

A Stoked Faith

Romans 12: 11-12

Sermon delivered by Reverend Leo Douma, 11th March, 2001

"What do you get passionate about? What gets you stoked up? What makes you lean forward in your chair, gives you a surge of energy and makes you talk faster? What subject would that be? Would it be politics, babies, computers, the next big business project, football, changes in the church, your faith, Jesus? What? What are you passionate about? Are you passionate about your spirituality? I mention it because this is one of the characteristics of a growing church. To provide the right environment for the "seed to grow all by itself", for the Spirit to develop the kingdom in our midst, we must have a passionate spirituality. Now by this we do not mean being over the top charismatic. That's an issue of spiritual style. Our expression is very different to the charismatics'. But we must still be passionate. The third characteristic in our Vision Statement outlines it like this: A Passionate spirituality (Romans 12:11-12). We recognise that the Christian faith is not just an acceptance of biblical teaching, but involves a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and as our relationship with Jesus intensifies so we become more passionate about our spirituality. So each of us commits to creating time for, and developing, our personal and family devotions (i.e. regular bible reading and prayer), as well as times of prayer as a congregation. We commit ourselves to live deeply committed lives that reflect Jesus as Lord in all aspects of our lives, displaying an enthusiasm and passion for following God's ways, living in the knowledge that God is in our midst and expecting Him to be active in bringing the Kingdom."

Now what do we base this on? Well we are going to see this point of passionate spirituality in our text (Romans 12:11&12). But first let's set the context. There already we see the tension, the passion, build up. At the end of chapter 11

Paul finishes off all his teaching about the amazing grace of God and the salvation and the hope that comes through Jesus. It affects him so deeply that Paul breaks into a doxology of praise. And then in 12:1 Paul writes, "Therefore I urge you, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God..." You notice the passion in Paul's language "I urge you". If God has done so much, our response of gratitude can be nothing less than for us to offer Him our lives. Now from: 9 on, Paul has a string of commands, all terse in language and passionate in intent. Listen to it "Love must be sincere." No pretend love, no going through the motions. This is deep and true. "Hate what is evil, cling to what is good.'" Again note the intensity. We are not to put up with evil - we do not try once or twice to deal with it. We are to hate it with a passion. We are to do everything in our power to strive against evil, to fight injustice, to take our stand against the ways of our culture that go against God's laws. And we don't just have a bit of a shot at doing good. We cling to the good. Again you see the passion. We pour our energy into doing God's will in our lives. :10 "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love". Again we see the passion; long for each other deeply. Be so intent in your doing good for the other that you truly "Honour one another above yourselves." You are so devoted to your Christian brother or sister that their issues are more important than yours.

Now in (our text) :11 Paul brings up three items that are closely related. "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord." The key point Paul is telling us here is that we are "serving the Lord." That is what the Christian life is about. All of life is a serving of the Lord. We do not serve Jesus one day a week, serving money and success and self ambition the other six days. Everything we do, every day is to be done in such a way that it is "serving the Lord." Whether we are or eating or drinking or whatever we are doing, we do it in the name of the Lord and for the glory of God, since all of life belongs to the Lord.

All of life; that includes our family life, our work, our economics, our sports, our education, our political life, all of it is to be lived for Christ, in such a way that we discover His way in all these areas, and we bring Him the glory. Now there are two phrases that describe how we are to serve the Lord. And they are the opposite of doing it reluctantly, or being apathetic, being bored, half hearted. The one expresses it negatively, the second positively.

First, we are "Never to be lacking in zeal". It's literally (from the Greek) "not lazy in earnestness". "Not lagging behind in diligence". RSV says "Never flag in zeal." This is a rebuke to passivity, to laziness and lethargy, to apathy and boredom. In Australia, this is one of the greatest threats to Christianity. Not persecution, but apathy and boredom as we yawn and "ho hum" our way through another church service, as we take little bother to be distinctively Christian in the workplace. Paul assumes that if you see this in yourself that you can do something about it. It's not a case of personality - "That's just me. I don't get excited about things. I am not expressive of my faith." It is a question of spiritual passion. And for that we have been given the Holy Spirit and the Word of God and the means of prayer precisely to fight against this. Paul is challenging us here. Don't just drift in life, don't float, don't just sit mindless in front of TV - don't just do the Aussie thing at work and dream of the weekend. Stir up zeal for God and for the cause of God in all of life. There are great things worth living for - not just a good weekend. Don't be lazy and holding back in giving all honour to Jesus.

The second thing Paul says is "keep your spiritual fervour". The Greek word "zeontes" means "boiling". That's where we get the word "fervent" from; it's Latin for boiling. Here's the positive side. Don't lag behind in diligence and zeal but rather be fervent, boil in the spirit. Be passionate in your spirit. Passion is a spiritual dynamic. The disciples before Pentecost could hardly be called leaders or influencers of others. They were a group huddling in fear in Jerusalem. But when they experienced the resurrection of Jesus and the

outpouring of the Spirit they changed completely. The Spirit of God burned in them. They became people driven by a passion to get the message out. They became zealous for the cause of the gospel. Jeremiah also knew what this boiling, this passion was about. He said (Jeremiah 20:9) "But if I say, "I will not mention God or speak any more in His name, His word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in, indeed, I cannot."

How can you tell if a person is passionate about some thing. Three things: conversation, enjoyment and energy. If you are really on fire about something, you keep talking about it, you enjoy doing it, and you don't get tired of it. In fact it energizes you. Are you bubbling over in your conversation to talk about Jesus and the love of God? Are you challenged and energized to think hard and deep about how to do your work from a more Christ-centred perspective? Do you enjoy considering the ways of God in creation, discovering His laws and norms for life, for your area of expertise, and making them clear to others? Are you passionate in your life and service to Jesus? Yes? Wonderful! No? If not, how is your relationship to Jesus? Remember how Paul puts this text "keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord". The Christian faith is not just about accepting certain teachings from a book, or trying to follow certain laws or a grand idea. It's about serving Jesus. Which means we personally know Him, and we deeply love Him for who He is and what He has done. It means we relate to Him daily, "...we walk with Him and talk with Him". If you lack passion and zeal, this is the first thing you need to look at. The National Church Life Survey many of us filled out a few years ago, made it clear that too many in our congregation were not regular in our devotions and prayer life. The intensity of our relationship with Jesus is a direct cause of our level of spiritual passion. If our minds are not on Christ, if our minds are more on big business, money, ourself, having a good time or whatever else we are focusing on, then we will lose our passion. If we take for granted what Jesus has done for us and are no longer moved by God's grace as displayed at His table, then we will lose our passion. If we no longer see the depth of our sin, then forgiveness means little

and it becomes a ritual, like saying "I beg your pardon" when we can't hear someone. We must then come back to basics "In view of God's mercy, offer your bodies as a spiritual sacrifice." In the last few days the Howard government has doubled its "first home buyer grant." That's good, but we are not awed by the generosity. We are cynical, thinking it is taxpayer money any way. Besides it's a panic act, an election ploy. But what if a mate says to you, "I'll pay your house off for you. The whole loan." Then you sit back and say "What!!?" And then it strikes you that this bloke is not rolling in the money. He does not want to pay you out of His abundance. He is saying that he wants to work for the next fifteen years just to pay off your mortgage. "I want to pay your greatest debt," he says, " to give you a break, a chance to move forward." What do you say then? You would be deeply moved and you'd say, "It's too much, I can't let you do that. That's too great a gift. It's too much of a sacrifice to take from any one." What did Jesus give to save you from your greatest debt, your debt of sin against God? Did He pay for you from the luxury of his throne in heaven? Did he not personally take your burden to the cross and suffer hell in your place? Can you think of that and be bored, yawn and be apathetic. Doesn't it stir your heart with deep emotion and gratitude? Doesn't it stir up a passion for Christ!!?

Yes, you might say, I know what you are saying. But you have not experienced what I have. I had zeal, but I have lost the joy in life. I don't see the point anymore. I am left with lots of questions. This brings up the three commands we find in :12. Again each is closely related. "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer." Now notice how it says, "Be joyful..." It's a command. So joy is not just a natural disposition of your character. Nor is joy based on your circumstances. It is a joy "in hope". But nor is joy an act of the will – I will be joyful! Joy is a spontaneous, emotional response of the heart. When Peter writes in 1 Peter 1:9 of rejoicing with "unutterable and exalted joy" in anticipation of our final salvation, he is not describing a decision, but an explosion, a spontaneous outburst of wonder and gladness. You can decide

to do things that may bring you joy, like visiting a friend, but whether joy actually happens is not in your power. You can prepare for it - like putting up the sail on your boat out on Sydney Harbour, but you cannot make the wind blow. The Spirit blows where it wills and joy is a fruit of the Spirit. But if that is the case how can Paul command it of us. Well, because we ought to have it. God is infinitely worthy of our delight. And also because the only thing standing between the command of God to rejoice and our experience of joy is a sinful heart - a heart that delights more in the things of the world than in God. In other words for us to experience joy we must stop being preoccupied with just the things and worries of this life. Our perspective must be in eternity. Our minds must be focused on our hope. If we think that this life is "all there is", that "this is as good as it gets", no wonder many people can feel pretty miserable. But if we focus on Jesus, and the forgiveness we have in Him, if we remember that God loves us deeply and is using life's circumstances to have us grow and achieve eternal life on the new earth, if we know that the point to all living is God Himself, not all we can get our hands on now, then a very deep joy develops in our heart. There is a wonderful sense of peace and calm. We have the patience to deal with whatever affliction comes our way. But to focus on our hope it requires prayer. That's the secret. Faithful prayer. It comes back again to having a vibrant ongoing relationship with Jesus. In prayer our hearts turn to Him. And Jesus Himself is our hope and our hearts desire. Jesus Himself is the one who has brought salvation, not only for believers, but also for a groaning creation. Jesus Himself is the point and purpose of life. In knowing Jesus, we know what life is in its deepest sense and most joyful experience. So be in prayer, faithfully, constantly, always. Not just as individuals, but in the bible study groups, and special prayer times with Zandra and Irene. Be joyful in prayer, be passionate in prayer, knowing that God is in our midst, expecting Him to work in our lives, expecting Him to bring in the Kingdom. Where we as a congregation are passionate in our spirituality we will indeed see God greatly at work in our lives and in our church."

Guidelines for discussion in bible study groups.

1. Tell the group what sort of things you get passionate about. Would you say you are passionate about your spiritual life? What's the difference between spiritual style and passionate spirituality? Eg. Can a reserved Calvinist be as passionate about Christ as an excitable charismatic?
2. What is it that makes Paul so intense about the Christian life? What is it in response to? Are our Christian lives a similar sort of response? How can we live out, in our day to day lives: love that is sincere; hating what is evil; clinging to what is good; being devoted to one another?
3. How do we go about serving the Lord in all of life? Isn't being religious a case of going to church and personal devotions, with the rest of life just doing what everyone else does in business or studies etc. If that is not the case, how do we actually go about economics, sports, education, politics or you name it, from a more Christ-centred perspective?
4. Do you find worship or the Christian life a bit of a bore a routine? Do you tend to take the Christian faith a bit for granted? How would it change your life if you were "not lazy in zeal", striving to do great things for Jesus?
5. How would you describe spiritual fervour or passion? What effect did it have on the disciples and on Jeremiah? Have you ever experienced this? Why or why not? Do you bubble over in your conversation about Jesus? Do you enjoy discovering God's ways for life in His Word and creation?
6. What is your personal relationship with Jesus like? Do you "walk with Him and talk with Him" as the old song put it? What do you focus on in your thinking? What energises you? How regular are your times of devotion with Jesus, your prayer life and your study of His Word? Are you still amazed and

awed by the grace of God and what Jesus has done for you? Or has it become something you take for granted?

7. What is joy and how do we experience it? Why is prayer the secret to joy? In what practical ways can we encourage prayer in our congregation? How can we encourage passion in our spirituality as a church?