

Never Be Lacking in Zeal
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
July 3, 2022-AM Service
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Romans 12:9-12

One of the reasons people say that Scripture memorization is a good idea is that it implants the words of the Bible deep in you. To memorize Scripture is to write it on your heart. And when something is written on your heart, it will shape how you see the world and how you interact with it. Memorization makes you a person of the Word. Many of you who are here are obviously memorizing, or trying to memorize, Romans 12:9-21. I can see you trying not to look at your Bibles. I hope that some of you who are out there livestreaming are trying to memorize this passage.

I know that even some of you who are on vacation are working on memorizing this passage. The Bouwman's—Joel, Leah, Jonathah and Joellah—are in Spain walking the Camino de Santiago, the ancient pilgrimage route that starts in France and goes along the border between Spain and France and ends at the cathedral of Saint James in Galicia, Spain. They've been memorizing Romans 12 as part of the pilgrimage. It's been going pretty well. I got an email from Leah the other day and she said that in the middle of a long and hot day, Joel was getting footsore and, in her words, 'maybe a little grumpy.' 12-year-old Joellah had a word of exhortation for her father, "Dad, never be lacking in zeal! Keep your spiritual fervor!" The whole family laughed. It's a pretty good illustration how when we memorize, the Word frames your experience.

It's also a pretty good illustration of the problem Paul is pointing at in this verse. Paul is warning Christians against losing the fervency of their faith. Paul is warning them against losing the excitement of following Jesus. Paul wants them to keep their zeal. And one of the places where it's sometimes hard to keep your zeal is in the middle of a long journey, a long struggle, a long pilgrimage. It's often in the middle of long struggles that we lose our zeal. It's when the pandemic drags on and on. When the meeting tips into its third hour. When we've been at our so-so job for 20 years and it doesn't look like anything will ever change. When our marriage just seems to be going through the motions. When the church just seems to lurch from one fight to the next. That's when we grow weary of well doing. That's when we start to lose our enthusiasm. That's when we lose our zeal.

It's a serious problem. In the Christian tradition, the loss of zeal was a serious enough problem and a common enough problem that they gave it a name. Not only did they give it a name, they numbered it among the seven deadly sins. Do you know which one? Sloth. The deadly sin of sloth is the sin opposite of zeal; zeal for the Lord is the virtue opposed to sloth.

Sloth is not laziness. It's an old word and we don't use it much, but when we do, we often think of laziness. A slothful person is a lazy person. But sloth is not laziness, it's deadness of spirit. Sloth is a feeling that nothing really matters. A person in the grip of sloth has lost their zest for life and is simply going through the motions. Dorothy Sayers, the great British author and theologian described it well when she wrote: "*[Sloth] is the sin which believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and only remains alive because there is nothing it would die for.*"

This sin can infect all areas of life. This deadness of Spirit can infect your work, your family, your marriage, your friendships. But when Paul talks about loss of zeal he is thinking of one area of life in particular, he's speaking to a loss of zeal for the things of God, a loss of excitement for his word, his people, his service, his way. And Paul undoubtedly speaks to this area, because just about every Christian I know who is honest about their life as a disciple will admit to going through seasons where they lose their zeal. Seasons where it feels as though they are going through the motions. Seasons where the joy of the Lord is elusive. We don't like to admit that we have these seasons. When we sing our songs they are songs of praise and joy. The hymns we sing in church make it sound like we are full of zeal, like our hearts are full of the joy of the Lord, but those words don't always match the state of our souls.

There is at least one hymn in our hymnal which acknowledges those seasons where we lack zeal. It's number 324 in Lift Up Your Hearts. It's the hymn '*O For a Closer Walk with God.*' We almost never sing it. It was written by William Cowper. Do you know this name? Cowper was a famous poet of the late 18th century. He was a friend and contemporary of John Newton. I read this week that he was Jane Austen's favorite poet. Cowper was a man who struggled with periods of dryness and even despair. He was not afraid to admit that he was sometimes lacking in zeal. That shows up in '*O For a Closer Walk.*' Listen to verse 2: "Where is the Blessedness I once knew, when first I sought the Lord? Where is the Soul-refreshing view of Jesus and his Word? What peaceful hours I once enjoyed, how sweet their memory still, but they have left an aching void, the world can never fill." They're not singing that in Joel Osteen's church. It's raw. It's vulnerable.

It's also honest. I don't know a single believer who doesn't struggle through seasons, sometimes long seasons, of spiritual dryness. Like Cowper, they can think back and remember times when it used to be different. "I remember when I was in that great Bible study! I was on fire!" "When my youth group went on that mission trip I was so pumped! That's why I made profession of faith!" "I went to that unbelievable church in college. I left every service full of gratitude for the grace of God and his salvation and his mercies." You have the memory of zeal, but now you feel, flat, numb. And you would do anything to get that feeling of Spiritual excitement back again.

That's part of what makes this verse hard. Paul says "Never be lacking in zeal but keep your Spiritual fervor serving the Lord." We hear that and we say, "Paul, what do you think we're trying to do here!?! That's what we want! We don't want to be numb, we want the joy of the Lord to fill us from head to toe. What else would we want?" So it's possible to hear this verse and be frustrated with Paul. "Paul, I want this, but I can't restart the zeal!" When you lose that feeling, how do you get it back?"

Several things here. First, these moments of flagging zeal are part of the Christian journey. They are completely normal. We don't talk about them and sometimes we talk and act as if they aren't happening, and that masks how often people feel this way, but seasons of dryness are absolutely part of the experience of every disciple. In the middle of his long hike through the desert, Moses wanted to give up. I'm tired of these people, he said to the Lord in Numbers 11. "If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me." When Elijah was burned out from his work, he sat under the broom tree and prayed to die. "I've had enough Lord!" he said. The writers of the Psalms give voice to their Spiritual dryness all the time: "I cry to you to help every morning Lord, why do you reject me and hide your face from me?" "And even Jesus asked, "My God My God, why have you forsaken me?" So this spiritual dryness is pretty normal. It was part of David's path and part of Moses' path; we should expect it on our

path too. It's unpleasant, and you and I might not always understand why God allows such times, but it's not necessarily a sign that you are off course.

Second, Paul is giving us a suggestion of how to handle these seasons when our zeal is lacking. "Keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord." Now, serving the Lord is a participle in the English and in the Greek, and you could take the meaning here a couple of ways. First, you could hear Paul saying that the service of the Lord as a result of zeal. Zeal and fervor lead to service of the Lord. That's certainly true. Zeal leads to service. When we are on fire for God, when we are overwhelmed with gratitude for the goodness of life and swept up by his grace, we will respond with acts of service. So you could hear the passage as, "Keep your spiritual fervor so that you will serve the Lord."

But you could also read it the other way around. You could say "Keep your spiritual fervor BY serving the Lord." In that reading, Paul would be saying something like this: "you want to know how to restore your zeal? You do it by serving the Lord." Service will help restore your zeal.

That's true too. The Holy Spirit uses service and engagement to restore zeal. That's been shown to be true in the area of youth. Way back in 2005, this church got a grant from the Calvin Worship Institute to study youth and worship. We wanted to see how to get young people to connect to worship. I don't think the word zeal showed up in the grant request, but we were trying to help parents and church leaders what helped their child grow in zeal for the Lord. After months of study the committee returned with a report that said it wasn't about worship style—having a really cool band or an organist with funky socks did not increase youth's attachment. It wasn't having a super cool, young youth leader that increased youth attachment. What did increase youth attachment? Involvement. If they were actively engaged in the work of the church, if they were given meaningful service within the church, if they knew the congregation listened to them and valued their service, they became more interested in church. When they were engaged in service, their zeal increased.

That finding was confirmed by the Fuller Youth Institute in their 2016 book *Growing Young*. They interviewed and observed dozens of churches that were doing a good job attracting and keeping young people and they also found that it wasn't about the cool, young youth pastor, it wasn't the groovy contemporary worship, it was involvement, engagement. When the young people were invited into meaningful church leadership and service that they became passionate and engaged. Both these studies suggested that youth keep their Spiritual fervor BY serving the Lord. Both studies showed us that serving the Lord isn't just a result of zeal, the Spirit uses your service to create zeal.

This isn't just true for youth of course; it's true for all of us. Here's how that works. You decide to get involved in a really simple way at church. You volunteer for the nursery once a month. On your second time you meet a young member of the church and, as you hold babies and manage the chaos, the two of you talk. She tells you that her mom is really sick with cancer and may not live long. As you talk more, it's clear that this young woman is really close to her mom, and this terminal diagnosis is really hard on her. The next day in your prayers you find yourself thinking of your nursery mate. You pray for her and her mom. The next week at church you see her in the narthex after church. You wave, come over and ask about her mom. She tells you that mom's had a rough week and you promise to pray for them. Two weeks later you see her again. This time she comes over to you and tells you that her mom died. Her voice cracks when she tells you and you spontaneously give her a hug. As you leave you feel like you really want to find out when the visitation will be because you want to go and show your support.

See what happened there? See what the Spirit did? You thought you were just going look after babies in the nursery, but the Spirit did much more than that. The Spirit engaged you more deeply in the life of God's people. The Spirit increased your zeal. "Never be lacking in zeal but keep your Spiritual fervor *by* serving the Lord."

Of course that doesn't mean you're creating the zeal. You keep your Spiritual fervor; you don't make it. The wind of your fervency doesn't come from you. The Spirit's wind is the power that moves you. But that doesn't mean you can't adjust your sails to catch the wind. Even in that nursery example I just gave, are the two people in that story creating the zeal, or are they stepping into the middle of something that the Spirit has already started? I firmly believe that they are just opening themselves to something the Spirit is already doing.

Let's think about that wind and sail image a minute. This sanctuary is meant to look like a boat, did you know that? Those rafters are meant to look like the ribs of the ship. What kind of a ship is this? It's not a Roman galley ship. The galley is one of those ships propelled by oars. Rows and rows of slaves would sit on benches and pull together on the oars. While a person stood in front and beat a drum to make sure the slaves all pulled together. This is not a galley ship. I'm not up here beating a drum while you all pull on the oars. This is a schooner. A great sailing vessel. The power that moves the church forward is the great wind of the Spirit.

That doesn't mean we are passive. We crew members have lots to do. Some of us are hoisting the sails, others are minding the lines, others are looking at the charts and trying to figure out the course God has laid out for us, others are up in the crow's nest looking ahead for possible danger signs. There's lots to do, and when we all work together, when the sails are trimmed and the lines are secure, and everyone is working together, the Spirit fills our sails and we surge forward. The church under full sail, all her sails up, moving forward under the benediction of a bright sun...that is a beautiful sight. That's enough to bring zeal to the most cynical heart.

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