

ZEAL

THE GOOD

THE BAD

THE UGLY



By Keith Green

soul pants for Thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." (Psalm 42:1,2)

David was describing true zeal. He thirsted after God. Do you have that kind of desperation? Do you have within that holy fire to know God? God doesn't want to be a casual acquaintance. He wants to be an intimate part of your life – alive and burning at the core of your being.

The second part of the cause we are to advance is to love our neighbor as ourselves. Not correct our neighbor, debate with our neighbor, or judge our neighbor, but love our neighbor. And how do we love our neighbor? We love them by serving them and doing things that bless them.

"[Christ] gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds." (Titus 2:14)

Are we zealous for good deeds? James says, "This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." (James 1:27)

Are you zealous for this pure and undefiled religion? Are you self-involved – or are you willing to serve others? The



zeal that pleases God is strength and talent directed towards serving others. Jesus reminds His disciples that if we want to be great in the kingdom of God we have to be the servant of all. (Matt. 20:26)

Watch out! Our flesh doesn't like the idea of serving others.

An attitude of servanthood runs against our egos. Maybe that's why God put so much importance on it. But God doesn't take our flesh into account; He commands us to serve others. The disciple of Christ has no option but to do what He has told us.

I can hear what many of you are thinking: *But we don't need to prove ourselves to God, or to anybody else. He's given us salvation as a gift.*

You're right. But He needs to turn on our zeal to make salvation real in every area of our lives. He wants us to train ourselves to eagerly serve others in love and compassion.

This is true zeal for God – to know Him and love Him with a deep and

consuming love, and to serve others in the same way we would serve Jesus. Anything else is an imitation.

Beware of it.

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Keith Green and his wife Melody founded Last Days Ministries in 1977, two years after they gave their lives to Jesus. The ministry was born out of their desire to reach others with the love of Christ. Keith and two of their children, Josiah and Bethany, went to be with Jesus on July 28, 1982, when the plane they were flying in crashed. Keith's writings, music, and teaching tapes continue to draw thousands to a deeper commitment in their walk with Christ.

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"Zeal – The Good, the Bad, the Ugly" was reprinted from an article in *The Last Days Magazine*, a colorfully illustrated publication filled with challenging articles, ministry opportunities, and more!

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"And [Jesus] found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the moneychangers seated. And He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple... His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for Thy house will consume me.'" (John 2:14,15,17)

Imagine how the disciples felt watching their Master upsetting the lovely decorum of the temple. The noise, the dust, the shouting, the money spilling, the tables upturned – how dare He do such a thing! The disciples were probably shocked at first, then elated. That's how I would have felt. "Good job, Jesus! Show everyone who's boss!" When it was over, the disciples thought back to the Scripture that says, "Zeal for Thy house has consumed me." (Psalm 69:9) They thought, *Now we see what that means. Jesus loves His Father's house so deeply that He won't tolerate sin in it.*

No doubt Jesus' action that day excited everyone. The common people were thrilled to have a hero who could kick around all the religious windbags and money-grubbing scum. If it meant popularity – or flexing their muscles – the disciples were all for it. The only problem was, they didn't understand one fundamental fact about human nature: our zeal lacks direction.

Right and Wrong Zeal

Zeal is simply earnestness or fervor in advancing a cause. But that cause can be good or bad, focused or misguided. And as we read throughout the Gospels, we see that the disciples' zeal was often misguided.

The Pharisees were zealous, too – and often misguided. No one could say these guys didn't have zeal. Everything they did involved religious duties and doctrines. But their zeal was founded on legalism, not on knowing God. They promoted a cause that was cold and lifeless – a cause that made their hearts proud and arrogant.

We love to poke fun at the Pharisees. We like to read the rebukes that Jesus used to level them. But we're just as capable of misdirecting our zeal to useless religious activities. Things that are all for outward show – stuff that generates heat but not light.

That's how I was when I first became a Christian – I had lots of zeal. I never gave too much thought about where my energy was directed, and I did a few things that were pointless, ungodly, and unproductive. They didn't advance my relationship with the Lord, or the Kingdom of God here on earth. We can all misdirect our zeal at times.

But some of us, like the Pharisees, get trapped by our own zealousness. We replace our relationship with the Lord with our "righteous" activity, and end up trying to earn our salvation by proving how zealous we are.

There are four ways Christians commonly misuse their zeal. They are: fighting causes that aren't God's causes, judging others, arguing over the Bible, and seeking blessings more than the Giver of those blessings. I want to focus on these areas because they cause destructiveness and havoc in the body of Christ. Let's take a look at each of these four areas and see what true zeal for God is not.

Zeal of the Flesh

First, we can be zealous for God yet totally miss His big picture. If we're not careful we can be zealous for causes that aren't God's at all.

Peter seemed to be the most zealous of the twelve disciples. Wherever there was trouble he was ready to jump in and save the day – at least in the flesh.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter provided us with a

perfect example of misplaced zeal. As the soldiers came to take Jesus away, Peter pulled out his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant.

Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matt. 26:52,53)

What did Peter think he was doing? The same thing many of us think we're doing – protecting the Lord's reputation with ungodly methods, and hurting innocent people in the process. Peter, like the other disciples, totally missed God's big picture – His plan to send Jesus to the cross.

Peter had another plan. He still hoped Jesus would be the conquering hero. Sure, Peter had a lot of zeal for that. But he lacked the same zeal when it came to being a spiritual companion to Jesus. Peter, who was so courageous about swinging his sword in public, was the same guy who abandoned Jesus at the moment He took on His most difficult spiritual mission – humbling Himself and going to the cross.

How is it that we're so zealous to put on outward, heroic shows of loyalty for our faith – and so reluctant to set aside our own agenda and do what Jesus wants us to do? Our zeal is misdirected. We need to transfer our zeal from outward things to inward spiritual things. We need to be less willing to cut off ears in Jesus' name, and more willing to humble ourselves, go into our prayer closet alone with Him and get His agenda for our lives.

Paul reminds us: "The mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the

law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Rom. 8:7,8)

Much harm has been done to God's name by so-called spiritual battles waged in the flesh. Look at all the religious wars that have been fought, the crusades that have been carried out. All the blood and destruction. How could zeal be so misdirected? How could people think they were committing such atrocities in the name of God? But before standing in judgment of anyone else, we'd better realize we're all capable of pushing our own agenda ahead of God's agenda.

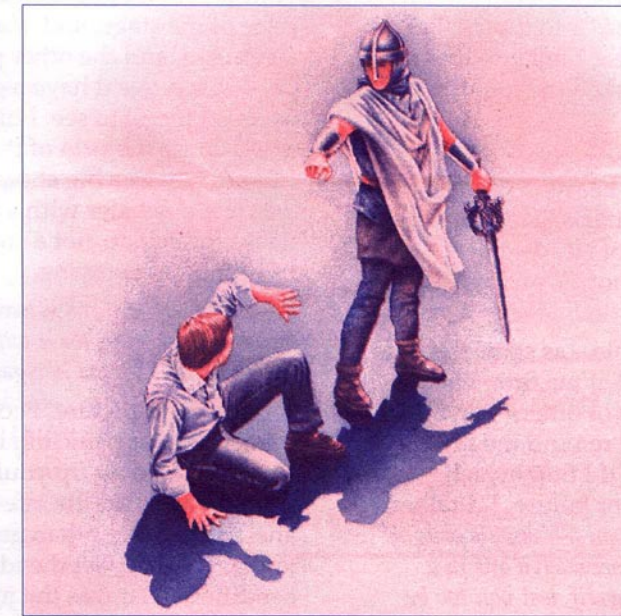
Zeal in Judgment

Second, we Christians have to admit that we have a problem – a bad habit of judging each other. In Luke 9, it says, "[Jesus] sent messengers ahead of Him. And they went, and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make arrangements for Him.

And they did not receive Him, because He was journeying with His face toward Jerusalem. And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, 'Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' But He turned and rebuked them." (vv. 52-55)

I doubt that James and John were expecting a rebuke. Here was a whole village of people who had rejected Jesus – they deserved to be fried. They'd blown their chance to welcome Jesus. As far as these zealous disciples were concerned, it was time for this village to see the power of God.

How many times have you acted like James and John? How often do you become a judge, and bring down the gavel on someone who's obviously in the wrong? Some people have a lifelong preoccupation with sitting in judgment over every ministry, every elder, every pastor and every Bible study



Judgment comes out of spiritual immaturity. Mature Christians will pray, discern, love, and counsel.

leader. They call down fire – bringing down the gavel of judgment hard and heavy. They say they're trying to bring correction, but they crush, kill, and destroy.

When I was a new Christian I opened up my Bible, then set myself up as judge. I'd go into ministries and get loud about their need for correction. Worse than that, within six months of my conversion I was on stage performing. Thousands of people came to hear me, and I really got into letting them know what I thought – judging things publicly. One day God grabbed me by the collar and showed me something: Judgment comes out of spiritual immaturity. Mature Christians will pray, discern, love, and counsel. If need be they'll rebuke, but never in a critical, destructive spirit, and never publicly to shame and punish. That's the godly way. Immature Christians can have a lot of zeal but little wisdom. They can put fire and noise into things that harm rather than help the cause of Christ. I fell into that trap and, like James and John, the Lord rebuked me for judging others.

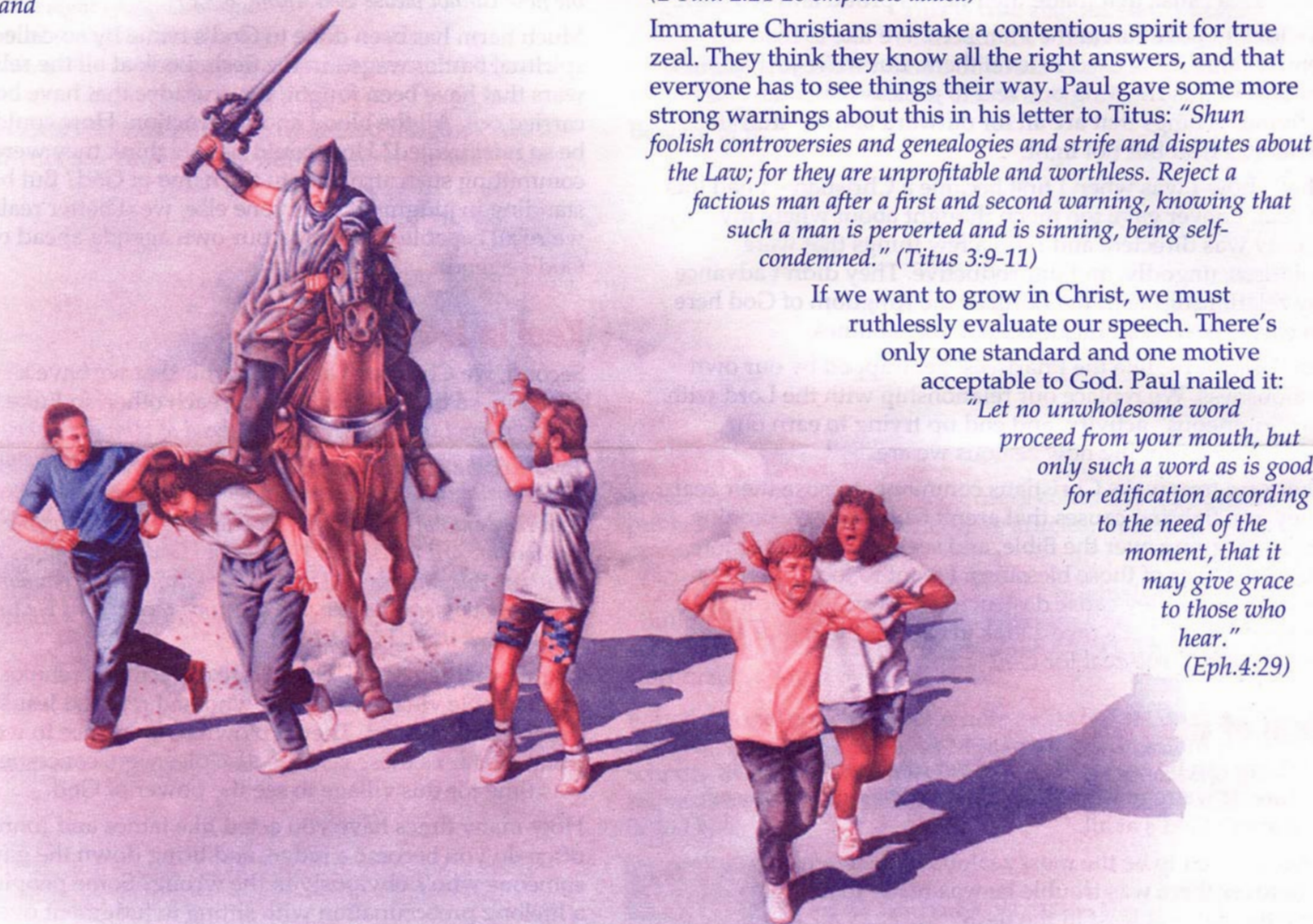
You see, when we judge we step into the place of God. God alone is the judge of the motives of our hearts. If Jesus had wanted to call down fire on that Samaritan village, He could have done it Himself without the help of His disciples. These guys wanted to usurp Jesus' authority, and so He had to set them straight.

I've come to see that my zeal as a disciple – as someone who knows God's Word – has to be directed at me first. The inconsistencies and sin I see in the lives of others – and let's face it, you can't help noticing – should remind me to beware of the sin in my own life. Now, if I find myself having to deal with someone else's sin or failure, I'd rather take Paul's advice to heart: *"Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted."* (Gal. 6:1)

Paul knew the Lord's correction is meant to bring restoration in relationship to the Lord and in ministry – not destruction. Restoration takes time, but it's God's goal.

Zeal for Words

There's another way our critical spirits can harm the body of Christ – when we fight over fine interpretations of the Bible. I've heard people get really nasty with each other – Christian brothers and sisters! Paul says, *"Remind them of these things, and solemnly charge them in the presence of God not to wrangle about words, which is useless, and leads to the*



ruin of the hearers." (2 Tim. 2:14)

When I was a new Christian I spent many useless hours wrangling over words. Added together, those hours probably amount to weeks, even months. I'd argue over anything and everything: When was the rapture going to happen? Can a Christian be possessed by demons? Do you have to be sprinkled or immersed to be truly baptized? Should you be baptized in the name of Jesus only or in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? Some of the arguments produced a lot of heat that looked like zeal for the Lord – but I can't remember any that produced much real light.

In some ways I set myself up for this. After concerts, people came up to me and said, "You know, I don't agree with your position on this or that." I loved it! I'd sit down on the edge of the stage, and a crowd would gather. I'd throw out scriptures, and the other person would lob different ones back at me. We'd have a great time, with our "flesh" exposed for all to see. I didn't realize then that my arguing could cause the ruin of those who listened to me. I was just thinking I was a big shot, a spiritual authority, when really I was just a debater with a big ego. I was sharpening a human talent for debate, not a spiritual talent for being quiet, listening, and praying.

Paul also said in his warnings to Timothy, *"Avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene."* (2 Tim. 2:16,17)

What a vivid picture. People didn't have the benefit of tetracycline or penicillin in Timothy's day. If you saw a big blue streak going up your arm or leg, you ran to the surgeon and had the infected limb cut off. There was no anesthetic – other than getting drunk or having someone knock you out. Get the idea? This was a drastic and painful condition. So it was the most vivid imagery Paul could use to get his point across. A dispute over words brings out a spirit of contentiousness – and this will spread infection through the body of Christ like gangrene. The only way to remove it is by major and painful surgery.

Why is it important to stay in the right spirit? Because there's a lot more at stake than who's right or wrong – I'm talking about eternal souls.

"The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will." (2 Tim. 2:24-26 emphasis added)

Immature Christians mistake a contentious spirit for true zeal. They think they know all the right answers, and that everyone has to see things their way. Paul gave some more strong warnings about this in his letter to Titus: *"Shun foolish controversies and genealogies and strife and disputes about the Law; for they are unprofitable and worthless. Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned."* (Titus 3:9-11)

If we want to grow in Christ, we must ruthlessly evaluate our speech. There's only one standard and one motive acceptable to God. Paul nailed it: *"Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear."* (Eph. 4:29)

Zeal for Power

The last thing I want to say about zeal is more than instruction, it's God's warning to all of us. In Acts 8:9 ff., we read the story of a man named Simon, who practiced magic and sorcery. Everyone in Samaria was astonished by the things he could do, and people called him the "Great Power of God." Then Philip came to town preaching the good news. People began getting saved and baptized. A revival hit, and even Simon was converted. After his conversion he began following Philip around, and saw all the miracles that occurred. Word got back to the other apostles in Jerusalem about what was happening in Samaria, and Peter and John were sent to check things out. They discovered that the new converts had not received the baptism of the Spirit, so they began laying their hands on the people and praying for them. Sure enough, the people began receiving the Spirit.

"Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, 'Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.' But Peter said to him, 'May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!'" (Acts 8:18-20)

Sure, Simon's idea was misguided – but didn't he give up his sorcery business to follow the Gospel? Wasn't Peter being a bit harsh with him?

I don't think so. Didn't some of us come to the Lord for the wrong motives? We came because we were sick of our lifestyle. Or because we couldn't find peace. Or we needed healing, or our marriage was on the rocks. We came for any number of other reasons.

From the New Testament times until today, there have been people who preach the Gospel for wrong reasons. They're not following Jesus; they're building their own kingdoms and their own egos. Some people get involved in Christianity simply because it is a market for their merchandise – they can make money. They don't care if people become Christians, they just want to sell their books or records.

Some people start with sincere motives but their appetite for money and fame overcomes them – they continue doing seemingly "good" things, but for all the wrong reasons. They're just putting up a front. They've learned how to effectively fake all the right moves and the right language.

But God will not be mocked. He never lets someone continue in that place for long. They either burn out because it's a work of the flesh, or they are publicly exposed and humiliated – and the name of the Lord gets tarnished in the process.

We always need to check our motives for doing something – even a good thing. And when we are successful in the things of the Lord, we must be careful not to look at the fruit and think it proves we're right with God. Nothing can replace our personal relationship with Him – not even the fruit produced by our ministries.

True Zeal

God wants true disciples who will move beyond selfish motives to a pure motive – and that is to know God Himself and the reason He created us. You see, Simon never made that shift. He became interested in the Gospel because of what the disciples had to offer – their "tricks" were better than his. They upstaged him. Scripture says that he truly

believed in the Gospel, but it appears that he never got beyond desiring power so he could have more influence than anyone else.

Simon had zeal all right. He was ready to do whatever it took to get the power he wanted. But his zeal was directed at self-promotion – not at knowing and sharing the love of God.

Working in the music industry, I see this confusion all the time. Today, we see "stars" who become Christians – but they never lay down their music on the altar. They just begin selling Christian versions of their songs. They have lots of zeal – but are they putting it into seeking God? Before I sound like I'm back to the old mode of judging again I have to tell you what I've witnessed. I've seen celebrities come to Christ and get pushed into the spotlight by publishers and record companies before they're ready. When they hit a "pothole," they fall away. Then they say, "Christianity is a joke. It doesn't work." While people looked on and said, "They have so much zeal for God," they were actually using their misdirected zeal to pursue their own interests.

That's what Simon did. The whole time he followed Philip around, he didn't accept the lifestyle of discipleship. He had plenty of zeal to pursue miracles and signs and wonders, but not much interest in pursuing God Himself. He had his eyes on the gifts of God, rather than

on the God of the gifts.

Paul saw the same kind of misdirected zeal among the Jews. He said, *"For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God."* (Rom. 10:2,3)

If Paul looked at your life, would he say the same thing about you? Would he say, "I've got to give you credit, you sure have a lot of zeal for God. You're doing many things in the name of the Lord. But you don't know His righteousness." Are you using your zeal to try to gain something from God, instead of using it as an expression of your gratitude to God for all that He's already done for you?

We can be zealous at keeping rules. We can be zealous debaters and defenders of the truth. We can zealously pursue the gifts of the Spirit. We can even be zealously contentious and fight fleshly battles. But none of this is true zeal for God.

What is zeal for God then? It's giving all our energy and enthusiasm to God's cause. What does that mean? Jesus made it pretty clear: *"The foremost [commandment] is, 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."* (Mark 12:29-31)

We are supposed to direct all our zeal into our relationship with the Lord, and then into our relationship with our neighbor. God wants us to get our eyes on Him. Loving Him is to be our cause. He can take care of a lot of other causes without us, but He can't make us love Him with all our heart. That's the work we must do – pursue Him with all our heart and soul and strength.

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