

## GOOD MOTIVES

A prerequisite to this sermon is to know that as long as we are alive on this planet, God has things for us to accomplish – a plan for us. It is hard to believe, with so many people in the world now and with so much confusion. But if we do not believe this, we have not yet encountered God personally and, as yet, we have no tie-in to our faith.

“The road to Hell is paved with good intentions,” or so it is often said. That is not true, of course. The road to Hell is paved with self-righteous intentions (pride) *masquerading* as good intentions. We suspect, even believe, that God cares about our genuinely good intentions even more than about the outcome of our efforts. “*God looks upon the heart.*” (Proverbs 21:2) We can be pretty sure – I should say absolutely certain – that God will appreciate, honor, and support our good intentions. What it is hard to be certain about is whether or not our “good intentions” are truly good and truly intentions!

The time is drawing near when we as a congregation must seek and find our own particular mission – the assignment the Lord has for us as a church. Individuals receive a *vocatio*, and so do congregations. But we have to be awake to it, and we have to be waiting and eager to receive it. Up until now we have not been any of these three things – not sufficiently or consistently. But the time is drawing near. You can feel it.

This is a troublesome issue for us, so you might as well fasten your seat belts right now. We have lost more members over this issue than over any other single item in the last three-plus years. While in fact we have already become more intentional and we now give more to “outreach” than ever before, the impression has been the opposite. That’s because I have been calling our outreach efforts into question on a mild but steady level. Essentially I have said:

- a.) We do not know what we are doing.
- b.) It is not coming from the Lord.
- c.) It is not doing any good.
- d.) The motives are fear and guilt – not love.

In short, we seem to be acting like humanists, not Christians.

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Now, that has not gone over too well. Nobody would have expected it to, least of all me. It would make my life and yours a lot easier if I would just leave it alone – beat the drum a little for “helping others” a few times a year and let well enough alone. I am capable of doing that, by the way. This has nothing to do with my integrity or sainthood. Only, it is not “well enough.” It will not work as part of our spiritual service to God the way we have been going at it – the way most churches go at it. Money does not get us into the Kingdom – love does. Money can work in the *service* of love, but it is no substitute, and the principle does not reverse. It is not just our community; every suburban church needs to wrestle with this one.

Let me give you a “for instance,” but first let me say that our Board of Outreach has been in an impossible bind these last three years. They have had to cope with my questions, with the reactions of angered members, and with the reactions of some members cheering (and maybe for the wrong reasons). And in the confusion of it all, they have had to try to figure out if this really is a transition time or just a temporary, minor fuss – all the while encouraging your giving and channeling those funds to the most reliable places they can. All things considered, they have done a remarkable job. It is important to keep supporting and paying attention to the Board of Outreach, or we will have no structured way to respond when the Lord does give us our mission.

Now to the illustration: We have supported the Emergency Feeding Program in this church for as far back as most of you can remember. I made an announcement about it last week because the Board of Outreach asked me too. I hope you responded to their plea for the same reason. They are getting more and more rigorous about examining programs *before* asking for your support (in contrast to merely giving you information). That is as it should be. The more we respond when they do ask, the more we can encourage their continued labor on our behalf to sort wheat from chaff – that is, mission from mush.

For the time being, the Emergency Feeding Program is to be supported. I hope you swamp it with your generosity. But it belongs to a passing age. Let me tell you why Outreach will probably one day tell you to put your efforts someplace else.

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1.) Nobody has joined our church as a result of this mission in the last twenty years. We do not hand out food for membership, but if there is *never* appreciation, interest, or a flow of progress from being helped to appreciation – to wanting to be part of the helpers helping others – then something is WRONG with the mission. It is a dud – a dead end.

2.) The Gospel is not part of this program. It maybe inspires some who give, but the Gospel has no part in what is received. “*Man shall not live by bread alone.*” We have to stop thinking that we can create or support a welfare state for the world off of our one hundred and thirty members. Because the need is so great, we have to make our sacrifices count. Nobody’s life is being changed in this program. People are merely helped to stay in the hole they are in. It is a government-type program, not a church-type program.

3.) If our motive is love, where is the personal involvement? Why are we not at least feeding them better food, or teaching them to eat more nutritiously and at a lower cost than they do now? Such an approach would require more from them as well as from us, of course. Love is like that. So what are the real motives?

4.) Mostly the motives for this kind of “help” are fear and guilt. We feel guilty about having plenty if others are in want. We are afraid, deep within, that if we do not help, maybe some day we will be in need and nobody will help us. But the manner and the amount of help we give reveal that it is not done from love; it is but mere token offerings that go on the altars of fear and guilt. This is not Christian mission or outreach; it merely pretends to be. And pretense is deadly to spiritual awareness and growth. (Are there exceptions? I cannot think of any.)

Of all the things we are taught, we might suspect that doing good deeds would bring the least objection, the least disagreement, the least problem. “Nothing worthwhile is lightly won.” And doing good is perhaps the most worthwhile of all endeavors. So why do we expect it to be easy, natural, and automatic?

What are good motives, anyway? Jeremiah says, “*The heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately sick; who can fathom it? I, the Lord, search the heart and test the mind ....*” (Jeremiah 17:9-10)

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Do we do good to look good in the eyes of others? Do we do good to help others? If so, is it for their gratitude, for God's approval, or so others might help us if one day we are in trouble? Is there not a certain kind of prestige and even power that come with doing good, if it is recognized? Are our motives ever pure? Only evil people pretend so.

Some say that there is yet another motive for doing good: the love of life, and wanting others to come into life too. And that this is consciously selfish, for it is an adventure – an experience of growth and expansion – for the giver too. Perhaps this is the motive which does the least harm. If I could, I would stop us all from doing any good on any other basis. (Assuming the Lord's approval.)

Since so much damage has come from unexamined goodness down through history, surely we know that if we are to fool around with good deeds, we need to become experts about knowing our own motives. The symbol for it, however unfair, is the Pharisee. Though it is sometimes seen as something from long ago, Pharisaism did not stop with biblical times. You remember that delightful song from *Man of La Mancha*, "I'm Only Thinking of Him"? It reminds us. G.K. Chesterton commented, "Most of us have suffered from a certain sort of people who, by their perverse unselfishness, give more trouble than the selfish."

If I consider myself a person of authentic spiritual hunger, is it not also necessary that I recognize behind it a certain *lust* for power? Perhaps I merely desire to become a healer. What could be wrong with that? Yet is this not a desire to have some personal control over life – and over death? In fact, this is the very sort of struggle that cost Jesus forty days and nights in the wilderness. It is goodness that is fraught with the greatest temptations. Ultimately the desire to see miracles is a hunger to learn their secret so that we also will be able to call upon them. It is surely a natural desire to want to be in control, to have power, to feel a little safer – to be beneficent to our friends and to play the hero, and then everyone will look up to us and come to us. Oh my! Isn't spirituality wonderful?

C.S. Lewis, in describing a certain woman, said, "She's the sort of woman who lives for others – you can always tell the others by their hunted expression."

These things we know: That doing good is the hardest assignment in the world. That our motives are never pure. That the more unconscious we are of our true motives, the more damage we do. How is it, then, that the Christian church continues to speak such platitudes about “loving your neighbor,” while designing such simple programs for accomplishing the good that we can just give a few bucks and forget it for another year?

Of course, the one thing that remains true in all of this is the fact that we are given the *assignment* to do good. We are even instructed to overcome evil with good. Evil? *What* evil? See what has come of our careless ways and approaches? We do not even remember what we are up against most of the time. There is no way to do good without encountering evil. If we do not remember that, how can we keep from playing into evil’s hands even with our best motives? The answer, of course, is that we have not kept from playing into evil’s hands.

I suppose the purpose for the Scripture passages I chose is becoming more obvious. Especially in Second Thessalonians, Paul is clearly trying to establish some principles for when the church will and when it will not “help” those in need. (The same theme is taken up in First Timothy 5:3-10; 16.) Jesus clearly refuses to help some people, though we are not always certain when it is His limitation (time and space) and when it is their “condition” (i.e., it is inappropriate to help).

Zoroastrianism is perhaps the most adamant and insistent of all the religions of the world on the necessity for doing good. Many scholars claim that the emphasis we find on doing good deeds in Judaism, and therefore in Christianity, came most powerfully from Zoroastrianism. No matter how strongly the principle was put, however, there was always a qualification. “It must, however, be judicious and discriminating charity. While it is meritorious to extend one’s bounty towards deserving objects, it is reprehensible to extend it to those who are unworthy of it.” (*Zoroastrianism* by Rustom Masani.) The ancients seemed to realize that if you used your resources to support unworthy people or causes, you were wittingly or unwittingly strengthening the wrong side – fighting God, and increasing evil. To do good carelessly or thoughtlessly was one of the worst sins.

The same awareness and struggle seem evident throughout Scripture, and indeed through all church history until the present day. Today we seem to think we are wrong to discriminate, wrong to

expect results, wrong to want increase for the church or significant change for those we say we are helping. There is an interesting quote in the Didache (a second-century church manual known as “The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles,” later shortened to “Teaching”; *didache* = “teaching” in Greek): “Let thine alms sweat into thine hands until thou knowest to whom thou art giving.” (Didache I:6)

What am I leading up to with all of this? Maybe for once I can get it put clearly and simply: Relationship to Christ must come first. Our good deeds must come second – they must flow from relationship to Christ, never vice versa.

We are not wise enough to do good on our own hook, by our own design, on our own power. Our motives are not pure enough either. Yet goodness draws us, and in gratitude to God for the goodness showered upon us, we cannot keep from the attempt to do good in return. So we attempt the good, but only under discipline – under orders. The servant’s first responsibility in the Luke passage is to be waiting – to be ready. The servant’s task is to be at the Master’s disposal – “At your service.” He has to wait and be ready, in order to serve rightly. That is the dimension we most often lack in our modern pride and haste.

The principle is: Do not do it for God. Do it because God asks. We must stop doing things to please God on the assumption that any good we might attempt will automatically be pleasing to God. Much of our charitable effort is a jumping of the gun – an attempt to make God proud of us, impress God with our goodness, or show God how hard we are trying. We must learn *to wait* for God’s guidance and for the inner conviction that we have received an assignment. This is not a turkey shoot. This is often life and death, and it is always a contest between good and evil. Do not do it for God without asking. Wait until God gives the go-ahead – grants you permission. When you go to do good, it must be because God sent you.

This principle is even more important for an entire congregation to know and understand and work from together. The time is getting closer. We have been at work to establish and reestablish the relationship between ourselves as a church and Christ. Individually and together, this is always the primary thing. Apart from this, nothing good can come, so we will go on paying attention to it. For that very reason, and long before we think we are really ready, some assignment will be given to us.

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I am asking all of you to be alert and watching and waiting for that. When it comes, it will be something for the whole congregation to be part of – not just a small group among us. It will probably not be easy, but in its way it will be delightful. Looking back we will say, “We wouldn’t have missed this for the world.”

So help us to not miss it. Wait and watch – all of you! Not impatiently, but staying alert for the special task the Holy Spirit has for us as a congregation. After all, we would follow Him anywhere.

I wonder ... *would* we follow Him anywhere?