

A BRIEF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF APATHY

A man was once asked if he thought ignorance and apathy were the two greatest problems of human nature. He replied, “I don’t know, and I don’t care!” While the response is humorous, it illustrates an attitude we must reject. As followers of Christ, we are called not to indifference but to be diligent and fervent in our love for God and others.

What does the Bible say about apathy? Though the word “apathy” isn’t found in Scripture, the Bible repeatedly warns against it—whether it appears as indifference, complacency, or a lack of zeal toward God and others. Below is a summary of key passages that address this spiritual danger.

1. Apathy in the spiritual life is condemned.

- Revelation 3:15–16: “I [Jesus] know your deeds [Laodicea], that you are neither cold nor hot;¹ I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit [vomit²] you out of My mouth.”
- Romans 12:11: “Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent³ in spirit, serve the Lord” (ESV).

2. Apathy toward injustice or need is sinful—especially toward the poor, oppressed, or suffering.

- Proverbs 24:11–12: “Deliver those who are being taken away to death, And those who are staggering to slaughter, Oh hold *them* back. If you say, ‘See, we did not know this,’ Does He not consider *it* who weighs the hearts? And does He not know *it* who keeps your soul? And will He not render to man according to his work?”
- 1 John 3:17: “But whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?”⁴

3. Apathy often results from prosperity, comfort, or distraction.

- Deuteronomy 8:1–20: “But you [Israel] shall remember the LORD your God . . .” Remember God’s *past* provision (wilderness), God’s *present* blessing (land/wealth), and God’s *future* judgment if they forget Him.
- Amos 6:1: “Woe to those [“distinguished” = leaders] who are at ease in Zion [Judah] And to those who *feel* secure in the mountain of Samaria [Israel].
- Luke 21:34: “Be on guard, so that your hearts will not be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life, and that day will not come on you suddenly like a trap.”

4. God calls His people to earnestness and watchfulness.

- Hebrews 6:11–12: “And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you will not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”
- 2 Timothy 1:6a: “I [Paul] remind you [Timothy] to kindle afresh [kindle into flame⁵] the gift of God [spiritual gift for ministry].”

¹ Contrary to popular opinion, “cold” (*psuchros*) and “hot” (*zestos*) are positive terms in this context. Cold water refreshes, hot water heals, but lukewarm water does neither.

² The translation of *emeo* as “spit” isn’t strong enough. John could have used *ptuo* (“to spit”) if that’s what he meant. *Emeo* means “vomit, throw up” (BDAG s.v. *emeo*; see also NKJV). A lukewarm church makes Jesus vomit.

³ The verb *zeo* (“to be fervent”) means “to boil or seethe.” When used figuratively, *zeo* means: “to be stirred up emotionally, *be enthusiastic/excited/on fire*” (BDAG s.v. *zeo*).

⁴ To withhold help from a brother or sister in need is to deny the presence of God’s love in our hearts. John is also clear that our *first* priority is to care for our spiritual siblings (cf. Gal 6:10). Only when we first care for our fellow believers, with whom we will spend eternity, are we prepared to care for the needs of the world.

⁵ *Anazopureo* (“kindle into flame”) is a present active verb, implying an ongoing need to fan or stir up the flame.

What is a path out of apathy? Overcoming spiritual apathy requires more than simply changing our behavior; it requires a renewed heart, intentional spiritual disciplines, and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. The path out of apathy begins with turning our hearts back toward Christ. Here's a suggested approach:

1. Recognize apathy as a spiritual warning sign. Apathy often masquerades as “neutrality” or “burnout,” but biblically, it's a heart issue—a drifting away from devotion, love, and purpose.

- Revelation 2:4–5: “But I have *this* against you, that you have left [abandoned⁶] your first love. Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent.”

2. Return to God with humility and repentance. Apathy is often rooted in sin, disappointment, disillusionment, or pride. The remedy begins with turning back to God.

- Psalm 51:10: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me.”⁷
- James 4:8a: “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.”⁸

3. Rely on the Holy Spirit's renewal. Spiritual apathy cannot be overcome solely by willpower. We need the empowering work of the Holy Spirit.

- Romans 8:14: “For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.”
- 2 Corinthians 3:18b: “. . . [We] are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”

4. Re-engage in the Word and prayer even when you don't feel like it.⁹ Apathy is both fed and defeated by habits. Don't wait for feelings to lead you—let disciplined obedience lead your feelings.

- Psalm 119:25: “My soul cleaves to the dust; Revive me according to Your word.”
- Isaiah 55:10–11: God's Word will fulfill its intended purpose.

5. Reconnect in community. Apathy thrives in isolation. One of the most effective antidotes is genuine fellowship.

- Ecclesiastes 4:9–10: “Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up.”
- Hebrews 10:24–25: “and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”

6. Refocus on the gospel and the mission of God. Sometimes apathy comes from losing sight of what truly matters—God's glory, His grace, and His calling on your life.

- 2 Corinthians 5:14–15: “For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.”
- Matthew 28:19–20: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations . . .”

⁶ The word *aphiemi* (“left”) means “to give up or abandon” (BDAG s.v. *aphiemi* 3.b.). It can be used for divorce, so the imagery here is strong.

⁷ David is living under the old covenant, not the new covenant (Ezek 36:26; 2 Cor 5:17; Heb 10:14). His words don't contradict the NT; they *anticipate* it (2 Cor 4:16; Eph 4:23; 1 John 1:9).

⁸ In this context, God must respond instead of taking the initiative because He's depicted as a lover who's been jilted. Therefore, it's the responsibility of the one who has been unfaithful to return to the One who has been faithful.

⁹ See especially John Piper, *When I Don't Desire GOD: How to Fight for Joy* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004).

What are some ways churches struggle with apathy? Even healthy congregations can drift into subtle—or more obvious—forms of apathy that gradually weaken their worship, mission, and witness. Here are some common ways apathy appears, along with a brief explanation of each.

1. Lack of financial generosity. Generous giving is dependent upon the core.
 - Symptoms: Giving minimally and sporadically to the local church, not giving to the general fund, and giving more to parachurch organizations.
 - Root: Misunderstanding of the role of the local church as the primary source of giving and lack of self-discipline and accountability to consistent giving.
2. Routine without reverence. Worship becomes mechanical: singing songs, listening to sermons, and participating in the ordinances out of habit rather than heartfelt devotion.
 - Symptoms: Arriving for worship gatherings late and leaving early, lack of engagement in singing, and shallow responses to God’s Word.
 - Root: Losing sight of God’s holiness and the wonder of the gospel along with misguided priorities (e.g., professional sports, children’s sports, packed schedules, social commitments).
3. Spectator mentality. Members attend but don’t participate. The church becomes a place to receive rather than a body to serve.
 - Symptoms: Reliance on paid staff, few volunteers, overworked leaders, consumer-driven attitudes (e.g., “What am I getting out of this?” “This ministry or group doesn’t meet my needs”).
 - Root: Misunderstanding that the church is a spiritual service provider, rather than a community of disciples.
4. Lack of passion for the lost. Members may talk about outreach, but rarely engage in it.
 - Symptoms: Few people inviting others to church or leading others to faith, meager engagement with the community, little urgency for missions.
 - Root: Indifference to the eternal stakes or loss of confidence in the power of the gospel.
5. Passive discipleship. Spiritual growth can stall because there’s minimal hunger for God’s Word or transformation.
 - Symptoms: Shallow Bible engagement, little prayer, and no accountability or mentoring.
 - Root: Comfort with spiritual stagnation or distraction by worldly concerns.
6. Tolerating sin or division. Apathy can lead us to ignore sin, unresolved conflict, or doctrinal drift to avoid discomfort.
 - Symptoms: Gossip, bitterness, moral compromise, or theological confusion going unaddressed.
 - Root: Fear of confrontation or a false sense of peace.

Note: Churches of every size must guard against apathy. Without intentional effort to keep their love for Christ vibrant and their hearts fully engaged in His mission, it is easy for spiritual passion to fade.¹⁰

¹⁰ This tragic phenomenon goes back to the church of Ephesus who left her “first love” (Rev 2:4). Over time, her vibrant Christian witness in Ephesus faded, and the city itself declined. When Islam spread through the region centuries later, the remaining Christian presence in Ephesus disappeared. Today, there is no active church in ancient Ephesus, and only a small Christian minority remains in modern Turkey. The land that once held all seven churches of Revelation is now over 98% Muslim. A region that was once filled with gospel light but is now largely a spiritual desert. What has happened in Turkey has also happened elsewhere. Every year, thousands of churches around the world close their doors. Sadly, Christ has indeed removed many lampstands throughout history (Rev 2:5).

How can the church combat apathy?

1. Preach the gospel clearly and consistently (Rom 1:14–16).
2. Foster a culture of prayer and dependence (Ps 80:18).
3. Model passionate leadership (Rom 12:11).
4. Engage in the mission (Matt 28:19).
5. Empower every-member ministry (1 Corinthians 12–14).
6. Cultivate genuine community (Heb 10:19–25).
7. Call for repentance and renewal (Rev 3:2).

Apathy is *not* overcome by mere activity but by a renewed affection for Christ.¹¹ As we preach the gospel, serve together, share life in community, pursue repentance, and join God in His mission, our hearts are stirred again with love and passion for Him. May the church of Jesus Christ remain spiritually awake, faithfully engaged, and fully devoted to the glory of God.

How can church staff overcome apathy?

1. Return to the gospel daily (Gal 2:20; Rev 2:4–5).
2. Pray together consistently (Acts 1:14; 2:42).
3. Equip the saints for the work of ministry (Eph 4:12 ESV).
4. Pray fervently for those in our area of ministry (Eph 6:18; 1 Thess 5:17).
5. Recognize ministry is a calling, not a career (1 Cor 9:16).
6. Keep the mission in view (Col 1:28–29).
7. Encourage honest evaluation (Ps 139:23–24).
8. Celebrate spiritual fruit (Ps 118:23).

Summary: In Scripture, apathy isn't a harmless personality trait; it's a spiritual threat. Whether it shows up as lukewarm faith, moral indifference, or neglect of others, apathy stands opposed to the vibrant, Spirit-filled life God desires for His people. Instead, believers are called to stay alert, passionate, compassionate, and fully engaged in both loving God and serving others.

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¹¹ Oswald Chambers (1874–1917) put it well, “Beware of anything that competes with loyalty to Jesus Christ. The greatest competitor of devotion to Jesus is service for Him.” See Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest* (November 23 entry).