

It Is Written

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MOTIVATIONS

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If you regularly watch any of the true crime shows [Dateline, Unsolved Mysteries, Forensic Files, etc.] or listened to one of the true crime podcasts [Casefile, 48 Hours, Cold Case Files, etc.], what you will most likely hear from those who either solved the crime or were trying to solve one is that they were looking for a motive. Why did they do what they did?

On a less serious matter, and as anyone who is a parent knows, we often look for motive in the actions of our children, too. We want to know why they colored a picture on the wall with a Crayon, why they hit their little sister on the head with a toy, or why they jumped in that mud puddle right after being told to not do that. Most often, the response is, "I don't know." And they are probably right, if they are very young; younger children quite often act on impulse, without much thinking. They couldn't tell you why they did what they did because they didn't think before they acted; they just did what they felt in the moment.

That is understandable and excusable in the little ones, but not so much when they get older; in fact, we try hard to get them to think about their actions — and before they act. Part of the maturing process of life is learning what motivates us and moves us to do or say what we do. Along the way, we learn strategies to prevent impulsive actions that may harm others or self, and get us in trouble. We learn how to control our temper and our feelings, which leads to controlling our speech and behavior — and that's a good thing. But it all begins with understanding our motivations.

Are we aware that God cares about our motivations, too? The God we know as revealed in the Scriptures has told us plainly that He cares about not just what we do, but also why we do it. I often think first of the condemnation of Jesus for the scribes and Pharisees and their insincere worship, who Jesus said, "honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me" (Matt. 15:8). Their motive was not right, for their hearts were not in the words they spoke. Their worship was not "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23), but merely hypocritical. These are the same ones, Jesus would say later, do "all their works they do to be seen by men" (Matt. 23:5); it wasn't to honor God!

God has always wanted the hearts of men in their service to Him and in their worship of Him, though; He has never wanted ritualistic, heart-less service or worship. His care for our motivation should be most obvious in what Jesus called the greatest command: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). It is only logical that if we begin with this commandment, our motivations will be correct in all our service to Him and worship of Him. Love is the proper motive for this, not fear.

Our motivation for becoming a follower of Jesus Christ is likewise based on love; I believe so strongly that this is what God's word teaches us that when someone asks me why I became a Christian, I take them to the words of Paul: "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). If the love of God doesn't motivate one to obedience, I have nothing else! John sums this up well when he wrote, "We love Him because He first loved us" (1st John 4:19). We live as we do as disciples because "Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us" (Eph. 5:2), and on a more personal note, because He "loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). It is highly unlikely that, as long as that is my motivation for serving Him, anything will convince me to cease doing so. Love is a powerful motive!

Love for our fellow man should be the motive behind all we do, also. Paul reminds us of this when he wrote of love to the Corinthian brethren, noting, "And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing" (1st Cor. 13:1-3). And, again, the love Christ had for us should be the motivation for our love of one another, too, for as John wrote, "By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1st John 3:16). He would even rhetorically ask, "But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?" (v. 17). The question answers itself: It doesn't! So, he then urges us, "My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth" (v. 18); in other words, let's not just speak words of love, but prove we love others by what we do. Our motives will then be obvious to all.

God is not shy about pointing out when motivations are wrong, either. Under the Old Law, God once chastised His people for insincere worship and unsatisfactory offerings, when they would say of it all, "Oh, what a weariness!" as they offered unacceptable offerings (Mal. 1:8-13); He would look back on their behavior in captivity and ask then, "When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months during those seventy years, did you really fast for Me—for Me? When you eat and when you drink, do you not eat and drink for yourselves?" (Zech. 7:5, 6); and He would also not tolerate their superficial 'repentance' in times of distress, demanding, "Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning. So rend your heart, and not your garments" (Joel 2:12, 13).

Up until then [and, sadly, even after for some] their motives were self-serving, and not because they felt genuine sorrow for their failures. The apostle Paul would note many years later, "godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (2nd Cor. 7:10); God demanded truer repentance, rather than merely 'crocodile tears.' He still does.

And let us not overlook the fact God has told us plainly our motivations will play a part in the final Judgment. When Paul spoke of the judgments we may make about one another, he said, "But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God" (1st Cor. 4:3-5; NASB). In other words, our motivations will be known to God and not just what we did, but also why we did it will be judged.

There is a popular view of God and His plan for our salvation that teaches [falsely so] that God has already predetermined all who will ever be saved, and that He sends the Holy Spirit into the hearts of those preselected individuals to cause them to be saved. I reject this false doctrine for many reasons, but at the base, it fails for this reason: The 'saved' do not choose to serve God, motivated by love; in fact, love plays no part at all in the scheme of this plan falsely attributed to God. This is not of God!

God has never wanted mindless, ritual service; He wants people in heaven whose motive is love and He wants us to love Him now. Motive matters!