christian zeal, arguing that it is a powerful force for good when directed towards God's glory and the salvation of souls. He clarifies that true zeal is not blind enthusiasm but is rooted in knowledge, love, and humility, and is essential for both individual believers and the Church as a whole. Ryle warns against the dangers of lukewarmness and encourages Christians to cultivate a fervent desire to please God, drawing inspiration from biblical examples of zealous figures like Paul and Christ Himself. He concludes by urging believers to remain steadfast in their zeal, as it is crucial for personal growth, church vitality, and the betterment of the world.

Transcript

"It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good."

(Galatians 4:18)

Zeal is a subject, like many others in religion, which is sadly misunderstood. Many would be ashamed to be thought zealous Christians. Many are ready to say of zealous people what Festus said of Paul: "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted, "Your great learning is driving you insane" (Acts 26:24).

But zeal is a subject, which no reader of the Bible has any right to pass over. If we make the Bible our rule of faith and practice, we cannot turn away from the subject of zeal. We must look it directly in the face. What does the Apostle Paul say to Titus? "Christ gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are His very own, eager [or zealous] to do what is good" (Titus 2:14). What does the Lord Jesus say to the Laodicean Church? "Be earnest [be zealous], and repent" (Revelation 3:19).

My object in this message is to plead the cause of zeal in religion. I believe we ought not to be afraid of it, but rather to love and admire it. I believe it to be a mighty blessing to the world and the origin of countless

benefits to mankind. I want to remind Christians that "Zealot" was a name given to one of the Apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to persuade them to be zealous men and women.

I ask every one of you to give me your attention while I tell you something about zeal. Listen to me for your own sake-for the sake of the world-for the sake of the Church of our Christ. Listen to me and by God's help I will show you that to be "zealous" is to be wise.

I. Let me show in the first place, what zeal is in Christianity.

II. Let me show in the second place, when a person can be correctly called "zealous" in Christianity.

III. Let me show in the third place, why it is a good thing for a person to be zealous in Christianity.

I. First of all, I want us to consider this question. What is zeal in Christianity?

Zeal in Christianity is a burning desire to please God, to do His will, and to advance His glory in the world in every possible way. It is a desire, which is not natural to men or women. It is a desire which the Spirit puts in the heart of every believer when they are converted to Christ, however, a desire which some believers feel so much more strongly than others that they alone deserve to be called "zealous" men and women.

This desire is so strong, when it really reigns in a person, that it impels them to make any sacrifice-to go through any trouble-to deny themselves anything-to suffer, to work, to labor, to toil, to spend themselves and be spent, and even to die-if only they can please God and honor Christ.

A zealous person in Christianity is preeminently a person of one thing. It is not enough to say that they are earnest, strong, uncompromising, meticulous, wholehearted, and fervent in spirit. They only see one thing, they care for one thing, they live for one thing, they are swallowed up in one thing; and that one thing is to please God. Whether they live, or whether they die-whether they are healthy, or whether they are sick-whether they are rich, or whether they are poor-whether they please man, or whether they give offense-whether they are thought wise, or whether they are thought foolish-whether they are accused, or whether they are praised-whether they get honor, or whether they get shame-for all this the zealous person cares nothing at all. They have a passion for one thing, and that one thing is to please God and to advance God's glory. If they are consumed in the very burning of their passion for God, they don't care-they are content. They feel that, like a candle, they were made to burn; and if they are consumed in the burning, then they have only done the work for which God has appointed them. Such a person will always find a sphere for their zeal. If they cannot work, or give money, or a man cannot preach, then they will cry out and sigh, and pray. Yes: if they are extremely poor, on a perpetual bed of sickness, they will make the activity of sin around him slow to a standstill, by continually interceding against it. If they cannot fight in the valley with Joshua, they will do the work of Moses, Aaron, and Hur, on the hill. (Exodus 17:9-13) If they are cut off from working themselves, they will give the Lord no rest until help is raised up from another quarter, and the work is done. This is what I mean when I speak of zeal in Christianity.

We all know the habit of mind that makes men great in this world-that makes such men as Alexander the Great, or Julius Caesar, or Oliver Cromwell, or Peter the Great, or Napoleon. We know that with all their faults they were all men of one thing. They threw themselves into one grand pursuit. They cared for nothing else. They put everything else aside. They counted everything else as second-rate and of subordinate importance, compared to the one thing that they put before their eyes every day they lived. I

say that the same habit of mind applied to the service of the Lord Jesus Christ becomes Christian zeal.

We know the habit of mind that makes men great in the sciences of this world-that makes such men as Archimedes, or Sir Isaac Newton, or Galileo, or James Watt. All these were men of one thing. They brought the powers of their minds into one single focus. They cared for nothing else. And this was the secret of their success. I say that this same habit consecrated to the service of God becomes Christian zeal.

We know the habit of mind that makes men rich that makes men amass mighty fortunes, and leave millions behind them. What kind of people were the bankers, and merchants, and tradesmen, who have left a name behind them, as men who acquired immense wealth and became rich although they may have been born in poverty? They were all men that threw themselves entirely into their business, and neglected everything else for the sake of that business. They gave their first attention, their first thoughts, the best of their time, and the best part of their mind, to pushing forward the transactions in which they were engaged. They were men of one thing. Their hearts were not divided. They devoted themselves, body, soul and mind to their business. They seemed to live for nothing else. I say that if you turn that habit of mind to the service of God and His Christ it produces Christian zeal.

(a) Now this habit of mind-this zeal was the characteristic of all the Apostles.

Look at the example of the Apostle Paul. Hear him when he speaks to the Ephesian elders for the last time: "I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me-the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace" (Acts 20:24). Hear him again, when he writes to the Philippians: "One thing I do: I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13-14). See him from the day of his conversion, giving up his brilliant prospects-forsaking all for Christ's sake-and going forth to preach that very Jesus whom he had once despised. See him going back and forth throughout the world from that time-through persecution-through oppression-through opposition-through prisons-through chains-through afflictions-through things next to death itself, up to the very day when he sealed his faith with his blood and died at Rome, a martyr for that Gospel which he had so long proclaimed. This was true Christian zeal.

(b) This again was "the characteristic of the early Christians."

They were persons "that people everywhere were talking against" (Acts 28:22). They were driven to worship God in dens and caves of the earth. They often lost everything in the world for their religion's sake. They generally gained nothing but the cross, persecution, shame, and reproach. But they seldom, very seldom, went back. If they could not debate, at least they could suffer. If they could not convince their adversaries by argument, at any rate they could die and prove that they themselves were very serious. Look at Ignatius cheerfully traveling to the place where he was to be devoured by lions, and saying as he went, "Now do I begin to be a disciple of my Master, Christ." Hear old Polycarp before the Roman Governor, saying boldly, when called upon to deny Christ, "I have served Christ for 86 years and He has never offended me in anything, and how can I then insult my King?" This was true zeal.

(c) This again was the characteristic of Martin Luther. He boldly defied the most powerful hierarchy that the world has ever seen. He unveiled their corruptions with an unflinching hand. He preached the long-neglected truth of justification by faith, in spite of curses and excommunications that were thickly poured on him. See him pleading his cause before the Emperor, and a host of the children of this world. Hear him saying-when men were persuading him from going, and reminding him of the fate of John Huss,

"Even if there was a devil under every tile on the roofs of this building, in the name of the Lord I shall go forward." This was true zeal.

(d) This again was the characteristic of our own English Reformers. You have it in our first Reformer, Wickliffe, when he rose up on his sick bed and said to the Friars who wanted him to retract all he had said against the Pope, "I shall not die, but live to declare the wickedness of the Friars."

You have it in Cranmer, dying at the stake rather than deny Christ's Gospel, holding out that hand to be first burned which, in a moment of weakness, had signed a recantation and saying as he held it in the flames, "This unworthy hand!"

You have it in old Latimer, standing boldly on his kindling wood for the fire, at the age of seventy years, and saying to Ridley, "Courage, brother Ridley! We shall light such a candle this day that, by God's grace, shall never be put out." This was zeal.

(e) This again has been the characteristic of all the greatest Missionaries. You see it in Dr. Judson, in Carey, in Morrison, in Schwartz, in Williams, in Brainerd, in Elliott. You see it in none more brightly than in Henry Martyn. Here was a man who had reached the highest scholastic honors that Cambridge could bestow. Whatever profession he chose to follow, he had the most dazzling prospects of success. He turned his back on it all. He chose to preach the Gospel to poor unreasonable heathen. He went forth to an early grave, in a foreign land. He said when he got there and saw the condition of the people, "I would be willing to be torn in pieces, if I could only hear the sobs of repentance-if I could see the eyes of faith directed to the Redeemer!" This was zeal.

(f) But let us look away from all earthly examples-and remember that zeal was preeminently the characteristic of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ Himself. Of Him it was written hundreds of years before He came upon the earth that He "wrapped Himself in zeal as in a cloak, and "the zeal for your house consumes me." And His own words were "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to finish His work." (Psalm 69:9; Isaiah 59:17; John 4:34).

Where shall we begin, if we try to give examples of His zeal? Where should we end, if we should begin? Trace all the narratives of His life in the four Gospels. Read all the history of what He was from the beginning of His ministry to the end. Surely if there ever was one who was all zeal, it was our great Example-our Head-our High Priest-the great Shepherd of our profession, the Lord Jesus Christ.

If these things are true, we should not only beware of running down zeal, but we should also beware of allowing zeal to be run down in our presence. It may be badly directed, and then it becomes a curse-but it may be turned to the highest and best ends, and then it is a mighty blessing. Like fire, it is one of the best of servants-but, also like fire, if not well directed, it may be the worst of masters. Do not listen to those people who talk of zeal as weakness and enthusiasm. Do not listen to those who see no beauty in missions, who laugh at all attempts at the conversion of souls-who call Agencies for sending the Gospel to the world useless-and who look upon City Missions, Visitations, and Open Air Preaching, as nothing but foolishness and fanaticism. Beware, lest in joining a cry of that kind you condemn the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Beware lest you speak against Him who has "left us an example, that we should follow in His steps" (1 Peter 2:21).

Yes! I fear there are many professing Christians who, if they had lived in the days when our Lord and His Apostles walked on the earth, would have called Him and all His followers zealots and fanatics. There are

many, I fear, who have more in common with Annas and Caiaphas-with Pilate and Herod-with Festus and Agrippa-with Felix and Gallio-than with Paul and the Lord Jesus Christ.

II. I pass on now to my second point. When is a man truly zealous in Christianity?

There never was a grace of which Satan has not made a counterfeit. There never was a coin issued from the mint that forgers did not at once coin something very much like it. It was one of Nero's cruel practices first to sew Christians into the skins of wild beasts, and then bait them with dogs. It is one of Satan's devices to place distorted copies of the believer's graces before the eyes of men, and so to bring the true graces into contempt. No grace has suffered so much in this way as zeal. Of none perhaps are there so many shams and counterfeits. We must therefore clear the ground of all rubbish on this question. We must find out when zeal in Christianity is really good, and true, and of God.

(1) If zeal is true, it will be a zeal according to knowledge. It must not be a blind, ignorant zeal. It must be a calm, reasonable, intelligent principle, which can show the warrant of Scripture for every step it takes. The unconverted Jews had zeal. Paul says, "I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge" (Romans 10:2). Saul had zeal when he was a persecuting Pharisee. He says himself, in one of his addresses to the Jews, "I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today" (Acts 22:3). Manasseh had zeal in the days when he was an idolater. That man threw his own children into the fire-who gave up the fruit of his body to the false god Moloch to atone for the sin of his soul-that man had zeal. James and John had zeal when they would have called down fire on a Samaritan village. But our Lord rebuked them. Peter had zeal when he drew his sword and cut off the ear of Malchus. But he was quite wrong. Bonner and Gardiner had zeal when they burned Latimer and Cranmer. Were they not sincere? Let us do them justice. They were zealous, though it was for a false religion.

The members of the Roman Catholic Inquisition in Spain had zeal when they tortured men, and put them to horrible deaths because they would not forsake the Gospel. Yes! they marched men and women to the stake in solemn procession and called it "An Act of Faith," and believed they were doing a service for God. The Hindus, who used to lie down before the car of Juggernaut and allow their bodies to be crushed under its wheels: did they not have zeal? The widows of India, who used to burn themselves on the funeral pyre of their deceased husbands; the Roman Catholics, who persecuted to death the Waldenses and Albigenses, and threw men and women from cliffs onto the rocks below because they were heretics; did they not have zeal? The Saracens, the Crusaders, the Jesuits, the Anabaptists of Munster, did they not all have zeal? Yes! Yes! I do not deny it. All these groups had zeal beyond question. They were all zealous. They were all very fervent. But their zeal was not the zeal that God approves-it was not a zeal based on knowledge.

(2) Furthermore, if zeal is true, it will be a zeal generated from true motives.

Such is the subtlety of the heart that men will often do right things from wrong motives. Amaziah and Joash, kings of Judah, are striking proofs of this. In the same way a man may have zeal about things that are good and right but from second-rate motives, and not from a desire to please God. And such zeal is worth nothing. It is impure silver. It is utterly inadequate when placed in the balance of God. Man looks only at the action: God looks at the motive. Man only thinks of the quantity of work done: God considers the doer's heart.

There is such a thing as zeal from party spirit. It is quite possible for a man to be tireless in promoting the interest of his own Church or denomination, and yet to have no grace in his own heart; to be ready to die

for the distinctive opinions of his brand of Christianity, and yet have no real love to Christ. Such was the zeal of the Pharisees. They "travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, they make him twice as much a son of hell as they are" (Matthew 23:15). This zeal is not true.

There is such a thing as zeal from mere selfishness. There are times when it is in men's interest to be zealous in their Christianity. Power and influence are sometimes given to godly men. The good things of the world are sometimes attained by wearing a cloak of religion. And whenever this is the case there is no lack of false zeal. Such was the zeal of Joab, when he served David.

There is such a thing as zeal from the love of praise. Such was the zeal of Jehu, when he was putting down the worship of Baal. Remember how he met Jonadab the son of Rechab, and said, "Come with me and see my zeal for the LORD" (2 Kings 10:16). Such is the zeal that John Bunyan refers to in "Pilgrims Progress," when he speaks of some who went "for praise" to mount Zion. Some people feed on the praise of their fellow-creatures. They would rather have it from Christians than have none at all.

It is a sad and humbling proof of man's corruption that there is no degree of self-denial and self-sacrifice to which men may not go from false motives. It does not follow that a man's religion is true because he "gives his body to be burned," or because he "gives his goods to feed the poor." The Apostle Paul tells us that a man may do this and yet not have true love. (1 Corinthians 13:1, etc.) It does not follow because men go into a wilderness and become hermits, that therefore they know what true self-denial is. It does not follow because people enclose themselves in monasteries and nunneries, or become "sisters of charity" and "sisters of mercy," that therefore they know what true crucifixion of the flesh and self-sacrifice is in the sight of God. All these things people may do on wrong principle. They may do them from wrong motives-to satisfy a secret pride and love of notoriety-but not from the true motive of zeal for the glory of God. All such zeal, let us understand, is false. It is of the earth, and not of heaven.

(3) Furthermore, if zeal is true it will be a zeal about things according to God's mind, and sanctioned by clear examples in God's Word.

Take, for example, that highest and best kind of zeal-I mean zeal for our own growth in personal holiness.

Such zeal will make a man continually feel that sin is the mightiest of all evils, and conformity to Christ the greatest of all blessings. It will make him feel that there is nothing which ought not to be done, in order to keep up a close walk with God. It will make him willing to cut off his right hand, or pluck out his right eye, or make any sacrifice, if only he can attain a closer communion with Jesus. Isn't this just what you see in the Apostle Paul? He says, "I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.-I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead. I press on toward the goal" (1 Corinthians 9:27, Philippians 3:13-14).

Take, as another example, zeal for the salvation of souls.

Such zeal will make a man burn with desire to remove the darkness which covers the souls of multitudes, and to bring every man, woman, and child he sees to the knowledge of the Gospel. Isn't this what you see in the Lord Jesus? It is said that He neither gave Himself nor His disciples much spare time and at times they didn't even have a chance to eat (Mark 6:31). Isn't this what you see in the Apostle Paul? He says, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22).

Take, for another instance, zeal against evil practices.

Such zeal will make a man hate everything which God hates, such as drunkenness, slavery, or infanticide, and long to sweep it from the face of the earth. It will make him jealous of God's honor and glory, and look on everything which robs Him of it as an offense. Isn't this what you see in Phinehas, the son of Eleazar? Or in Hezekiah and Josiah, when they eliminated idolatry in the land?

Take, as another example, zeal for maintaining the doctrines of the Gospel.

Such zeal will make a man hate unscriptural teaching, just as he hates sin. It will make him regard religious error as a pestilence which must be stopped, whatever the cost may be. It will make him scrupulously careful about every word in the counsel of God, lest by some omission the whole Gospel would be spoiled. Isn't this what you see in Paul at Antioch, when he withstood Peter to his face and said he was clearly in the wrong? (Galatians 2:11) These are the kind of things that true zeal is made of. Such zeal, let us understand, is honorable before God.

(4) Furthermore, if zeal is true, it will be a zeal tempered with love.

It will not be a bitter zeal. It will not be a fierce hatred of people. It will not be a zeal that is ready to take up the sword and to lash out with the weapons of the world. The weapons of true zeal are not worldly, but spiritual. True zeal will hate sin, and yet love the sinner. True zeal will hate heresy, and yet love the heretic. True zeal will long to smash the idol, but deeply pity the idolater. True zeal will detest every kind of wickedness, but labor to do good even to the vilest of sinners.

True zeal will warn as Paul warned the Galatians and yet feel tenderly, as a nurse or a mother over erring children. It will expose false teachers, as Jesus did the Scribes and Pharisees, and yet weep tenderly as Jesus did over Jerusalem when He came near to it for the last time. True zeal will be decided, as a surgeon dealing with diseased limb; but true zeal will be gentle, as one that is dressing the wounds of a brother. True zeal will speak truth boldly, like Athanasius against the world, and not care who is offended; but true zeal will endeavor in its speaking, to "speak the truth in love."

(5) Furthermore, if zeal is true, it will be joined to a deep humility.

A truly zealous man will be the last to discover the greatness of his own attainments. All that he is and does will fall immensely short of his own desires, that he will be filled with a sense of his own weakness and be amazed to think that God should work through him at all. Like Moses, when he came down from the Mountain, he will not be aware that his face shines. Like the righteous in the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew, he will not be aware of his own good works. Dr. Buchanan is one who is praised by all the churches. He was one of the first to take up the cause of the perishing heathen. He literally spent himself, body and mind, in laboring to arouse sleeping Christians to see the importance of missions. Yet he says in one of his letters, "I do not know that I ever had what Christians call zeal." Whitefield was one of the most zealous preachers of the Gospel the world has ever seen. Fervent in spirit, instant in season and out of season, he was a burning and shining light, and turned thousands to God. Yet he says after preaching for thirty years, "Lord help me to begin to begin."

M'Cheyne was one of the greatest blessings that God ever gave to the Church of Scotland. He was a minister insatiably desirous of the salvation of souls. Few men ever did so much good as he did, though he died at the age of twenty-nine. Yet he says in one of his letters, "No one but God knows what an abyss

of corruption is in my heart. It is perfectly wonderful that God could ever bless such a ministry." We can be very sure where there is self-conceit there is little true zeal.

I ask all of you to especially remember the description of true zeal which I have just given. Zeal according to knowledge-zeal from true motives-zeal warranted by Scriptural examples-zeal tempered with love-zeal accompanied by deep humility-this is true genuine zeal-this is the kind of zeal which God approves. You and I need never fear of having too much of such zeal.

I ask you to remember the description because of the times in which we live. Beware of supposing that sincerity alone can ever make up true zeal-that earnestness, however ignorant, makes a man a really zealous Christian in the sight of God. There is a generation in these days which makes an idol of what it calls "seriousness" in Christianity. These men will allow no fault to be found in a man who is serious. Whatever his theological opinions may be-if he is a serious man, that is enough for these people, and we are to ask no more. They tell you we should just ignore the minute points of doctrine and any questions about words and names, about which Christians are not agreed. Is the man a serious man? If he is, we ought to be satisfied. Seriousness in their eyes covers over a multitude of sins. I solemnly warn you to beware of this dubious doctrine. In the name of the Gospel, and in the name of the Bible, I enter my protest against the theory that mere seriousness can make a man a truly zealous and holy man in the sight of God.

These idolaters of seriousness would make us believe that God has not given us a standard of truth and error, or that the true standard, the Bible, is so obscure, that no man can find out what truth is by simply reading it. They pour contempt upon the Word, the written Word, and therefore they must be wrong.

These idolaters of seriousness would make us condemn every witness for the truth, and every opponent of false teaching from the time of the Lord Jesus down to this very day. The Scribes and Pharisees were serious, and yet our Lord opposed them. And shall we dare even to hint the thought that they ought to have been left alone? Queen Mary was serious in restoring the Roman Catholic religion and trying to put down Protestantism, and yet godly brothers who believed in Christ in truth and seriousness opposed her to the death. And shall we dare to say that since both parties were "serious both were in the right? The Devil-worshippers and idolaters of today are serious and yet our missionaries labor to expose their errors. And shall we dare to say that seriousness would take them to heaven, and that missionaries to heathens and Roman Catholics should stay at home? Are we really going to admit that the Bible does not show us what is truth? Are we really going to put a vague thing called seriousness, in the place of Christ and to maintain that no serious man can be wrong? God forbid that we should give place to such doctrine! I shrink with horror from such theology. I warn men solemnly to beware of being carried away by it for it is common and most seductive in this day. Beware of it, for it is only a new form of an old error-that old error which says that a man can't be wrong whose lives a serious and righteous life.

Admire zeal. Seek after zeal. Encourage zeal. But see that your own zeal is true. See that the zeal which you admire in others is a zeal based on knowledge-a zeal from right motives-a zeal that can bring chapter and verse out of the Bible for its foundation. Any zeal but this is nothing but a deceiving fire. It is not ignited by the Holy Spirit.

III. I now move on to my third point. Let me show why it is good for a person to be zealous.

It is certain that God never gave men and women a commandment which was not in their interest to obey. He never gave a teaching to His believing people which His people will not find it their highest happiness

to follow after. This is true of all the instructions about the Christian character. Perhaps it is preeminently true in the case of zeal.

(a) Zeal is good for the soul of a Christian.

We all know that exercise is good for the health, and that regular exercise of our muscles and limbs promotes our bodily comfort, and increases bodily strength. No one has so much enjoyment of Christ as those who are always zealous for His glory, watchful over their own walk, sensitive to their own consciences, full of concern about the souls of others, and always watching,

working, laboring, and striving to expand the knowledge of Jesus Christ on earth. Such men and women live in the full light of the sun, and therefore their hearts are always warm. Such men and women water others and therefore they are watered themselves. Their hearts are like a garden daily refreshed by the dew of the Holy Spirit. They honor God, and therefore God honors them.

I want to be sure that everyone understands what I am saying. I do not want to appear to speak thoughtlessly of any believer. I know that "the Lord takes delight in his people" (Psalm 149:4). There is not one, from the least to the greatest—from the smallest child in the kingdom of God, to the oldest warrior in the battle against Satan—there is not one in whom the Lord Jesus Christ does not take great pleasure. We are all His children—and however weak and feeble some of us may be, as a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him. (Psalm 103:13). We are all the plants which He has planted; and though many of us are poor, weakly exotic plants, scarcely staying alive in foreign soil—yet as the gardener loves that which his hands have raised, so does the Lord Jesus love the poor sinners that trust in Him. But while I say this, I do also believe that the Lord takes special pleasure in those who are zealous for Him, in those who give their body, soul, and spirit, to extend His glory in this world. To them He reveals Himself, in a way different than to others. To them He shows things that others never see. He blesses the work of their hands. He commends them with spiritual contentment which others have only heard about. They are people after His own heart, for they are people more like Himself than others. No one has such joy and peace in believing—no one has such tangible contentment in their Christianity—no one has so much of heaven on earth—no one sees and feels so much of the compassion of the Gospel as those who are zealous, serious, devoted Christians. For the sake of our own souls, if there were no other reason, it is good to be zealous, to be very zealous in our Christianity.

(b) Just as zeal is good for us individually, it is also good, in a general sense, for the professing Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Nothing is so effective in keeping true Christianity alive as the yeast of zealous Christians scattered throughout the Church. Like salt, they prevent the whole body from falling into a state of decay. No one but men of this kind can revive Churches that are about to die. It is impossible to overestimate the debt that all Christians owe to zeal. The greatest mistake the leaders of a Church can make is to drive zealous men out of its congregation. By doing so they drain out the life-blood of the system, and advance the church's decline and death.

God delights in honoring zeal. Look through the list of Christians who have been used most mightily by God. Who are the men that have left the deepest and most indelible marks on the Church of their day? Who are the men that God has generally honored to build up the walls of His Zion, and also to fight the enemy at the gate? He does not use men of learning and literary talent as readily as men of zeal.

Latimer was not such a deeply-read scholar as Cranmer or Ridley. He could not quote from memory about the early church, as they did. He refused to be drawn into arguments about church history. He stuck to his Bible. Yet it is clear that no English reformer left such a lasting impression on the nation as old Latimer did. And what was the reason? His simple zeal.

Baxter, the Puritan, was not equal to some of his contemporaries in intellectual gifts. He in no way could stand on a level with Manton or Owen. Yet few men probably exercised so wide an influence on the generation in which he lived. And what was the reason? His burning zeal.

Whitefield, and Wesley, and Berridge, and Venn were inferior in mental attainments to Butler and Watson. But they produced effects on the people of this country which fifty Butlers and Watsons would probably never have produced. They saved the Church of England from ruin. And what was one secret of their power? Their zeal.

These men stood up front at turning points in the history of the Church. They remained unmoved during storms of opposition and persecution. It could be said that:

--They were not afraid to stand alone.

--They did not care if their motives were misinterpreted.

--They considered everything a loss for the sake of the truth.

--Each one of them was eminently a man of one thing: and that one thing was to advance the glory of God, and to declare His truth in the world.

--They were all on fire, and so they lighted others.

--They were wide awake, and so awakened others.

--They were always working, and so shamed others into working too.

--They came down upon men like Moses from the mountain-they shone as if they had been in the presence of God.

--They carried with them everywhere they walked in the world, something of the atmosphere and savor of heaven itself.

There is a sense in which it may be said that zeal is contagious. Nothing is more useful to those who profess to be Christians than to see a real live Christian, a thoroughly zealous man of God. They may speak reproachfully to him-they may criticize him-they may nit-pick his conduct-they may look at him suspiciously-they may not understand him any more than men understand a new phenomena in the heavens when it appears; but by degrees so slight as to be virtually imperceptible, a zealous man does them good. He opens their eyes. He makes them feel their own indifference. He makes their own great darkness visible. He compels them to see their own emptiness. He compels them to think, whether they like it or not-What are we doing? Are we nothing better than a vegetable that grows out of the ground?

It may be a sad truth that one sinner destroys many good people; but it is also a blessed truth that one zealous Christian can do a lot of good. Yes: one single zealous man in a town-one zealous man in a congregation-one zealous man in a society-one zealous man in a family, may be a great blessing.

How many useful ministries does such a man get going! How much Christian activity he often calls into being which would otherwise have remained dormant! How many fountains he opens which would otherwise have been sealed! Truly there is a deep mine of truth in those words of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians: "Your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action." (2 Corinthians 9:2).

(c) But, just as zeal is good for the Church and for individuals, so zeal is also good for the world.

Where would the Missionary work be if it were not for zeal? Where would our City Missions and School Missions be if it were not for zeal? Where would our evangelistic outreach program be without zeal? Without zeal who would be willing to go and root out sin and ignorance, and find the dark places of the earth, and recover poor lost souls? Where would all these glorious instruments for good be if it were not for Christian zeal? Zeal called many of these institutions into being, and zeal keeps them at work when they have begun. Zeal gathers a few despised men, and makes them the nucleus of many a powerful ministry. Zeal prevents man from becoming lazy and sleepy when the ministry is large and begins to get favor from the world. Zeal raises up men to go out, putting their lives in their hands. Zeal supplies their replacements when their lives are taken from them and they go home to heaven.

What would become of the ignorant masses who crowd the streets and alleys of our overgrown cities if it were not for Christian zeal? Governments can do nothing with them: they cannot make laws that will confront the evil. The vast majority of professing Christians have no eyes to see it: like the priest and the Levite, they pass by on the other side. But zeal has eyes to see, and a heart to feel, and a head to devise, and a tongue to plead, and hands to work, and feet to travel, in order to rescue poor souls and raise them from their fallen state.

Zeal does not stand meditating over difficulties, but simply says, "Here are some souls that are perishing, and we will do something." Zeal does not shrink back because the enemy is standing in the way: it looks over their heads, like Moses standing on top of Pisgah, and says, "We will possess the land." Zeal does not wait for reinforcements and delay until good works are fashionable: it goes forward like one who is deserted, and trusts that others will follow eventually. Yes, the world knows very little what a debt it owes to Christian zeal. How much crime it has restrained! How much disobedience it has prevented! How much public discontent it has calmed! How much obedience to the law and love of order it has produced! How many souls it has saved! Yes! and I believe we know very little of what might be accomplished if every Christian was a zealous person! How much if more ministers were zealous! How much if more laymen were more zealous! Oh, for the world's sake, as well as your own, resolve, work, strive to be a zealous Christian!

Let every one who professes to be a Christian beware of suppressing zeal. Seek it. Cultivate it. Try to enlarge the fire in your own heart, and the hearts of others, but never, never stop it. Beware of throwing cold water on zealous souls, whenever you meet with them. Beware of nipping in the bud this precious gift when it first shoots up. If you are a parent, beware of suppressing it in your children. If you are a husband, beware of stopping it in your wife. If you are a brother, beware of restraining it in your sisters-and if you are a minister, beware of restraining it in the members of your congregation. It is a shoot of heavens own planting. Beware of crushing it, for Christ's sake.

Zeal may make mistakes. Zeal may need directing. Zeal may lack guiding, controlling, and advising. Like the elephants on ancient fields of battle, it may sometimes injure its own side. But zeal does not need to be restrained in a wretched, cold, corrupt, miserable world like this. Zeal, like John Knox tearing down the

Scottish monasteries, may hurt the feelings of narrow-minded and sleepy Christians. It may offend the prejudices of those old-fashioned religionists who hate everything new, and (like those who wanted soldiers and sailors to go on wearing pigtailed) abhor all change. But zeal in the end will be justified by its results. Zeal, like John Knox, in the long run will do infinitely more good than harm. There is little danger of there ever being too much zeal for the glory of God. God forgive those who think there is! You know little of human nature. You forget that sickness is far more contagious than health, and that it is much easier to catch a cold than to give warmth.

Depend on it, the Church seldom needs a bridle, but often needs a spur. It seldom needs to be restrained; it often needs to be urged on.

And now, in conclusion, let me try to apply this subject to the conscience of each one of you.

It is a warning subject, an arousing subject, an encouraging subject, according to the state of our hearts. I hope, by God's help, to give every reader his portion.

(1) First of all, let me offer a warning to all who sit in churches and yet who have not made a clear profession of Christianity.

There are millions, I fear, in this condition. If you are one, the subject before you is full of solemn warning. Oh, that the Lord in mercy may incline your heart to receive it!

I ask you, then, with all love, Where is your zeal in Christianity? With the Bible opened before me I am bold in asking. But with your life before me, I tremble what your answer will be. I ask again, Where is your zeal for the glory of God? Where is your zeal for sharing Christ's Gospel to an evil world? Zeal, which was the characteristic of the Lord Jesus-zeal, which is the characteristic of the angels-zeal, which shines forth in all the brightest Christians-where is your zeal unconverted reader? Where is your zeal? You know it is nowhere at all; you know you see no value in it; you know it is scorned and rejected as evil by you and your companions; you know it has no place, no share, no home in the religion of your soul. It is not that you don't know what it is to be zealous. You have zeal, but it is all misapplied. It is all earthly: it is all about the things of this age. It is not zeal for the glory of God: it is not zeal for the salvation of souls. Yes: many a man has zeal for the newspaper, but not for the Bible-zeal for the daily reading of the news, but no zeal for the daily reading of God's blessed Word. Many a man has zeal for the checkbook and other business books, but no zeal about the Book of Life and the last great accounting at the Great White Throne Judgment-zeal about gold, but no zeal about the unsearchable riches of Christ. Many a man has zeal about his earthly concerns-his family, his pleasures, his daily pursuits; but no zeal about God, and heaven, and eternity.

If this is the state of any of you, wakeup, I implore you, and see your gross folly. You cannot live forever. You are not ready to die. You are utterly unfit for the company of saints and angels. Wakeup!: be zealous and repent! Wakeup! to see the harm you are doing! You are putting arguments in the hands of unbelievers by your shameful coldness. You are pulling down as fast as ministers build. You are helping the devil. Wakeup!: be zealous, and repent! Wakeup to see your childish inconsistency! What can be a more worthy zeal than eternal things, than the glory of God, than the salvation of souls?

Surely it is good to labor for rewards that are temporal, but it is a thousand times better to labor for those that are eternal. Wakeup! be zealous, and repent! Go and read that long-neglected Bible. Take up that blessed Book which you have, and perhaps never use. Read that New Testament all the way through. Do

you find nothing there to make you zealous-to make you serious about your soul? Go and look at the cross of Christ. Go and see how the Son of God shed His precious blood there for you-how He suffered and groaned and died for you-how He poured out His soul as a offering for sin, in order that you, sinful brother or sister, might not perish but have eternal life. Go and look at the cross of Christ and never rest until you feel some zeal for your own soul-some zeal for the glory of God-some zeal for sharing of the Gospel throughout the world. Once more I say, Wakeup!: be zealous and repent!

(2) Let me, in the next place, say something to arouse those "who make a profession of being committed Christians, and are yet are lukewarm in their practice."

There are too many, I regret to say, in this state. If you are one, there is a lot in this subject which ought to lead you to a thorough searching of your heart.

Let me speak to your conscience. I also desire to put the question to you with complete brotherly affection, Where is your zeal? Where is your zeal for the glory of God, and for the spreading of the gospel throughout the world? You know better than anyone else, that your zeal is almost nonexistent. You know that your zeal is nothing than a feeble glimmering spark that just sits there and does nothing-it is like something "about to die." (Revelation 3:2). Surely, there is a fault somewhere if this is the case. This state of things ought not to be. You, the child of God-you, redeemed at so glorious a price-you, ransomed with such precious blood-you, who are an heir of glory such as the world has never seen or spoken of-surely you ought to be a man of great zeal. Surely your zeal should not be so weak.

I deeply feel that this is a painful subject to talk about. I do it with reluctance, and with a constant remembrance of my own weakness. Nevertheless, I must speak the truth. The plain truth is that many believers today seem so afraid of doing some harm that they hardly ever do anything good. There are many who are quick to object to something, but never take any action; they are truly lacking anything even like Christian fire. They are like the Dutch government officials recorded in the history of the 18th century who would never allow Marlborough to risk anything, and by their extreme caution prevented many victories from being won. Truly, in looking around the Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ, a man might sometimes think that God's kingdom had come, and God's will was being done upon earth, so small is the zeal that some believers show. It is vain to deny it. I do not need to go far for evidence. I point to the many missionary agencies that are trying to reach the heathens in foreign lands and even the lost of our own country, struggling and paralyzed because of the lack of workers and funds. I ask you, "Is this zeal?" I point to the false doctrine that is allowed to flourish in our churches and homes without an effort being made to stop it, while so-called believers look on, and are content with wishing that it wasn't that way. I ask, "Is this zeal?" Would the apostles have been satisfied with such a state of things? We know they would not.

If the conscience of any of you pleads guilty to being any part of the weaknesses I have just spoken of, I call on you in the name of the Lord, to wake up, be zealous, and repent. Don't let zeal be confined to those who are busy making money in the marketplace or the stock markets. Let us not be so zealous to pursue riches or to make new discoveries in the world but indifferent to send the Gospel to the heathen, or to pluck Roman Catholics out of the coming fires of hell, or to the sharing of the gospel to those in our own country. Never has there been so many doors of opportunity opened-never has there been so many possibilities for doing good. I detest that squeamishness which refuses to help Christian ministries if there is an imperfection in the methods by which the work is carried on. At this rate we would never do anything at all. Let us resist the feeling, if we are tempted by it. It is one of Satan's schemes. It is better to work with

weak instruments than not to work at all. At all times try to do something for God and Christ-something against ignorance and sin. Give, teach, admonish, visit, pray, according as God enables you. Only make up your mind that everyone can do something and resolve that you, at any rate, will do something. If you have only one talent do not bury it in the ground. Try to live your life so as to be missed when you are gone. You can do more in twelve hours than most people have ever done on any day in their lives.

Think of the precious souls which are perishing while you are sleeping. Go ahead, if you want, and be taken up with your inward conflicts. Go on and analyze your own feelings and lament over your own vices, if you are so determined. But remember all this time souls are going to hell, and you might be able to do something to save them by working, by giving, by writing, by begging, and by prayer. Oh, wakeup! be zealous, and repent!

Think of the shortness of time. You will soon be gone. You will not have any opportunity for works of mercy in heaven. In heaven there will be no uneducated people to instruct, and no unconverted to save. Whatever you do must be done now. Oh, when are you going to begin? Wakeup! be zealous, and repent.

Think of the devil, and his zeal to destroy people. It was a solemn saying of Bernard when he said that "Satan would rise up in judgment against some people at the last day, because he had shown more zeal to ruin souls than they had to save them." Wakeup! be zealous, and repent.

Think of "your Savior," and all His zeal for you. Think of Him in Gethsemane and on Calvary, shedding His blood for sinners. Think of His life, death, and His sufferings. All this He has done for you. What are you doing for Him? Oh, resolve that for the time to come you will spend and be spent for Christ! Wakeup! be zealous and repent.

(3) Last of all, let me encourage "all of you who are truly zealous Christians."

I have but one request to make, and that is that you will persevere. I implore you to maintain your zeal and never let it go. I urge you never to stop doing the things you did at first, never to leave your first love, never let it be said of you that the things that you did in the first part of your Christian life were better than the things you did in your latter years-Beware of cooling down. All you have to do is to be lazy, and to sit still, and you will soon lose all your zeal. You will soon become another person from what you are now. Oh, don't think that this is a needless exhortation!

It may be true that wise young believers are very rare. But it is just as true that zealous old believers are also very rare. Never allow yourself to think that you can do too much-that you can work too hard and long for the cause of Christ. For every person that does too much I will show you a thousand who don't do enough. Instead think that "Night is coming, when no one can work." (John 9:4). Give, teach, visit, work, and pray as if you were doing it for the last time.

Take to heart the words of a zealous Christian, who said, when told that he ought to rest a little, "What should we rest for? Don't we have all eternity to rest?"

Do not fear the reproach of men. Do not faint because you are sometimes abused. Don't let it bother you if you are sometimes called a bigot, a zealot, a fanatic, a crazy person, and a fool. There is nothing disgraceful in these titles. They have often been given to the best and wisest of men. If you are only zealous when you receive praise for it-if the wheels of your zeal must be oiled by the world's commendation, your zeal will be short-lived. Do not care for the praise or the frown of man. There is only

one thing worth caring for, and that is the praise of God. There is only one question worth asking about our actions: "How will they appear in the day of judgment?" Amen.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/jc-ryle/christian-zeal/>

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