

Is Your Zeal According To Knowledge?

Daniel Bailey

Do not let your heart envy sinners,
But be zealous for the fear of the LORD all the day;
For surely there is a hereafter,
And your hope will not be cut off.

– Proverbs 23:17

Zealously is an excellent word to describe how every Christian should strive to serve the Almighty God. If we're going to serve God at all, we should do it with zeal. The dictionary definition of zeal reads something like this: "*enthusiastic devotion to a cause, ideal, or goal and tireless diligence in its furtherance.*" In other words, zeal is a passion, a fervent and enthusiastic devotion to a cause, an active pursuit of some goal or ideal. In Psalm 119:139, the Psalmist describes his zeal for the word of God, a zeal enflamed upon witnessing those who disregard God's commands and precepts: "*My zeal has consumed me, because my enemies have forgotten Your words.*" Truly, the Scriptures reveal that David, who penned many of the Psalms, had a tremendous zeal for the word of God – he meditated upon it day and night, regarded it as a lamp to his path and a rock in times of trial, and often expressed his devotion to share the word of God with others (cf. Psalms 18:30, 56:10, 9:1).

The Lord Jesus Christ exhibited a tremendous zeal for God and for the holiness of the things that belong to Him. Christ's righteous zeal is powerfully displayed in John chapter 2 when Jesus drives the money changers and merchants from the Temple in Jerusalem, stating, "*Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!*" Later on in the life of Christ, He cleansed the temple again, this time condemning the merchants and money changers for their thievery (cf. Matthew 21:12f). But in John 2, it appears that the Lord's anger was stirred simply because the merchants treated the Lord's house as a common market, failing to revere the holiness of what belongs to God. Upon witnessing this scene, Christ's disciples immediately recalled Psalm 69:2, where it is written, "*Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up.*" Righteous zeal is a tremendous benefit, even an absolute necessity in serving God and shunning the very appearance of evil.

On the other hand, sometimes zeal can be destructive and harmful, actually leading away from God instead of toward Him and His righteousness. For instance, in Philippians 3:6, the apostle Paul describes the zeal he once had for the Old Law and the traditions of the Pharisees – a zeal which led him to persecute the church and try to destroy it (cf. Galatians 1:13). While persecuting Christians, even to the point of death, Saul of Tarsus firmly believed that his zeal was for the will of the Lord, and that his actions glorified God, yet in truth his zeal was according to ignorance and unbelief, harming the church and thus Christ Himself (Acts 9:4f). Similarly, the Holy Spirit attests in Romans 10:2f that the Jews of the 1st century who rejected the gospel in favor of the Old Law had "*a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.*" The men and women described in this passage zealously sought to serve God, but in their own way instead of His, and thus they fell far short of the righteousness of God.

These examples stand as a warning for all who would seek to serve God in this life: zeal, if not in accordance with knowledge of God's word, can easily lead away from righteousness unto destruction and death. Many people in the religious world today, even in the Church, mimic the mistakes described in Romans 10:2, having much zeal for God, but focusing that zeal only with their emotions and the teachings and traditions of men, resulting in vain worship and the very opposite of edification (Matt. 15:89). Our zeal in serving and worshipping the Lord must be tempered by the truth, not fueled only by emotion and man's wisdom. We must be sure that the concerns and ideals we are enthusiastic about, and the causes and goals that we strive to advance are truly righteous in the eyes of God – a fact we can only know through diligent and humble study of the Holy Scriptures.