



St. Paul's Lutheran Church
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The Epistle of Romans

The Justification of the Ungodly

Chapter 10 Verses 1-3

You would think that “zeal” for God would be a good thing. Many churches *long* for zeal among members, especially youth. Many times churches try to promote zeal: *Get on Fire! Commit Yourself! Dedicate Yourself! Sell out to the Lord!*

However, there is a significant problem and danger with zeal. More often than not, zeal is a sign of heretics, sectarians, and those who divide the church. But why? Well, zeal can be the antithesis of faith.

Here is how it works; zeal can go the way of pride. For example, have you ever met a young zealot who has a so-called *zeal for God*; however, he is more in love with his zeal than he is for God? Furthermore, have you ever tried to talk to a young zealot? It is exhausting, frustrating, and frankly, annoying! A young zealot is not able to hear or receive because they are so zealous to prove to everyone how zealous they are and how ‘sold out’ and ‘on fire’ they are for God. They are in love with their zeal because they are in love with their super-religious-powers. They *need* to show everyone how zealous they are because they need to validate that they are more zealous than others to validate their self-righteousness. What fools!

We need to keep in mind – according to Paul in Romans 10:2-3 – that many of these zealots possess the right knowledge. That is to say; their failure is not a lack of information. Instead, it is a lack of recognizing, receiving, and hearing the message for themselves.

Think of it this way: frequently, churches can be accused of *dead orthodoxy* – having theology but not zeal. Dead orthodoxy churches have theology but the theology remains in the theoretical realm and never travels to the hands and feet in the form of love. Dead orthodoxy is wrong (see Rev. 2:1-7). But equally wrong is a zeal that is in love with itself.

So, how do we make sense of zeal? Well, a lack of zeal/love is not o.k. (see *Ephesus’ lack of love in Rev. 2:1-7*) and zeal for itself is wrong too. Zeal does not earn us brownie points before God. Being more zealous than another person does not make one more righteous than another. Instead, zeal should be primarily directed to receiving, not doing.

For example, too often, we find people in the church being zealous for certain so-called ministries: Let's go to Africa and dig a well! Let's start a new outreach program in the church that will grow us! Now, is there anything wrong with going to Africa to do good works? No! Is there anything wrong with starting an outreach program in the church? No! But the problem that arises is that it is so easy to let zeal overtake us which results in our identity, worth, and righteousness being tied to our zeal – a zeal that is tied to a particular church mission trip or church program. Furthermore, the much bigger problem is that we often run from the real important good works in our vocations to more flashy good works that fuel unholy zeal.

Consider another example, a fictitious mom named Susan. Susan has lost her love for her husband. Of her three kids, one is a drug addict, the other won't talk to her, and the other child is mentally handicapped. And her job in the cafeteria at the local school? It isn't that glorious. And so, Susan is hugely involved in the community and church. She is always pushing to do *new things!* She pushes against the status quo! She has tremendous zeal! And people in the community and church? They respect her zeal because she is a 'mover and shaker.' Now, the problem with Susan is that she is avoiding her stations in life – she is avoiding the vocations that she has been called into. In other words, she is failing to realize that the most significant works that she can do are to be a mother, wife, and cook at the school. But because these vocations involve suffering and lack excitement, she runs to other projects that can excite her, enliven her zeal, and promote her self-righteousness before God and mankind. Oh, how tragic! If only Susan's zeal could be redirected to *receiving* from God's Word and Sacraments! Indeed, people like Susan don't need zeal in things that are not a part of their vocation, but they need zeal to receive from God so that they can serve in their God-given vocations.

Foolish preachers, though, mess this up all the time. They are intoxicated with great works, flashy programs, and legendary works of the Saints of old. And so, they push zeal upon parishioners, which way too often pulls parishioners away from their vocations into self-serving things. Again, zeal should be mainly directed to *receiving* and not doing. And when we zealously *receive*? Well... we are prepared to faithfully serve in the vocations that the Lord has called us into, vocations at home, within the state, and within the church.

