



Motivations for Serving God

Why *do* we as Christians serve God? Why *should* we serve God? Many have probably never paused to consider their motives. While we do not need to understand our motives in order to serve God or grow in godliness, the more we are aware of them, the better we will be able to serve God as He deserves. Motivations are often hard to discern and they sometimes overlap, but it is clear from the Bible that Christians can serve from either worthy or unworthy motives.

Illegitimate unbiblical motivations

Some motivations are not worthy of God or Christians. Though service may result from those who are improperly motivated, it is not really God that these people serve, but themselves.

1. *Legalism*: Some people may try to serve God in hopes that this will either earn them eternal salvation or help them hang on to it. Of course, this is contrary to the grace of God in salvation and in sanctification (Eph. 2:8-9; Gal. 3:1-9).

2. *False guilt*: A failure to trust God to forgive their sins may cause some people to try to serve God in order to work off their guilt, as in works of penance. But this ignores God's promise of complete forgiveness to all who confess their sins (Col. 2:13; 1 John 1:9).

3. *Self-seeking*: Financial gain, preeminence, power, or self-aggrandizement may motivate some to try to serve God. Obviously, they are only serving their own selfish desires. The Bible has examples of those who were so motivated (Matt. 6:1-6; Mark 12:28-40; Phil. 1:15-18; 3 John 9; 2 Pet. 2:14-15). The apostle Paul taught against such motives (2 Cor. 4:2-5; Gal. 1:10; 1 Thes. 2:3-6; 1 Tim. 6:1).

Legitimate biblical motivations

The Bible presents some powerful and clear motivations for service and godly living. Good motives may overlap, and some seem higher in principle than others. Here are five easily identifiable motives from the New Testament in somewhat of an order of priority.

1. *Love*: This includes first a love for God, then an accompanying love for others (Matt. 22:37-39). A Christian motivated by love works for the benefit of the One loved. Love for God is often demonstrated through obedience (John 14:21; 1 John 5:2). Love also expresses itself in a desire to glorify (John 12:27-28), please (Col. 1:10; 3:20; 1 Thes. 4:1), and know God (Phil. 3:10-14; 1 John 4:16). Love for God would also mean love for that which God loves, thus we love other people (2 Cor. 5:14; 12:15; 1 John 4:11; 5:2).

2. *Gratitude*: Because we benefit from God's actions, we may wish to respond gratefully. Our service and our lives become a "Thank You" to Him. In light of God's blessings, we are motivated to offer our bodies to Him (Rom. 12:1-2) and to live for Him (Gal. 2:20). Paul was motivated to serve God with thanksgiving (1 Tim. 1:12).

3. *Eternal Significance*: We can be motivated to fulfill our longing for some significance beyond this temporary life according to God's original purposes. God created us to participate in His rule over the earth (Gen. 1:26-28). This will be fulfilled in His coming kingdom to the degree that we



are faithful in our responsibilities in this life (Matt. 19:27-30; Luke 19:11-27) or our faithful endurance in suffering (Rom. 8:17; 2 Tim. 2:12). The enjoyment of this earned inheritance should inspire godly conduct (1 Cor. 6:9-11; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5). The book of Hebrews promises those who are faithful a share in Christ's future rule (Heb. 1:14; 3:14; 4:1, 9; 6:11-12). Eternal significance can begin when we engage in serving Christ in this life (Matt. 10:38-39; 16:24-27; Luke 9:23-26).

4. *Rewards*: We can also be motivated by God-given rewards in this life (Mark 10:28-31) and in eternity (Matt. 16:27; Rev. 22:12). The judgment seat of Christ is the scene of future rewards. There all Christians will appear and give an account (Rom. 14:10-12; 2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Cor. 3:9-13). Eternal rewards include *treasures* (Matt. 6:20) and *crowns* (1 Cor. 9:25; 1 Pet. 5:4; 2 Tim. 4:8). Motivation also comes from the possibility of losing out on eternal rewards (Matt. 22:1-14; 25:14-25; Luke 19:11-27; 1 Cor. 3:12-15). Rewards are not a selfish motivation if our goal is to use them to glorify God in the end.

5. *Duty*: Some Christians will serve God because they have made a commitment to do so, or because they are living up to that which God has called them to do. Duty does not expect a reward, but is performed out of obligation (Luke 17:7-10). This is seen in Jesus' own commitment to do what God had called Him to do (Mark 1:38; John 12:27; 17:4; Heb. 2:17; 5:5-10). Paul was motivated to live up to his calling to be an apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 20:24; 2 Tim. 1:1, 11; 2:7). Christians might also feel it their duty to be faithful stewards of their gifts (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Tim. 4:14; 1 Pet. 4:10-11) or the gospel (1 Cor. 9:17-18; Col. 1:25; 1 Tim. 1:11, 18; 6:20; 2 Tim. 2:14; 2:2; Titus 1:3).

6. *Fear*: This motivation is inferior to love (1 John 4:18) but can motivate the Christian away from sin or unfaithfulness and towards godly conduct. One might fear a negative judgment at the judgment seat of Christ (James 2:13; 3:1) which can include shame (2 Tim. 2:15; 1 John 2:28) or loss of reward (1 Cor. 3:13-15; 9:27). The Christian may also fear God's temporal discipline (1 Cor. 5:5; 11:29-32; Col. 3:23-25; 1 Tim. 4:14; James 5:15-16, 19). The book of Hebrews effectively uses five fearful warnings to motivate its readers away from apostasy and on to maturity (Heb. 2:1-4; 3:7—4:13; 6:1-12; 10:26-31; 12:25-29). There is also a positive aspect of fear in the sense of reverence, which is also a motivation for the Christian (Acts 10:2; 2 Cor. 7:1; Eph. 5:21; Phil. 2:12; Heb. 12:28).

Conclusion

Just as there are illegitimate unbiblical motivations to serve God, there are legitimate biblical ones also. We should learn to seek the highest motivations in our own service. We should also learn to motivate others toward service or godliness with the best motivations. It is healthy to evaluate our motives for serving God or for growing in godliness so that we might serve Him better.