



"The heart is heated by meditation and cold truth is melted into passionate action."  
—Donald Whitney

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## Are You Zealous? (Part Two)

In Jesus Christ's letter to the congregation at Laodicea ([Revelation 3:14-22](#)), He pulls no punches in His evaluation of their works, essentially saying that they sickened Him with their lukewarm attitude toward Him and His way of life. They cannot be described as zealous.

About what do they become enthused? They say, "I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing" ([Revelation 3:17](#)). This statement is the Laodiceans' judgment about their lives. When they look around, they see nice cars, fine houses, and fashionable clothes. With good jobs, they can afford to travel to "in" locations around [the world](#), own the latest gadgets, and partake of popular entertainments. Evaluating themselves, they believe they have life by the tail.

And in this, we find the answer to our question: [Laodiceans](#) are enthusiastic about being rich, becoming wealthy, and needing nothing. Life is good. They are content.

It may be unfair to say that they lack zeal altogether, but they are zealous for the wrong things. Apparently, they have the focus and drive to acquire enough wealth to feel that they need nothing, which requires a certain amount of ambition and aggression, but [God](#) considers their enthusiasm to be directed at ill-considered goals. As Jesus puts it in [John 6:27](#), they are "labor[ing] for the food which perishes" rather than "the food which endures to everlasting life."

In spending all their time and energy pursuing material gain, the things of God receive, at best, only the cooling cinders of their zeal, so they have little in common with their Savior. Oriented toward what they can see, they give little or no regard to the invisible God. To them, He is "out of sight, out of mind." Toward God, then, the Laodicean is essentially apathetic. They have no feeling, as that is what *apathy* means: "without feeling."

Christ cannot stand their apathy. He hates the middle ground they have staked out for themselves between Him and the world. Though He would love for them to be red-hot for Him, He would rather they be ice-cold than the lifeless, tepid, indifferent fence-sitters they have become. He is ready to

vomit them out of His body because it is evident that they do not love Him. If they did, they would be zealous for Him and His way of life. Yet He says, "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and [repent](#)" ([Revelation 3:19](#)).

How does Scripture approach the subject of zeal? In the New Testament, the Greek word for "zeal" is *zēlos*, a direct ancestor of our English word. Knowing this helps us very little because the Greeks used *zēlos* in the same way we use "zeal." However, if we look at the word's root, *zeō*, we can find some insight. *Zeō* is a primary word in Greek, meaning "to be hot," "to possess heat." In fact, used in the context of, say, water, *zeō* could be translated as not just "to be hot" but "to boil," expressing not mere warmth but extreme heat. If the subject were wood or metal, *zeō* might be used to describe the shimmering heat of embers in a hearth or the ruddy glow of an iron rod being beaten flat by a blacksmith. It describes intense heat.

Words like "ardor" and "fervor," which also express heat, are good synonyms for this word. They describe a kind of passion and intensity, both of which can also be synonyms for "zeal." In this emotional sense, its antonym is "indifference."

*Zēlos* also possesses a negative sense, which has also come down to us except it is spelled with a *j*: "jealous." Jealousy is also a heat or a passion, but it has been turned to evil purposes. It is zeal for a bad thing, a kind of fiery wrath to harm a rival. William Congreve describes this well when he wrote in his 1697 play, *The Mourning Bride*, "[Hell](#) hath no fury like a woman scorned." Zeal, then, is jealousy's (usually) positive cousin.

The New Testament authors use "zeal" with four primary connotations:

- *Holy fervor*: On one hand, it can be righteous indignation, that is, virtuous wrath against what is evil. On the other, it can be great ardor for doing good for others.
- *Hostility and ill will*: Throughout the first century, the Jews worked zealously against the church. They had zeal for their religion, but in the eyes of Christians, it was not a good zeal.
- *Human jealousy*: *Zelos* and some of its related forms appear in lists of sins that Paul includes in his epistles (see, for example, "jealousies" in [Galatians 5:20](#); [II Corinthians 12:20](#)). This, of course, is a sinful kind of zeal.
- *Devotion to a person and enthusiasm to attain goals*. A soldier might be devoted to his captain and model himself after him. In biblical terms, the soldier would be zealous for his captain. Regarding an enthusiasm to attain goals, a climber may be zealous to reach the peak of Mount Everest. Paul had a zeal to preach to the Gentiles. He also had goals to evangelize in Rome and Spain, and he gave his all to accomplish them.

The contexts in which these appear make apparent which connotation the author meant. Overall, then, zeal represents intense effort and emotional energy focused single-mindedly on a goal. It is an emotional drive as well as the passionate labor a person puts into his activities.

Under this summary definition, we can say that none of us is without zeal. We are all emotionally involved and intensely focused on something. Even the blandest person is zealous—we just do not know what thrills him or her enough to overcome the blandness. People can be intensely ardent about a sports team. We call them "fans," short for "fanatics." Some people almost swear by their brand of

coffee or detergent or cellphone. Other people will refuse to drive anything but a particular make of car because they believe it is the best in the world. Many fixate on athletes or movie stars, hanging posters of their idols on the wall and dressing or acting like them.

These are all aspects of zeal. Everyone exercises an intense focus and energy on some particular thing or things. In his study on zeal, theologian Joel Beeke comments, "Zeal runs in our veins for what we love and against what we hate." Whether we are intensely for something or intensely against something, we are expressing zeal.

So, we are all zealous. As Christians, though, our zeal must be properly motivated and directed. Ours must be a genuinely godly zeal, one with a nature distinctly loftier than our extreme likes and dislikes of things in this world and one that is our paramount focus. Our zeal for God, His way of life, and His Kingdom must be our primary zeal—what we get most excited about.

In Part Three, we will consider the most exceptional example of zeal, that of [Jesus Christ](#).

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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## **From the Archives: Featured Sermon**

### **[Guarding Against a Laodicean Attitude](#)**

by Kim Myers

Kim Myers, seeing a parallel between the church's drift into Laodiceanism and the physical nation of Israel drifting into a similar tolerant attitude toward immorality and lawlessness, as seen by the continuous trashing of the Constitution and the Federal judges' advocating immorality, warns that we cannot not allow ourselves to backslide, allowing pressure from the world's culture to water down God's laws and commandments. Instead, we are admonished to get off the fence and get back to the faith once delivered. If we revert to the old habits that we practiced during our pre-conversion period, God will be compelled to vomit us out. If we become again entangled in the world's pollution after we have been extricated, our latter state will be worse than our first one. As God's called-out ones, we have witnessed many miracles through the years, especially our miraculous calling. It behooves us to move forward as an energized body, assiduously avoiding the Laodicean mindset of self-satisfaction.

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## **From the Archives: Featured Article**

### **[The World, the Church, and Laodiceanism](#)**

by John W. Ritenbaugh

The seventh and last of the attitudes within the church, Laodiceanism is the attitude that dominates the era of the end time. It seems more natural to think that this attitude would be the least likely to dominate in such terrible times—that it ought to be obvious that the return of Christ is near. But Christ prophesies that it will occur. In fact, it indicates the power of Babylon! Why does Babylon dominate the church in the end time? Because it dominates the world, and the Christian permits it to dominate him!

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