

Soul Stuff: “Zeal is Passion with a Purpose”  
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This week we are finishing this series on Soul Stuff. The spiritual discipline is Zeal. But, first we need to define it. Zeal is like an inner disturbance that will not let us rest until we accomplish whatever is driving us forward. Being zealous as a Christian is much more than being a “go getter,” or being “success driven.” It is the satisfying resolution of the inner conversation about your purpose in life. Zeal, or passion, is what drives your inner decision process to resolve your purpose in the world. Of course, there are different categories of zeal. It might be based on immoral or bad motives. It might be divisive and cold. The kind I want to focus on is Christian zeal--an inner compunction to be what Christ has made us to be and to do what we have to do with joy and energy. This sermon focuses on the enthusiasm of a Christian that is demonstrated by a passion with a purpose in a life centered on God as known through Jesus Christ.

Is there a New Testament example of someone with “zeal.” The apostle Paul was one, and eventually all the apostles, even Judas who had his own brand of zeal. But, I want to challenge you with a story from Jesus’s life. And it will be a challenge!

It is one of the most compelling stories in the Bible to me. Jesus came to the temple one day where he found a setting that he could not tolerate any longer without addressing it in no uncertain terms. I can’t believe he had never observed it before. Perhaps he had passed by many times on the way to the temple thinking that one day he would do something about it. Maybe he saw the opportunity as a way to address how different his idea about the kingdom of God was compared to the religious institutions of the day. Whatever, Jesus felt compelled to take a stand completely out of character as we remember his way of doing things. In a scene that might have been straight from a set in Indiana Jones and The Lost Ark, He turned over tables and literally ran off the profit driven attendants. Here’s a little background before we can go on.

There were vending tables set up to provide the temple approved kind of sacrifices for worshipers who came from long distances but either had the wrong sacrificial animal for the occasion or needed the convenience of a close by purchase source for their required atonement. The disciples couldn’t even imagine it. They tried to explain to one another but all they had was a text from a Psalm—

“The zeal of the Lord has consumed him.” We even have an expression like that in English. You can sometime hear the old people say, “Well, that just burns me up.” Those venders just burned Jesus up when it came to what he knew was true about the temple of God.

Whereas some stories from Jesus’s ministry are mentioned in one or two of the gospels only, this story is found in all four. To be fair, that doesn’t mean that this one is more important than the others, but it does beg the question why four different gospel writers with four different purposes include this same story in their narrative.

Matthew, Mark and Luke place it chronologically sometime during Jesus’s last days before his crucifixion. Writing to the Hebrews, Matthew saw it as an imperative story to a new understanding about the kingdom of God in Jesus’s teaching to Jerusalem and the cleansing of the temple before the story of the fig tree. Writing to Gentiles, Mark chronicles events in the life of Jesus one after another with rapid succession—from Bethany to Jerusalem and the cleansing of the temple after the story of the fig tree. So, it was one more essential event to be described.

Also writing to the Gentiles, Luke proposes an accurate account of the life and times of Jesus—the triumphal entry, several events, the cleansing of the Temple and a whole chapter before you get to the fig tree. So, it appears important to the historical narrative Luke was telling. However, the apostle John enters his account of the episode in the second chapter of his gospel, just after the first of seven miracles, in Jerusalem but no story of the barren fig tree but one that Nathaniel was found beneath. So, the question is why there and not at the end of the gospel like the others, or did Jesus drive out the traders more than once. It is likely that the story is essential to the reason John wrote in the first place. In all of the gospels there is an account of Jesus’s authority being questioned and his responses to the affronts.

The Gospel of John is not a chronology but a collection of arguments that he said were convincing proof that Jesus was the son of God and that believing in him people could have everlasting life. And so, with that story John recalls that the disciples were aghast. John notes that the best explanation they could give was an Old Testament passage that said, “The zeal of Lord has consumed me.” They were quoting from Psalm 69:9 where David was addressing his indignation over people in the history of Israel who were his enemies. The disciples compared Jesus’s actions to those of David. Later the gospel writers put the whole narrative in their summary statement about the authority of Jesus Christ as Lord, whose life was

consumed by a passionate fire from within that they could not explain apart from his death, burial, and subsequent resurrection. Even from the vantage point of looking back, we have a hard time today explaining Christ's own zeal. Not just the story of cleansing the temple but the powerful story of someone who lived only 33 years on earth. And, obviously, there were sometimes, from our point of view, he wasn't very nice about it. For him it was about his authority. For the disciples it was about his passion for introducing a new way of thinking about the kingdom of God.

Just as Jesus came to terms with his own divine purpose on earth, he also sought from those who followed him a serious commitment to their own purpose for following him. He wanted passionate, zealous people who would choose a clear, distinctive pathway for their lives. Statements like, "if you want to be my disciple you will have to give up your personal welfare and follow me," or, "if you want to have abundant life you must be willing to give up the old life in favor of the new," or if you want to be my disciple you must take up your own cross and follow me." Those statements and other like them sought from his followers, not merely allegiance, but zeal. Passion for life that comes from a thoughtful, and willful centering of one's life on the chief purpose of human beings in the first place, as we say, to glorify God and enjoy God forever."

As the Greek suggests the word zeal is a consuming fire. It comes from a steady, disciplined approach to life that considers who we are and whose we are. Apparently, Jesus was in an unknown place for twenty years or more contemplating the human life he was sent to live. When at thirty he arrived in Galilee there was no doubt what he knew about himself and what he had to say and do. Paul was another example of unrelenting passion. He wrote about that zeal in the text we read earlier. [And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.](#)

C. S. Lewis makes a good argument in his book *Mere Christianity* about why the inner disciplines result in a zealous, or passionate, response to our faith. "[To have Faith in Christ] means, of course, trying to do all that He says. There would be no sense in saying you trusted a person if you would not take his advice. Thus, if you have really handed yourself over to Him, it must follow that you are trying to obey Him. But trying in a new way, a less worried way. Not doing these things in order to be saved, but because He has begun to save you already. Not hoping to get to Heaven as a reward for your actions, but inevitably wanting to act in a certain way because a first faint gleam of Heaven is already inside you."

There are three sparks in us, I think. One is the spark of the divine. Second, there is the spark of the kingdom of God. And finally, there is the spark of life that must consume us with our love for God and others for the glory of God, now and forever more, world without end. Amen. Our passion comes from our purpose. Our Christian zeal is the energy of our Christian souls.