

How often do you use the word “zeal”? I’m willing to bet your answer is, “not often.” If you do use it, it is probably embedded in the longer word, “overzealous.” And that word carries a negative connotation, doesn’t it? It is not a good thing to be called “overzealous.” It’s a quality that makes people feel uncomfortable. It’s funny, though; “overzealous” implies that there is a proper amount of “zealous;” a level of zeal we can deal with; and even then, when someone displays a lot of emotion or enthusiasm or excitement, that can still be off-putting. I think that, in general, there is discomfort with the overzealous and the just plain zealous. When someone cares so much about something, it puts us on the defensive. Think of the non-sports fan watching sports fans watching their sports, to understand how *zeal* can come across.

And so it is that there exists a general discomfort with the Biblical account of Jesus cleansing the Temple. The aggressive action he takes against the money changers is offered as fulfillment of the prophecy, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” Yet it still shocks us to see Jesus’ passion for His Father’s house take this form.

No bowing to decorum for Jesus, if it means compromising God’s house. No polite, collected, “Let’s wait and see” when it would rob God’s people of the comfort they should receive when they come to the temple. No playing it safe, blending in, keeping quiet, even though this sort of outburst will get Him killed. No greater love, no greater intensity, no greater mercy could be shown to prim and proper sinners than what we see in the person of Jesus. He’s too genuine to play it cool, not when lives hang in the balance, not when the difference is either a broken or a restored relationship. Not when the difference is either heaven or hell.

To be clear: why was Jesus so upset? He was angered by the abuse he observed. To put it bluntly, the money changers were jacking up the price for sacrificial animals. They had devised a system that would take advantage of travelers, line their own pockets, while giving the appearance of piety. Not only was it a burden, it was stealing, and Jesus could no longer stand to see it happening in His Father’s house. Especially since He had come to make more than a fair exchange. He had come to exchange His spotless life for ours, so stained by sin. He had not come to impose more burdens on the downtrodden, but to remove burdens by opening a direct way to God. He would become that way. He came to give riches, not get them. The zeal of the Lord is revealed as Jesus flips tables and opens cages, offending some and shocking others, and while some would still say that He was overzealous that day, do you see what’s being communicated here? We do not have a God who reacts to sin with a shrug. It makes Him mad. Jesus’ anger against sin, especially this sin, veiled in the disguise of religious practice, boils over, but His anger is not wrong. And that’s one of things that sets Jesus apart from everyone else who ever lived.

Full disclosure: I really do not like to get angry. You know why? Because anger makes me say and do stupid, embarrassing things; things that you can’t really walk back. But Jesus is different. The anger against sin burns within Him, but He does not cross the line into sin. That is

an absolutely astounding quality of our Lord, especially when you realize that, on the cross, all of God's anger against sin will burn against Jesus, and no one else.

This might be the perfect moment to remember that the reason Jesus is in Jerusalem on this occasion is the Passover. For centuries, the Passover had been a chief revelation of God's zealous love for sinners. All those centuries, roasted lambs had conveyed the Passover miracle. Participants experienced the intensity of God's deliverance, as He passed over sin for the sake of the bloody Lamb to come. Now, Jesus, God in the flesh, comes into the Temple, with the sacrifice of Himself on the horizon. Yes, he's zealous. Yes, He's intense. His life is the ransom payment! His life will pay for the cost of shady business practices in the temple. His life will pay for abuse, selfishness, cruelty, and mean-spiritedness. His life will pay for apathy and avoidance of those in need. His life will pay for lust, and the hunger for power and the desire to control all the action from our little thrones. His life, Jesus' life, as the once-and-for-all Passover Lamb, will pay for all the sin humanity can come up with. All the sin you have ever come up with, even the stuff you've buried deep, forgiven by this one person. The shouting rabbi, twirling His whip, driving the animals from their pens; the servant who steps into a punishment He never deserved; He's the One whose death bring your sin debt to a balance of zero.

The message of the Bible is not some dry, academic lecture. It is meant to shake up your life, to move you, to awaken something in your heart, something like: "Jesus took the hit for me. Jesus paid for my most horrible mistakes. Without Him, I'd be alone in the dark, forever. With Him I have light and the peace of knowing I am loved." God loves you completely, and the cross of Jesus is proof. It is Exhibit A. It is the sign that you are treasured by God. Your sin has been dealt with and removed, and you are adopted into the family of the baptized. "The zeal of the Lord...will accomplish this."