

Are You Enthusiastic?

Romans 12:11a

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

If anyone asks you the question "Are you enthusiastic?" you feel you should answer "Yes," because enthusiasm is regarded as a desirable quality for those of us in the twentieth century. It is enthusiasm that makes a good cheerleader; it is enthusiasm that makes a good team; it is enthusiasm for your company or your product that insures upward mobility in your career. So when anybody says "Are you enthusiastic?" there are kinds of reflexes that rise inside our tummies and the nether regions and we feel we should say, "Rah! Rah! Rah! Two, four, six, eight. Who do we appreciate? You bet I'm enthusiastic!" Yet deep, deep down there is a kind of ambivalence about enthusiasm in our own minds, especially about that externally stimulated and humanly originated enthusiasm. Maybe we have seen one too many top salesmen in the nation whose domestic life is in ruins, or maybe we have seen one too many cheerleaders who is sunk in depression when she is home and not in front of the crowds. Somehow we feel there is enthusiasm and there is enthusiasm, and it really depends on what you mean when you say, Are you enthusiastic?"

It is interesting that that view of enthusiasm has always existed in the western world. There is a good enthusiasm that you ought to have, and there is a bad enthusiasm that is not real. In the eighteenth century people praised good enthusiasm that is, the enthusiasm that reflects the life of God's own heart. They believed that that was right. I don't know if you know where the English word "enthusiasm" comes from etymologically, but it comes from two Greek words, "en" meaning "in" and then "theo" meaning *God." So when you ask a person "Are you enthusiastic?" you are really saying, "Are you in God?" In the eighteenth century they praised that kind of enthusiasm in a person who really was in God and shared the enthusiasm of God's heart.

But there was another enthusiasm that they regarded as not simply unhealthy but as something that would destroy your life. Here is a piece from a diary that was written in 1742. The man writes: "I was both surprised and grieved at a genuine instance of enthusiasm." This was the wrong kind of enthusiasm. So you see they did use the word in those days in a bad sense, too. "I was both surprised and grieved at a genuine instance of enthusiasm. J.B. of Tanley Lay who had received a sense of the love of God a few days before came riding through the town yelling and shouting and driving all the people before him, telling them God had told him he should be a king and should tread all his enemies under his feet. I sent him home immediately to his work and d him to cry day and night to God that he might be lowly in heart lest Satan should again get an advantage over him." Some of us have seen that kind of enthusiasm at times. It wasn't real charismatic experience but a kind of charismania where the person became exalted in their own opinion of their powers. You can see therefore, there is a good enthusiasm and there is a bad enthusiasm.

Actually, loved ones, it is the same with this verse that we are studying today, because in a way the word that is translated "zeal" in this verse is "enthusiasm." If you would look at it you will see there is a right zeal and a wrong zeal. It is Romans 12:11a, "Never flag in zeal." There Paul is implying that zeal is a good thing. "Don't sink back; don't get weary of being zealous and enthusiastic." Yet a few chapters earlier he talks about a zeal or an enthusiasm that isn't good. Turn to Romans 10:2 where Paul is talking about his brothers in the faith--the Jews. "I bear witness that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened." Paul says there is a zeal that you should have and that you should never flag in, but there is a zeal that is not enlightened that is wrong.

Now if you want to find what is the right zeal and the wrong zeal, you just look at the next verse. In Romans 10:3 Paul elaborates on the way in which their zeal was wrong. "For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness." There is a zeal that comes from God. There is a zeal that you establish on your own, that you pump up inside you for your own purposes. There is a zeal that is submitted to God and his will and there is a zeal that you let fly and is governed by your own will alone.

That is it, loved ones. There are two kinds of enthusiasm. There is an enthusiasm that comes from God himself and that is submitted to his will. Then there is an enthusiasm that you establish on your own, and that is the enthusiasm that can destroy you. Now in a very human example we all have helped to destroy good relationships that way, haven't we? Many of us husbands or boyfriends have got wildly enthusiastic about the Honda 1000 or 1200 and it has a way of coming between you and somebody else. We can do the same with things we want. We let fly and we stir up an enthusiasm in ourselves and the enthusiasm controls us rather than us it. Therefore, we find lots of relationships are harmed and lots of people are hurt by it.

It is very interesting that the King James version translates this verse utterly differently. The King James Version translates it "Not slothful in business." You might wonder how they get that out of it. Well, the first Greek word is "spoude" and it means "in haste." It means the haste with which you do things to get them done as quickly and efficiently as possible. Then it came to mean a wall that was put up fast, or a military maneuver that was carried out efficiently. It then came to mean the effort or the energy that was used to do that, as opposed to the planning and the thinking and the intention. It eventually came to mean any piece of business that was done efficiently and energetically. The other word is "me okneroi" and it means diligent -- not hesitating, not delaying, never flagging and never holding back and not being negligent or slothful. So the King James Version translates it "Not slothful in business."

We human beings took that as our banner and we divorced it completely from God and completely from the zeal for God and we said, "That's what you do if you are God-fearing men--you want to be not slothful in business." No doubt that is true, but we divorced it completely from God and then we backed it up with a verse in Proverbs 6:6-11. I can even imagine you little American boys and girls lying in bed and your mom beating you over the head with this. "Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. Without having any chief, officer or ruler, she prepares her food in summer, and gathers her sustenance in harvest. How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a vagabond, and want like an armed man."

We took that and especially the part "without an officer or ruler" and we devised our tycoon and our self-made man--a complete myth. The idea of a man whose zeal was let loose for his own profit and his own exaltation and out of that we developed our railroad barons, our oil barons and our steel barons. We developed not a puritan work ethic, loved ones. That is not fair. The Puritans were people who believed in pure doctrine of God and wanted to live a pure life that was submitted to God. We didn't develop a puritan work ethic; we developed a secular work ethic, a secular work ethic that was fueled by our own zeal for whatever purpose we wanted to achieve. So you can see we carried zeal divorced from God to an extreme, and often it was that zeal that brought about the indifference to human suffering in factories and the indifference to labor and their needs. It was a secular work ethic; it was not a puritan work ethic. The puritan work ethic would have remained under God.

So that is not the zeal that we are talking about this morning. It is not that zeal and enthusiasm which you choose to use to achieve some purpose that you have established in your own mind as worth pursuing. That's not it, loved ones. It is not zeal that you use to bring about your own exaltation, your own gratification, your own greed, your own achievement, your own success, your own prowess, your own fame, your own reputation or your own popularity. That is not what God is talking about when he says, "Never flag in zeal."

What zeal is he talking about? I'll show you how to find out. Go back to Romans 12 and the context of that verse. Most of us would say, "You can laugh at the old ant in Proverbs, but it is that zeal that has often saved many of us from indolence, from self-absorption and from depression." So there is something about zeal that gets us going. It is that kind of work ethic that has saved many of us from psych wards and all kinds of anxiety, selfishness, introversion and introspection. I think that is true. That zeal itself is of value, but there is another zeal that will do those same things for us, and it is this zeal that is outlined in Romans 12:4, "For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another." In other words, none of us has any eternal existence on our own. When we had that existence all we did was deify ourselves and defy God and refuse to allow him to be God of our lives. Because of that, God took us all and put us into his Son and re-made us in him so that we are all now a part of him and that is the only existence, the only destiny any of us actually have. The only existence we have outside Christ is a destroyed one, and insofar as we live in that, we experience the effects of that destructive life. The only existence you have is the one in Jesus.

So all of us actually are in Jesus, and God has given to Jesus and to each one of us certain things. You see that in verse 6-8. "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: If prophecy in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in our teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. Then Christ himself has certain qualities and attributes in his heart also. Verse 10, "Love one another with brotherly affection." In regard to honor, "Outdo one another." Then in verse 11 in regard to zeal. Christ's heart is filled with a zeal for his Father and for fulfilling his Father's purpose in this earth, and he allows our hearts to feel the same zeal. That is the zeal that God says we are never to flag in -- the zeal that comes from Jesus himself.

Now what kind of incentive is it against slothfulness in our lives? It is a bit the same as the Houston Space Ground Control in regard to the space shuttle. You remember when we watched the TV after they shot the space shuttle into space; we saw dozens of guys sitting in front of switchboards and television screens. They are the technical experts who control the space shuttle that is carrying the two astronauts thousands of miles away. Indeed, there is actually an absolute replica of the space shuttle there in Houston, and they make it go through all the things that are happening to the actual space shuttle out there in space. So they are in a position in Houston Ground Control of being able to see far better than the astronauts what is happening inside and outside the space shuttle. They are far better able to tell how many tiles have come off the heat shield; they are far better able to see what kind of corrective is needed with the retro rockets than the astronauts themselves, because they have this replica and they make it go through exactly the same things. They are all sitting at their computers and they are checking them to see what things need to be initiated and then they tell the astronauts.

You who were dead in your trespasses and sins, God has raised up and made to sit with him in the

heavenly places in Christ Jesus. There is a replica of your life in Christ. There is an exact pattern of the new life that God has given you in Christ with the years of actions and experiences that you are going to enter into spread out before you, and there is in heaven the resources that make your resources laughable. There is in heaven omniscience--an ability to look at something that is far better than computers or television screens. Our dear God studies your life in Jesus and in the light of that gives you your directions.

Now just go back to the space shuttle. "Fire the left retro rocket!" "Now? I mean, could we think about it a little?" You know what Houston would say. "Think about it, buddy, and you have seen the last of the earth! You are on your way past Mars at this moment." Any slothfulness and that is the last slothfulness that they will ever show. When Ground Control tells them to do it they do it, because they know they can see everything, they can see the way it is going, they can see the way the shuttle is moving and they know this is the moment to do it.

They act now. Is it zeal? They would say, "Zeal? It is just good common sense. Those guys in Houston know exactly what is happening. Our only hope of life is in obeying immediately what they tell us. We are not living in our own little space shuttle. We can't play around as we want. We can't lie in bed all day or laze around or think about their commands. We are utterly dependent on them. They can see everything and they don't tell us anything before we need to do it because they know we have plenty on our hands up here. They are not giving us a list of things we should do tomorrow or that we should do when we have time. They tell us what to do when we need to do it, and we obey immediately, with zeal."

Do you think that God operates any differently with you? Do you think God through his Holy Spirit sends you some command earlier than you need to obey it? If you do, I'd love you to give the justification for it. I don't quite see the point of God piling up a backlog of commands in the lives of billions of little human beings who can hardly keep two thoughts in their mind at once. It seems to me that God is not in the business of giving us the right to decide when we are going to obey or when we are not going to obey. If we take time we have missed our chance. Do you see that? Has that ever struck you that God actually doesn't give you direction or thoughts about something you should do before you need to do it? Isn't that where our slothfulness comes in? We have a little thought and we think, "That is interesting. I must do that sometime."

So our lives become littered with intentions that are not fulfilled at all, and we wonder why our life is not taking clear direction. Just think of the situation in the space shuttle. Because you have missed one or two of those, life is so far out of its original orbit that it takes a long, long time for God to bring it back into line at all, and it will only come back into line, if you start obeying what he is telling you to do immediately with zeal. God doesn't tell you ahead of time. If he said you should visit this person, visit them now, because they may not be there by the time you get around to it. Besides, visiting them now or obeying now in regard to the new command that he has given you about your own life frees you. That is how the astronauts are up there with all the complex machinery, facing interminable and massive problems that no human being could tackle, and yet they are so free and liberated at times that they are doing somersaults in the air. That comes from one easy practice -- instantly obeying the Ground Control. So it is with us. Not slothful in zeal means realizing that you are in Christ at God's right hand and God can see everything that is happening. He directs you from what he sees and at exactly the right time.

Will other lives be affected if you don't respond? Ask that about the space shuttle. Sure. With you and me? Sure. Have you any idea how many people have missed a touch of God because you have been slothful in your zeal? Because you have lain back in your chair and said, "I'll think about it" or,

"I'll wait for a more convenient season" or, "That might be a good idea"? There are hundreds of lives that are going to come across your life and our Father can see all those lives. He knows exactly what you should do at that moment and he does tell you one second before you need to do it.

I joke about the Irish, but the laziness and slothfulness that we joke about and the paralysis that James Joyce talked about so often in his short stories. That comes from the myth you and I entertain that we are here on our own and can do what we want when we want. The fact is, you're not! Thank God, you're not! Because you know that when you carry that to an extreme you end up in depression, complete passivity, complete paralysis of will, complete introspection. We are not here on our own. You are in Jesus; you are here to do things he has to do in this world and you are vital part of him and his plan. When he gives you a direction, do not flag in zeal. Obey immediately and your life will begin to take on that upward incline that moves into his presence. I pray that God will help anybody who has been caught in this deception to step right out of it today. Let us pray.

Dear Father, we have not seen it as serious as that at all. Somehow Satan or some power has deceived us into thinking you are primarily an advisor to us. It is then up to us whether we take your advice or not. We have at times thought of you as some kind of managing director who gave us the general goals and outlined the distant long term objectives. It was up to us to scramble up and through those the best we could.

Lord, we see it is totally contrary to what we see in the natural world. We see how precise is the rising of the sun. We see how precise is the movement of the planets. We see how precise is the pressure of the air and the boiling point of water. We see how precise the protons and neutrons are held together. Father, it is fully reasonable to expect you are just as precise in regard to our lives and the directions they are taking. So, Lord, we ask forgiveness for any slothfulness in our zeal to obey you. Lord, we see you tell us a thing when we need to do it, not before but when we need to do it. Lord, we intend to move into a life of zeal -- true zeal, a zeal that comes from Jesus' heart and desire to please and obey you immediately knowing it is a matter of life and death.

So, Lord we commit ourselves this day to a new life of instant obedience so that you can get our lives back on track and so that others can meet you.

Now the grace of our Lord Jesus, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit guide you into all truth today and throughout this week. Amen.