

The Christian's Motivation for Serving God

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Introduction

Why do Christians serve God? Why should Christians live a godly life? At one time or another most believers have probably questioned their motives for service and godly living.

The purpose of this study is to explore motivations for Christian service and godly living by looking at biblical data. The study will focus chiefly on the Christian's motivation for *servicing and actively living for God* because there are less discernible passive forms of doing God's will (abstaining from evil for example). But to press forward in godly disciplines and to serve God sacrificially calls for effective motivations. One can not really separate godly living from godly service. Christian service is the subject of this study because serious questions about motivation come when confronted with the demands and sacrifices required by it. Such service includes any ministry, be it volunteer or vocational, from teaching and evangelizing to working in the church nursery or kitchen--in other words, any godly activity that seeks to do God's will.

Why Study Motivation?

Scripture shows that believers have served and will serve from both good and bad motives. To be sure, motives do not need to be understood or sorted out before one can serve, but would it not be helpful for someone to know why he or she serves? If indeed there are unworthy motives, they should be avoided. And if present motivation affects the quality of one's eternal existence, one should want to know the consequences.

Motivation is an important study because it reaches to the core of Christian spirituality. Deeds alone are not a good measure of spirituality and so they are an unreliable judge of salvation and personal holiness. The Pharisees had no shortage of outward deeds to which they could point, but they were rebuked by Jesus as hypocrites (Matt. 23:23-30). As a Pharisee, the apostle Paul claimed he was faultless in regards to law keeping, but later he renounced those bragging rights (Phil 3:4-8). Jesus himself put the pox on deeds alone when he told self-righteous legalists that despite their many deeds, He never knew them (Matt. 7:22-23).

Deeds should be evaluated separately from their motivations, because extrinsically good deeds can come from intrinsically bad motivations. In the economy of God, however, only the properly motivated deed is rewarded, not the deed in and of itself, as will be shown. To understand one's motivations is to understand in part the heart of God and to be able to please Him better.

The danger of this study is that it could lead to excessive introspection or psychologizing. This is far from this author's intent and qualifications. However, much of a person's motivation is evidently unconscious. The apostle Paul seemed to acknowledge possible ambiguity about his own motivations when he defended himself against those who cast aspersions on his motives. He was unwilling to make a final judgment on himself in this matter but deferred to God who will "reveal the counsels of the hearts" (1 Cor. 4:3-5).

God, of course, *is* the final judge of motives. Some Christians who examine their own motives may be in for a surprise. Consider how confusing motivation can be among pastors:

It often comes as a shock to pastors to learn that not all their motivation for entering the ministry was highly altruistic and based only on the desire to preach the Word and honor the Lord. Of course this may well have been the conscious motivation, but this does not rule out the existence of additional unconscious determinants.

. . . As with persons in any other helping profession, sometimes the motivation to enter the ministry is to gain the appreciation, attention, and acceptance which is personally needed but which is not being supplied elsewhere. Sometimes it is the unconscious desire to dominate others and in effect to become little popes, which is an easy goal to achieve if one ministers to immature people. Many pastors receive much unconscious gratification from being able to direct people and set them straight. Many pastors after self-examination have discovered that part of their original motivation was the need to be infallible and the church situation often plays right into this pathology. Another very important motivating factor in some pastors is the presence of a repressed and unrecognized reservoir of anger and hostility. In this case the pastor will probably become a preacher whose favorite and most frequent message is one of hell-fire and brimstone--yet he himself will have absolutely no awareness of the great satisfaction he receives from roasting his flock over the flames of hell.¹

Hopefully, a study of motivation will help Christians discover why they really serve God so that they might serve Him from the best motives.

A study of motivations should correlate with a biblical view of grace that maintains salvation as a free gift, negates damaging legalistic motivations, and inculcates the abundant biblical data on rewards and accountability. Perhaps because some have misunderstood the reward passages of Scripture, little seems to be written or taught about rewards and even less on motivation. That is another reason for this study.

This article will focus chiefly on the New Testament. It will be shown that appeal to motives is very common, though many times motivations are not given, only implied. Also, it will become obvious that motivations overlap. Unworthy motives will be discussed first, then worthy biblical motives.

Unworthy Motivations

Several motivations are clearly against biblical teaching and should not motivate the Christian's service. At best they are detrimental to spiritual growth and at worst will bring God's judgment. These include legalism, false guilt, and self-seeking.

Legalism

There are two kinds of legalism to consider. First is the legalistic view of salvation by works. The other is a form of legalism that can control the Christian's life.

As to the first kind, it is pandemic that there are those who serve God in order to earn salvation. This category of people extends to those of other religions who serve in order to earn their idea of eternal salvation or acceptance by God (whatever their perception of Him is). Paul became a Pharisee out of a desire to be among the righteous of Israel, as his boasts in Philippians 3 demonstrate. Those of a Christian heritage or tradition might also serve to earn salvation. According to one biographer, Martin Luther entered the monastery out of fear for his eternal salvation after he was struck by lightning.² Errant Christians may falsely assume that volunteering for some Christian ministry might impress God to the point that He rewards them with His eternal life. Of course, this is contrary to the truth of Ephesians 2:8-9 and other passages that speak against works for salvation.

A hybrid of this first kind of legalism is the belief that service or godly conduct will keep one from losing one's salvation. Assuming that a person has legitimately believed in Jesus Christ alone at some time in the past, this person, for whatever reason, now (inconsistently and erroneously) believes that he must maintain a certain (and certainly arbitrary) level of service or conduct in order to be acceptable to God or to remain saved. But this also contradicts many passages, such as Romans 8:28-39 or the teaching of Galatians, and contradicts the grace of God that assures salvation only apart from human effort or merit. Christians are not only saved by grace, but kept saved by grace. Chafer comments,

It could not be denied truthfully that the mass of professing Christians have been

deprived of the knowledge of positional truth and because of this have never conceived of any other idea of Christian conduct than that they are obligated to make themselves acceptable to God by their own works of righteousness. Naturally, being so deprived of the knowledge of positional truth they are correspondingly ignorant of the true basis and motive for life truth. This one distinction between positional truth and life truth constitutes one of the most vital contrasts between law and grace.³

The second kind of legalism is the belief that in order to be acceptable as a “good Christian” one must be active in service. Again, it must be said that godly living would normally involve service of some kind. However, circumstances (e.g. relocation, the need for rest, discontinuation of that ministry) may not permit a Christian to minister, which may result in feelings of insecurity about God’s acceptance. Such a person could wonder, *Is God now frowning His disapproval because I am not busy in ministry?* Essentially, in this person’s theology God accepts Christians not for who they are, but for what they do. But God accepts all Christians because of their identity in Christ as God’s sons.

Both brands of legalism are unbiblical motivations for serving God. The Christian can do nothing to earn or keep God’s salvation or favor, because one is accepted in Christ if he has believed in Him.

False Guilt

In a related fashion, a Christian may serve God because of a guilty conscience. Some think it too easy to confess and accept forgiveness for free. The fleshly instinct is to do something additional to appease God’s perceived anger. Here is the Roman Catholic concept of doing penance, or working off one’s sins through prayers and deeds.

It is easy to see how this contradicts grace, for either grace is given as a free gift, or it is not grace. To work for forgiveness is not according to grace. Forgiveness comes freely when one

confesses sins to God (1 John 1:9). There is nothing left to do nor any price to pay, because Jesus Christ has done it all and paid it all.

Self-seeking

Sinful selfish motives are surely behind some service. There are many selfish reasons one might serve: financial gain, preeminence, power over others, self-aggrandizement, to impress others, to prove to others that one is spiritual. Indeed, even eternal rewards can be sought for purely selfish reasons.

There are many biblical examples of those with self-seeking motives. Jesus exposed the hypocritical charity and praying of those who pandered to the praise of people (Matt. 6:1-6) and condemned the Jewish scribes who feigned following God because they loved the public recognition and perks (Mark 12:38-40). Jesus also rebuked James and John when they argued about their future position in the kingdom, which indicates their motives for following Christ were tainted to some degree by selfishness (See Mark 9:33-35; 10:35-45; Luke 22:24-30). The Apostle Paul rejoiced that some in Philippi were preaching the gospel, but impugned their selfish motives (Phil. 1:15-18). John warned Gaius that Diotrephes desired the preeminence in their church (3 John 9).

Paul was sensitive to ministry that cloaked selfish motives. He warned Timothy that such men “suppose that godliness is a means of great gain” (1 Tim 6:1). Because others were trying to subvert Paul's credibility by questioning his motives, he was compelled repeatedly to assert that he did not minister from selfish motives (2 Cor. 4:2-5; Gal. 1:10; 1 Thes. 2:3-6). Peter had a threatening word for self-seeking teachers as well (2 Pet. 2:14b-15).

The ministry of the gospel was not given to advance any selfish agenda. Those who so

misuse it are ministering from unworthy and ungodly motives.

Conclusion

Even Christians can “serve God” for the wrong reasons. But it would be better to say that they participate in works of service, for they are not truly serving God with their errant agendas, only themselves.

Worthy Biblical Motives

Good motives are more easily discerned in the Scriptures than sorted one from another. With this in mind, they will be examined according somewhat to their moral priority, though this is not easy to assume either. The worthy biblical motives considered are love, gratitude, eternal significance, reward, duty, and fear.

Love

The Christian's love for God deserves first focus. But this must also, by biblical edict, result in an accompanying love for others (Matt. 22:37-39).

Surely love is the highest motive for serving God. A boy may be motivated to clean his room by a number of things: fear of punishment, desire for reward, or sense of duty. But isn't he most virtuous when, out of love for his parents and with nothing to gain only to give, he does what he knows will please them? So too, the child of God is at his ethical zenith when he chooses to do what is good and right out of unselfish love for God. Jesus taught that those who love God will obey Him (John 14:21; 1 John 5:2).

In addition to obedience, it seems that this motive of love expresses itself in several other related ways. When one loves God, that person will want to *glorify* God, *please* God, and *know*

God better. A brief explanation of each of these follows.

When someone *glorifies* another, love is expressed because the person is exalted for his or her own benefit. When the Christian does something to glorify God, he is doing something which by definition is not self-centered, but God-centered. Jesus persisted to the cross in order to glorify God. He prayed, "But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father glorify Your name" (John 12:27-28). Similarly, Peter appeals to his readers' desire to see God glorified when he encourages their good works (1 Pet. 2:12; cf. Matt. 5:16). The pleasure we derive from glorifying God is what John Piper calls "Christian Hedonism." In other words, a worthy motive for service and worship is the pleasure we enjoy when we glorify God because we love Him.⁴

Love will also naturally want to *please* the object of its affection. When Paul discusses how those who are married desire to please their spouse, but the unmarried desire to please God, he shows that pleasing another person is inherent to a loving relationship (1 Cor. 7:32-34). Many passages appeal to the motive of a desire to please God. It is why children should obey their parents (Col. 3:20) and repay them for their care (1 Tim. 5:4). It is also behind Paul's prayer for the Colossians "to walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him" (Col. 1:10) and the exhortation to the Thessalonians to walk in obedience to God's commandments (1 Thes. 4:1). The Hebrews are told to "do good and share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased" (Heb. 13:16). Pleasing God is also linked closely with obedience in a condition for answered prayer (1 John 3:22).

Love will also express itself in a desire for intimacy, i.e. to *know* another person deeply. To know Jesus Christ more intimately was the driving motivation behind the apostle Paul's forward press to maturity (Phil. 3:10-14). The idea of abiding in Christ seems to echo the desire

for intimacy springing from love. John writes about the love/obedience/abiding relationship:

As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. (John 15:9-10; cf. 1 John 4:16)

But the Bible does not allow for a love for God without a corresponding love for others. Jesus' "first and great commandment" to "love the Lord your God with all your heart . . ." was accompanied by another inseparable command, "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37-39). Jesus said this is "the second like it," referring not to rank of importance, but logic of sequence. When someone loves another, they will care about what the object of their love cares about. Since God cares about people, the one who loves God will also love people, especially His children (1 John 4:21). When Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him, He was qualifying him for ministry to His people, i.e. His "sheep" (John 21:15-17). Jesus assumed that vertical love would elicit a corresponding horizontal love. Paul told the Corinthians that "the love of Christ compels" him in his ministry to them (2 Cor 5:14). While contextually it seems "the love of Christ" refers objectively to Christ's love for people rather than subjectively to their own love for Christ, it is Christ's love for Paul that motivates him to serve the objects of Christ's love (cf. v. 15).

Love, then, is the chief motivation for a life of Christian service and good works. Those who love God want to obey his desires, glorify Him, please Him, and know Him better. They will also love the objects of His love, other people, which expresses itself in ministry.

Gratitude

A second worthy motivation comes from the desire to respond favorably to someone out of gratitude for a kindness shown. A boy might clean his room because he is grateful to his parents for taking him to the zoo that morning. Christians who realize what God has done for

them in Christ may be motivated by deep gratitude to respond in service.

It is somewhat difficult to separate gratitude from love. When the sinful woman gratefully washed Jesus' feet with her tear-soaked hair, Jesus explained that those who are forgiven much love much, and those who are forgiven little love little (Luke 7:36-50). Jesus appears to be speaking not so much about the objective nature of forgiveness, as He is about one's subjective understanding of how much they have been forgiven. Those who fully realize how much they have been forgiven will respond in expressions of love and gratitude.⁵

Gratitude is a result of grace. Out of gratitude for all God's blessings mentioned in Romans 1—11, Paul urges his readers to respond by offering their bodies as living sacrifices, which is their "reasonable service" (Rom. 12:1-2). Gratitude for Christ's sacrifice is seen in Paul's own desire to live for God (Gal. 2:20). A thankful heart should encompass all that is done in life (Col. 3:17). Gratitude initiated by grace is also how "the grace of God that brings salvation" teaches believers to "live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age" (Titus 2:11-12). Paul indicated his missionary ministry was an expression of his gratitude to God (1 Tim. 1:12) since he attributed his salvation and even his ministry to the grace of God (v. 14). Also, Peter expects his readers to adopt godly conduct since they have tasted that "the Lord is gracious," (1 Pet. 2:1-3).

It is fitting and healthy for recipients of someone's love and gracious actions to be grateful and to reciprocate with gratitude-inspired actions towards that person. Such a response seeks nothing for itself, but only echoes the pure motives of the initiating action.

Eternal Significance

The desire to fulfill God's eternal purpose can be another significant motivation for the

Christian. This speaks of one's enjoyment of the eternal purposes for which they were created, redeemed, sanctified, and glorified. If God has "put eternity in their hearts" (Ecc. 3:11), then people are driven to have that capacity filled. This begins with obtaining eternal life, but goes far beyond life as a *quantity* to life as a *quality* of existence. For example, a boy might clean his room because he understands that this act expands his significance in the home and brings the possibility of a greater role for him in the future.

When God restores the rule over the earth that Adam lost, it will be through Christ as the "last Adam" (1 Cor. 15:45) who will allow believers to rule with Him in the coming kingdom (15:24-28; Rev. 20:4-6). If there is eternal significance attached to one's participation in Christ's rule in the kingdom, then the varying degrees in which one will participate are degrees of significance. To enjoy a greater rule can therefore motivate Christians in this life. Dillow calls reigning with Christ the "joy of participating with the Messiah in the final destiny of man."⁶

Jesus taught that the things done in this life affect the significance of one's rule in the future. Disobedience or obedience to God's commands determine whether one is called "least in the kingdom of heaven" or "great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:19). Jesus' parable of the minas was given to the disciples in anticipation of the kingdom. It taught that responsible stewardship will be rewarded with corresponding responsibilities to rule over cities (Luke 19:11-27). Jesus spoke of inheritance in connection with participation in His rule in the kingdom. Ruling with Him was a motivation and a consolation for those who had left all to follow Christ (Matt. 19:27-30). It is also a motivation to endure faithfully, for "If we endure, we shall also reign with Him" (2 Tim. 2:12).

Paul seemed to separate entrance into the kingdom with possessing or inheriting the

kingdom. All Christians will enter the kingdom: "and if children, then heirs--heirs of God . . ."

But Paul promised a joint rule with Christ that is conditioned upon one's experience of suffering with Christ in this present life: ". . . and joint heirs with Christ if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together" (Rom. 8:17; cf. Titus 3:7-8).⁷ Peter also separates *mere* entry into the kingdom from an *abundant* entry into the kingdom based on one's appropriation of Christian virtues (2 Pet. 1:11).

The difference between entering the kingdom and inheriting the kingdom is greatly neglected by Christians in general and ignored by some altogether. Many Christians, especially reformed Calvinists, view inheritance as merely getting into heaven.⁸ In response to this interpretation and the theology behind it, Michael Eaton has called the reward of inheritance "the central motivating theme in the New Testament,"⁹ an exuberant overstatement when all the motivations are considered. Still, when understood, this concept is a powerful motivation that too many Christians of all theologies neglect.

The prospect of "the reward of inheritance" is used by Paul to motivate Christians to serve their masters/employers and to work heartily (Col. 3:22-24). God's purpose for those in His kingdom is also used as an appeal by Paul to the Thessalonians to "walk worthy of God" (1 Thes. 2:12; cf. also 2 Thes. 1:5). Inheritance is used to inspire godly conduct in a number of other passages as well (cf. 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5; Titus 3:7-8).

Hebrews is a study in motivation in itself. In seeking to keep the Hebrew-Christian readers faithful to Christ, the author uses negative motivation (the warning passages, which will be discussed later) and positive motivation. Much of his positive motivation is built around the concept of eternal significance in the coming kingdom of Christ.¹⁰ Finally, in Revelation 2:26-27

Jesus promises to those who are victorious and faithful in the Christian life "power over the nations" when He receives His millennial rule from the Father.

The prospect of becoming like Jesus Christ or becoming holy is also used as a motivation that suggests eternal significance. To be made like Jesus is to be divested of sin and that which is temporal, and to be invested with righteousness and that which is eternal. The Bible authors hold that out as a prospect to inspire purity and faithfulness in Christians (1 Pet. 1:16; 1 John 3:3).

Christ also appealed to Peter's sense of eternal significance when he called him from a life spent merely catching fish to a life spent catching men (Luke 5:10). There is a powerful urge in most people to invest their lives in something of enduring or eternal value. Life in the present can be graced with eternal significance so that the Christian who loses his life to Christ will save or find his real life (Matt 10:38-39; 16:24-27; Mark 8:34-38; Luke 9:23-26; John 12:24-26). This refers not to eternal salvation but to the preservation of and the fulfillment of one's essential life that comes from enjoying God's eternal purpose.

Christians want to know not only that they will outlive this life, but that they will supersede this life with a life of eternal significance. This is the gracious purpose God has intended. Since significance is conditioned upon faithfulness, obedience, and service, it motivates believers towards these virtues.

Rewards

Rewards is a broader category than eternal significance, though eternal significance can be seen as a reward in itself. Rewards in the Bible can be enjoyed in this life or in eternity. Both prospects are unquestionably a motivation for Christian service. Christians might serve faithfully

for rewards just as a boy might clean his room because he is promised a dollar to do so.

But such an illustration will raise the question about the propriety of rewards as a motivation. Isn't it selfish for the boy to work in order to receive a dollar? That is not an easy question to answer, because it necessitates judging motives. Yes, it is selfish if the boy intends to spend it only on himself (as might be expected with an immature boy). However, what if the boy wanted the dollar to spend on a gift for his parents? It seems that one's response to rewards is ultimately an expression of one's maturity. If someone desires rewards so that he or she can better enjoy God, serve Him, or serve others, then that motive is good. Thus crowns are ultimately for throwing down in worship and gratitude at the feet of the Savior who gives them (Rev 4:10). Besides, if God designs and delights to give rewards, then would it be good to deny Him that pleasure? Can the Christian's love for God and desire to please Him be separated from the motivation to receive what God would gladly give? The parable of the vineyard workers in Matthew 20:1-15 shows that God retains the sovereign prerogative to bestow rewards. He is in no way indebted to do so, rather, He delights to reward His servants.

Jesus promised that he will dispense rewards at His coming according to one's works (Matt. 16:27; Rev. 22:12). Rewards are also tied directly to the eschatological event known as the Judgment Seat of Christ (or Bema). It is here that every Christian will give an account (Rom. 14:10-12) for what he or she has done and receive a corresponding reward (2 Cor. 5:10). The latter reference is especially pertinent because Paul saw the Bema judgment as a motivation for his ministry of persuading men (5:11). Likewise, the context for the discussion of rewards at the Bema in 1 Corinthians 3:9-15 is in the context of ministers who build into other believers. Those who build with good motives ("gold, silver, precious stones") will receive an unspecified reward.

While many rewards are eternal in nature, some rewards are of a more temporal nature. Jesus promised that those who left all to follow Him would be rewarded in this life as well as in the future (Mark 10:28-31; cf. Matt. 19:27-30 and Luke 18:28-30). Other rewards that are enjoyed in this present life include (for deacons) "a good standing and great boldness in the faith" (1 Tim. 3:13), godliness that enhances life (4:8), and the "crown of life" (James 1:12).¹¹

With the prospect of reward comes also the prospect for a loss of that reward. If gaining rewards is a positive motivation, then losing them is a negative motivation. Jesus used parables to teach the possibility of lost rewards in the kingdom (Matt. 22:1-14; 25:14-25; Luke 19:11-27). Paul noted that anyone who ministered with improper motives ("wood, hay, straw") would have his work burned at the Judgment Seat of Christ so that he would "suffer loss" though "he himself will be saved" (1 Cor. 3:12-15). If a believer's work is burned as useless material, it will not be rewarded.

Serving God for the sake of rewards is not necessarily a mercenary motivation. God offers rewards as a way to both enhance his children's enjoyment of His goodness and a way to console them when they sacrifice to follow Him. While rewards are sometimes left unspecified, it should be enough to know that they are God-given and therefore good for both He and His children. It may well be that the highest motivation from rewards will be the opportunity to give them back worshipfully to the Savior in the future.

Duty

The motivation of duty is not one often contemplated. Duty is action that comes from a sense of obligation or commitment to a purpose or calling. It springs from personal convictions that are true to a higher purpose. A boy might clean his room because it is right to do so and he

has obligated or committed himself to do so.

Ideally, the believer's execution of duty will be accompanied by love and gratitude towards the one who charges him with it. However, duty is compelled by its own motive. Someone may persist in a ministry compelled by a sense of duty though she might feel little love or gratitude because of some besetting circumstance. There is a strong motivation in some to live up to their commitments and obligations because they were originally made to a high principle with proper motives.

Doing one's duty may result in a reward, but true duty does not expect one. In Jesus' teaching on the faithful servant, duty is done as its own reward (Luke 17:7-10). The servant is not first rewarded with a meal for his work, but is expected to do first his duty in preparing his master's meal before he himself eats. Jesus asks,

Does he thank the servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all those things which are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.' (vv. 9-10)

Jesus Himself was motivated by His sense of duty and purpose. When tempted to distraction from His preaching ministry, He explained He would keep on "because for this purpose I have come forth" (Mark 1:38). Likewise, He went to the cross in great agony because of His duty to the Father's purpose (John 12:27). At the end of His life, Jesus was able to say to His Father, "I have finished the work which You have given Me to do" (John 17:4). Hebrews presents Jesus as a faithful High Priest in performing His duties before God and for man (Heb. 2:17; 5:5-10).

In the same way, a believer can recognize God's calling to a certain ministry and then desire to fulfill it. Paul was motivated by his calling to be the apostle to the Gentiles (2 Tim.

1:11). He considered it a divine appointment (1 Tim. 1:1; 2:7) that kept him motivated to finish his ministry for the Lord (Acts 20:24). Paul used the same motivation with Timothy when he told him to "fulfill your ministry" (2 Tim. 4:5).

A sense of duty is inspired by the many analogies used for the Christian minister. All involve living up to a position or an obligation. One prevalent analogy is that of a steward who must be faithful in his management responsibilities (1 Cor. 4:1-2). As such Paul felt he had no choice but to preach the gospel entrusted to him regardless of any reward (1 Cor. 9:17-18). He considered the gospel ministry a sacred trust or commitment that was to be managed responsibly for the Lord's sake (cf. Col. 1:25; 1 Tim. 1:11,18; 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14; 2:2; Titus 1:3).

There are other analogies of duty and calling. For example, Paul considered himself an ambassador for Christ who had been given the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-20). He also compared the Christian and his duties to that of a soldier, athlete, and farmer (2 Tim. 2:3-6). As a "prisoner of Jesus Christ" Paul was bound to do what his divine Master dictated (Phile. 1, 8). Perhaps Paul's favorite analogy was that of a servant, or literally "slave," who was obligated to do His Master's bidding (cf. Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 4:1; Gal. 1:10; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1).

When duty is invoked, it is easy to understand the necessity of faithfulness. Faithful to what? To one's duty, calling, or purpose designated by God. Jesus commended faithful stewards and servants who performed their duties (Matt. 24:45; 25:23; Luke 16:10-12). Paul commended those who were faithful in their duty to him or to Christ (Eph. 6:21; Col. 1:7; 4:7, 9). Herein lies the admonition to "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed" (2 Tim. 2:15). There is no shame in faithful performance of one's expected duty.

The motivation of duty may not evoke the nobler sentiments stirred by the motives of

love or gratitude, but who can deny it is a worthy and even major motivation in the New Testament? Duty sometimes connotes perfunctory or mechanical actions. However, it is often more noble than suspected when it reflects the virtues of integrity, truthfulness, respect, submission, commitment, loyalty, diligence, responsibility, and faithfulness.

Fear

Fear is another worthy biblical motivation. It is more a motivation to not do evil than it is to do good or to serve God. A boy might clean his room because he fears a punishment if he doesn't clean. But when the threat of punishment is removed, so is his motivation.

In this negative sense, fear is the most immature of the motivations because it comes from an immature or undeveloped love:

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. (1 John 4:18)

Since perfect love casts out fear of judgment, love is evidently the superior motivation.

As seen in 1 John 4:18, the Christian may fear a negative judgment at the Bema. If there she receives recompense for what she has done, it is good only if her works have been good (2 Cor. 5:9-11; 1 Pet. 1:17) or if she has faithfully fulfilled the ministry entrusted to her (2 Tim. 3:8). If Paul's aim was to be pleasing to the Lord at the Bema, the inverse motivation is not to be displeasing. He realized that he could be "disqualified"¹² from receiving rewards if he did not discipline his body (1 Cor. 9:27). Christians may also displease God and experience a negative judgment because of unmerciful, unloving behavior towards others (James 2:13) or irresponsible use of one's position as a teacher (James 3:1).

This possibility prompts inquiry about the negative consequences of the Judgment Seat of

Christ where believers will give an account for what they have done, both good and bad (2 Cor. 5:10). Certainly one negative consequence is the denial of one's share in kingdom rule or the rewards that were discussed earlier. Another is the negative emotion of shame due to unfaithfulness (2 Tim. 2:15; 1 John 2:28). This shame may result from the shame God has towards those who were unfaithful (Luke 9:26).¹³

Christians can also serve in fear of God's discipline or chastisement. The admonition to servants is to obey their masters "in sincerity of heart, fearing God." For this there is reward, "But he who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and there is no partiality" (Col. 3:23-25). Here the consequence may include not just a denial of rewards at the Bema, but a negative recompense, which might imply temporal chastisement. Likewise, Paul wanted God to repay Alexander for betraying him (1 Tim. 4:14). Peter warned that God's judgment would "begin at the house of God" (1 Pet. 4:17). God's chastisement of sin through physical consequences shows that there is good reason to fear God when one disobeys Him (1 Cor. 5:5; 11:29-32; James 5:15-16, 19). Encompassed in the concept of divine discipline is the recognition that whatever is good can inversely be turned into a fear if the loss of it is invoked. Thus for example, the Christian could fear losing fellowship with God, fellowship with others, fruitfulness, or usefulness to God.

The all-knowing, all-seeing judgment of God brings an awareness to all that actions are being committed in the sight of God or with God as witness. This recurring consciousness mentioned in the Bible denotes the accountability to which believers are held for their actions, an accountability that implies negative consequences for disobedience (2 Cor. 7:12; 8:21; 12:19; 1 Thes. 1:3; 2:4-5, 10; 1 Tim. 2:3; 6:13; Heb. 4:12-13).

The book of Hebrews stands alone with its unique warning passages unquestionably intended to evoke a motivating fear in the readers. While the positive motivation for eternal inheritance is the major theme of the book, these negative motivations are formidable. They are designed to evoke fear in those who are tempted to turn away from Christ or not press on in their sanctification. When surveying the warnings, one notices that the consequences of apostasy and unfaithfulness sound terrifying though they are not really defined.¹⁴ Such ambiguity should not lessen the impact of these warnings. Indeed, uncertainty about what is in store for apostates might even heighten their fears. It should be enough to know that God will deal severely with the believer who turns from the truth.

There is a sense in which fear is less negative and more positive. This would be fear in the sense of reverence. In the Old Testament there is an emphasis on the fear of the Lord, an attitude that desires to conform to God's law. Likewise, in the New Testament there is a similar attitude of reverence. Cornelius was a man who feared God and gave alms and prayed always (Acts 10:2). Paul's pleas for holiness (2 Cor. 7:1) and for mutual submission (Eph. 5:21) are based on the fear of God. Beneath the surface of this healthy respect also lurks the negative kind of fear, as demonstrated by Paul's statement to the Philippians to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12). In the last warning of Hebrews, the author encourages his readers to "serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (Heb. 12:28).¹⁵

When positive motivations that draw Christians forward are not enough, the negative motivation of fear can keep Christians from slipping back. Such fear does not appeal to one's higher virtues. It appeals more to self-preservation. But this will sometimes accomplish God's ultimate purpose of shaping godly conduct and character, especially with the less mature, until

they learn to serve God from a higher motive.

Conclusion

There are good biblical motivations for serving God and living a godly life. Though how they overlap is not so discernible, they together or alone can motivate the Christian to one degree or another. Most probably a believer is influenced by different motivations at different times depending on his or her circumstances, disposition, background, and biblical knowledge.

Some Practical Implications

It is clear that unworthy motivations have no place in the Christian's life or service. Legalism, false guilt, and self-seeking can not produce godliness because their inspiration is not godly truth and the assurances of God's Word that comes through faith. Motives must constantly be evaluated. If the truth were known, many in vocational and volunteer ministry might find that too much of their "ministry" is really fodder for repentance instead of foundation for reward. Christians should call into account those they see ministering with selfish or unworthy motives (1 Pet. 4:7), because God is disgraced by such greedy and perverse conduct.

Furthermore, Christians should learn to inspire others to godly living and service with the highest of motivations, beginning with love and gratitude to God for all that He has done. Christians must constantly remind one another of all that God has freely given them by His grace. The disciplines of discipleship will fade in the believer's life without these heartfelt motives that pull one forward into maturity. People can not be legislated into spiritual growth, nor can they be shamed into godly service or intimidated into Christ-like maturity. Rather, it is the duty and ministry of knowing Christians to teach others that there are high and worthy

motivations to which they can aspire, and that there are also temporal and eternal consequences for how they shape their lives and ministries.

Finally, preaching, teaching, and counseling should seek to effect change by appealing to the highest motives. Then the resultant change and service to God will have enduring value for both the speaker and the hearers.

Conclusion

The intent of this article has been to shed light on a subject rarely addressed as a whole. It has attempted to organize in a preliminary fashion the New Testament presentation of motivation for godly living and service.

To be sure, the subject is complex and not always given to easy discernment. Humans are complex beings who rarely understand their own motives for doing things, but God does. He can use even improper motives to serve His purposes and accomplish something good. Fortunately He will be the final Judge of one's motives. Still, there are clearly decent and proper motives that God has designed to accomplish His will in and through every believer. In as much as Christians learn and apply them, they will be pleasing to God in their lives and service.

1. Basil Jackson, "Psychology, Psychiatry, and the Pastor: Part II: Maturity in the Pastor and Parishioner," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135 (April 1975), 111-12.

2. Bainton, Roland H., *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), 25 .

3. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1978), VI:163.

4. John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1996), 23. His definition seems to assume a love for God that seeks to glorify and enjoy Him, as shown by his "Love Poem" (pp. 25-31; Also cf. p. 20, 49).

5. It seems no coincidence that the pericope following the story of the sinful woman mentions other women who were healed of diseases and demons, and that they assisted Jesus with provisions (Luke 8:1-3).

6. Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*

(Hayesville, NC: Schoettle Publishing Co., 1992), 590.

7. Important to this interpretation is placement of the comma after “God” rather than “Christ” contra the NKJV (quoted above) and the NIV and so omitted here. For a good discussion, see Dillow, 55, 86-87, 373-77, 416. He argues that there is a difference between an unconditional heir of God (all Christians), and a conditional heir of Christ (deserving Christians).

8. See Michael Eaton, *No Condemnation: A New Theology of Assurance* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1995), 175.

9. *Ibid.*, 179.

10. The first indication of eternal significance is in 1:14 where the author reminds the readers that they “will inherit salvation.” The future tense is used in reference to the future purpose for which they were saved in the past. Later, the author indicates that becoming “partakers of Christ” depends on whether “we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end” (3:14). He reminds his readers that a promise of millennial rest remains for those who are faithful (4:1,9). This enjoyment of God’s blessings can begin in this life to a degree (4:11), but continues on into eternity. His comparison to Joshua’s day shows that he is talking about not only entering the kingdom, but possessing or enjoying it as Jesus Christ allows faithful believers to share in it with Him as “partakers.” Joshua led the Israelites into the Promised Land, but all did not possess it or receive rest because of disobedience (4:6-8). These promises are inherited through faithful endurance (6:11-12) as is illustrated by the many examples of faith in chapter 11.

11. This is probably a temporal reward because the similar blessing of 5:11 is temporal (See Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistle of James: Proven Character Through Testing*, ed. Arthur L. Farstad and Robert N. Wilkin [Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1994], 25-26; J. Ronald Blue, “James,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament ed.*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, 815-36 [Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983], 821). The crown of life in Rev 2:10 is evidently an eternal reward because it is bestowed after death.

12. That this translation of *adokimos* as “disqualified” has rewards as its object, not salvation, is obvious from the fact that Paul includes himself as a hypothetical possibility. See the discussion in Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1978), III:308, and Bob Wilkin, “The Biblical Distinction Between Eternal Salvation and Eternal Rewards: A Key to Proper Exegesis” (*Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 16 [Spring 1996]), 15-24.

13. For a fuller discussion of the negative consequences of the judgment seat of Christ, see Dillow, 530-49.

14. The first warning (2:1-4) simply says that those who neglect their Christian faith will not escape (v. 3). But escape *what* exactly? The second (3:7—4:13) warns against missing the blessing of rest, a fearful prospect to the author (4:1). The warning against unbelief also invokes God’s anger (3:10,17) and the prospect of the readers’ “fall” (4:11). But these are all ambiguous to a great degree. The third warning (6:1-12) is an admonition to press on to maturity with an attendant negative consequence of what will happen if they do not, implied by the analogy of the thorny land which “is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned” (6:8). But how does this analogy apply to the Christian? The fourth warning (10:26-31) mentions “a fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries” (v 27) and a “worse punishment” than that experienced by those who rejected Moses (vv. 28-29). It has an ominous ending: “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (v 31). But with all this, the judgment is still not specified. The last warning (12:25-29) declares that they will not escape who refuse to listen to Christ (v. 25), and ends with the statement “For our God is a consuming fire” (v 29).

While many interpreters consider these terrible-sounding fates to be eternal punishment, It should be noted that the central purpose of the warnings is a fear of God’s unspecified judgment. The preponderance of evidence

shows that Hebrews was written to genuine Christians. As noted earlier in this article, God's judgment of Christians can have negative elements both temporally and at the Judgment Seat of Christ. For example, the imagery of fire in 10:27 is in harmony with the many references to fiery judgment of God's people in the Old Testament (e.g. Deut. 4:24; Num. 11:1; Ps. 78:21; 89:46; Isa. 29:6; 33:14; Lam. 2:3; 4:11; Eze. 22:20-21,31; 38:19; Zeph. 1:18) and in the New Testament (John 15:6; 1 Cor. 3:13-15). Thus in 10:31 it is noted that the judgment is for "His people" (v. 30) and that at least they fall *into* God's hands, not out of them.

15. The word used in these verses (except Heb. 12:28) is *phobeo* which usually means *be afraid*, in the sense of terror, but it can also be used to express *reverence* or *respect* (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 1952 ed., s.v. "phobeo," 870-71). In Hebrews 12:28 the word used is *eulabeia* which is more restricted in meaning to *awe* or *reverence* (*Ibid.*, s.v. "*eulabeia*," 322).