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John Gill's

A BODY OF PRACTICAL DIVINITY

Book 1—Chapter 19

OF ZEAL

Zeal is an ardor of mind, a fervent affection for some person or thing; with an indignation against everything supposed to be pernicious and hurtful to it. As it is a divine grace, it is a vehement affection for God and his glory, an earnest study, by all proper means, to promote it; with a resentment of everything that tends to obscure, let, and hinder it; it is hot, burning, flaming love, which cannot be quenched by water, nor drowned by floods, nor abated, restrained, and stopped, by any difficulties in the way (Song of Sol. 8:6,7). It is sometimes used for that strong affection God bears to his people, expressed by his earnest care of them, and indignation against their enemies, called, "The zeal of the Lord of hosts, and his great jealousy" (Isa. 9:7; Zech. 1:14; 8:2). And sometimes for a gracious disposition in man, which has God for its object, and is called "zeal towards God," an eager desire after his glory; and of which God is the author, and is called, "A zeal of God," or "a godly jealousy" (2 Cor. 11:2). In treating of which I shall consider,

1. The various sorts and kinds of zeal; that it may be the better known what is right and genuine. And,

1a. First. there is a "zeal of God," which is "not according to knowledge," which the Jews had, as the apostle testifies (Rom. 10:2), and which lay in a zealous concern for the performance of legal duties, and in a studious attempt to set them up, and establish them as a justifying righteousness before God; to the entire neglect and rejection of the righteousness of Christ. Which zeal of theirs, in this attempt, arose,

1a1. From ignorance of the perfection of God's righteousness, which is displayed in all his ways and works, who is the Judge of the whole earth, and will do right; and will not clear the guilty without full satisfaction to his justice, nor justify any without a perfect righteousness; and his "judgment of things is according to truth;"

and he cannot reckon an imperfect righteousness a perfect one; nor account that for righteousness which is none: to secure his honor and glory in this point, he has set forth Christ to be the propitiatory sacrifice for sin, thereby making satisfaction for it; "to declare his righteousness:" but of this the legal zealot is ignorant, and therefore takes a wrong course.

1a2. It arises from ignorance of the righteousness which God in the law requires; the law is holy, just, and good, and requires a perfect righteousness; both as to the matter of it, and the manner of its performance; all that the law has commanded must be done, and as it is commanded, or it is no righteousness (Deut. 6:25), and the law is spiritual, and reaches to, and is concerned with the heart, the spirit, and the soul of man; it forbids sinful thoughts, inward lusts, and irregular affections, as well as the outward and grosser sins of life; it allows of no peccadillo's, or little sins, but condemns all; so extensive is the law, and such the spirituality of it; which the Pharisee being ignorant of, sets up his own righteousness as sufficient, and zealously endeavors to establish it; but it will be of no service (Matthew 5:19,20).

1a3. This ignorant zeal arises from a want of knowledge of the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel; which is no other than the righteousness of Christ, who is God as well as man: being ignorant of this, its excellency, fullness, and suitableness, men submit not unto it, but reject it, stumbling at the stumbling stone and rock of offence (Rom. 1:17; 3:21,22).

1a4. It arises from ignorance of their own righteousness; the Spirit of God not having convinced them of it, how imperfect and polluted it is; how it is not answerable to the law of God; and how short it comes of its demands and requirements; and how insufficient it is to justify them before God; and while this is the case they are warmly attached to it, and zealous to establish it: but when they come to be made sensible of the imperfection and unprofitableness of it, they desire to be found in Christ, and in his righteousness, and not their own (Phil. 3:9).

1a5. It arises from want of faith in Christ; being destitute of that, the zealots follow eagerly after righteousness, but do not attain it; "Because they seek it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law;" now, what is not of faith is sin, and therefore zeal without faith cannot be right; zeal without faith in Christ must be without knowledge, must be without the knowledge of Christ, and without the knowledge of God in Christ; and therefore cannot be well pleasing and acceptable to God; nor is such a righteousness they are following after and endeavoring to establish. Therefore,

1a6. Such a zealot goes contrary to the will and way of God, in the justification of a sinner; and therefore his zeal must be a false one: the declared will of God is, that a man is not, and cannot be justified in the sight of God by the deeds of the law; but that a man is justified by faith in the righteousness of Christ without the deeds of the law; the way and method God takes to justify men is by grace, freely imputing righteousness, without works, unto them; by making and accounting them

righteous, through the obedience and righteousness of his Son (Rom. 3:20,28,24; 4:6; 5:9). And therefore it must be a blind, ignorant zeal, which sets up a man's post by God's post, and advances his own righteousness above that of Christ's.

1b. Secondly, there is a mistaken zeal of the glory of God; and for it.

1b1. When that is opposed which is right, under a false notion of its being contrary to the glory of God; as when Joshua requested of Moses to forbid the young men prophesying in the camp; as being neither, as he thought, for the glory of God, nor to the honour of Moses; and when the priests and scribes were sore displeased at the children in the temple, crying "hosanna" to the Son of David; and when they exclaimed against the works of Christ done on the sabbath day, as if contrary to the honour of the sabbath, and the sanctification of it, and so to the glory of God in it; and such was the indiscreet zeal of Peter in chiding Christ for saying he must suffer many things, as if it was injurious to his honour and glory; when all these things were right.

1b2. When that which is not for the glory of God, is wrongly thought to be so, and is zealously pursued as such: this is a mistaken zeal; as was the zeal of the idolatrous Gentiles for their idols, and idol worship; and of the Papists, for their worship of images, angels, and saints departed, and for many other things; and of the Jews, for the traditions of the elders, of which the apostle Paul was very zealous, before conversion; and of the believing Jews, who were zealous for continuing the ceremonies of the law, though abrogated (Gal. 1:14; Acts 21:20).

1b3. When ways and methods improper are taken to defend and promote the glory of God; as when the disciples, in their zeal for the honour of Christ, were for having fire come down from heaven upon those who had shown some disrespect to Christ; and when Peter, in his preposterous zeal, drew his sword in defence of his Master, and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant; for which both the one and the other were rebuked by Christ (Luke 9:55; Matthew 26:51).

1c. Thirdly, there is a superstitious zeal, such as was in Baal's worshippers, who cut themselves with knives and lancets, while calling upon him; and in all idolaters using a multitude of superstitious rites, of which they are extremely zealous; particularly in the Athenians, who were wholly given to idolatry, and whose city was full of idols; of whom the apostle says, that he perceived that they "were in all things too superstitious;" and therefore, lest they should be at all defective in the objects of their worship, they erected an altar to an unknown God, that they might be sure to comprehend all; and in the Jews, who were zealous of the traditions of the fathers, and were superstitiously careful that they did not eat with unwashed hands, and of the washing of their cups and pots, &c.

1d. Fourthly, there is a persecuting zeal, under a pretence of the glory of God; so Saul, before his conversion, says of himself; "Concerning zeal, persecuting the church;" that is, he showed his zeal, as he thought, for the glory of God, when he

persecuted the church of Christ, and made havoc of it; and he seems to have respect to this when he tells the Jews that he was "zealous towards God, as ye all are this day;" so the "devout and honorable women," whom the Jews stirred up to persecute the apostles, were, no doubt, under the influence of such a false zeal; imagining, that what they did was for the glory of God, and the honour of religion (Phil. 3:6; Acts 22:3,4; 26:9,10; 13:50; see John 16:2).

1e. Fifthly, there is an hypocritical zeal for God; as in Jehu, when he said, "Come with me, and see my zeal for the Lord;" when, at the same time, he took no heed to walk in the law of the Lord, nor did he depart from the sins of Jeroboam; for though he destroyed the images of Baal, he worshipped the calves at Dan and Bethel: and in the Scribes and Pharisees, who brought the woman taken in adultery to Christ, under a pretence of a great regard to the law; and yet were guilty of like sins and others: and in Judas, who pretended regard to the poor, when he only sought to gratify his covetousness: and in the Pharisees, who made a show of great zeal for piety, by their long prayers, when they only sought to devour widows' houses by that means (2 Kings 10:16,29,31; John 8:3,9; 12:5,6; Matthew 23:14).

1f. Sixthly, there is a contentious zeal; which often gives great trouble to Christian communities: of men of such a spirit the apostle speaks when he says, "If any man seems to be contentious," about trivial matters, things indifferent, and of no moment, "we have no such custom, nor the churches of God;" nor should such be indulged: this sort of zeal is oftentimes no other than a mere logomachy, "a striving about words to no profits" it is a contention about "foolish and unlearned questions," which "gender strifes;" and at best about things curious and useless; whereas true zeal is always employed about the more solid and substantial doctrines of the gospel, and the ordinances of Christ.

1g. Seventhly, sometimes it is only a temporary passion; a flash of zeal, and continues not; so Joash, while Jehoiada the priest lived, did what was right, and showed zeal in repairing the house of God; but after his death, left the house of the Lord God of his fathers, and served groves and idols. John the Baptist was a burning and shining light, and his hearers and disciples burned with zeal for him, his ministry, and baptism, and envied, on his account, the increasing interest of Christ; but it was but for a season they "rejoiced in his light:" so the Galatians were zealously afflicted towards the apostle Paul, to such a degree, that they would have been willing to have "plucked out their eyes" and given them to him; whom they first received as an angel of God, even as Jesus Christ, so acceptable was his ministry; and yet he became their enemy, because of his preaching the same truths.

1h. Eighthly, true zeal is no other than a fervent ardent love to God and Christ, and a warm concern for their honour and glory; such who are truly zealous for the Lord of hosts, love him with all their heart, with all their soul, and with all their strength; they love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, as well as one another fervently; it is accompanied with a saving knowledge of God and Christ; of God in Christ, and of Christ and him crucified; and such prefer the excellency of the knowledge of Christ

above all things else, and prefer him to all created beings (Phil. 3:8; Ps. 73:25), they have faith in God, and also in Christ; a faith which works by love, and this love constrains them, inspires them with zeal to seek their honour and glory; whatever they do, whether in things civil or religious, they do all to the glory of God. To true zeal there must be spiritual knowledge, unfeigned faith, and undissembled love; and this stands opposed,

1h1. To a neutral spirit in religion, to a halting between two opinions, condemned by Elijah in the Jews (1 Kings 18:21). There can be no true zeal to the truth of worship, doctrines, and ordinances, where there is no stability; but a continual wavering and inconstancy.

1h2. To carelessness and indifference about religious matters; when men, like the Jews of old, regard their own paneled houses, and not the house of God; when they mind their secular affairs more than the interest of religion; when, as to the church of God, the truths of the gospel, and the ordinances of Christ, Gallio like, they care for none of these things.

1h3. To lukewarmness, with respect to divine and spiritual things; which the Laodicean church is charged with, and resented by Christ (Rev. 3:15,16). I proceed to consider,

2. The objects of zeal.

2a. First, The object of it is God; even a false zeal is called, "a zeal towards God;" and that which is not according to knowledge, is said to be "a zeal of God;" Jehu called his hypocritical zeal, a "zeal for the Lord;" true zeal most deservedly bears this name; so Phinehas had the covenant of an everlasting priesthood given him, because he was "zealous for his God" (Num. 25:13), which springs from a principle of love to God, and its end is his glory; and it has for its objects the worship of God, the word of God, and the truths contained in it.

2a1. The worship of God; who must be known, or he cannot be worshipped aright: the Samaritans worshipped they knew not what; and the Athenians erected an altar to an unknown God; and therefore, though they were both zealous of worship, their zeal was not according to knowledge; but true believers worship God in "the Spirit," whom they know in a spiritual way; through faith in Christ, and with a zealous concern for his glory: and they worship him in truth, and keep close to the pattern of worship shown them; to which they are zealously attached, and will not depart from it. Wherefore,

2a2. The word of God is the object of their zeal; to the law and to the testimony they appeal for the truth of all they say and do; they make that the standard of their faith and practice, and the rule of their worship; they earnestly contend for the perfection and integrity of it; and endeavour, with all their might and main, to preserve it pure and incorrupt (2 Cor. 2:17).

2a3. The truths contained in the word; they who have a true zeal are valiant for the truth; and can do nothing against it, but everything for it, in defence of it, and for the continuance of it; they will buy the truth, give a great price for it, and highly value it; but will not sell it, nor part with it at any rate.

2b. Secondly, the cause of Christ, is another object of zeal; and which is a good one, and the apostle says, "It is good to be zealously affected always in a good thing" (Gal. 4:18), and those who are possessed of this zealous affection, seek not their own things, but the things of Christ; they have a sort of a natural care, as Timothy had, for the state of the churches, and interest of Christ, and of true religion, and for the support of it; not only in that branch of it to which they more peculiarly belong, but in others; as the Corinthian church, who was not only zealously concerned for their own welfare, but for that of others; and the apostle testifies, that their zeal in their liberal ministrations to the saints, had "provoked very many" (2 Cor. 9:2). True zeal for the cause of Christ is concerned about the gospel of Christ, the ordinances of Christ, and the discipline of his house.

2b1. The gospel of Christ: great reason there is to be zealous for that; since it is "the gospel of the grace of God," which displays the free grace of God in every part of our salvation; and therefore the apostle was so zealously concerned for it, as not to count his life dear to himself, so that he might finish his course with joy, by bearing a testimony to it: and because it is, "the gospel of salvation," which publishes salvation by Christ; and declares, that whosoever believes in him shall be saved: and because it is, "the gospel of peace," preaching peace by Jesus Christ, and by the blood of his cross; and because in it forgiveness of sin is preached in the name of Christ, and justification by his righteousness.

2b2. The ordinances of Christ; which every true Christian should be zealous for, that they be kept as they were first delivered, without any innovation or corruption; that the mode of administration of both baptism and the Lord's Supper should be strictly adhered to; and that none be admitted to them but believers in Christ, or such who profess faith in him.

2b3. The discipline of Christ's house should be the object of our zeal, as it was of his; who said, the "zeal of thine house hath eaten me up;" and this is shown when the rules of discipline are strictly observed, both with respect to private and public offences; when churches, and the members of them, like the church at Ephesus, cannot "bear them which are evil," to continue them in fellowship with them; whether men of immoral lives, or have imbibed false doctrines; but withdraw from them that walk disorderly, and reject such who are not sound in the faith. Hence,

2c. Thirdly, everything that is evil is the object of zeal, or against which true zeal should be expressed. As,

2c1. Against all false worship, particularly idolatry, or the having more and other gods than one; whether found among the heathens, or any that bear the Christian

name; as was by Moses, when his anger, zeal, and indignation, waxed hot against the Israelites for their idolatrous worship of the calf, and he broke the tables of the law which were in his hands, and ordered the Levites to put their swords by their side, and slay every man his brother, companion, and neighbour: and so Elijah, who was jealous for the Lord God of hosts, because Israel had forsaken the covenant of the Lord, had thrown down his altar, and slain his prophets; and where there is true love for God, and zeal for his worship, there will be an hatred of every false way, be it in what shape it may.

2c2. Against all errors in doctrine; especially such as affect the Persons in Deity, Father, Son, and Spirit; with all others, which are the fundamental doctrines of religion; such as deny them are to be rebuked "sharply," warmly, vehemently, with a becoming zeal, that they may be sound in the faith; such who bring not the doctrine of Christ, respecting his person, office, and grace, are not to be received into the houses of saints, nor to be bid God speed.

2c3. Against all immorality in practice; true zeal will be as much leveled against a man's own sins as against the sins of others; he will be concerned to remove the beam out of his own eye, as well as the mote out of his brother's; he will be severe against right hand and right eye sins, such as are dear to the flesh as these be; and real godly sorrow for sin, and true repentance unto salvation, is always productive of zeal; "What zeal" it wrought in you? against a man's own sins more especially, as against others; and that which is against the sins of others, is tempered with commiseration and pity to the sinner (2 Cor. 7:11; 12:21).

2d. Fourthly, true zeal is concerned in all the duties of religion, and shows itself in them; in the service of God in general, we should be "fervent in spirit," warm, hot, zealous; "serving the Lord," in such a manner, and not in a cold, indifferent way, and in the ministration of the gospel; it is said of Apollos, that being "fervent in spirit he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord," the doctrines of the gospel, so far as he was then acquainted with them (Rom. 12:11; Acts 18:25). It is also very requisite in prayer to God; it is said of Epaphras, that he was always "laboring fervently in prayers" for the church at Colosse; and it is the effectual "fervent prayer" of the righteous man that availeth much (Col. 4:12; Jam. 5:16). And it should be shown in the love of the saints to one another (1 Pet. 1:22; 4:8). In short, believers in Christ ought to be "zealous of good works," careful to maintain them, diligent in the performance of them, especially of those which are the greater and weightier duties of religion; though they are not to neglect and omit the lesser ones. To say no more, good men are the objects of true zeal; the apostle Paul was informed of the "fervent mind" or zeal of the Corinthians towards him, of the warm love and ardent affection they had for him; and he advises them to covet earnestly, to desire the best gifts, spiritual ones, fitting for public service, even prophecy, or preaching (2 Cor. 7:7; 1 Cor. 12:31; 14:1,12,39).

3. Motives or arguments exciting to the exercise of true zeal.

3a. The example of Christ, whom David in prophetic language represented, saying, "The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up," consumed his spirits, his strength, and life; so much did he exert himself in his public ministrations: he showed his zeal for the doctrines of the gospel, by his warm and constant preaching them, even with power and authority, as the Scribes and Pharisees did not; in the indefatigable pains he took, travelling from place to place to do it; running the risk of his life, and exposing himself to frequent dangers on that account: and for the worship of the house of God, as appears by inveighing so severely against the traditions of men; by asserting the purity of worship in spirit and in truth; by expressing his resentment at the profanation of the house of God, driving out the buyers and sellers from it; which brought the above passage to the mind of the disciples, who clearly discerned the fulfillment of it: the zeal of Christ against immorality was seen also in his sharp reproofs of the vices of the age, both in professors and profane; and in all he is a pattern worthy of our imitation.

3b. True zeal answers a principal end of redemption by Christ (Titus 2:14), and where there is no zeal for God, and for that which he requires an observance of, the claim to redemption seems very precarious. The love of Christ in redeeming his people will constrain them to show a zeal for his glory, both with respect to doctrine and practice.

3c. It is "good," the apostle says, "to be zealously affected in," and for that which is good; and it is approved and commended by Christ; as the church at Ephesus was for it, because she could not bear them that were evil; and a contrary disposition, that of lukewarmness, is disapproved of and resented; as in the church of Laodicea, threatened to be unchurched for it; and therefore strongly exhorted to be "zealous and repent" (Rev. 3:15,16,19,20).

3d. A lukewarm temper, which is the opposite to zeal, seems not consistent with true religion, which has always life and heat in it; to be neither "cold nor hot" is condemned as having no religion at all.

3e. The zeal of persons shown in a false way, should stimulate the professors of the true religion to show at least an equal zeal; for that "all people will walk everyone in the name of his God," and appear zealous for his worship, "we will walk in the name of the Lord our God," at least we ought to do so, and determine upon it. The Pharisees showed great zeal, and took great pains, compassing sea and land to make one proselyte, though made worse than he was, and worse than themselves; and should not we Christians exert ourselves to the uttermost for the interest of the Redeemer (Micah 4:5; Matthew 23:15), this must be a becoming zeal. And in order to keep up and promote such zeal, it will be proper frequently to meditate on the love of God and Christ, the blessings of the gospel of the grace of God, the excellency of the Christian religion, the benefits and privileges of the house of God, and to converse often with warm and lively Christians, and to sit under a savory and fervent ministry.

