

# The Pastor's Zeal

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Please turn your Bible to Paul's book of Romans. [Romans 12](#). In the latest issue of *The New Yorker*, there is a fascinating article that immediately caught my interest. Here was the title, *A Unified Field Theory of Bob Dylan*, subtitled, *He's in his eighties. How does he keep it fresh?* It's a fascinating article about a fascinating artist. In trying to answer this question, the author makes this remarkable observation. He writes this,

*"In his own way, Dylan is reminiscent of Verdi, Monet, Yeats, O'Keeffe, a freak of creative longevity."*

A freak of creative longevity. If you're a Dylan fan, and you should be, you'll love the article.

It explores Dylan's longevity as an artist, but it provoked in me a question that fascinates me even more, a question I care about much more, especially on the occasion of our 40th anniversary. What about pastoral longevity? Is there some secret that ensures a pastor's long-term enduring effectiveness? What makes the difference between a pastor who runs the race faithfully to the end and a pastor who does not? Who begins well, and for a while, runs fast, but eventually fades, loses his pastoral edge, his Godly vibrancy, maybe even quits the race altogether?

In Andrew Bernard's diary, he records a moment from his ordination where an old minister approached him and spoke to him very solemnly. These were the words that continued to ring in Bernard's mind.

*"Remember that very few men and very few ministers keep up to the end the edge that was on their spirit at the first."*

Haunting words, aren't they? How do we, as individuals, as a company of pastors, how do we keep up to the end the edge that was on our spirit at the first?

We might point to a number of factors that play a part, but I believe we can find a preeminent factor in our text this morning. It comes in a surprising place, almost buried in a litany of command astute believers. In this string of imperatives in [Romans 12](#), we find a single verse that I believe reveals a secret to pastoral longevity, to faithfulness and fruitfulness that endures, that doesn't dissipate as we age, but can even grow and grow as we age.

This is a virtue that is often overlooked, and it can be easily neglected, but given attention, I think there's a promise in this text for us this morning. Given attention, and cultivated, and protected, this virtue holds enduring promise for another 40 years. Promise for the pastor, promise for your pastoral team, promise for pastor's wives, promise for all of sovereign grace. What is this secret? I believe we can find it almost hidden, amidst the flurry of commands in [Romans 12:11](#). [Romans 12:11](#):

*"Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord."*

Here I believe Paul discloses this secret, the forgotten virtue of zeal. I call it a secret, not because it's hidden, but because we can so often overlook it.

Let me ask you a question, how often have you reflected upon zeal? How many sermons have you heard on zeal? In our culture's exaltation of professionalism and competence, zeal is optional. In our culture of irony and cool and snark, you're not going to find zeal celebrated. Who wants to be called a zealot? Even biblically, it's not as explicitly prominent as other virtues, at least measured by word count, but we don't do theology by word count.

Zeal is actually present everywhere. Everywhere we see God, who does says things like this, "The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this." It often bursts forth in glory in the life of Jesus. Zeal for your house has eaten me up. It's a literal translation. You see it everywhere, the gospel is reflected upon its fruits, celebrated, its mission pursued. Though this is commanded here of all believers, it has special relevance for the pastor.

As verse 8 suggests, you remember verse 8, there Paul exhorts the one who leads, and I think he has primarily in view those who lead the church, they are to do so, not with wisdom, although that's critical, not with gentleness, although that's non-negotiable, not with purity, although that's imperative, he tells them to lead with zeal. Zeal is a peculiar virtue for the pastor, and it's one that can ensure long-term faithfulness and fruitfulness.

Here's what's encouraging to us this morning. Zeal is available to everyone regardless of age, regardless of ministry experience, regardless of pastoral

personality, regardless of pastoral giftedness. It's a virtue to value, to guard, and to eagerly pursue. This morning, this is what I'd like to do. I'd like us to explore this forgotten virtue of zeal. Taking our cue from [Romans 12:11](#), but we will range more broadly as well. I believe the Lord would have us this morning carefully consider this virtue, evaluate ourselves against this virtue, and this is what I think he wants to do, lodge this virtue in our minds and in our hearts as a pastoral category. Most importantly, to kindle this virtue in our souls, to strengthen us, to preserve our pastoral faithfulness, to make us freaks of pastoral longevity. Wouldn't that be cool?

That's our goal this morning. Guided by our text, we'll explore this virtue into three simple headings, three dimensions of zeal that I pray will impress this virtue upon us and inspire us towards this key to pastoral longevity. First, number one, the imperative of zeal. That's how this virtue is presented to us. It's not explored, it's not explained, it's not apologized for, it's commanded. Verse 11 again, "Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord." Verse 8, look up again, "The one who exhorts in his exhortation, the one who contributes in generosity, the one who leads with zeal."

Now, we need to be clear. What is Paul commanding? What does scripture mean by zeal, by godly zeal? Now, zeal is one of those things that is assumed but rarely defined. For most of us, it's far easier to illustrate than it is to define it. We all have portraits of zeal in our minds, usually certain extroverted people, or compelling public ministry. Last night, CJ preaching on [Isaiah 53](#), that's zeal. What I do with my children, man. I'm just doing the children thing.

Those kind of definitions exclude all manner of Christians to which this command applies. It excludes the more quiet among us, the less publicly prominent among us. This zeal, this virtue is not a superficial virtue. It's not a function of personality. Paul is not requiring the emulation of type A leaders. It's not what he's talking about. Now, there's a few words for zeal in the New Testament. A primary one is in our text, translated elsewhere as eagerness or earnestness. It's more than an emotion, although it's not less than emotional, but it's not an emotion. It can speak. This word can speak of, these are some of the phrases, some of the translations, an earnest commitment to something or someone, devotion to a cause, a single-minded determination toward a goal, an unswerving resolve to fulfill an obligation.

You hear in those translations, don't you, this combination of sincerity and commitment, desire and determination. The picture must be filled out because the Bible also knows of a false zeal like Jehu, who boasted of his zeal, which proved to be a zeal for violence and not for obedience. The Puritans are so

helpful here. Far from overlooking zeal, they studied zeal in scrupulous detail. They wrote sermons and books on zeal. They actually cataloged and condemned false zeal or blind zeal at length.

Here's a sampling from the Puritans of bogus zeal. See if you can relate. Zeal over trivial matters, zeal driven by pride, zeal that is rash, zeal that fades over time. That's not zeal. Zeal that's discouraged by difficulties, not zeal. Zeal that stirs up controversies, definitely not zeal. Zeal that divides, zeal that resists authority, zeal that is harsh, zeal that is untreatable, zeal that is stubborn in its convictions on secondary matters.

John Evans, he worked with Matthew Henry, he was an 18th-century separatist pastor, said this about false zeal.

*"Indeed, heat without light, or rash and blind zeal, is the most extravagant and mischievous thing in the world. Therefore, careful examination should always go before the actings of zeal. Otherwise, we may be found fighting against God."*

The proud zealous poser can't hide from the Puritans. Mere passion, or strong feelings, or stubborn dogmatism, or loud personalities is not sacred zeal. Sacred zeal is not only about the heat of our emotions, but the focus of our affections.

We see that on our text. Verse 11 shows us the object of our zeal. "Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord." Do you see what he's doing there? This internal fervency, their energies of mind and heart and soul and will have a target. They're to be engaged in serving Christ. When we look up from that single command and we consider the context, the landscape in which this command is set, that little phrase "serve the Lord," explodes in significance.

Think where we are in the book of Romans. The reader or listener of this letter will just emerge from the most magnificent exposition of the gospel ever written. 11 chapters expounding the climax of salvation history, the fulfillment of all of God's revelation, the greatest saving act of all of God's saving acts, the sacrifice of his son, which as Romans explains, at one and the same time, both vindicated God's righteousness and rescued hopeless and helpless sinners.

They've also heard or read of the transforming effects of this gospel. God's provision of a savior inaugurated not just forgiveness, it inaugurated a new age of existence. A toning grace ushered in transforming, sanctifying, empowering grace. This flurry of commands in [Romans 12](#), they're not footnotes to Paul's gospel. They're the necessary implications of the gospel.

Those saved by God's son are united to His son and given the life of His son, which is then to be given in zealous expression to the glory of the son. That's the Christian life. You're united to Christ, that His life might be lived for you, through you, zealously for His glory. Welcome to the Christian life. Anything less, it's becoming slothful in zeal.

When Paul says, "Be zealous, serve the Lord," he's not calling for spiritual heroism. It's a reverberation of the gospel set loose in the world and set loose in our lives. Even the strong verb there, serve, in verse 11, breathes this intentional zeal. It's not the deacon word. It's different from the word serve in verse 11. This is a slave word. Devote yourselves in total service. Murray Harris gives the literal translation, "give a slave's service". Abandon all your rights, subordinate all other priorities, invest all your energies is what Paul is calling us to. This verb actually reigned through [Romans 6](#), announcing our liberation from sins bondage and our glorious slavery to a new master.

True zeal burns with passion and it burns with a focus. All the energies of the soul are ignited by the spirit and fixed upon the object of God's greatest affection, Jesus Christ. We burn to know Him. We burn to please Him. We burn to glorify Him. J.C. Ryle speaks eloquently of the laser-like focus of this sacred zeal.

*"A zealous man in religion is preeminently a man of one thing. It's not enough to say that he is earnest, hardy, uncompromising, thorough-going, wholehearted, fervent in spirit. It's not enough. He only sees one thing. He cares for one thing. He lives for one thing. He is swallowed up in one thing, and that one thing is to please God. Whether he lives or whether he dies, whether he is rich or whether he is poor, whether he pleases men or whether he gives offense, whether he is thought wise or whether he is thought foolish, whether he gets honor or whether he gets shame, for all of this, the zealous man cares nothing at all. He burns for one thing, and that one thing is to please God and to advance God's glory."*

Recognize that one thing. David's voice, "One thing have I asked of the Lord that I will seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord and to inquire one thing." Recognize Jesus' voice. One thing is necessary. "Come sit at my feet." Recognize Paul's voice. "One thing I do, forgetting what lies behind, straining forward to what lies ahead." For the Christian, the one thing is Jesus Christ, who is like Him, friends. Majestic in His eternality, marvelous in His condescension, fierce in His holiness, tender in His care, all glorious, as we heard last night, all glorious in His what? Self-abnegation. His zealous embrace of scorn, and blows, and

thorns, and nails, and suffering, and cosmic justice, and the wrath of his dearly loved father for you and for me. Who's like him?

When that one thing, nothing but Christ and him crucified to live is Christ. All things lost that I might gain Christ, then I might know I Him. When that one thing captures you and captivates you, and stirs your affections, and inflames your soul, and impels you to give yourself to Him and for Him, that's sacred zeal. That's what God requires of us, especially pastors called to care for his own. Not exquisite gifting. Not an impressive persona, or academic achievement, or pastoral experience. Not merely a doctrinal affirmation or sterling ordination credentials. You can have all of that, and yet lack this imperative, this required virtue, an earnest, unwavering, all-encompassing devotion to Christ, and his kingdom, and his cause, and his glory.

Our text is realistic. It anticipates challenges to obeying this imperative, which leads to our second point, the second dimension of zeal, number two, the enemies of zeal. Look again at verse 11. Let's keep working our text. "Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit." While we are exhorted to zeal, the text implies it can be neglected. It struck me how spiritually insightful Paul's words are. Note what he doesn't say. He doesn't just say, "Don't be slothful." He doesn't say, "Don't be lazy." He doesn't say, "Get off the couch." He doesn't say, "Get out of bed." He doesn't say that. What does he say. "Don't be slothful in zeal."

Don't neglect this specific virtue. Tend to zeal. Like a campfire in a barren cold wilderness, you just can't afford for it to die down. You tend it, you stoke it, you feed it. Your life depends on it. The pastor must maintain this virtue. He must maintain his zeal, which requires diligence. It requires constant attention, which is critical for us to be aware of because zeal doesn't suddenly vanish. The flame of zeal is rarely extinguished by a single gust of wind. Zeal erodes. The erosion happens slowly and gradually, usually imperceptibly.

Here is a spiritual skill we must develop. We must learn to discern when zeal diminishes. The signs are subtle. Perhaps you don't enter into singing on a Sunday morning like you used to. In the Sunday meeting, you're less engaged with encountering God, and more preoccupied with your contribution. You move through the crowd and you're less aware that people you're passing are those for whom Christ died, who are carrying burdens, and you're just more aware of what I got to do.

When you're not preaching, you're honed in on the critique of your brother's sermon, but oblivious that you are being addressed by God. Your appetites

slowly change. Reading for your own soul is displaced by- well, name your preference. Blogs - here today, gone tomorrow, or political commentary, or social media scrolling. Gosh. Oh, it's been 45 minutes and all I've done is see pictures of people's meals.

All gradual, easily dismissed, explained, justified, maybe, but all potential signs of the erosion of zeal. These are signs. These are signs. What are the causes? Why does zeal erode? What are the enemies of zeal? I do not think these are complicated, but they are insidious. This is what's tricky about it. Their effects are often seen only in hindsight. You don't see the erosion of zeal coming. As I reflected on this, it dawned on me, their operations can be mysterious. I can think of men whose zeal bears little resemblance to their younger days, but pinpointing a specific cause can sometimes be difficult.

I'm just going to name a few of these enemies. Number one, and most clearly, the deadly effect of sin, the greatest enemy of our zeal. For instance, teaching on sin is part of our toolkit. We know it offends God. We know it nailed Jesus to the cross. We teach all that, and we can teach all that, all the while ignoring the deadening effects of sin on our soul. It might lead to shipwreck, but it will always drain your spiritual life in its deadly zeal.

Remember when David was still cherishing his sin, postponing confession? What did he say? [Psalm 32](#), "My bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night, your hand was heavy upon me. My strength was dried up by the heat of summer." Oh, we don't want to be found that way as a pastor. Here's a tragedy. As a pastor ages, there's a decreasing sensitivity to sin and an increasing accommodation of sin. We take drastic measures to avoid a virus, but we breathe in sin like oxygen. To use Pauline metaphors, we are pouring water on the very spirit who kindles zeal.

Remember Richard Baxter's warning? "Apostasies have small beginnings."

It always starts small. We hear, we read of a public scandalous sin. Rarely do we reflect, somewhere there was a small beginning. We'd be wise to ask ourselves, where might there be a small beginning in my life presently, a small accommodation of sin? It could just as well be bitterness as it is lust. Whatever it is, do something about that. Don't allow-- The stakes are too high. Watch your life, Timothy, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your heroes. Eternal destinies are at stake if we do not tend to this.

Take, talking to myself, whatever action is necessary now to address my accommodation of sin. That in itself is true zeal. Do you see? True zeal burns with a passion for holiness. This isn't legalistic. Nobody here is sinless. This

sensitivity, this passion for holiness, it's a mark of godly zeal. Why? Because godly zeal yearns to be like the one we're zealous for. A second enemy, the wearying laborers of a shepherd.

I walked in last night, I walked by my eyes filled with tears, tears filled my eyes. I just started seeing people and I thought, this person's going through that, and I thought, this person endured that. They're on the other side. I just thought, these are the excellent ones in whom is all our delight. This is just an unavoidable occupational hazard every day as we bear the burdens of others, walk with people through-- You're doing it. Suffering and heartache, and lives just made so complex by sin. We could be weighed down, and our affections and our zeal diminish.

Third enemy, the discouraging effects of a lack of fruit. Actually, it is a seeming lack of fruit. Don't judge before the time. We've all been there, haven't we? You labor maybe for years. You labor and growth is not coming. People are struggling. Preaching doesn't seem to have its intended effect. Counseling brings few breakthroughs. You make your way to the office, no longer marveling that you've been enlisted among the happy few Christ's under-shepherds who care for his father. When that marveling erodes, pay attention, you start to wonder, "What would it be like to do something else for a living? I know pizza. I'm pretty good at pizza. When I leave work, work's over. I don't lose sleep of the bad pizza I made."

Fourth enemy, the debilitating effects of prolonged hardship. This could be personal or pastoral. It could be physical or relational or circumstantial. It could be your marriage, it could be your family, it could be your team. It's been hard for so long. Oliver Bowles, he was a member of the Westminster Assembly. He's actually tutored a number of Puritans. He said this,

*"We have many that begin well, our hearts are eager while in such a godly company, while they have such props, while carried on by such hopes, while not assaulted with such temptations, while they thought the cause would go, thus they were hot and eager in the work of reformation. As things alter from without, they alter from within, even to the total remitting of their zeal."*

As we mark our 40th anniversary, I think there's another more insidious enemy of zeal to be aware of. I'll call it the cooling effect of competence. As we have matured as a family of churches, there are some, and this room is filled with some wonderful signs of health. A statement of faith that defines us, a polity that protects us, global partnerships that enrich us. Our younger pastors enjoy the fruit of the labors of our founding generation. They're walking down

paths others have carved out. Don't forget that, guys. As a whole, compared to our founding generation when they started out, our younger guys as a whole, better educated, more theologically sophisticated, more culturally informed. These are blessings to rejoice there, but there's a vulnerability in such blessings that competence and knowledge and polity and your liturgy will in themselves guarantee future fruitfulness. Beware, pastoral fruitfulness, ex opere operate, just do it right and it will work. Say the words, it'll work. Sing the songs, it'll work. Establish the structures, it'll work.

You know the names of once prominent denominations. They had a statement of faith. They had a detailed polity that makes ours look thin. They had an educated clergy. They had a time-honored liturgy. They had corporate quality administration only to end up parables of compromise.

What will be said about us in 40 years? We had really smart young pastors?!

Some of the most sobering warnings in scripture involve the cooling of zeal. The decline of spiritual passion, and they're given to churches in the letters of Revelation two and three. Ephesus wasn't rebuked for its lack of theological sophistication. No, they "abandoned the love you had at first." Think of your early days as a Christian. What was your love like at the first? Remember that?

Sardis had a reputation. They weren't on the blogs. They had a reputation of being alive, but what they had was about to die. "Wake up," was the risen Christ's warning. No rebuke has stung through the ages like Leodicia's: a Christ nauseating lukewarmness, neither hot nor cold, bringing neither healing nor refreshment. You remember Christ's remedy them? Be zealous and repent. Open the door to me. Sit and feast with me. You say, "I'm rich, I prospered, I need nothing," but you don't have me. No love for me. No zeal for me.

Oh, dear God, may it not ever be us, but it doesn't have to be. It doesn't have to be. Zeal, doesn't go unopposed, but we can pursue it. We must vigilantly pursue it, and that leads to our final point. Number three, a third dimension of zeal. The pursuit of zeal. To use Bernard's terms, how do we keep up the edge on our spirit until the end? Now let's work our text some more, embedded in our text, we see two things. We see first the key to this pursuit and a paradox in this pursuit.

First, the key right in our text. Verse 11, "Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit." Now, be careful in your reading. That's not a simple contrast. It's not, don't do this, do this. The second phrase tells us how to overcome indolence. How we maintain our zeal, be fervent in spirit. I'm going to suggest

to you that the footnote in the ESV that suggests a capital S spirit is to be preferred.

Why? A number of reasons. Paul seldom uses pneuma to refer to a psychological state inside a person. It's almost always the Holy Spirit. That's reinforced by a number of things, the parallel in verse 11c, with serving the Lord, the particular metaphor in 11b, connected to the spirit. We'll look at that in a moment. Very importantly the connection between the Spirit's presence and influence on the one hand and our inner condition on the other, so frequent in Paul and decisively so in this very letter in Romans Chapter 8, "Remember these phrases, we've received the Spirit, we walk according to the Spirit, we set our minds on the Spirit, we put to death by the Spirit, the Spirit bears witness to our spirit."

That's a key text. "The Spirit intercedes for us with groanings, the Spirit makes us fervent." If that interpretation sounds innovative to you, well, study it yourself.

[laughter]

If you go to your shelves, Moo and Shiner and Cranfield and the Sultan and Dunn and Osborn and Calvin they would all agree. I also ran it by C.J. Again, the verbal metaphor here, it's evocative, be fervent is literally boil, sieve, bubble up, be on fire. Fervency misses the metaphor. Again, the idea is be made fervent, be made to boil, be set on fire by the Holy Spirit. It's the Spirit of God who creates Godly zeal. It's the Spirit who stirs us and fires us, who inclines our souls to Christ who solidifies convictions, who stirs longings, who fortifies resolve.

Here's the reality folks, zeal is not an accomplishment. Zeal is a miracle. It's a gift of grace that lifts our burdens. You don't have to lift your burdens, zeal will lift your burdens. It mortifies our selfishness, it conquers our appetites. It subdues our love and preference for things other than God for ourselves, and our ease and our reputation, and our glory. See, Godly affections are not within our power. Why? Because they're godly affections. Something Godly in you apart from the Holy Spirit.

That's why I was saying earlier Godly zeal is not mere enthusiasm. It's being convinced of new realities. It's being compelled by new priorities. It's being enamored of Christ, which channels our greatest passions and our greatest efforts into knowing Him and honoring Him and serving Him, and magnifying Him. Creating that's not in our power. What is within our power, what is our obligation as pastors is pursuit. What great news, isn't it? How liberating.

Godly zeal is not some unreachable goal that only a few gifted people or big personalities or prominent leaders attained to, zeal-- Let me tell you this, as you come here from serving your people. Zeal is not reserved for the strong or the competent, or the prosperous.

Zeal is reserved for the weak and dependent, that's the way to zeal. Verse I meditate on every single day I think without fail because I'm so desperate [John 15:5](#), "Abide in me, and I in you. Apart from me, you can do nothing, nothing." It doesn't say apart from me, you can preach a pretty good sermon, just not over the top. For me, you're pretty wise but just maybe not world-class. No, nada, nothing.

This is command is an invitation. Every command in Scripture is an invitation to come to God to encounter God and to receive from God faith-filled undaunted resolve to magnify Christ, with all that we are whether you are a pastor or whether you are a pastor's wife or whether you are a mother with young children or whether you are an elderly saint with limited mobility and limited energy. This is an in the invitation for you to be zealous for Christ.

That's the key. Only the spirit can generate and sustain Godly zeal. Here's the paradox. In our pursuit, zeal is not our actual goal. Zeal is a spirit kindle fervor that impels us to our goal. It's a passionate, single-minded whole soul lived out desire for our true goal which is Christ and his smile and his glory in our lives and in the church and in the nations, that's what our text points to. Here's my paraphrase.

Be made to boil, to burn hot, by the Holy Spirit for total devoted joyful service to the Lord Jesus. That's our fundamental call as pastors so we must pursue it. We actually must fight for it. There's two fights to be had, there's a negative and a positive. Time doesn't permit us to linger here but here's the negative fight we must avoid anything that quenches zeal. Don't be slothful in it, tend it, put wood on it, blow on it. Protect it, build a wall around it. Keep it up because it will impel you to bring glory to Christ, so don't go there.

I want to go there. Monitor our heart, stay alert for zeal's enemies. What were they? Sin, weariness, discouragement, suffering, professionalism. The positive battle is equally simple, but still a fight. We ruthlessly place ourselves in God-ordained paths of zeal kindling joy in Christ. It's not complicated. You folks, you're pastors and pastors are alike, you know this, I don't mean having your devotions, making it through your Bible in a year, four chapters flying through. No, I mean, here's the fight every day. Just got to do this every day coming to

God through His Word, reading and meditating and praying until-- keep going, until-- the older I get the longer my devotions have to be.

I'm just so weak. I just going to pray and read and meditate until I'm aware of Christ and His heart for me and His presence with me and His provision of grace for me for the day I'm about to live, for the responsibilities I carry, for the circumstances I'm about to face. I can't get up until-- sometimes you have to, but I'm trying not to emerge from my devotions until I know I am His and He is mine.

I am satisfied with Him, I am in faith toward Him, I am happy in Him, I have glad expectations toward Him, and I have a zeal for Christ to be magnified in my life in this meeting, this phone call today. Often I get up in the morning and I just see everything but Christ, and I mean Christ smiling on me because of his scars and sitting on his throne and ruling my life. In this intractable circumstance and this prayer request that I just think I'm praying, I just don't see it.

All things are possible with God, but pretty much, maybe not this. Just can't get up for my devotions without seeing all that, without seeing Him, and especially without seeing Him crucified for me and risen for me, and now dwelling in me and forever for me and with me. As pastors, we do a lot of things. Most of us do it pretty unspectacularly. We are ordinary pastors, but if something extraordinary every one of us can give to our people. One of the most important things besides your preaching, besides your counseling, besides your great wisdom, besides your knowledge, one of the most important things we can give to our people is this, a heart that is obviously animated by a fervent love for Christ and His priorities and His glory in the church and in people's lives.

My goodness, if we give them nothing else, let's give them this. We can give them this. In His book, brothers, we are not professionals. John Piper asks a searching question,

*"Are our packed calendars and handheld computers really fulfilling our own hunger for life in Christ, let alone the hunger of our people in the world? Are not our people really yearning to be around a man who has been around God?"*

He later writes this,

*"The great pressure on us today is to be productive managers. The need of the church is pastors who feel the weight and glory of eternal reality, even in the midst of a business meeting, who carry in their souls such a sense of God that*

*they provide by their very presence, a constant life-giving reorientation on the infinite God.."*

Whether we are preaching or counseling or informally interacting, all of our pastoral ministry will be strengthened. Our influence deepened, our example more compelling, people's trust more freely given when they perceive Godly zeal, when they perceive-- "He's not the best preacher. I know what he's all in for. I know everything he does. I know every word he's counseling me flows from a passion for Christ and is done with joyful dependence upon Christ."

Think through your pastoral context. Is your congregation or the individual in front of you, when they encounter you, are, they encountering a person who obviously has been around God, who carries in their soul a sense of God? This is what I ask myself. Do they encounter in me-- think of a person. Think of a particular encounter, do they encounter in me-- not frivolity, not distraction, not busyness, not coolness, but a warmth and joy and gratefulness and gentleness and concern and wisdom and faith that leaves them encouraged and provoked and more aware of Jesus Christ, His worth, His beauty, His faithfulness, His power. Is that what they are encountering with me?

That's what undershepherds do. We are undershepherds. We're not freelance mini shepherds. We're undershepherds. We reflect to our people the disposition of the great Shepherd to them. Not my pastor or heart for them, the great Shepherd's heart for them. I'm a mirror. He smiles at them. He's concerned for them. He carries them on His heart. I mirror that to them. That's what we're called to do. As we do that, as we embody in our preaching, oh, we preach like we just want to-- we don't just give good sermons.

We don't just, "Oh, pastor, how well crafted." No, may be well crafted, but we want to embody in ourselves the glory of the truth of God's word that we're preaching. As we embody that in our preaching, and then in our tender interactions, and in our evangelism, in our greeting on a Sunday morning, in our singing, in our pastoral prayers, we embody, this is what we're called to do. We embody the realities we believe and we love, and we proclaim. I long to so know and love and preach and walk with Christ that others think I want to know Jesus that way.

I pray for pastoral longevity that I can take a few more steps that way. As we have been taught, and this is really true, I thought it was a cliché a number of years ago, but it's true. People are studying you and they can perceive what you are most zealous about, what you're most affected by, what you're most trusting in. We serve incredible people who actually love, ask majority, they

love their pastors and they want to be like their pastors. I want to live so that what they want to be like looks more like Jesus and myself. When it's Christ they see and His all-satisfying sufficiency, when they taste of that, when they're provoked by that, when they're drawn to that, that will be the moment that Christ is magnified in our bodies.

Charles Spurgeon told his Pastor's College students this,

*"As a rule, real success is proportionate to the preacher's earnestness. Both great men and little men succeed if they are thoroughly alive unto God and fail if they are not so. In many instances, ministerial success is traceable almost entirely to an intense zeal, a consuming passion for souls, and an eager enthusiasm in the cause of God. We believe that in every case, other things being equal, men prosper in the divine service in proportion as their hearts are blazing with Holy love."*

That is great news for ordinary pastors like us.

As a leadership team, we recently articulated, as you know, what we've called our seven shaping virtues, qualities, that they're not exclusive to us, they're qualities that flow. They should flow from an intentional, thoroughly applied gospel centrality. By the grace of God, these qualities have tended to mark our churches and our pastors, and our people, humility, joy, gratitude, encouragement, generosity, servanthood, Godliness. You could argue, and we have, that there are other virtues worthy of inclusion, but here's one I'd put in the mix. A virtue that really has marked us for 40 years, a virtue that our founding generation-- I see some of you, virtue you guys modeled.

In these men and their wives, it portrayed Christ as glorious. It portrayed the pursuit of Christ as exhilarating, it made the preaching of God's word compelling. It made pastoral ministry look to young guys thrilling, "I want to do that." I'm not claiming that our founding generation was flawless... ask C.J. about some of their early exegesis.

[laughter]

**Jeff:** Try to forget some of our early songs. Sorry, Bob, you've grown too.

[laughter]

**Jeff:** Former organizational names.

What were you thinking, guys? What were you thinking?

[laughter]

But they had this virtue, they had zeal. They had a spirit inflamed, earnest devotion for Christ and His glory and His cause. By the grace of God, through the work of the Spirit, because of that, we sit here today. It's my prayer that we, that I, will not lose that virtue, that we would fight to see the Spirit kindle a zeal that keeps us 40 years from now passionate for Christ, dependent upon Christ, holding to Christ with single-minded devotion that we would never become--

Let us not become professional pastors, but by the Holy Spirit be made to boil, set on fire so that we, as pastors, as a family of churches, would follow hard after God, that we would live, here's a great verse for us, to spend and be spent for Christ's glory in the lives of those He came to save. Let's pray.

"Oh, Father, Lord, if you didn't command this, if you didn't provide for this, if this wasn't your will, if you didn't delight to give us zeal, Lord, this command would be so heavy because we are so weak and inconsistent. Our zeal, it fades, Lord, and our energy, it flags, and our passions are easily distracted, but you are faithful. I pray. Among many things, I pray, would you lodge this virtue a spirit kindled, unflagging, earnest, all-encompassing, whole soul, single-minded devotion to Jesus Christ, His presence, His glory, His purposes, Lord, would you kindle it? Would you sustain it? Lord, can we ask this 40 years from now? May people say after many of us are gone, "I still have zeal and it's a zeal for Christ." Amen."