

THE UNDERLYING MOTIVE

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on February 20, 1955 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC.

I know of no study that is more interesting than the study of motives. Why did this man do this or that? Why did this woman say so and so? Why did this teen-age boy act in such a manner? What possible motive could he have had for doing it?. In other words, a study of motives is a search for the “why.” Why this, or why that.

We are all aware that the motive behind an act often determines the acceptability of the act. There is an excellent example of this in the Biblical story of the widow who brought two mites and cast them into the treasury. As Jesus told the story various people were bringing their gifts, and as they cast them into the treasury he happened to see that this poor-woman brought only two mites, less than a penny according to our standards. Yet, he said that she cast in more than all they that cast into the treasury because she cast in of her want. (Mark 12:41). They gave of their superfluity, while she gave all that she had. Her motive was so good that even though she cast in little, in God’s sight it was very much.

A contrasting example of this truth is found in the betrayal kiss which Judas gave to Jesus on the night of his arrest. Ordinarily we think of a kiss as being an evidence of tender affection and love, yet there in the garden of Gethsemane when Judas came with a mob of ruffians at his heels, his kiss was an ugly infamous thing. Behind that kiss was a traitor’s heart. (Matt. 26:49). The motive changed it from something that might have been beautiful into something terrible and rotten.

“As A Man Thinketh In His Heart”

Jesus was deeply concerned about the attitude of heart. Jesus placed a very strong emphasis upon the motive behind the act, upon the thinking of the heart out of which the act comes. Near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus used two examples which show his deep concern for the heart of man. The first is, “Ye have heard that it was said to them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: but I say unto you, that everyone that is angry with his brother shall be in danger of the judgment; and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council; and whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of the hell of fire.” (Matt. 5:21-22). Jesus, in this passage, is saying that there is many a murderer in the world who has never committed murder. He is saying that any man who has wished to commit murder, who has been willing to commit murder, is a murderer in his heart. The man who hates another man so strongly as to wish him dead is a murderer in Christ’s sight, even though he may never have had the courage to fire the gun that took the other man’s life.

His second example is, “Ye have heard that it was said, Thou shalt not commit adultery: but I say unto you, that everyone that looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery already with her in his heart.” (Matt. 5:27-28). He is saying that there is many an adulterer in the world who has never actually committed adultery. If a man has been willing to commit adultery, has wanted to and has not curbed his desire, he is an adulterer in heart. The whole emphasis is on the motive or intention of heart.

All of this has been said in order to introduce a very significant question. We have established the fact that what we think, as well as what we do, is important. Please do not misunderstand, I am not saying that what we do is not important, but that what we think and the reasons behind what we do is vitally important. Now if that is so, why are you a Christian? Why am I a Christian? What was my motive in becoming a Christian? What caused us to be Christians? What was the thinking behind our coming to Christ?

Man as Center -- Works of Merit

At that point I would like to review a very challenging page of religious history. Go back with me to the Medieval period, sometimes called the Middle Ages, or the age of Scholasticism. All three of these names refer to the period beginning in the 11th century and closing in the 14th century. During that period the Roman church was the supreme church. During that period Christianity was conceived almost exclusively as a divine-human management by which a person could escape being lost in hell and could receive the blessing of being saved in heaven. During the Middle Ages Christianity was conceived primarily as a means of saving a man from hell and getting him to heaven. That was the center of Christianity. God was “way off up yonder” somewhere and there was not much concern about him. The primary concern was this ladder by which a man could climb from earth to heaven this bridge over which a man could go from earth to heaven. All of this involved the doing of “works of merit.” It involved, for instance, vigils in which a man would stay up half the night to engage in prayer. The number of prayers was especially significant. The more one prayed the greater the blessing. It involved pilgrimages to places of religious significance. It involved the giving of great sums to the church. It involved extensive fasting. All of these works were supposed to build up merits. If a man prayed enough, paid enough, made enough pilgrimages, climbed enough stairways on his knees he eventually would build up a big bank account of merit that he would receive salvation. Salvation was a kind of payment for services rendered.

God as Center -- Love and Trust

Then came Martin Luther. Luther had been a monk. He stayed up many nights and prayed. He did all the usual merit works. He confessed his sins often. In fact his fellow monks in the monastery complained because Luther confessed his sins to them so often that he became a kind of nuisance. After a while he came to the place that he almost hated God, the God that made him stay up for prayers, and who made him do all of these acts of penance. It was then that he realized that this is not Christianity. He said, "The whole system is wrong. Instead of trying to build up works of merit, instead of trying to multiply good deeds and earn salvation, we need to rely on God's love as manifest in Christ."

Luther condemned the emphasis of the Middle Ages as "man-centered" rather than "God-centered." To him its preoccupation with escaping hell and getting into heaven was selfish and unworthy. To Luther the center of Christianity was loving God. The Christians major concern should be to honor and glorify God rather than to save his own soul. He fought to make God the center, not man. Man's chief concern ought to be to honor and glorify God. His chief concern ought to be to know God's will, and then let God's will become his will. At this point he spoke the great sentence, "I could will myself to be damned, if that is what God wills." These are quite different conceptions. One centers on God, honoring God, glorifying God, conforming to God's will. The other centers on man.

#### What Do the Scriptures Say?

Now what is the emphasis of the scriptures? I think you will agree that the primary emphasis is not "I want to be saved," but that the real essence of Christianity is to love God. Out of that love for God we will obey God's commandments and we will receive salvation for ourselves, but the beginning place ought to be a love and devotion for our God.

One time when a scribe came to Jesus and asked; "What commandment is first of all?" Jesus replied, "Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." (Mark 12: 28, 30). What is Christianity? Jesus said it was loving God with all one's heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Here is another passage, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever shall save his life shall lose it: and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it." (Matt. 16:24-25). Again, "Seek ye first his kingdom and his righteousness." (Matt. 6:33).

I mentioned a few moments ago that if we love God we will obey his commandments. In fact the apostle John quoted Jesus as saying, "If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments." (John 14:15). But which is first, keeping the commandments for a selfish purpose--to avoid hell and to get to heaven, or loving God, which leads us to keep his commandments? In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "Even so let your light shine before men that they may see your good works ..." How is the sentence finished? "Even so let your light shine before men that they may see your good work and ye may be saved?" No. "Even so let your light shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." The 34th Psalm begins with the same emphasis of honoring and glorifying God. David wrote in the long ago,

I will bless Jehovah at all times  
His praise shall continually be in my mouth,  
Oh, magnify Jehovah with me  
And let us exalt his name together. (Ps. 34:1-3).

#### Duty or Desire

If we let our Christianity be a selfish concern by which we try to avoid hell and get to heaven, then praying prayers is simply a duty. The reading of one's Bible and the doing of good works are merely paying of premiums on an insurance policy. Attending services on Lord's day is the keeping up of weekly payments. But if we love God and if all of these things are done because of that love, then Christianity is a wonderful thing. All these acts are ways of showing God how much we love him and how much we want to honor him in our lives. Is not that the richer conception?

Please do not misunderstand. I am not saying that there is nothing in the Bible about the saving of our souls. There is a strong emphasis upon it, but for the mature Christian it is not the main thing. It may be that we began to be Christians because of the fear of being lost, but for the mature Christians the central thing is the love of God. It is a devotion to God that transcends everything else. It is conforming our wills to God's will, attending services because we want to honor our God, praying our prayers because we love God so much. This love for God takes hold of a life and breathes something into it that man needs. It is not primarily legal, though it is a wonderful keeping of God's law out of love and respect.

#### God's Majesty and Glory

I like to read the fourth chapter of the book of Revelation. Notice the emphasis in this last book on the glory of God. John presents the heavenly scene with the throne of God as center. Around it are four marvelous creatures who continually cry, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come." (Rev. 4:8). Beyond them are the thrones occupied by the four and

twenty elders. They fall down and worship God saying, "Worthy art thou, our Lord and our God, to receive the glory and the honor and the power: for thou didst create all things, and because of thy will they were, and were created. (Rev. 4:11). It is difficult for man to even begin to comprehend the transcendent glory and majesty of God. Surely God is the center of the whole universe, and man must not be so preoccupied with saving his own soul that he forgets to love and glorify God. To so blunder is the surest way of losing one's soul.

#### Only Love Satisfies

What I want to say can perhaps be made clear by a little incident that has happened to me on several occasions. I have been visiting in someone's home. Night has come and the children have been taken off to another room and dressed for bed. After a while a little boy, clad in pajamas has come back to tell his daddy good night. He hugs his daddy's neck and kisses him, and then, out of respect to the guest, they have sometimes said, "Son, go over and love Brother Baxter's neck and give him a good-night kiss." So the little fellow has timidly crossed the room and given me a hug and a kiss. That is rather a wonderful thing, a child doing that to a stranger, but it does not really mean love. It means the obedience to the command of parents.

How different it is when I go home at night. The moment the door opens two little boys rush over, arms outstretched, glad because their daddy is home. As I take one or the other up in my arms, the arms go around the neck and sometimes there is a hug so tight that it hurts. That is spontaneous love.

I think God looks down at us sometimes and says, "Why are you a Christian?" Someone answers, "I am a Christian because I do not want to go to hell. I am a Christian because I want to go to heaven." And then he looks at you and says, "Why are you a Christian?" And you reply, "I am a Christian because I love you. Because you have blessed me in so many ways I want to give you my love. I want my life to honor and glorify thee."

Out of love and respect for God we keep his commandments, and he gives us a home in heaven. It is not a payment for services rendered, but the inheritance of children.