

Called to be Passionate

Romans 12:11

National's Mission

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Real Audio (2 MB)

Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Romans 12:11

The vision statement printed every Sunday on the front of the bulletin is abbreviated. The official version includes the words Called to at the beginning: Called to a ministry of grace! Those are significant words because they make it abundantly clear that this church is not a voluntary organization like Rotary or the Junior League. Rather, we are called into this ministry by no less an authority than Almighty God. We are not volunteers; we are conscripts.

I was a Kiwanian thirty years ago in Spokane, Washington. We met for lunch every week, ribbed each other a lot, and heard more or less interesting speakers. Every fall we raised money to support our work among youth by selling apples out in front of the local K-Mart. I didn't do very well at first. When I asked people to buy an apple for twenty-five cents they gave me a stony look and walked on by. They could buy apples at Safeway for a dime, so why give me a quarter? So I changed my sales pitch. When I saw someone walking toward the door, I said, "Sir, wouldn't you like to help a teenager? Donate a quarter and I'll give you an apple for free." It worked every time! Folks, you're looking at the all-time champion Kiwanian apple peddler of Spokane, Washington!

But when I left Spokane, I quit Kiwanis. I took off the lapel pin, threw away my membership card, and never sold another apple. You see, all that time I was a volunteer. I had joined out of personal interest. If the speaker's topic caught my fancy, I showed up at lunch. If not, I could choose not to attend.

But you and I did not choose to be members of Christ's church; we were chosen. You were called to belong to Jesus Christ, Paul writes at the beginning of his letter to the church at Rome (1:6). And he repeats that claim in eight of his letters in the New Testament. So we are called to a ministry of grace. We have been drafted into Christ's company. And our proper response is not to show up only when it suits us, not to serve willy-nilly, but, as the vision statement puts it, to be passionate about Christ's mission in the world.

When you stop to think about it, passionate is an intriguing word to include in a church's vision statement. When I saw my sermon title posted on one of the signboards out on the corner --Called to be Passionate -- I thought the sanctuary would be packed this morning, packed with people curious to hear what a preacher knows about passion. I do know this: the word passion never appears in a positive sense in the Scriptures. Invariably passion refers to immorality. Colossians 3:5, for example: Put to death whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed. And Proverbs 14:30, A tranquil mind gives life to the flesh, but passion makes the bones rot.

But if the Bible never uses the word passion in a positive way, it often commends a passionate spirit. For example in today's text: Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.

One commentator calls those lines a staccato series of imperatives. Staccato, because they are abrupt and brief, and therefore easily memorized by new believers. And imperative, because these are some of the attributes required in a passionate Christian.

First, do not lag in zeal. That may sound as if Paul is saying, live at a fever pitch twenty-four hours a day; never let up; or, as some in my background used to say, burn out for Christ. But if you turn the negative into a positive, it sounds like this: shield your passion against premature burnout. Long distance runners know about burnout. They may lag behind the rest of the field for a number of reasons: they haven't trained properly, they didn't eat sufficient carbohydrates, they're running on an old injury, they may be

coming down with a cold, or, as was the case with me once or twice, the race was longer than I expected, and I simply burned out. I was passionate about running, but I took on more than I could handle, and, in Paul's language, I lagged in my zeal.

New Christians often take off like a rocket. In their passion to serve their Savior, they take classes, watch videos, read books, sign up for retreats, serve on committees, go off on mission trips, and teach Sunday school, until one day they simply burn out. They are tired, exhausted, worn out, and next Sunday you'll find them on the back pew if you find them at all, for many simply give up and go home.

So the best advice I can give is, don't do too much, too soon, too fast. In order never to lag in zeal, shield your passion against premature burnout.

But don't go to the other extreme! Be ardent in spirit, Paul writes next. Greek writers used the word ardent to describe a boiling pot of water, and you won't get water to boil without adequate fuel -- wood, coal, oil, electricity. So we might paraphrase Paul by saying, supply your passion with proper fuel.

Our first apartment forty-eight years ago was a garage with a small wing attached. The garage, with oil stains still on the cement floor, was the bedroom, and the wing contained the kitchen, living room and bathroom. The washer and dryer were out back on a cement pad that served as a patio. They were fairly new, but no matter what Carol did, white shirts came out gray and coloreds invariably dull. She turned the wash dial to "hot" and the rinse dial to "cold," but to no avail. She put in more soap, but it was no soap! She put in extra bleach, but nothing brightened. One afternoon I accidentally touched the hose leading to the hot water connection on the back of the machine, and it was cold. Then I felt the hose to the cold water connection, and it was hot. Whoever installed the washer had inadvertently switched the hoses. We were washing in cold water and rinsing in hot. Then and there I switched the hoses, and from then on Carol could have given the TV testimonial for Tide.

We were supplying the washer with the wrong fuel. And when the fuels we Christians imbibe consist mainly of sitcoms, or soap operas, or sports, or computer games, or what is worse, pornography or drugs or alcohol, then we are throwing cold water on our spirit. Please don't misunderstand me: I'm not asking you to turn off the Redskins this afternoon. I am asking you to connect the hot water tap, to imbibe the word of God, to spend time daily in prayer, to find a small group of believers to whom you can be accountable for your spiritual goals, to worship and commune regularly in this church or some other. Supply your passion with the proper fuel.

Finally, submit your passion to Jesus Christ: serve the Lord, Paul writes. And what kind of Lord is he? A servant-lord who washed the feet of his friends at the last supper, who fed his disciples with bread and wine to remember his impending death, and who then went out to give his life for our sins, all of which led the early church to speak of his suffering and death as his passion. Ignatius, writing in the early years of the 2nd century, speaks of the birth, passion, and resurrection, which occurred while Pontius Pilate was governor. In that sentence Ignatius substituted the word passion for death. In another letter he speaks of our sharing Christ's passion, meaning that we are to sacrifice too, if not by death, then by the sacrificial quality of our lifestyle.

So I dare to ask, whose feet, grimy from having trod dead end streets, will you wash this week? Whose thirst, defiled from drinking at polluted wells, will you slake; whose spirit, wounded by the slings and arrows of misfortune, will you bandage; whose hunger, unfilled by secular fast food, will you satisfy?

I intentionally used the word will in those questions, (not, whose hunger might, but whose hunger will you satisfy) because we cannot eat this bread and drink this cup and remain nonchalant to our hungering neighbors. The passion of Jesus Christ, so visible at this table, calls us to be passionate. So when you eat the bread, promise not to lag in zeal. When you drink the cup, vow to be ardent in spirit. And when you walk out these doors, resolve to serve the Lord, the Lord who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life for you.