

Story 30

The Disease of the Zealous

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The Story: The Disease of the Zealous

My memory isn't exact, but I believe it was around 2002 — as part of the preparation process to be commissioned as a missionary to Nepal for our second assignment — that I spent a full day undergoing psychological and personality assessments.

I asked the assessor:

“Do you really need to evaluate missionaries this thoroughly — people who have committed to obeying God’s call and working according to Jesus’ teaching?”

The reply came back:

“Yes, we do. Most people who want to go as missionaries are exactly as you describe — their purpose and calling is obedience and following. But among them, a few go out thinking they are Jesus. Those are the ones we need to screen out.”

| It seems there is a particular disease that the zealous can catch.

Small Group Discussion Guide

This is a short, sharp story. It can begin with laughter — but inside it is a deep question of self-examination. The author's own confession (“I was not without this myself”) lowers defenses and makes honest reflection possible. The discussion task is not to critique zealous people but to look for the disease in one's own life.

— Church Community —

Young Adults (20s–35) | Church Group

Opening (5 min)

- In service or ministry, what is the difference between the feeling “I need to do this” and “I have been called to do this”?

Discussion (20 min)

- “Some go out thinking they are Jesus.” How does that land? Is it funny, or uncomfortable, or both?
- Has zeal ever damaged a relationship for you? What would have made it different?
- How is ministry motivated by obedience and following different from ministry where you are the main character? Can those two be distinguished from the outside?

- Is this disease only for missionaries? How does it show up inside a church community?

Scripture (10 min)

Mark 10:42–45 — “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant... For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.”

- In Jesus’ way of serving, is there something that heals this ‘disease of the zealous’? What is it?

Application (5 min)

- If there are traces of this disease in you, what do they look like?

Adults (36–60) | Church Group

Opening (5 min)

- In leadership or ministry, have you ever had the thought: “Without me, this won’t work”?

Discussion (20 min)

- When you served zealously but the results didn’t match your expectations — how did you respond?
- How is ministry with “obedience and following” as the motive different from ministry where “I am Jesus” is the motive?
- Trying to ‘screen out’ this disease — how is that possible within a community, and where are its limits?
- Over a long time in ministry: have you seen people with this disease? Or discovered it in yourself?

Scripture (10 min)

Galatians 2:20 — “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.”

- “I no longer live” — if that confession is the opposite of “thinking you are Jesus,” how can it actually become real?

Application (5 min)

- In your current ministry or service: pause and ask whether ‘I’ has become too large.

Seniors (60+) | Church Group

Opening (5 min)

- Over a long life of ministry: have you seen this disease in others? Or discovered it in yourself?

Discussion (20 min)

- How would you describe the difference between humble service and zealous service from your own experience?
- What do you think is the most important thing in healing this disease?
- How can you pass this wisdom on to the next generation?

Scripture (10 min)

Micah 6:8 — “To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

- Walking humbly — how is that different from working zealously?

Application (5 min)

- What is the one thing from today’s story that stays with you most?

— General Community —

Young Adults (20s–35) | Community Group

Getting In (5 min)

- Has your own zeal ever made things harder for the people around you? What was the problem?

Discussion (20 min)

- How can you tell the difference between “obedience” and “self-conviction”?
- Has something you started with good intentions become a burden for someone else?
- In service or commitment, how do you distinguish between “for me” and “for the other person”?

Going Further (10 min)

- Have you known someone in an organization or team who felt “Without me, this won’t work”? What was the result?

One Step (5 min)

- Quietly consider: if there are traces of this disease in you, what do they look like?

Adults (36–60) | Community Group

Getting In (5 min)

- As a leader or professional, have you felt a strong sense of “I have to be the one to do this”?

Discussion (20 min)

- What methods, if any, do you use to check your own zeal?
- What are the positive and negative impacts of highly zealous people on a team or organization?
- The difference between zeal and calling — how can you tell them apart?

Going Further (10 min)

- Psychological assessment to ‘screen out’ missionaries — in what other organizations or roles would this kind of examination be valuable?

One Step (5 min)

- What is the most striking thing from today’s story? Say it in one sentence.

Seniors (60+) | Community Group

Getting In (5 min)

- From your long experience: how have you seen highly zealous people affect an organization?

Discussion (20 min)

- Looking back at your own life: was there a moment when your zeal became a burden?
- What do you want to pass on to the next generation about “zeal”?

One Step (5 min)

- What is the one thing from today’s story that stays with you most?

Facilitator’s Guide

The Heart of This Story

This is one of the shortest stories in the series. It lands like a punchline. The humor is the door — what the humor opens is a serious question about the direction of our zeal. The author’s own confession (“I was not without this myself”) is what makes the story a mirror rather than a verdict. Zeal is not the problem. Where it points is the question.

What This Story Is Really About

- ① The difference between zeal and calling — which is the actual motive?
- ② What “thinking you are Jesus” actually looks like in practice
- ③ This disease is not only for missionaries — it is in all of us

Where This Story Sits in the Series

Story 14 (I Am Speaking to My Son) addresses the burnout that follows zeal. This story addresses the stage before burnout — the direction of the motivation itself. Story 27 (Maximization and Sufficiency) examines the goals of a life; this story examines the structure of motivation in service. Story 22 (As I Go) addresses the error of “already knowing” — this story is about the error of “being the one”.

How to Begin

- ✓ Read the story aloud — let the laughter come. Then quietly: “Is this story only funny?” Let that shift happen in the room before any discussion begins.
- ✓ Or: “In service or ministry, what is the difference between the feeling ‘I need to do this’ and ‘I have been called to do this’?” Start with that distinction.

Four Risks to Watch For

△ **Risk 1: The conversation becomes a critique of zealous people** Zeal itself gets condemned.

Why it matters: The story is not against zeal. It is asking where zeal points.

Redirect: "The story doesn't criticize zeal. It asks about the direction of zeal. What is the difference between zeal that points toward others and zeal that points toward yourself?"

△ **Risk 2: Specific people in the room get targeted** The discussion becomes personal critique.

Why it matters: The author includes himself. The story only works as self-examination, not as verdict on others.

Redirect: "The author says he was not without this himself. Let's stay in that direction — what does it look like in each of us, rather than in others?"

△ **Risk 3: The laughter is the end of the story** No one moves to honest reflection.

Why it matters: The humor is the entry point, not the destination.

Redirect: "It's a funny image. But — if there are traces of this disease in you, what do they look like?" Hold the silence after that question.

△ **Risk 4: The group concludes they don't have the disease** The story becomes about other people.

Why it matters: The assessment officer did not say most missionaries have the disease. He said some do. The question is whether any of us are in that 'some'.

Redirect: "The officer says it's a small number. But he also says it's worth checking. What does that check look like for you personally?"

Notes for Specific Groups

Ministry and pastoral groups: This is the group where the story lands most directly. Creating a space for honest confession — not performance — is the most important task.

Young adults: In cultures where zeal is a virtue — startups, volunteering, activism, social media impact — this question may land as a fresh challenge. What is the difference between being the hero of a story and serving the story?

Leadership groups: "Without me, this won't work" is a specific organizational psychology question. The impact of this posture on teams and institutions can be examined directly.

Retired or senior groups: This group has watched the disease in others across decades. Creating space for them to share what they've seen — and to name honestly whether they've found it in themselves — is where the most generative conversations happen.

Cross-sector or mixed groups: The disease appears in politics, social work, parenting, and professional life just as much as in ministry. Widening the conversation beyond religious contexts makes the self-examination more honest.

Closing the Session

✓ "If there are traces of this disease in you, what do they look like?" — close with this. Leave silence after it.

✓ Or: each person quietly considers “In my current service or work, how large is ‘I’?” If they wish, they share one sentence.

In the Author’s Words: “It seems there is a particular disease that the zealous can catch. I was not without it myself.”