

What is Christian Zeal?

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[0:00] The college and career will recognize this story. It's from John Piper's book, *Don't Waste Your Life*.! We recently read it, and it's a fitting beginning to this Sunday school lesson.

! Jack Lucas was 14 years old when Pearl Harbor was bombed. He fast-talked his way into the Marines at the age of 14.

He was assigned to drive a truck in Hawaii, but he grew frustrated because they wouldn't send him to the front lines, and he wanted to fight.

So he stowed away on a transport going to Iwo Jima, and he survived on food that was passed to him by sympathetic Marines.

D-Day of Iwo Jima arrived, and he landed on that shore with no rifle, and he ran up on the beach, grabbed a rifle lying there, and fought his way inland.

[1:04] D-Day plus one. Jack and three of his buddies were crawling through a trench when eight Japanese soldiers jumped out, and he shot one of them in the head, and then his rifle jammed.

D-Day, immediately, while he's trying to get his rifle to work, a hand grenade goes into the trench, and he shouts a warning at his buddies, and then he jumps over them on top of the hand grenade, and he pushes it down into the ash.

D-Day, immediately after that, another hand grenade flew in, and he grabbed that one, and he shoved it under his own body, and he took the full blast of two hand grenades, and he survived.

D-Day, immediately after that, 21 reconstructive operations later, he was back on his feet, and he was the youngest Medal of Honor winner in American history, and he was the only high school freshman to ever have that honor.

Lucas was a man of zeal. He was a man of one thing. He wanted to fight for his country. And zeal is the chapter that we are on next in J.C. Ryle's book, *Practical Religion*, and I'm not sure how to measure these things, but in my humble opinion, I think this is one of the best chapters in the book, and that's why we're going to spend probably three weeks on zeal.

[2:43] Ryle says, *Lazy, Lazy, Sleepy Christians*.

And that's why we're going to spend so much time on this chapter. I don't even begin to think that you are lazy, sleepy Christians, but I don't even begin to think that we don't need to be continually stirred up in this area.

And zeal is a fire that quickly goes out, isn't it? And so we want to stoke our hearts and cause them to burn, and so we're going to be doing that.

I want to stoke your heart so it's hot for God, and I want to do the same for my own heart. We have two points this morning. The first one is shorter.

The second one is longer. And the first point is we're going to have a definition of zeal. What is zeal in religion? You're eager. Eager is a very good synonym for zeal.

[4:15] Fervor? Passionate? Passion? Right. Right. Zeal in religion is a burning desire to please God, to do His will, to advance His kingdom in every possible way.

Zeal is a desire before it is anything else. Zeal is not so much an action that anyone does. It's a burning desire that is in the heart of every Christian.

And we don't feel it by nature. It doesn't come to us by nature. It's produced by the Spirit of God. He puts that desire to see God's will done in the heart of every believer.

And so zeal is this burning desire, a consuming desire, to please God. Some people feel this desire more than others.

And that's the sad truth, the sad reality. Later we're going to talk about some examples of Christians who have shown great zeal. And my zeal in comparison is a match compared to the inferno that was going on in some of those men's hearts.

[5:23] Some desire a little and some desire a lot. But it's only those who are really consumed by this desire who are held in its grip.

And those are the only ones that can really be called zealous men. Zealous men are men of one thing. And it's not enough to say that they're earnest and they're uncompromising.

It's not enough to say that they're thorough and wholehearted and fervent. They are men of one thing and one thing only. It's that one thing and it's nothing else for them.

They live by it and they die by it. Their life doesn't have any meaning. If you take that one thing away from them, their lives are swallowed up with that one thing.

They live by it and they die by it. Listen to J.C. Ryle. Now, whether he lives or whether he dies, whether he has health or whether he has sickness, whether he pleases man or whether he gives offense, whether he is thought wise or whether he is thought foolish, whether he gets blame or whether he gets praise, whether he gets honor or whether he gets shame.

[6:38] All this, the zealous man cares nothing at all. He doesn't care about honor. He doesn't care about blame. He doesn't care about life or death or giving offense.

He's a man of one thing. So I referred to Jack Lucas at the very beginning. He was a man that was consumed with one passion, and that was to fight for the United States of America.

He was a Marine before he was anything else. He forged his mother's signature so he could get into the Marines. He went AWOL from not only one unit but two units so he could get to the front.

He ran up on a beach with no weapon so he could fight. He was consumed with that one desire to go forward and to fight. Or you can think of Warren Buffett.

Warren Buffett is called the Oracle of Omaha because he knows about how to make money more than almost anyone else in this whole world.

[7:42] He's almost the perfect money-making machine. At 14, he took money that he earned selling papers and bought a ranch.

And he made money off of that. And by the time he was 21, he was a millionaire. And this was in the 40s and the 50s and when it meant something to be a millionaire.

He, last year at one point, was the wealthiest man in the world. But he cares nothing for spending his own money. He only wants to accumulate more and more.

He doesn't care about spending. He only wants it to come in. He lives in the same house that he bought in 1958 in Omaha. And it looks like a barn, if you've seen it.

He recently traded his six-year-old car in for a used Cadillac. And he makes probably more money every second than I will in my entire life.

[8:42] He doesn't own a cell phone. He doesn't own his own personal computer. He only cares about making money, about putting money in his own pocket.

Now, the zealous Christian is a man of one thing. It's not about fighting or it's not about making money. The man, the zealous man, wants to please the Master to advance God's glory.

And if he's burned up in the pursuit of it, he doesn't care. He wants to be burned up. He feels that he's a lamp that's made to burn.

And when he's burnt out, then he's only done what he was called to do. If he's consumed, then it is his joy to be consumed. Zealous Christians come in all stripes.

Zealous Christians come in all stripes. We're going to talk a lot about preachers and men and famous men, but it's not only preachers and men that are zealous.

[9:44] They come in all different stripes. It doesn't matter if a Christian is zealous if he preaches or not or if he has lots of money to give away or not. He has that one desire to see Christ magnified.

Ryle says, If he can't preach and work and give money, then he'll cry and sigh and pray. And if he cannot fight in the valley with Joshua, he will do the work of Moses, Aaron, and Hur on the hill.

If he is cut off from working himself, he will give the Lord no rest till help is raised up from another quarter and the work is done. So if he can't do the work, he's going to pray that someone else will.

The important thing is that the work is done. Zealous Christians are not easily satisfied. They're not easily satisfied. They want to see more and more and more done for the kingdom.

And so they devote themselves like an animal to the sacrifice. In the Old Testament, if an animal was devoted to the Lord, it meant he was going to the altar to die.

[10:56] And a zealous Christian views himself that way. He's an animal that's destined for the altar that God might be glorified. So if he's consumed, then he's consumed.

The important thing is that God's kingdom goes forward. So zealous Christians, they give their best thoughts to Jesus.

They give their first thoughts to Jesus. They give spiritual matters their keenest attention. This is what's important to them.

Their hearts are not divided. They're not running two different ways. They're not running to win second place. Their emotions are fixed on God and on that one thing.

And so they're devoted, body and soul and spirit and mind, to see God's kingdom advance, to please their master. That's their one thought.

[11:58] So they're men of one thing. I keep saying that, but that is the important thing about zeal. They're men of one thing. And everything else must find its place underneath that one concern.

There's no idol left on the throne. Nothing is allowed to interfere with this one thing, with the glory of God. So money, we're going to make money.

Money will be spent for God's glory. And time will be used for God's glory. Not a penny will be wasted. Not a second will be lost.

Everything is going to find its place under this one concern of glorifying God. Recreation has a real, legitimate place. But it finds its place under this one consideration.

And TV, and the internet, and friends, and family, and exercise, and clothes, and books, and cars, and your work, and your play.

[13:05] Everything will find its proper place under this one consideration. So these things aren't necessarily forsaken. Some of them might be. But they're not necessarily forsaken.

But everything is shaped and used for this one purpose of honoring God. Everything is wrapped up and pointed in the direction of pleasing God.

And so that is religious zeal. That is what it means to be zealous. So, to our second point. Let's see true religious zeal in action.

Turn in your Bibles to 1 Samuel 17. 1 Samuel 17. And as you probably have already noticed, this is the story of David and Goliath.

And so we don't need a lot of introduction to the story. But we do want to notice a few verses about David's zeal for the Lord. Remember, Goliath has challenged the armies of Israel.

[14:10] And he has defied them. And in doing so, he has defied God himself. And he comes out.

Goliath comes out day after day. And he challenges the Israelites to single combat. And day after day, the Israelites are shaking in their boots, only concerned about their own welfare.

Well, David shows up on the scene. He's arrived to give some food to his brothers, to send back news to his father. And as soon as he drops off the food that he brought, he goes to the front lines to see his brothers.

And that just happens to be the time when Goliath comes out to taunt the armies of Israel. And so David hears this taunt. He hears Goliath defying the armies of Israel and God.

And he has two questions. Look at verse 26. Or verse 25, excuse me. Now the Israelites had been saying, Do you see how this man keeps coming out?

[15:18] He comes out to defy Israel. The king will give great wealth to the man who kills him. He will also give him his daughter in marriage and will exempt his father's family from taxes in Israel.

So there's going to be great material gain for killing Goliath. You're going to be exempt from taxes. You're going to be married into the king's family.

So David asked in verse 26, David asked the men standing near him, What will be done for the man who kills this Philistine and removes this disgrace from Israel?

Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God? Look at David's second question. Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?

Do you hear, do you feel his indignation? David hears something that is mocking God and a fire is lit in his heart.

[16:21] The armies of the Lord and therefore the Lord of the armies have been defied and mocked. And so who is this uncircumcised dog?

Who does he think he is that he should say something like that? So the desire is burning in David's heart. And he looks at the situation. He sees Goliath taunting God and it makes him angry.

Something has to change. Something has to be done. This must be put to a stop. So you know the rest of the story. He goes to Saul and Saul outfits him with his armor and that doesn't work.

And so David goes down into the valley with a sling in his hand. He has five stones in a shepherd's pouch and he has a desire to vindicate God's name.

Goliath mocks him when he sees him coming. And look at David's response. Verse 45. David said to the Philistine, You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.

[17:42] This day the Lord will hand you over to me, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel.

All those gathered here will know that it is not by the sword or spear that the Lord saves, for the battle is the Lord's, and he will give all of you into our hands.

So why did David fight Goliath? Was it for his own personal glory? No, it wasn't for his own personal glory.

In verse 46, he says, I want the whole world to know that there is a God in Israel, and you have defied him, and he is worthy of honor, and you will die because of it.

So he goes down, and he does something mighty for God. The Lord helps him. The Lord honors his zeal. David was zealous for God's name.

[18:51] So David was characterized by zeal. Now zeal characterized not only David in the Old Testament, but zeal characterized the apostles.

Can you read the book of Acts without coming to the conclusion that these men were eager to do the Lord's work? They were zealous for Jesus. So remember, early on, the high priest and the rest of the Sanhedrin drug the apostles in, they arrested them, and they put them on trial.

Turn to Acts chapter 5. Acts 5 verse 27. Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest.

We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, he said, yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.

Peter and the other apostles replied, we must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead, whom you killed by hanging on a tree.

[20:06] God exalted him to his own right hand as prince and savior, that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.

So do you see their zeal? They are in the clutches of people that can put them to death. And they've already been told to be quiet one time, and they've already disobeyed that.

And the high priest and the Sanhedrin, they're sensitive. They don't want the blame of Jesus' death on them. And so they're saying, you're making us out to be the bad people.

You're telling everyone that we killed them. The apostles were not afraid. They said, we must obey God rather than men.

And you did kill the Son of Glory by hanging him on a tree. And so this made the Sanhedrin furious. They were angry, and they had the apostles flogged.

[21:12] But look at verse 41. So they've been flogged. The apostles left the Sanhedrin rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name.

Day after day, in the temple, in the temple courts, and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ. The apostles were men of one thing.

They were men of one thing. They counted a joy to suffer for God's name, for the name of Jesus. And so life and death and authorities and threats and orders and pain, it meant nothing to them.

The desire consumed them to glorify Christ. Or you could think of the apostle Paul. In Philippians, he says, Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to take hold of it, but one thing I do.

Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. So if we were to meet Paul on one of his journeys and said, Paul, what are you doing?

[22:38] What are you doing? And Paul would say, I'm doing this one thing. I'm forgetting what's behind and I'm pressing forward. Well, haven't you suffered enough?

Haven't you been beaten enough? Haven't you been in enough danger? Haven't you planted enough churches? Haven't you done enough good things? Haven't you been away from home long enough?

And Paul would say, Nope, all that stuff is forgotten. All of it is behind me. There's still more to do. There's still places to go.

There's still more to reach for. I'm pressing on and I want to win the prize. Paul was not running for second place. He wanted to win the prize.

He wanted first place. And so Paul was zealous. Zeal was the characteristic of Paul. And zeal was the characteristic of the early church.

[23 : 44] So if you think in the first 300 years of what it meant of the church, what it meant to become a Christian, it offered nothing good. Really. To become a Christian, you set yourself up for possible persecution, possible death.

They gain nothing outwardly for their conversion to Christ except for trouble. Listen to Ryle again. They generally gain nothing but the cross, persecution, shame, and reproach.

But they seldom, very seldom, went back. If they could not dispute, at least they could suffer.

However, if they could not convince their adversaries by argument, at any rate, they could die and prove that they themselves were in earnest.

So Polycarp, he was a disciple of the apostle John, and he was an old man when he was arrested. And under threat of death by a Roman governor, he was told to deny Christ.

And Polycarp said and answered, for 86 years I have served Christ and he has never offended me once. How can I revile my king?

[24 : 57] And Polycarp was put to death for his answer. And that's zeal. That's being consumed by one thing. Ignatius was a bishop in the Eastern Church and he was arrested and sent to the Colosseum to be eaten by lions.

And as he was making his way to Rome to die, he had the opportunity to stop at all these churches and the records say that his one message that he would say over and over again was, well now I begin to be a disciple of my Master Christ.

Now I'm starting to learn what it means to follow Jesus. And he was taken to the Colosseum and he died there. Origen.

And I'm not sure if this is misguided zeal or just zeal, but Origen was a teenager when his father was arrested and sent to die and his mother had to hide all of Origen's clothes so that Origen wouldn't run outside and die with his father.

He wanted to honor Christ in life or in death. And so it was the only thing that mattered was making and staying faithful to Christ.

[26 : 15] Zeal characterized the early church. Zeal characterized Martin Luther. He was scheduled to face the Emperor Charles II who's the most powerful man in all of Europe.

He's the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. He's the King of Spain and he probably had a lot of other titles. He's the most powerful man in Europe. He's scheduled to meet him at the Diet of Varms.

In Varms he would be confronted he would have a face-to-face dealing with the Emperor who was not happy with him. And he would have face-to-face meeting with the legate of the Pope which means the Pope's representative.

He was surely going to die. As far as the human perspective on things he was going to die. His friends reminded him remember John Huss which he died a hundred years earlier when he defied the Emperor and he was burned at the stake and his friends did everything to dissuade Luther.

And Luther's response was this though there were a devil under the roof under the tile on the roofs of the Varms if there was a devil under every tile on the roof of Varms in the name of the Lord I shall go forward.

[27 : 32] So he didn't care who he was going to meet there. He was going forward. He was going to do this one thing. The gospel had to be defended. And I can't imagine what it would be like to be walking to your death and to be okay with that.

To be so consumed with the desire to make much of Christ that your life and your death meant nothing. So we could go on.

John Calvin who basically broke his body and his health for the kingdom. We could talk about John Bunyan who spent years in prison away from his family because he would not stop preaching the gospel.

We could talk about Richard Baxter who went to prison when he was an old man for preaching the gospel. We could talk about Jonathan Edwards. We could talk about Henry Martin who died in the

wasteland in Turkey from tuberculosis trying to make, trying to get a translation of the scriptures for people that had no translation.

We could talk about Jim Elliot and he died by spears in the Aka Indians in 1956. We could talk about the English reformers.

[28:58] have any of you ever heard of Thomas Cramner? A few of you. Thomas Cramner lived and was a bishop in the Church of England in the time when Bloody Mary was the queen and she was putting tremendous pressure on anyone who had Protestant leanings.

Under the threat of death, Cramner signed a recantation. He said, I'm going to stop being a Protestant. I'm embracing the Catholic Church.

Well, later he recanted his recantation and he was sent to the fire to burn. And Cramner held up his right hand and he had it burnt to a stump.

And he said, you unworthy hand. And then he embraced the fire and was burnt to death. And J.C. Ryle says, that was zeal. And that's some Christian zeal that we know very little of.

So all those men have been zealous Christians. And we should note here that there's never been an excellent Christian who wasn't zealous. Zeal is the mark of every excellent and complete Christian.

[30:18] But we can turn from the shadows and see the reality in our Lord Jesus. Jesus Christ was characterized by zeal.

There has never been a man more zealous than our Lord. Hundreds of years before he was born, it was prophesied about him. Zeal for your house has consumed me.

Christ had a fire burning inside of him that was burning him up for the Lord's name. Isaiah 59 says, he wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak.

So zeal was on the inside burning away and zeal was on the outside marking everything he did. So why did Jesus come? Why did Jesus come?

It says in Hebrews, sacrifice an offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, here I am.

[31:14] It is written about me in the scroll. I have come to do your will, O God. So this one thing brought him to earth to do the will of the Father.

And so you can see him going about his whole life every single minute and every single second doing the will of the Father.

We can see him in Gethsemane and he's in the garden just like Adam was in a garden and he was under temptation by Satan. and there is pressure there from within and from without and the question is will he be faithful?

Will his zeal fail now? And it wouldn't. He had set his face like a flint to go to Jerusalem and to die and he won't be turned aside now.

The will of the Lord was to cause him to suffer and so he embraced it and he went to his suffering. And so in the face of a horrifying prospect of the cross and of experiencing the Lord's wrath, he said nevertheless not my will but your will be done.

[32:29] Christ was a man of one thing. He was a man of one thing and that was to do the will of the Father. No cost was too high. No pain was too great.

No grief was too sharp. Christ was consumed with zeal. And so zeal made Christ a sacrifice and zeal sent Christ to the cross to suffer for his people.

So Jesus was characterized by zeal. Now, we can go away from a lesson like this and see examples like this and be discouraged because you could feel, I could never be that way.

I don't have that sort of thing in me. I could never do and be that zealous for God. And I don't want you to walk away from here thinking that's for them and some other lower standard is for me.

And we just want to conclude with saying this is really possible for you to be this zealous. And I want to tell you why it's possible for you to be as zealous as Thomas Cramner and Martin Luther and the early church.

[33:49] And I'm going to tell you why. And the reason is before 1 Samuel 17, when David kills Goliath, 1 Samuel 16 says, so Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed David in the presence of his brothers.

And from that day on, the Spirit of the Lord came upon David in power. David didn't do his mighty feet because David was a superman. David did his mighty feet because the Spirit of the Lord was in him, the same spirit that each of you have.

And so before the apostles faced flogging and death and persecution and execution, there was Pentecost. There was Pentecost.

They were not supermen. They were filled with the same spirit as each one of you. so we're all frail. We're all sinners. But the same spirit indwells each one of us.

And remember we said earlier that this zeal is not natural. It's a spirit-produced desire within you.

And so, if it's a spirit-produced desire, it means that zeal is a prayer away.

[35:06] Romans 12, 11 says, never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor serving the Lord. Zeal is something that God wants for us. Zeal is something that God wants us to have, and he's commanded it.

And if he's commanded it, it means that we can pray for it as much as we want. And the only limit to the amount of zeal that we will have is the amount that we pray for it. So we can be zealous because it's a spirit-produced work.

We can be zealous because we have the same worthy causes as all those people did. God's name still needs vindicated on the earth. In your workplace, there are people that make fun of God, just like Goliath did.

There are still people that need to hear the gospel in faraway places, just like Henry Martin and David Brainerd and all those people that they went and did amazing things.

There are still people like that. places in our society, in our culture, where people don't acknowledge that Jesus is king, and their hearts need to be turned.

[36:14] So we have the same causes. There are still injustices to be righted. There are still strongholds of Satan that need torn down. There are still opportunities to suffer for the gospel, and that means we have the possibility to be as zealous as all those men that we've talked about.

We can be zealous, just as zealous as they were, because Jesus has paid the penalty for our lack of zeal. To not be zealous is a sin.

God has told us to love him with all of our heart, and all of our mind, and all of our soul, and all of our strength. And because we haven't done that, we have sinned. Because we haven't been zealous in that way, we have sinned.

But Jesus died so that we could be forgiven of that lack of zeal. And Jesus has died so that we can be free from that sin. We're not stuck in our lazy past, in our cold-heartedness from before.

So Jesus provides not only an example, but he provides the way out of our failures. We can be zealous, because if we make mistakes in our zeal, which if you're like me, you're going to make mistakes if you get zealous about something, because we're sinners.

[37:36] But Christ died for us. He died for us. So we don't have to be afraid to be zealous, to adventure boldly, to go forward and do something for the kingdom of God.

We are sinners. And so that means we're going to sin in our zeal. But Christ is forgiven. Christ has died for those sins. So be careful not to sin in your zeal, but be zealous.

There's a balance. We can be zealous just like those people that we've talked about, because we still have the same loving Father as all those people did.

If we become zealous for God, if we start doing great things for God, it's going to bring us suffering, and it's going to bring us pain. The kingdom of God must violently advance, and violent men are going to oppose us.

But we have a Father that will uphold us in all of our suffering. If we're zealous, we're going to suffer, but we have a Father that will uphold us. He'll be our refuge for us.

[38:48] And so that's why Jesus said, seek first the kingdom of God. And all of those things that the pagans run after, they'll be added to you. If we make zeal for God's kingdom our one priority, then God has promised that He'll take care of our needs, that He'll uphold us.

And so, don't we want Grace Fellowship Church to be a zealous people? And if the church is going to be a zealous people, it starts with each one of us being zealous ourselves.

So let's pray that God would make us zealous. Let's pray now. Our Heavenly Father, we thank You for the Lord Jesus.

We are sinners and we are beggars at best. We thank You that we have all the riches of Christ Jesus, that we are as righteous as He because He died for us.

Father, thank You for Your Word, and I pray that You would stir us up with the things that we've talked about. Father, we are dependent upon the Holy Spirit to move and to work in us.

[39 : 59] We don't have the ability to make ourselves zealous, and so we ask You, will You do something in us for Jesus' sake? Amen.