

*Discipleship 202: Best. Teacher. Ever.*  
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*Psalms 69:8-18, Matthew 5:13-16, Romans 12:4-12*

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Romans 12:4-12. Listen now to God's Word. "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully. Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer."

I had a few great teachers during my time in school. Miss McNealy for second grade. Mr. Goss for fifth grade. Oddly enough, two of my favorite teachers were named Lawson – Mr. Lawson taught my high school English classes, and Dr. Lawson Stone taught my Old Testament classes in seminary. (There need to be more Lawsons in the world, I think.) When I remember all of them, the thing I think about most is how they loved what they were doing. Miss McNealy always encouraged me to write stories, even in second grade. Mr. Goss taught everybody chess. With Mr. Lawson, we analyzed Mark Twain and Ray Bradbury, and he taught me something I've always kept with me – he would say, "You've got to earn the right to your opinion." And Dr. Stone? Unlike many seminary professors, he hadn't written a ton of books...he didn't have the time because he just loved to teach people while we should love the Old Testament. All of them were passionate about their subjects and their students – and I'll never forget them.

This weekend also marks a different kind of passion – the passion for football. There's probably no bigger event in all of American sports than the SuperBowl. People buy all sorts of team gear and some paint their bodies and yell and cheer. Many people are spending thousands of dollars to go see the big game in person. I have to admit that I'm a little jealous not to be in my hometown of Indianapolis today just to witness the sheer wacky splendor of it all. And I'm not even a big football fan!

When I think about all the passion that people have for their hobbies and interests, sometimes for their families and their jobs, it kind of amazes me. But it also surprises me that many people who spend a couple hours of their week every Sunday at church are so passionless about Jesus. As we've been studying discipleship the last few months, we've seen God calling us to draw closer to Him, to experience His love and share it with others. But we often are missing a key component of discipleship, and that's passion. Today we're going to look briefly at what biblical zeal is, and perhaps how we can lay claim to it in obedience to our LORD.

Now before we get too far into this, we need to reclaim the concept of the word “passion.” Often we think of it in a romantic sense, but that’s not what we’re talking about. Instead, there are two deep concepts in biblical thought about passion for God. The first is the word *qinah* in Hebrew – it’s translated to *zelon* in Greek, which is the root for our word “zeal.” This word means a righteous jealousy. We often think of jealousy as being bad, but this is good jealousy. We’re talking about a jealousy that God be given His due, a jealousy that wants to put things right, a jealousy that confirms that some things belong together by rights. When God is jealous, it means that He wants His people to follow Him and His ways, not foreign gods, not their sinful attitudes. He has the right to be jealous for us because He created us and desires for us to be holy like He is holy – and He knows only through that holiness will we be truly happy. The other word we see in Scripture for biblical passion is the Greek word *spoude*, which means diligence and earnestness combined with a sense of urgency. God wants us to follow Him earnestly, with drive and momentum. These two words lay the foundation for our understanding of what it means to passionately follow Christ.

Our first Scripture today from Psalm 69 is a tough one because there’s a lot of lament in it. David writes about being abused and scorned, and why? Because he says, “zeal for your house consumes me.” He is passionate for God; he is fired up that God would be honored and praised. We’re told that David was so excited about the ark of the covenant coming into Jerusalem that he danced in a loincloth among the people, and his wife Michal despised him for it, to the point where their relationship was permanently damaged. David was a man who loved God so much that he risked his life again and again to trust in God rather than his own cunning and skill. You hear that passion in the psalm when David pleads for rescue and deliverance. This is a guy who has his whole heart set on God.

This same sort of zeal was found in Jesus. We’re told that in Jesus’ time, the temple had become a religious marketplace where worship was nearly impossible in the outer courts because of all the selling of sacrificial animals and the changing of currencies. Jesus drove all of them out in a fervor. When the disciples saw what happened, they remembered the words of Psalm 69 – “zeal for your house has consumed me” – and they realized they applied to Jesus. Jesus was jealous for God’s name to be honored and the temple dedicated to Him to show Him glory.

Sometimes, we think that we are supposed to be Stoics, unemotional in the face of sorrow or trouble. But Stoicism was a Greek philosophy that has nothing to do with Christianity and nothing to do with Christ’s own personality. When Jesus spoke about his upcoming crucifixion and how afterwards the Holy Spirit would come in tongues of fire, he said, “I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!” When Jesus prophesied about the upcoming destruction of Jerusalem, he wept. When his friend Lazarus was dead four days in the tomb, even though Jesus would raise him from the dead, He wept. He showed great compassion to the poor and to the sinners willing to turn from their sin, and He vigorously argued with the Pharisees that tried to discredit Him. Jesus was a man full of life in every way.

That kind of life was what he taught to the disciples in our reading today from Matthew. Jesus called us salt and light. But the metaphor didn't end there. Salt has a purpose; light has a purpose. Salt seasons; it brings out flavor. Light illuminates the darkness. But if salt isn't salty, then it's just sand, good for nothing. A light put under a bushel or a barrel – that defeats the purpose! In both metaphors, Jesus is telling us, “Be passionate for me to the point where you flavor your conversations with me and brighten up the dimly lit corners of this world.” A faith that has no salt and light isn't a faith at all. Jesus means for His disciples to be consumed with His Father's business just as He is. And as Paul tells us in Romans this morning, we are never to be lacking in zeal. We'll talk more about that passage from Romans in a minute, but it's safe to say that discipleship is demonstrated by our passion for our LORD.

What are some steps to becoming more passionate about what God has done and is doing in our lives and in our world? It's difficult to find excitement or enthusiasm out of nowhere. What are we supposed to do? I have a few ideas for us this morning. The first one is the cautionary one: *don't fake it*. Genuine enthusiasm for God's Kingdom comes from a realization of our sin, the humbling of repentance, and the joy of discovering the freedom that comes from forgiveness. Once you know God's love for you, it's real. Your excitement may ebb and flow. But you can't manufacture it.

Scripture speaks about this kind of false passion. In Malachi 2:13-15, we see the people weeping and wailing to be heard by God, as if to get His attention. But God says that He is holding His people to account for their sins. He wants obedience more than enthusiasm! And Jesus spoke about how the Pharisees would pray on the street corners and in the synagogues so that people would see them and think of them as being so righteous. Their passion for God was simply a show. Jesus said, “Better to pray at home in your closet where no one else knows.”

Our church is a part of the Presbyterian tradition, and we tend to show our passions differently than some other churches. Our passion tends to be toward the life of the mind, and we have a habit of honoring study. Some churches, you go into worship and everybody's clapping or got their hands up. Others, they might speak in tongues. And in still other churches, the quieter you are, the more worshipful you're thought to be. Some churches teach evangelism is the way you show passion; others say it's through serving. We tend to gravitate towards whatever form we've been taught or where we attend now to fit in.

But God wants the real you, the honest you, the you without any pretenses or walls or fakery. If you don't have a deep passion in your heart for God yet, He knows that. He understands. And it's far better to be honest with God than attempt to pretend. The passion you will have for God, He will give to you. The truth is, plenty of people in every kind of church fake passion for God, whether it's lifting hands or evangelizing or whatever. In my mind, that's one of the most dangerous things that can ever happen. Because when we force it, when we live a lie saying, “Oh how much I love you God,” when that's really not true, that's when hypocrisy gets on the rise. So many of our churches are country clubs with God on the nameplate because they faked it so long that they forgot what genuine worship and genuine passion really look like. Let's be honest before God and let Him stir the Holy Spirit in our hearts to ignite our passion for Him the way He wants.

And just because your passion doesn't look like everyone else's, don't feel bad. You know what? I absolutely love to sing and play in worship. I am passionate about music. But whenever I'm in a church where a lot of people start lifting their hands, I become self-conscious. The worship is no longer about God but about whether or not I fit in. For some folks, that's their natural expression of their love for God, and that's great. I'm not built that way. Maybe you are; maybe you aren't. And you know what? I want a church where people can express themselves in worship however God made them. Where if you want to put up your hands and your neighbor sings his heart out and the third person simply smiles and takes it all in, that's OK. And that applies to all areas of the Christian life.

That's where my next point comes in, coming off of our passage in Romans: *let God lead you into your passion for Him*. Often times, we don't feel passionate about what God is doing because we either don't know where we're gifted or we get stuck in an area that doesn't really suit us. But Paul says we have different gifts because we are all different members of the same body. I don't have your gifts and you don't have mine, and that's a good thing! Because we are all made uniquely to reflect the glory of Christ and to serve His purposes. Paul encourages us to find those gifts and to use them diligently.

Now this doesn't mean that God doesn't want to stretch you. Sometimes we get lazy and think that we're not called to do something because quote-unquote, "that's not where my gifts are." If you ever get a twinge from the Spirit that you should be doing something and your first instinct is, "Ah, I could never do that," that's probably a good sign that you should. God may be wanting to build up a gift in you that you never knew you had.

But it also means that, if you are a genuine believer, through the Holy Spirit God has given you a gift to serve in the local church and to serve out in the community in ways that honor Him. I can tell you that I see it all the time. I love watching Kurt mow the lawn. He's so into it! I love seeing Ed working around the building or Kathy bringing in a dish to share or Barb and Diana and Andrew doing Nick and Cooper. So many of you have shown your passion in various ways for what Christ is doing, from singing in the praise team to changing letters on our sign to putting together our bulletins. I thank you all for the passion you've shown for Christ.

And yet there's still much more God wants to do here in and through us! We need for God to bring us or make us into passionate givers – and we have a few. We need God to give us the gift of passion for spreading the word about what God is doing here. I don't even know all we need – but God does. We are becoming a place where people come in for movie night or the pantry and see people using their gifts and say, "These folks really love Jesus because I see it in who they are and what they are doing." Passionate people, transformed lives, genuine and honest friends who believe in Jesus with all their might – that's who we can be when we act upon the gifts God has given us.

That's why our structures are changing too. Presbyterian churches are known for committees. While we still have a couple, our goal is not to have committees. Our goal is to have opportunities for you to serve Christ where your gifts lie. When God puts it on your heart to volunteer, ask around – ask me or one of the elders, and we'll help you find the perfect spot where God has made you passionate.

And my final point, as it often is, is this: *pray for Godly zeal to infuse every part of your life*. While God gives us specific gifts where we can live out our passions, God first and foremost wants us to be passionate about Him. When we're being salt and light, it's flowing out of our relationship with Him. We can get so wrapped up in doing what we do, what we're passionate about, that we can forget who our enthusiasm is ultimately for. All the work that we do is merely a thanksgiving for what God has already done by saving those who would believe in Jesus Christ.

But that kind of passion is difficult. It's not the passion of a football fan who puts all the jerseys and bullhorns away for next season, who's not truly invested in his team in a real way. It's not the passion of someone who doesn't have a stake in the game. The passion of Jesus-followers is a lifelong slow burn, a fire that sometimes is rekindled and burns hot but never goes out. Passion for God means that we love Him – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Passion for God means we love the Scriptures He has given to us and the truth they speak. Passion for God means that we eagerly desire to be made holy and yearn for fully obedient hearts. That kind of passion changes the world, but that kind of passion doesn't come overnight. It comes from growing deeper and deeper in love with our Savior.

Reading Scripture and participating in church and the other things we've talked about in this series will stoke the flames of that zeal, that diligent search for Him. But ultimately, I believe we must ask for that passion in prayer. Let's be praying for the Holy Spirit to come upon us the same way that He came upon the believers at Pentecost, where 5,000 came to believe in Christ in a single day because of the Spirit's passion burning within the disciples. Let's pray that the passion God gives us would spread into every area of our lives so that we would be enthusiastic to pursue God through Scripture, through study, through fellowship, through worship, through service. He can do it within us, but He will not work unless we are willing. Let's show the first strains of our fervor with passionate prayer that we would have the boldness, courage, and confidence to do what God asks of us with zeal.

I'm going to close this morning with a story about a woman named Sherry. In almost all ways, she was average. Not terribly tall, not terribly pretty, not terribly noticeable. She had no knack for knowing Scripture or leading people to Jesus. But back in 1998, she got involved with CrossRoads Church. God lit a passion in her for that congregation, and she told everybody she knew about it...and I mean everybody. When somebody new walked in the doors, we could make a pretty fair guess that it was someone Sherry told about the church. That church went through struggles and hardships much like ours has...yet that church went in ten years from barely 30 people to over 150 in worship every Sunday. Many of those people, when they joined the church, were first-time believers or folks who had left belief behind for a very long time. When Sherry enjoyed the band or the sermon or the fellowship, it just fueled her fire all the more. While it was God's handiwork to shape CrossRoads, there's no doubt that that church wouldn't be standing today without her willingness to be on fire for that little group of believers.

Friends, we have a great God worthy of our passion and praise. Are we willing to be a Jesus, a Paul, or a Sherry and fan the spark of God's Holy Spirit in your life for the world to see? Because if you are willing to set yourself aflame for God, the world will come to watch you burn.