

*reasons for acting
according to God's will*

2 MOTIVATION

Human corruption as described in chapter 1 is depressing, frightening, immobilizing. Powerful motivation is required for us to act despite it and in the face of it. That motivation for the Christian is the gift and work of God. He moves us, for we cannot move ourselves. This is a basic part of the Good News of the gospel: the God who forgives us for the sake of Jesus Christ also enables and moves us to become new, better people.

I. GOD OVERCOMES CORRUPTION IN JESUS CHRIST

In order to move us, God did something about the spiritual and moral corruption which traps and ruins us. He solved the great problem of sin which we could never solve. He released us from bondage to the worst elements of ourselves. He raised us from the spiritual death which had come upon us as a result of sin. Jesus is God at work in our world and in our lives, combating the corruption of sin, rescuing and restoring the victims of corruption.

A. Jesus Reveals Our Potential

Jesus provides us with a vision of uncorrupted humanity. He is a living, moving example of what we are supposed to be and can be with His help. He is the only whole and completely authentic human being who has ever lived. The more fully we are made aware of His human personality and life, the better we know our own potential. A model is an essential and a very powerful motivating factor. Most often we look only to other sinful human beings as models. Although some may exemplify Christian values and conduct, all are limited and hindered by their sinfulness.

Unfortunately, most of our fellow human beings—even our fellow Christians—do not serve as good models at all. As was observed in chapter I, we tend to drag down and disillusion one another because we are so often acting out our corruption rather than the love and will of God. All of this underscores the importance of Jesus' matchless and flawless human life and personality as a motivating factor. He came, in part, to show us what we ourselves can become.

That a model can be motivating is clear from much human experience. Educators in ghetto schools have discovered that students' eyes are opened and their sights are elevated significantly by contact with prominent and successful persons of their own ethnic or racial background.

Patients in amputee wards of military hospitals after World War II, many of whom had given up hope of resuming a normal life, were startled by the strange behavior of an unannounced visitor. This middle-aged man in a business suit would walk into a ward and, without a word of explanation, flawlessly perform a series of acrobatic feats—handsprings, flips, and cartwheels. At the conclusion of his act he would lift his trouser legs, revealing two full-length artificial limbs. The impact was tremendous. Many who were unwilling even to try to adjust to their handicaps or to artificial limbs suddenly had a powerful motivation. In this man they saw what they could do and be despite their loss.

B. Jesus Reveals God's Love

Because Jesus is God, the Father's divine and eternal Son, He enables us to know God for who He really is. Not only does He

reveal ourselves and our potential; He also reveals the heart of God and His compassion for us despite our corruption. Through Jesus, what He is as well as what He did, we become aware of God's determination to help us, His willingness to go to any lengths on our behalf, to pay any price. By His obedience and sacrifice, Jesus provides complete and continuous pardon for all our disobedience.

This love of God expressed in Jesus Christ is the key element by which God wants to motivate us. He wants to move us with the power of His love. He could easily force us to comply with His will, but He refuses to do this. Whenever we obey and honor Him, He wants it to be because we know His love, accept it, appreciate, and return it.

C. Jesus Liberates

By obtaining pardon for us on the cross, Jesus broke the claim and hold of Satan. He sets us free from the helplessness and hopelessness which our corruption imposes. Although Satan can still tempt, deceive, and torment us, Jesus promises that if we accept His pardon and the power of His Spirit, Satan will no longer be able to tyrannize and dominate us. This is great news—it is the gospel. This emancipation proclamation tells us not only what we are freed *from* (sin and Satan) but also what we are freed *for*. By the redemptive work of Jesus we are liberated and motivated to become more like the one who has done all this for us. We are free to begin to realize our potential as saved human beings.

II. GOD IMPLEMENTS RECOVERY THROUGH THE SPIRIT

What the Father wills for us and what the Son obtains, the Holy Spirit applies and makes effective in our lives. He is the outreach of the Father and the Son. He is the agent through which they relate to us and help us. As was mentioned in the previous section, Jesus overcame our spiritual and moral corruption. In this section we note how the Holy Spirit makes this victory a practical reality in our lives.

A. The Spirit Reestablishes and Builds the Relationship with God

The initial goal of the Spirit as He reaches out to the lost human being is to relate that person to God. Through the message of the gospel He establishes communication with God and stimulates interaction. He enables the person to accept God's love and help in Christ, that is to say, He creates and sustains faith. There is no other way for faith to begin. With our own strength we cannot fear, love, and trust God. In a state of corruption our ability for faith is destroyed. Only by the Spirit's gift and work can it be generated.

B. The Spirit Creates and Builds a New Person

Once the bond of faith is established, the Holy Spirit launches a major rehabilitation program in the person who has been reached. Alongside the old, corrupt person, the Spirit begins to bring forth and shape a new person. The Christian, then, is simultaneously two persons—the old and the new. There is one with ideas, values, and behavior patterns that are corrupt and responsive to Satan. And, there is another with ideas, values, and behavior patterns that are Christ-like and responsive to God.

The unbeliever is only one person—the old. The Christian is two persons. These are not two separate sections of the Christian's being, one good and the other evil. It is not, for example, that the soul is the location of the new person and the body the location of the old. Rather, both persons occupy and function throughout the entire being. What are the characteristics of this new person whom the Spirit is developing within every Christian?

1. *He is inclined toward the good.* The new person who is emerging and growing within the Christian reacts in a new way both toward God and toward people. In relation to God the new person delights in God's will and is able to do it. He trusts God, appreciates God, and obeys God willingly and joyfully. In relation to other people the new person has a deep concern and commitment, is determined to love and to help people regardless of the cost.

2. *He resists corruption.* In addition, the new person has an aversion to those things which offend God and hurt people. He

opposes every evil impulse and influence both from within and from without. This means that the new person is in a state of constant tension and conflict with the old person and his desires. Scripture describes the Christian life, not as a steady and uninterrupted course of improvement, but rather as a struggle, a contest, a fight, in which the new person must combat the old in order to survive and to grow.

The willingness and determination to do this is an essential characteristic of the new person. The new person is alert and opposed to every temptation that comes from without, whether from corrupt individuals or from a decadent culture. The new person is not a conformist, except to that which is from God. Stubbornly and courageously he insists on defying the immoral trends of the environment.

C. The Spirit Dwells Within

We do not struggle alone against sin and corruption. God Himself, the Holy Spirit, is personally present within, fostering moral recovery and improvement. In order to motivate us, to move us in the right direction, and to divert us from what is wrong, God not only gives us gifts and powers, but He gives us Himself. We have a living, loving divine Person with us at all times providing the moral encouragement, support, and direction that we need. The strength and insight on which we rely are His, not ours or someone else's. We can communicate with Him; He hears and responds to our prayers and our cries as we carry on the difficult and lonely struggle of the moral life. He also speaks to us through His Word, written in Scripture and lodged in our hearts, offering us guidance, reinforcing our convictions and conscience, providing consolation and hope.

III. MOTIVATION

What God does for us through Christ and in us through the Spirit provides us with powerful and compelling reasons for acting according to God's will. As we are reached by His love, as His forgiving and transforming work is done in us, new attitudes and values are formed which enable and impel us to become better people.

A. Desire to Praise God

This is the supreme motivation—our love answering His. Aware of His love and grateful for it, we respond in kind. His love for us stimulates our love for Him and for others. Furthermore, out of love and appreciation grows the impulse to praise—to call attention to His goodness and greatness, to make Him and others aware of our admiration for Him and our delight in what He has done.

The purpose of praise is not to repay God, but to display His magnificence and to express our acceptance and thanks. Our obedience to God is eucharistic, a giving and a living of our thanks. This means that our chief concern as we make an ethical decision and take a course of moral action is: What decision and action is most likely to please and honor God?

To praise is quite natural, almost irresistible, when we encounter someone who is exceptionally considerate and helpful. I have a friend who, at a time when I was in great personal need, without being asked, assessed my needs and attended to them in a most sensitive and generous way. I was overwhelmed at the time and still am. I never tire of telling him and others how much this meant to me.

This type of motivation, above all, can and should characterize Christian ethical and moral response. It is the highest form of motivation. Other, lower forms of motivation discussed below are also valid and may properly function in combination with this one. However, the praise of God belongs in first place. The best and most compelling reason a Christian has for doing what is right and avoiding what is wrong is that this glorifies God.

B. Desire to Help Others

Those who have been loved and helped by God develop the desire to treat others in the way that God has treated them. God intends and encourages this. When we want to express our love and praise He directs us to other people. All human beings need something from us; some have great and desperate needs. "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me," Jesus said (Matt. 25:40, RSV). One's fellow man is the primary object of and outlet for Christian response to the love of God.

I once had some automobile problems in an out of the way place where it was difficult to get service. A stranger stopped, and with the expenditure of considerable time and effort, was able to repair the car. I felt grateful and obligated and wanted to pay him, but he refused. "No," he said, "I don't need or want your money. But I tell you what: the next time you have a chance to help someone, do it, and think of me." This is precisely what God says to those who have been saved by His love. "When you have a chance to help someone, do it, and think of me."

The Christian's second great concern in making ethical decisions, growing out of the highest concern, is: What course of action is most likely to help the people concerned? Almost every ethical decision and moral action directly or indirectly affects others, for better or for worse. Moved by the love of God, Christians want to do what is best for them. The second most important reason for doing what is right and avoiding what is wrong is that other people benefit.

C. Desire to Realize One's Potential

Here we come to the proper place of self in Christian ethical and moral motivation. The location of self is third on the priority list. First comes concern for God, and second comes concern for others. Although not at the head of the list, self does have a high and important place. As long as concern for self remains subordinate to these higher concerns, it is appropriate and even necessary. In chapter 4 we discuss Christian selfhood more extensively. At this point we focus on the self only as it is a motivating factor, a reason for doing what is right and avoiding what is wrong.

Because a Christian believes in Jesus Christ and accepts His mercy, he knows that he is forgiven and that he has the power to become a better person. Jesus has both reconciled him to God and restored his potential for improvement. The Christian wants to make the most of this, and it is right for him to feel this way. He will not be confused and held back and pushed around by sin the way he once was.

Because of what God does for him through Christ and in him through the Holy Spirit, the Christian can grow and produce. He can become a new person. He can begin to overcome his moral problems, weaknesses, hang-ups, and conflicts. He can

and he will! He doesn't want to be a spiritual and moral cripple. He wants to experience and exercise in his own heart and life the victory that Christ has obtained for him. This, too, is a good and valid reason for obedience.

D. Awareness that God's Will Is Best

Among the great blessings of reconciliation with God through faith in Jesus Christ is a positive attitude toward what God requires. Before a person's conversion, God's revealed will is almost exclusively a negative force. It exposes and condemns the sinner. However, once trust in God is evoked through the gospel, a person is able to view God's commandments in a different light. Although the commandments continue to expose and condemn sin in Christians (the law always condemns, see Rom. 7:7-24) they also become a helpful statement of what is good for us.

Through faith in the gospel we discover that God in His law is not merely trying to boss us around, or make us jump through hoops. He desires to help us. He is our Creator, so He knows what is best for us and for others better than anyone else. His commandments are like a manufacturer's instructions for the operation and maintenance of a product. It is in our best interest that we do what He commands.

This, too, is a proper form of self-interest, which must remain subordinate to concern for God and others. It can and should be expressive and supportive of these higher motives rather than in competition with them. A Christian can honor God and demonstrate His love and wisdom by faithfully and gratefully doing what He says. Furthermore, a Christian can be sure that what he does is best for others, too, if he orders his relationships by God's commandments. God knows best!

E. Awareness of Rewards and Punishments

God promises to reward the person who obeys. In Scripture He indicates that often (though not always) happiness and success will come in this life to those who conform to His will, and He absolutely guarantees special recognition to them hereafter. It is important to note that these rewards are *not*, as well as what they are. They are not forgiveness of sins and eternal life, for

such supreme blessings can never be earned by good behavior. The blessings that are given as rewards for obedience, though valuable and desirable, are of a much lower order. Furthermore, God also warns that punishments will follow disobedience. In this life misery, loss, and failure almost always strike the person who defies and violates God's will. Hereafter, retribution is certain.

Awareness of rewards and punishments should serve as motivation only in an indirect manner. By alerting us to them, God is not so much trying to move us to action as to reassure us, to overcome our hesitancy. He is, in effect, telling us that we do not have to be afraid to obey, even if it is difficult or costly. We will not lose or be hurt by our obedience, at least in the long run, because He rewards obedience and punishes disobedience. Obedience that is primarily in response to rewards and punishments is not pleasing to God and, therefore, not rewardable. He wants us to obey for His sake and for the sake of other people, not for the rewards.

F. Fear of Disobedience and Its Consequences

To disobey God, that is, to neglect or hurt other people, to surrender to the corrupt elements in and around us, is to jeopardize our relationship with God and risk His judgment. The Christian realizes this and fears it. Disobedience and immorality can be disastrous. To violate or disregard the will of God is a gamble in which the stakes are immeasurably high. Although every act of sin does not destroy faith and result in damnation, almost any sin can have this effect. Sin is not a harmless amusement or plaything. It is a serious threat to our ultimate well-being. We should not confuse God's mercy and patience with softness. Writing to Christians, Paul says, "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption..." (Gal. 6:7-8, RSV).

Fear of relapse and its consequences is, obviously, a low level of Christian motivation. It is, in fact, the lowest. However, it is a necessary factor because of our continuing sinfulness, our dangerously strong attraction toward that which is evil and forbidden. Such motivation can never move us in the right direction, for only what is done out of love, not fear, is acceptable to God.

However, this kind of fear may check our drift in the wrong direction. In a weak and rebellious Christian, fear may still be functioning even after love for God and others has become virtually inoperative.

Some years ago I was pastor of a little congregation on the Lower East Side of New York City. One of my members, a poor and not very bright woman, had not been in church for a while so I went to see her. I asked her about her absence and she said bluntly that she was tired of being good, taking care of her children, being faithful to her husband, and coming to church. These things were no fun. Fun was doing what she felt like doing, such as picking up men in bars and sleeping with them. I tried to appeal to her love for God and for her family, but there was not much response. Finally, in exasperation I said, "Dorothy, [not her real name] how would you like to go to hell?" Startled and obviously frightened she assured me that she would not like that at all. "Well," I said, "with your attitude and behavior, that is exactly where you are headed." This sharp warning and the fear of hell stopped her short. It provided the opportunity for a further ministry, resulting ultimately in her repentance and the straightening out of her life on the basis of higher motives.

Motivation is an essential factor in ethical decision and moral action. God is at least as interested in why we do something as He is in what we do. Proper ethical instruction and healthy moral development involve concentration on the higher levels of motivation. Although lower motivations are also valid and may be used when the situation requires them, the goal is to move from the lower to the higher levels, to emphasize the best reasons that we have for doing the will of God.