

Making Biblical Decisions

LESSON
NINE

THE EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE:
INTENDING GOOD



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Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson Nine

The Existential Perspective: Intending Good

INTRODUCTION

Every parent knows that children sometimes break things. It may be a dish, a toy, or a decoration. But once in a while, all children leave a little destruction in their wake. Now, as parents, there are a number of ways we can respond. If the child breaks something on purpose, we may be angry. We may also be cross if the child is careless or disobedient at the time. But if it was truly accidental, we might not be upset at all.

Why do we react in these different ways? Our responses are different because we take our children's motives into account. We may have no reaction at all, a mild sympathetic reaction, or even a reaction of anger, depending on how we assess their motives. And something similar is true in ethical decisions, even for adults. Ethics must never be divorced from our motives. Our motives, desires and intentions are important factors to consider in every ethical choice we make.

This is the ninth lesson in our series *Making Biblical Decisions*. And we have entitled this lesson "The Existential Perspective: Intending Good." In this lesson, we will investigate the existential perspective on ethics by looking at the ways our motives and intentions affect the morality of our decisions.

As you will recall, our paradigm for making biblical decisions has been that ethical judgment involves the application of God's Word to a situation by a person. When we look at our choices in the light of the norms of God's Word, we are using the normative perspective. When we pay attention to circumstances, we are using the situational perspective. And when we consider the persons involved in ethical questions, we are using the existential perspective. In this lesson we will continue our investigation of the existential perspective.

We introduced the existential perspective in our last lesson by exploring the kind of people or persons it takes to make a good ethical choice. Specifically, it takes good people, good in the sense that they have been redeemed by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

In this lesson, we will focus on another aspect of the existential perspective: our ethical motives. As we will see, in order to please God, good people must do the right thing for the right reason; their motives must be righteous.

Our lesson on intending good will divide into three main parts. First, we will discuss the importance of motives, answering questions like, what is a motive and how do motives relate to good behavior? Second, we will speak of the motive of faith as a critical aspect of biblical ethics. And third, we will focus on the motive of love that the Bible encourages us to have. Let's begin with the importance of motives in ethics.

IMPORTANCE OF MOTIVES

We will discuss the importance of motives first by considering the concept of motive, and second by speaking of the necessity of having proper motives. Let's start by looking at the concept of motive.

CONCEPT

There are two basic ways that we commonly speak about motives. On the one hand, a motive can be the purpose for which we take an action — what we hope to accomplish. And on the other hand, a motive can be the cause of an action.

In the first sense, motives are essentially the same as goals, which we have dealt with in earlier lessons on the situational perspective. So, in this lesson, we will focus on motives as causes of actions.

The concept of cause and effect is well-known from ordinary experience. For instance, when a person kicks a ball, we say that the kick is the cause that moves the ball. And the ball's movement is the effect or result of the kick. We might think of many other examples as well. Rain causes the effect of wet ground. Closing our eyes causes us not to see. Working hard all day long causes us to be tired.

Well, something similar is true with human motives and actions. Motives serve as causes, and our actions are the effects they produce. In this sense, a motive is an inward disposition that moves us to action. Inward dispositions are things like character traits, desires, feelings, commitments, and anything else within us that cause us to act.

With this basic idea of motives in mind, we need to make three brief comments.

Complex

First, motives are usually complex. In normal circumstances, many character traits, desires, feelings and commitments work together to lead us to ethical decisions.

For example, consider a father who goes to work to earn a living for his family. He loves his wife and children, he is committed to providing for them, and he desires food, clothing and shelter for himself. At the same time, he may have conflicting desires, such as the desire to stay home and relax, or to work on his house, or to go on vacation. All of these inward dispositions exist in varying degrees of tension and harmony within him. But in the end, on most days the collective impact of these motives causes him to go to work.

General and Specific

Second, some motives are very general, and some are very specific. And many motives exist somewhere between these extremes.

For instance, our Christian desire to share the gospel with the lost is a general motive. We are motivated by our desire for people to believe in Jesus and for the whole world to be brought into his kingdom. But sometimes we may be motivated to share the gospel in a specific way with a specific individual whom we have met. And still other times our motives might lie between those two extremes; we might go out looking for unbelievers with whom we can share the gospel.

Known and Unknown

Third, in addition to being complex and more or less general and specific, our motives can be both known and unknown to us. We know some of our motives well, but we can never be fully aware of all our motives.

For instance, if a man eats a meal, we might rightly say that his motive is hunger. Hunger is an internal feeling and state of being, and a hungry man is usually aware of his hunger.

But psychology and common experience have taught us that sometimes people eat because they are unhappy and want to be comforted. In these instances, the people who eat are often unaware that their underlying motive is to be comforted, to stop feeling unhappy.

Having discussed the basic concept and some of the complexities of motives, we are ready to turn to the necessity of having the right motive. Why are motives so important in ethics?

NECESSITY

Unfortunately, Christians often fall into the trap of believing that being ethical is merely a matter of outward obedience to the will of God. We mistakenly think that God does not require us to have the right motives and desires. Sometimes this is because behaviors are easier to identify and to correct. Sometimes it's because our pastors and teachers consistently draw our attention to behaviors rather than to inner desires and commitments. And there are other reasons as well. Nevertheless, the Bible makes it clear that if we are to be truly ethical, our God-honoring behaviors must be rooted in God-honoring motives.

We will explore the necessity of having the right motive in three ways. First, we will look at the Bible's requirement that good works flow from the heart. Second, we will consider the Bible's condemnation of hypocrisy. And third, we will speak of the fact that Christian virtue is a source of ethically good motives. Let's begin with the idea that good works must be done from the heart.

Heart

Scripture speaks of the human heart in many different ways. But for our purposes, we will concentrate on its description of the heart as the depth of our inner person and the

seat of our motives. Or to put it in the terms we used earlier in this lesson, we will focus on the heart as the sum of all our inward dispositions. In this sense there is a great deal of overlap between the biblical concepts of heart, mind, thoughts, spirit and soul.

Listen to 1 Chronicles 28:9, where David drew a close association between motives and the heart:

My son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father, and serve him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts (1 Chronicles 28:9).

In this passage, David taught his son that obedience to God must flow from the depths of our inner person. It involves wholehearted devotion and a willing mind. God is not just interested in outward obedience. He requires every heart and every motive behind the thoughts to be truly committed to him. He requires genuine obedience that flows from our deepest thoughts and desires.

Many passages in Scripture teach that obedience must flow from good motives, such as Deuteronomy 6:5-6 and 30:2-17; Joshua 22:5; 1 Kings 8:61; Psalm 119:34; Matthew 12:34-35; Romans 6:17-18; and Ephesians 6:5-6 — just to name a few. By way of example, let's look at one passage from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament.

First, listen to the words of Deuteronomy 6:5-6:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments ... are to be upon your hearts (Deuteronomy 6:5-6).

As we see in this passage, in the Old Testament God required his people to love him with their hearts. God's law was to be written on their hearts, so that they would obey him from their hearts.

And this is also true in the New Testament. For example, listen to these words from Romans 6:17-18:

Thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness (Romans 6:17-18).

The Greek expression translated here “wholeheartedly” is *ek kardias*. More literally, this could be translated “out of the heart.” As Paul taught here, God requires wholehearted obedience — obedience that flows from the heart.

Having seen that good motives are necessary because good works must be done from the heart, we should turn to a second reason that we must have good motives when we make ethical decisions: Scripture's teaching on hypocrisy.

Hypocrisy

Hypocrisy comes in many forms in the Scriptures, but here we are particularly interested in hypocrisy as the false appearance of morality. When our outward behavior seems to conform to God's word but our motives do not, we are acting hypocritically, and our actions do not please God.

Listen to Jesus' teachings in Matthew 6:2-16:

When you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men... And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men... When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting (Matthew 6:2-16).

Giving to the needy, praying and fasting were good and righteous behaviors, in and of themselves. But in these cases, Jesus condemned them as hypocritical because they were motivated by pride rather than by love for God and neighbor. By condemning evil motives in this way, the Bible's teachings against hypocrisy indicate that good behavior must always flow from good motives.

Now, we have to be careful not to limit hypocrisy to pretentious unbelievers; even Christians can have motives that do not match their outward actions. Perhaps the most blatant example of this in Scripture is the way certain Jewish Christians in Galatia treated the Gentile believers. These Jewish Christians had ceased to observe many traditional Jewish practices, knowing that Christ's death and resurrection required them to apply Old Testament principles in new ways. Even so, they maintained some outmoded traditions that allowed them to be honored more highly than the Gentiles in the church.

Surprisingly, even the apostle Peter and the missionary Barnabas were among these Christian hypocrites. This is all the more shocking when we consider that Peter was the first one to bring the gospel to the Gentiles (as we read in Acts 10), and that Barnabas had been one of the first missionaries to the Gentile world (as we read in Acts 13). Listen to Paul's account of this problem in Galatians 2:11-13:

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray (Galatians 2:11-13).

In response to this hypocrisy, Paul rebuked Peter to his face, pointing out that Peter himself lived like a Gentile and not like a Jew. Peter knew that in Christ Gentiles were equal to Jews. But for fear of losing respect, he was willing to act in ways that suggested the Gentile Christians were inferior to Jewish Christians. Peter's actions were

hypocritical because he was motivated by a selfish desire to preserve his reputation rather than by a godly desire to honor God and his church.

Now that we have seen that good works must be done from the heart and without hypocrisy, we are ready to look at a third reason for the necessity of good motives, namely, the virtue that should characterize followers of Christ.

Virtue

In simple terms, virtue is praiseworthy moral character. We might also speak of virtues in the plural, referring to the different aspects of a praiseworthy moral character. Virtue is important to our discussion of motives because virtuous character expresses itself in the form of good motives. The Scriptures have several lists of what we might call virtues, but perhaps the most familiar is Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit.

In Galatians 5:22-23, Paul described the fruit of the Spirit in this way:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

This list is not exhaustive, but it's a good summary of the moral qualities God wants his people to have. Each of these virtues should be an inward disposition that moves us to ethical actions. And in this sense virtues are motives.

For example, the virtue of Christian love should motivate us to act in loving ways. Similarly, people who are joyful in the Spirit will be motivated by their joy. Peaceful people will be motivated by the peace within them. Patient people will be motivated by their patience. As Jesus taught in Matthew 12:35:

The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him (Matthew 12:35).

For the remainder of this lesson, we will focus on the virtues of love and faith because Scripture says they are required for good works. In preparation for this, let's look briefly at the idea that unless we possess the virtues of love and faith, and unless those virtues motivate our behavior, nothing we do can be considered good. Think first about the way that Paul spoke about love to the church in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 he wrote these words:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

This passage clearly indicates that our actions must flow from the love in our hearts. That is to say, if our actions do not flow from the love in our hearts, God does not count them as good.

Similarly, Hebrews 11:6 teaches us that the virtue of faith should function as a motive. Listen to its words:

Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him (Hebrews 11:6).

According to this passage, the virtue of faith must move us to act in faithful ways. Only then will God be pleased with our behavior.

The Scriptures stress Christian virtue because motives are so important to ethical living. And every virtue taught by Scripture functions as a motive within us. So, whenever Scripture emphasizes the importance of Christian virtues, it is also emphasizing the importance of good, virtuous motives.

Now that we have seen the importance of having the right motives when we make ethical decisions, we are ready to explore the motive of faith in greater detail. Why is it critical for us to be motivated by faith? And how does faith motivate us?

MOTIVE OF FAITH

Anyone who knows the Bible realizes that faith is a central concern of both the Old and New Testaments. And the topic of faith has also held a central place in traditional Christian theology. In this lesson we are particularly concerned with looking at faith as a central motive in ethics. We want to explore how faith motivates us to obey God's Word.

Scripture says so much about faith that it would be impossible for us to mention every way faith serves as a motive. So, we will limit our discussion to some of the more common and fundamental ways the motive of faith functions in our decision-making process. First, we will speak of the ways that saving faith serves as a motive. Second, we will discuss the motive of repentance as a primary expression of faith. And third, we will speak of hope as faith directed toward the future. Let's begin with the motive of saving faith, the kind of faith that brings eternal salvation.

SAVING FAITH

For our purposes in this lesson, we can summarize saving faith as:

Assent to the truth of the gospel, and trust in Christ to save us from our sin.

Of course, there is much more that could be said about saving faith. But this definition will help us see how faith functions as a motive for good works.

Scripture talks about saving faith in two main ways. On the one hand, it speaks of faith as the means of initial salvation. On the other hand, it speaks of this same saving faith as an ongoing commitment throughout our Christian lives. Let's look first at saving faith as the means of initial salvation.

Means of Initial Salvation

When we say that saving faith is the means of initial salvation, we mean that it is the tool God uses to apply salvation to us. We might compare faith to a paintbrush that a painter uses to apply paint to a house. The paintbrush does not make the house worthy of being painted, just as faith does not make us worthy of being saved. The paintbrush is merely the tool that the painter uses to get the paint from the bucket to the wall of the house. In the same way, faith is a tool that God uses to apply salvation to sinful individuals. There is nothing in our faith that deserves or earns salvation. On the contrary, Christ's life and death earned salvation, and Christ freely gives us salvation through faith.

Listen to Paul's words in Romans 5:1-2:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand (Romans 5:1-2).

The justification Paul spoke of here, where God pardons sin and declares us to be righteous, took place for Paul and his readers when they had first come to saving faith.

This type of justification happens in the initial stage of our salvation. It is God's gracious act by which he forgives our sin and credits Christ's merit to our account. And it changes our status forever. Before we are justified, we are sinners and enemies of God. But as soon as he saves us, we become his beloved saints. And the tool God uses to justify us is saving faith.

In the context of our initial salvation, saving faith motivates us to repent of our sin and to trust in Christ for our salvation. These good works are the first evidences of our salvation since they can only be motivated by true saving faith.

Besides speaking of saving faith as the means of our initial salvation, the Bible also talks about saving faith as our ongoing commitment to Christ.

Ongoing Commitment

As an ongoing commitment, saving faith consists of continuing assent to the truth of the gospel, and continuing trust in Christ to save us from our sin. It is a constant maintaining of the same faith that was the means of our initial salvation. And this kind of assent and trust necessarily influences everything we believe. They affect the way we

think about ourselves, our families, our jobs, our societies, and everything else in our lives. In this sense, saving faith is a comprehensive worldview that stays relatively stable in our hearts and that influences all our decisions. It is an active faith that underlies and motivates our good works.

Now, we need to be careful not to think that faith is merely a mental act. It is not simply an acknowledgment that Jesus is Lord, and that we are saved through his gospel. As James 2:19 indicates, even demons mentally acknowledge truths about God, but this does not save them.

Instead, saving faith also involves our hearts. It is an inward disposition that causes us to think, speak and act in ways that please God. So, yes, saving faith involves mental acts. But when our faith is genuine, those mental acts flow from our hearts. In this way, saving faith functions as a motive in the life of every believer, enabling and even compelling us to do good works. For example, listen to the way Genesis 15:6 speaks of Abraham's faith:

Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6).

This verse describes Abraham's faith at the time when God first made a covenant with him, and it is traditionally used to provide the definition for saving or justifying faith. To understand why it helps to know that the Hebrew word for "believe" is from the same root as the Hebrew noun for "faith." It also helps to remember that to be justified is to be declared righteous. So, this verse teaches that Abraham was saved, or justified, by means of his faith.

This is why the apostle Paul appealed to Genesis 15:6 to prove the doctrine of justification by faith. He did this in both Romans 4 and Galatians 3. And each time he provided extensive arguments based on Abraham's example, explaining that Abraham's salvation by means of faith is the model for every believer in Christ. And following Paul's lead, Protestant theologians often appeal to Abraham to prove that faith alone is a sufficient means of justification. And while this argument is perfectly true and accurate, we can also take it a step further.

The fact is that Abraham had saving faith long before God made a covenant with him in Genesis 15. According to Hebrews 11:8 and Genesis 12:4, Abraham acted in faith when he left Haran to travel to the Promised Land — long before the justification recorded in Genesis 15.

The covenant ceremony recorded in Genesis 15 took place after Abraham had arrived in the Promised Land, many years after he first came to faith. To be sure, Abraham's faith at this moment was saving, justifying faith. But it was not new faith. It was the same faith that had characterized Abraham throughout his life as a believer. So, when Paul used this event to provide a model for us, he was not just referring to the fact that our initial salvation takes place by means of faith. He was also saying that every believer must maintain saving faith as an ongoing commitment just as Abraham did. As Paul wrote in Galatians 2:20:

The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:20).

And listen to Hebrews 10:38-39 where the author quoted the Old Testament and related it to the early church:

“My righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.” But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved (Hebrews 10:38-39).

Those who believe and are saved — that is, those who have saving faith — do not shrink back and are not destroyed. They stay the course in faith.

True saving faith characterizes us throughout our lives. So, if our faith does not remain in us, then it was never truly saving faith. Moreover, true saving faith motivates us to do good works. So, if we are not motivated to do good works, our faith is counterfeit; it is a false faith that cannot save us. As James wrote in James 2:17-18:

Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead... I will show you my faith by what I do (James 2:17-18).

Saving faith always manifests itself in good works throughout our Christian lives.

Consider Hebrews 11, sometimes called the “Hall of Faith.” This chapter summarizes the ongoing saving faith of many Old Testament believers and appeals to them as examples for our own faith. Hebrews 11 emphasizes that these people all lived by faith, not just when they first came to faith, but throughout their entire lives. And more to the point, the many good works they performed were motivated by their ongoing faith.

For example, in Hebrews 11:4 we learn that Abel’s saving faith motivated him to offer pleasing sacrifices to God. Abel assented to the truth that God had the right to require whatever sacrifice he wanted, and Abel trusted that God would bless him if he obeyed God’s will. And because of his faith, Abel was willing to sacrifice things that were extremely valuable to him.

In Hebrews 11:7 we are told that Noah’s saving faith motivated him to build the ark, and to preach against the sin he saw in the world. Noah assented to the truth that God would use the ark to spare him and his family from the flood, and he trusted in God to deliver him in this way. This faith motivated Noah to tackle the enormously difficult task of building the ark, and also to preach the gospel to those around him. He endured the ridicule of his neighbors because he was confident that God had spoken truly and that God would spare his neighbors if they would only turn to the Lord in faith.

In Hebrews 11:17-19 we learn that Abraham’s saving faith motivated him to obey God’s command to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham assented to God’s right to require Isaac’s death, and he trusted that God would bless both him and Isaac through this act. His faith was so strong that he believed that God would raise Isaac from the dead. And in his mercy God ultimately accepted Abraham’s faith without requiring Isaac’s death.

In Hebrews 11:25 we are told that Moses’ faith motivated him to identify with the Israelite slaves, even though he could have enjoyed favor as a member of Pharaoh’s household. Moses gave up a life of luxury and power because he assented to the truth that

all real blessings come from God. And he willingly joined the enslaved nation of Israel because he trusted that God would redeem them from their bondage.

Beyond this, in verses 33-38 we read that the faith of the Old Testament saints motivated them to conquer kingdoms, administer justice, survive threats to their lives, triumph in battle, endure torture, bravely face execution, and endure many other sorts of persecutions and mistreatments. They were able to persevere and to triumph because they had confidence in God's goodness toward them, and they trusted him as their Savior. This assent and trust strengthened them to desire and to pursue God's pleasure above everything else in their lives.

And the same thing is true for us today. We must remain steadfast in our faith throughout our lives. We must constantly assent to the truths that God proclaims in his Word, and we must earnestly trust in his blessings and salvation.

As we have seen in prior lessons, those who lack saving faith — that is, the unbelievers in the world — reject God's truth and refuse to trust him. Because they are enslaved by sin, they deny God's goodness and sovereignty, they spurn the salvation he offers, and they are motivated only to sin.

But when we really believe that God is who he claims to be and trust him in every way, then we should recognize that happiness and fulfillment come only from him. We should see that obedience to his will is the path to these blessings. And in this way, our faith can motivate us to good works as well.

With this understanding of saving faith in mind, we are ready to discuss repentance as a second way the motive of faith functions within the Christian life.

REPENTANCE

In the Bible repentance is a heartfelt aspect of faith whereby we genuinely reject and turn away from our sin. It is more than admitting and believing that we are sinners, and even more than feeling sorry for our sins. Of course, repentance involves these things. But unless we actually turn from our sins and turn to goodness, we haven't really repented.

In Scripture repentance and faith are often two sides of the same coin. Faith is turning to Christ, and repentance is turning away from sin. And these two turnings are the same motion. The main difference between them is that faith is described from the perspective of what we are beginning to embrace, and repentance is described from the perspective of what we are leaving behind. In this process, our actions of repentance are motivated by our feelings of repentance — our penitence, our contrition. And these feelings are expressions of faith. By faith we assent to repentance as an integral part of the gospel, and by faith we trust that God will forgive us when we repent.

Consider, for example, the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius, which is recorded in Acts 10. In that event Peter was sent to preach the gospel to Cornelius and his household. And while he was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon the household proving that they had come to saving faith. Later in Acts 11, Peter reported this event to the church in Jerusalem. And the church's response strongly equated repentance and faith. Listen to the church's response in Acts 11:18:

[The church] praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18).

Cornelius' conversion was motivated by genuine feelings of repentance. In fact, the connection between saving faith and repentance was so strong that in the church's mind, conversion could rightly be summarized in terms of repentance.

In a similar way, John the Baptist equated the motive of repentance with the motive of faith. When the Pharisees and Sadducees came to him to be baptized, John exhorted them to do good works in keeping with repentance. In Matthew 3:8 John instructed them with these words:

Produce fruit in keeping with repentance (Matthew 3:8).

John's baptism of repentance was intended to have lifelong repercussions. It was intended to get people to turn from their sin and to embrace goodness from that point on. In John's mind, true repentance motivated good works.

And the apostle Paul taught the same principle. As he stood before King Agrippa explaining why he had been imprisoned, Paul summarized the gospel in terms of repentance and good works. Listen to his words in Acts 26:20:

I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds (Acts 26:20).

Again, repentance and turning to God are mentioned as two sides of the same coin. When our hearts are truly repentant, our repentance motivates us to turn from our sin and to live in ways that God approves.

There are many memorable examples of repentance in Scripture. For example, Luke 19:8 records the repentance of Zacchaeus, the tax collector. When he came to faith in Christ, he stopped cheating people, gave half his possessions to the poor, and repaid four times the amounts he had stolen from people. He turned from his sin of theft, and turned toward an ongoing life of faith and good works.

And Acts 9 records that when the apostle Paul was converted, he repented of his sins against the church, and became a powerful evangelist, risking his life to preach the gospel and humbly seeking fellowship with those he had previously persecuted. He turned from his sin of persecuting the church and turned toward a life of faithful service to Christ.

And in 2 Samuel 12 we read of David's repentance after he was confronted by the prophet Nathan. David had committed adultery with Bathsheba and had arranged the death of her husband Uriah to cover up his sin. But David turned from his sin by confessing it and showing great contrition. And he turned toward faith by beginning to live according to God's will, especially by praising God for the forgiveness he had received and also by teaching others to repent as well. He even memorialized his repentance in what is perhaps the greatest psalm of repentance in the Bible, Psalm 51. Listen to what David wrote in Psalm 51:12-14:

Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you. Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness (Psalm 51:12-14).

In David's life, repentance motivated him to rejoice, to obey God willingly, to teach God's Word to others, and to sing the Lord's praises.

David's example of repentance is particularly important for Christians because David was such a strong believer and model of faith before he sinned. Before David's sin, he had demonstrated his faith in God time and again throughout his life. And God had blessed David's faith by raising him from a humble shepherd to a powerful warrior to the king over the nation of Israel. But seemingly at the height of David's favor with the Lord, after his faith had been proven over and over again, David fell into horrible sin. He became an adulterer and a murderer. And modern believers fall into equally heinous sins as well. Question and answer 82 of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* summarizes this biblical teaching quite well. In answer to the question:

Is any man able perfectly to keep the commandments of God?

The *Catechism* answers:

No mere man since the fall is able in this life perfectly to keep the commandments of God, but doth daily break them in thought, word, and deed.

We fall into sin every day. And this means that we have both an obligation and an opportunity to repent every day.

You may be aware that in the year 1517 the German theologian Martin Luther unintentionally started the Protestant Reformation by posting his famous *Ninety-Five Theses* on the church door at Wittenberg. But do you know what the first of his theses was? It was simply this:

When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent," he called for the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.

Because the Christian life is a life of faith, it must also be a life of repentance. As we journey ahead by trusting in God's promises, we look back from time to time. And when we see how we have offended God and others, repentance motivates us to ask for their forgiveness, and to act differently in the future. Practically speaking, it is sometimes uncomfortable for us to admit and confess our specific sins. But when we trust in God's forgiveness and salvation, and when we desire to please him, it should motivate us to humble ourselves, to turn from our sin, and to pursue the righteousness that characterizes the kingdom of God.

Having considered saving faith and repentance, we are ready now to address hope as a third aspect of the motive of faith.

HOPE

The Bible speaks of hope in different ways. But for our purposes it will help to think of those times that it describes hope as faith directed toward the future aspects of our salvation in Christ.

Scripture teaches that salvation is not completed in this life. We have been justified, and we have received the Holy Spirit. But we have not yet been made perfect. We still wrestle with sin. We still suffer from death and disease, and we still struggle against many problems and corruptions in the world. When we die and go to heaven, we will be freed from these problems. But even then our salvation will not be complete. We will still be waiting for Jesus to return to earth in order to make all things right and new. We will still look forward to our glorified resurrected bodies, and to the new heavens and the new earth.

In the Old Testament, God's people were frequently exhorted to hope in God's future salvation. And following this example, the New Testament commonly refers to our confidence in the future aspects of salvation as the great hope of Christianity. For instance, in Romans 8:23-24 Paul spoke about our hope of future resurrection with these words:

We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved (Romans 8:23-24).

Hope is the confident belief that as surely as Jesus gave us his Holy Spirit, he will return to renew the world and to grant us our inheritance in it. And like saving faith, this type of hope is firm and sure.

Hebrews 6 speaks of this hope by relating it to Abraham's belief in God's covenant promises. And it says that our future salvation is based on the promises that were made to Abraham. Listen to Hebrews 6:17-19:

Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that ... we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure (Hebrews 6:17-19).

Our hope is not a tentative or wishful desire. It is steadfast and certain because God has sworn to complete our salvation.

This kind of hope motivates good works in various ways. According to 1 Thessalonians 5:6-10, the helmet of hope motivates alertness and self-control. And by comparing these verses to others that speak about the armor of God, it is clear that one way the helmet of hope helps us control ourselves is by protecting us from demonic

attacks and temptations. So, hope serves as a motive for good works by giving us a reason to resist sin.

As we look forward to the blessings that await us, we know that we will be blessed more greatly if we obey the Lord than if we sin. We also know that the temporary pleasures of sin are not worthy to be compared with the eternal blessings that God has in store for us.

In Colossians 1:5 we also learn that hope in our future salvation motivates us to love more greatly and to have stronger faith. And of course, both love and faith are themselves not only good works, but also motives for good works. So, by motivating faith and love, hope is the source of immeasurable good works.

Similarly, 1 Thessalonians 1:3 teaches that hope increases our endurance, helping us to remain steadfast in our faith, and to perform works that are pleasing to God. But perhaps the most comprehensive summary of hope as a motive can be found in 1 Peter 1:13-15. Listen to what Peter wrote there:

Prepare your minds for action ... set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do (1 Peter 1:13-15).

Hope prepares us to obey and to be holy in every aspect of our lives. It prepares us to endure hardship, just as Jesus himself did. As we read in Hebrews 12:2-3:

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart (Hebrews 12:2-3).

Many of us have had the experience of losing hope at one point or another. Maybe we felt that God had abandoned us or were unsure that our faith was true. But whatever the cause, hopelessness often causes us to feel helpless, like nothing we do can change anything. It deprives us of purpose and meaning in life. And it can make even the simplest jobs seem too difficult to attempt.

When we lose hope as Christians, we often stop trying to resist sin. We lose our purpose for enduring the struggles we encounter in life, and we may even despair of life itself. But when our hope is strong, we can be motivated to endure life's greatest challenges, to overcome every obstacle, because we have our eyes fixed on God, who promises to preserve us.

Now that we have seen the importance of motives and have discussed the motive of faith, we are ready to address our third major topic: the motive of love.

MOTIVE OF LOVE

Love is one of the most recognized but least understood concepts in the Christian faith. We can see that love is central to the Bible's teachings. We are exhorted to love the Lord, to love each other, and even to love our enemies. At the same time, most people have very little idea how to fulfill the Bible's commandments to love.

Do you remember how Jesus summarized the teachings of the Old Testament? He said that the greatest commandment of the law is Deuteronomy 6:5, which says that we must love God. And the second greatest commandment is Leviticus 19:18, which requires that we love our neighbors. And then he said that these two laws summarize the entire Old Testament. Listen to his words in Matthew 22:37-40:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (Matthew 22:37-40).

Jesus' point was not that the hundreds of other laws in the Old Testament were somehow less important than these two. Instead, these two are the greatest commandments because they include the others, because the others hang on them. They express the general principles that all the other laws explain and apply.

This is the same principle that Paul taught in Romans 13:9 and Galatians 5:14. In fact, love is so foundational to all good works that if it is not among our motives, our works can never be counted good.

So, we know that it is critical for us to love God and neighbors. But what does this kind of love look like, and how should it motivate us? Well, according to Jesus, the way to love God and our neighbors is to live according to the teachings of the Law and the Prophets, rightly interpreted and applied to our situations. Of course, it is not possible for us to explore all the ways the law and the prophets help us understand what love is. So we will offer a definition that summarizes the Bible's teachings on love in terms of three general elements.

We will summarize love as consisting of allegiance, action and affection. These three elements cover most of the Bible's teachings on love, and they overlap in many ways. By considering love from the perspective of each element, we will be able to learn a great deal about the ways love can motivate us to do good works.

In line with our definition of love, we will explore the motive of love by speaking first of allegiance, second of action, and third of affection. Let's begin with love as allegiance that motivates us to do good to God and to our neighbor.

ALLEGIANCE

Our discussion of allegiance will divide into three parts. First, we will speak of the loyalty we owe to God and to others. Second, we will address our life orientation.

And third, we will mention the importance of discovering our responsibility. These are some of the main ways that the Bible speaks about allegiance and motives, so they will give us a good foundation for understanding allegiance as a whole. Let's begin with loyalty as a critical aspect of allegiance.

Loyalty

In many ways loyalty is the cornerstone of the concept of love. As we saw in an earlier lesson, the Old Testament consistently portrays God as the covenant king over his people. He is the suzerain or supreme emperor, and his people are his vassal or servant kingdom. And as in any kingdom, the most basic responsibility of the people is loyalty to the king. But how does this relate to love?

Well, in the ancient Near East (the world of the Old Testament), it was common for the covenant relationship between a suzerain and his vassal state to be described in terms of love. The suzerain's love was expressed largely in the form of covenant loyalty to his people. He gave them protection, preserved justice for them, and met their earthly needs. This was his love toward them. And in response the vassal people were required to be loyal to him. They were to obey his laws, support him through taxes and service, and honor him as their king. This was their love toward him. Similarly, citizens were to love each other by treating their neighbors as fellow countrymen, respecting and caring for them.

In line with this concept of love, covenant kingdoms of the ancient Near East used many metaphors to describe the relationship between the suzerain and his vassals. Frequently, the suzerain was described as a father, while the vassals were described as his children, as in Isaiah 64:8. We also see this relationship described in terms of a husband and wife, as in Jeremiah 31:32. By thinking of their relationship to the king in these terms, the people were able to understand his feelings for them and their obligations to him. And because the citizens of the kingdom were all part of the same family, they were to see and to treat each other as their brothers and sisters. Thinking of these political relationships in terms of family helped the people see that this loving allegiance and loyalty was to be heartfelt. It was to be an inward disposition of favor that motivated the people to honor, respect and obey the king, and to treat their neighbors with true compassion and concern.

A good place to see this idea in action is Deuteronomy 6, where Moses used the concept of love to explain the loyalty and obedience the Israelites were to render to God. Although it would be useful to quote the entire chapter, time will only permit us to highlight some of its statements. Listen to these words from Deuteronomy 6:1, 5:

These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe ... Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength (Deuteronomy 6:1, 5).

In this chapter, love for God is summarized in terms of obedience to God's commands, decrees and laws. And this summary is then followed by several specific ways that Israel was to show their love for God.

For instance, Deuteronomy 6:13-17 highlights loyalty and obedience. Listen to what Moses wrote there:

Fear the Lord your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name. Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you; for the Lord your God, who is among you, is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you, and he will destroy you from the face of the land... Be sure to keep the commands of the Lord your God and the stipulations and decrees he has given you (Deuteronomy 6:13-17).

Now, if God's love for us were just like the love that an ordinary father has for his children, we would never expect to hear about his willingness to destroy us if we fail to follow him. But the fact is that God's fatherly love is the love of a king for his people. The metaphor of fatherhood is helpful because it highlights the ways God protects us, provides for us, and cares about us. But fatherhood is still just a metaphor. Behind this metaphor is the fact that God is our king. He really does rule over us. He really is sovereign. We really are bound in covenant with him. And therefore the most basic and important way we can show our love for him is through our earnest covenant loyalty.

And the New Testament confirms this idea in many ways. For instance, Jesus is our Lord and King, and we are to render love to him through loyal obedience, as well as through our loyalty to his church. We cannot turn away from him or reject him. We cannot place other loyalties ahead of our loyalty to him. We cannot reject the obligations he places on us. And we cannot mistreat or abandon the people he loves. To show such disloyalty would be to hate him and to invite his judgment. But if we remain steadfast in our love for him, he will reward us in his kingdom.

Consider Revelation 1:4-6 where John introduced his book in this way:

Grace and peace to you ... from Jesus Christ ... the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father — to him be glory and power for ever and ever! (Revelation 1:4-6).

And as Jesus stated in John 14:15:

If you love me, you will obey what I command (John 14:15).

In God's covenant relationship with us, loyalty is a positive virtue, motivating us to serve our Lord and King, and to honor and care for those who live with us under his rule. And conversely, it is also a negative requirement, forbidding rival alliances to other gods and idols in our lives.

With this understanding of loyalty in mind, we are ready to speak of the way our love for God requires us to adopt a new orientation to life.

Orientation

The allegiance we owe to God touches every area of our lives. There is no aspect of life that takes place outside his kingdom or beyond his sovereign rule. For this reason, our lives must be comprehensively oriented around him. God and his kingdom must be our highest priorities, the focus of our desires, and the center of our worldview. We must be inwardly disposed to work for the benefit of God and his people in everything that we think, say, and do.

As we have seen, Deuteronomy 6:5, the first great commandment, summarizes the human person in terms of heart, soul and strength. These terms are not meant to represent the different portions of our being, as if we could be divided into three or four distinct parts. Rather, each one speaks of the whole person. In the Hebrew vocabulary, our heart is not just our emotions, but the center of our entire being, including our mind, our conscience, and every other aspect of our character. Similarly, our soul is our entire self, including both our conscious mind and our subconscious desires. And the word for “strength” in Deuteronomy does not refer to our bodies or actions so much as it refers to the intensity of our love for God, and to our determination to use all our abilities to pursue that love. So, by each of these terms, Scripture exhorts us to be totally committed to God with the whole of our being.

And by coupling this great commandment with the command to love our neighbors, Jesus indicated that we are to have the same type of love for other people and especially for our fellow citizens in God’s kingdom. These commitments to God and his people should be our primary orientation in life. They should be the most fundamental commitments of our inward dispositions.

Of course, the greatest example of the proper orientation in life is Jesus. Jesus oriented his entire life around God and around the people he came to save. This orientation motivated him to obey God perfectly in all things and to sacrifice himself willingly for the people he loved. And our allegiance to God and to our neighbors should lead us to have the same orientation in our lives. It should even motivate us to make the same kinds of sacrifices that Jesus made. As we read in 1 John 3:16:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers (1 John 3:16).

When we make God the center of our lives, it affects all our decisions, from our random thoughts, to the way we treat other people, to the person we choose to marry. When we fail to orient our lives around God, we end up centering our lives around other priorities such as money, or power, or influence, or recreation, or charismatic individuals. And these orientations also influence our behavior, but they do it in a way that furthers a different agenda than the one God has prescribed in his Word. But when we orient our lives around God and his people, we pursue the agenda of his kingdom, and are motivated to live in ways that please him.

Having addressed the matters of loyalty and orientation, we are ready to consider the way that our love for God and for our neighbors should motivate us to discover our responsibility before the Lord in every area of life.

Responsibility

Love is an orientation of obedience and service to God. So, it should dispose us to keep all of God's commandments. But how exactly can we do this? Is it simply a matter of counting up all the statutes and requirements in the law and then doing the things they explicitly list? Or should we serve the Lord in ways that go beyond the examples specifically mentioned in Scripture? Well, the answer is that our loving allegiance to God should motivate us to seek out additional ways that we are responsible to him.

To explain what we mean, let's look at the Ten Commandments. As they are listed in Exodus 20:3-17, the commandments are:

- You shall have no other gods before me.
- You shall not make for yourself an idol.
- You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.
- Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.
- Honor your father and your mother.
- You shall not murder.
- You shall not commit adultery.
- You shall not steal.
- You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.
- You shall not covet.

Eight of these commandments specifically forbid certain behaviors, and do not explicitly mention anything that we must actively do. If we imagined that all our responsibilities were explicitly mentioned in Scripture, we would conclude that there are only two things we must actively pursue: Sabbath keeping, and honoring our parents. Similarly, we would conclude that the commandment against murder prohibits murder but not things like unrighteous anger. But we would be wrong. The fact is that the Bible regularly applies these commandments to every area of our lives.

As just one example, consider Matthew 5:21-22 where Jesus presented the following teaching:

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, “Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.” But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment (Matthew 5:21-22).

Here Jesus referred to what was said to the people, that is, what was taught to them by some Jewish interpreters of Scripture.

If we don't seek our responsibilities before God, it is very easy to develop the mindset that God's Word only binds a very small part of our lives, that the allegiance we owe him is extremely limited. We can make the mistake of thinking that because our circumstances are different from those in Scripture, God's requirements don't apply to us. This leaves us ignorant of our responsibilities so that we cannot guard ourselves against sin.

But when we properly seek our responsibilities before God, understanding that we are obligated to him in every area of our life, we are in a better position to make decisions that he approves. Our love for God should make us dissatisfied with a limited knowledge of his requirements and of our neighbors' needs. It should motivate us to discover all our responsibilities toward our great King and his people so that we can fulfill our duty in the best possible way.

Having spoken of allegiance, we should turn to the topic of action, which describes how we should behave toward God and toward each other.

ACTION

Our discussion of action will divide into two parts. Specifically, we will talk about the ways that God's actions serve as models for our own behavior. On the one hand, we will look at God's actions of atoning grace. And on the other hand, we will look at his actions of common grace. Let's begin with the way God's atoning grace serves as a model for our actions.

Atoning Grace

As we have said throughout this series, God's character is our ultimate ethical standard. And because God always acts according to his character, all his actions are perfect expressions of his character.

This is why Scripture commonly exhorts us to pattern both our character and our actions after God's, especially with regard to his rescue and redemption of those he loves. For instance, in Deuteronomy 5:13-15 the Lord required all Israel to observe the Sabbath. Masters, servants, sojourners and even animals were given this day off in imitation of the rest from labor that God brought to the entire nation when he redeemed them from slavery in Egypt.

Similarly, in Matthew 18:23-35 Jesus taught that we are to imitate God's forgiveness. We are to forgive those who sin against us because God has forgiven us for sinning against him. And just like God's forgiveness of us, our forgiveness of others is to be genuine and heartfelt, motivated by true compassion for them.

More generally, Scripture teaches that we should love each other in imitation of the love that God has shown for us. And of course, the greatest example of this is Christ, who died for our sins. Listen to John's teaching in 1 John 4:9-11:

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:9-11).

As sinners, we were offensive to God. We hated him. We were set against him as his enemies. We deserved punishment, not mercy. Even so, God was willing to sacrifice his Son, whom he loved above all else in order to save us. And following his example, we should be willing to suffer on behalf of others.

Of course, we can never make an atoning sacrifice on behalf of someone else — and Scripture doesn't ask us to. But it does ask us to show the same kind of love for others that God showed to us in the atonement. We would willingly make these sacrifices for our own children because we value their lives more than our own. And God asks us to imitate his grace by placing the same value on his children too. As John wrote in 1 John 3:16-18:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth (1 John 3:16-18).

When we fail to imitate God's atoning grace, it is easy for our so-called "love" to consist merely of lip service. For instance, it is easy for us to think that the poor deserve their poverty or that it is someone else's responsibility to take care of them. It is easy for us to place our own interests above the interests of others and to prefer comfort and ease to the hard work of helping others.

But God's gracious example obligates us to give up our money and possessions, and even our lives, to protect and care for our brothers and sisters in Christ. It teaches us to love them wholeheartedly so that we are motivated to sacrifice, to suffer, and even to die for them.

With this understanding of God's atoning grace in mind, we are ready to talk about the way his common grace provides an example for us to follow.

Common Grace

Common grace is a technical term in theology that refers to God's kindness to those who will never be saved. For those of us who will ultimately receive salvation, God's grace always works toward our redemption. But God also extends non-redemptive kindness, or "common grace," to those who will never receive salvation.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus referred to God's common grace as an expression of his love for all humanity. To be sure, God's general love for humanity is not nearly as great as his love for believers. Nevertheless, it is true and genuine, and it

provides a model that we are to imitate. In Matthew 5:44-48 Jesus gave the following teaching on common grace:

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:44-48).

As Jesus taught, God's perfection includes his love for evil people, even for those who will never come to faith in Christ. And God expresses this love in many ways, such as through sunshine and rain. God is kind to all people, providing stability and productivity for them in nature, and allowing them to thrive in this life. This is not to say that God is always kind — he is not. Sometimes he sends judgment against the wicked. But generally, he shows forbearance and generosity, even to his enemies.

And because we love God, we should also love the people he loves. Following God's example, our love should motivate us to be good and kind to all people, even if they hate and persecute us. For instance, in Exodus 23:4-5 God's law requires us to protect our enemy's goods. Listen to what it says:

If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it (Exodus 23:4-5).

These instructions appear in a context that speaks of justice. The idea is that we should preserve justice for all people, even if they hate us.

But Jesus did not simply teach us to preserve justice for our enemies; he taught us to love them. We should preserve justice for them because we honestly want them to receive the benefits and protection of justice, and because we love the God who is the standard of justice.

It is easy not to have this kind of love for our enemies. At best, we usually prefer to ignore their needs. And at worst, we are motivated to take vengeance against them and to rejoice when they suffer injustices. But these are not the attitudes that characterize God; they are not the motives he has modeled for us. When we do these things, we are thinking in selfish ways, seeking to please ourselves. We are following the examples of the sinful world and the devil, not of the Lord of mercy and righteousness.

Think about an argument you have had with someone you love. Maybe it was a parent or a child, a spouse, or a close friend. Sometimes these arguments produce anger and hard feelings. But most of the time, our anger does not overshadow our love for these people. Even in our anger, we remain committed to them. We still love them. And we are still unwilling to see them treated unfairly.

Well, in many respects, this is the way God wants us to feel about our enemies. We should have genuine concern for their well-being. And this genuine concern should manifest itself in action. It should motivate us to be kind to them, to pray for them, to protect them, and to provide for them when they are in need.

Now, we need to offer at least one qualification to the way we imitate God's common grace. Specifically, we need to mention that this type of love does not preclude a desire for justice. God sometimes withholds his kindness in order to execute judgment against the wicked. And God's judgments are always good and right. Moreover, Scripture teaches that justice is an important aspect of love. As we read in Psalm 33:5:

The Lord loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love (Psalm 33:5).

A desire for justice against those who have wronged us is not incompatible with love. In fact, ideally, when we truly imitate God's common grace, our desire for justice, our love for God, our love for our neighbors, and our love for our enemies are all remarkably similar. And the reason is this: God, who is justice, often uses his judgments as a corrective to drive sinners to repentance and salvation. For example, in Zechariah 14:16, God's judgment against the nations leads to repentance:

Then the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord Almighty (Zechariah 14:16).

Even when we desire God's justice, our ultimate motive should be love. We should hope that God's justice will bring about the repentance that leads to life.

God's love is complex. If we oversimplify it, we may wrongly conclude that we cannot love our neighbors at the same time that we desire justice against the wicked, or that we cannot love them at the same time that we hate the evil we see in the world. But Scripture teaches that God's love includes both a desire for justice and a hatred of evil. So, the solution for us as Christians is to make sure that our desires for justice and our hatred of evil are part and parcel with our love for all humanity. When these feelings are divorced from love, they are sinful. But when they are expressions of love, they are righteous, and they motivate us to think, to speak and to act in ways that God approves.

Having spoken of allegiance and action, we are ready to turn to affection, which is the most explicitly emotional aspect of love.

AFFECTION

Christian teachers sometimes speak of biblical love as if it consisted entirely of actions and thoughts. For example, some argue that the Bible exhorts us to love in active ways and that it doesn't matter how we feel emotionally. They say love for God consists of outwardly obeying God's commandments, doing things like going to church, saying our prayers, reading the Bible, and having our quiet times. And love for neighbor consists of restraining our anger, being polite, refraining from boasting, and the like. But the Bible gives us a very different perspective on the matter. Recall the words of 1 Corinthians 13:1-3:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

The good works Paul described here are morally good when they are motivated by heartfelt affection. But when they are not, they are worthless. Without love, the spiritual gift of tongues becomes a clanging cymbal. The one who has prophecy, knowledge and faith is nothing. And the one who gives up all his possessions and even his life gains nothing. Love is a critical emotional dimension of every action we can perform. Without it, nothing we do can be considered good.

Consider also Matthew 15:7-9 where Jesus gave this sharp criticism:

You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain” (Matthew 15:7-9).

Jesus’ point was simple — to honor and worship God without affection is hypocrisy. Whether our actions are directed toward other people or toward God, they must be motivated by a genuine feeling of affection.

There are many different affections or emotions that we might discuss as aspects of love that motivate good works, but time will only allow us to mention two. First, we will speak of gratefulness to God. And second, we will consider fear of God. Let’s begin with the way gratefulness motivates us to please the Lord and to care for our neighbors.

Gratefulness

In Scripture, gratefulness should be our normal response to God’s grace and benevolence, and it should motivate us to obey him. For example, the Ten Commandments are introduced by a statement of God’s benevolence. This benevolence is supposed to make us grateful so that we want to keep the commandments that follow. Listen to the way Exodus 20:2 introduces the Ten Commandments:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery (Exodus 20:2).

At the time that God gave the Ten Commandments to Israel, their Exodus from Egypt was the greatest event of redemption that had ever occurred. It was the Old Testament equivalent of Christ’s sacrifice in the New Testament — the event that biblical writers constantly mentioned in order to inspire gratefulness in their readers.

Immediately after this introduction to the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, we find the Ten Commandments themselves. As many theologians have noted throughout

the centuries, these commandments are set into two groups: first, laws summarizing what it means to love God; and second, laws summarizing what it means to love our neighbors.

So, in the Ten Commandments, we find that heartfelt gratefulness to God is intended to be the motive that inspires us to allegiance, action, and further affection, both toward God as our king and toward our fellow human beings as his beloved creatures and children.

And the New Testament teaches the same principle. As we have said, it tends to appeal more regularly to Christ's sacrifice as the basis of our gratefulness, but the concept is the same: God's benevolence deserves our love and obedience. As John stated in 1 John 4:19:

We love because he first loved us (1 John 4:19).

And as Paul wrote in Colossians 3:17:

Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:17).

Our thankfulness for the gift of his Son should motivate us to love our Lord and to express this love through good works done in his name and for his glory.

It's not hard to understand how gratefulness functions as a motive. Most of us have many reasons to be grateful. We may be grateful to our parents for the way they have cared for us, or to particular teachers for the way they have mentored us. We are grateful when people rescue us from danger or distress. And in all these cases, our response is often to thank the people who helped us and even to repay them in some way if possible.

On the other hand, it should also be easy to think of people in our lives who have been ungrateful, people who have not appreciated the good things that others have done for them. When we are ungrateful, we typically have no desire to please those who help us. Instead, we tend to receive their help as if it were our just reward, and we resent them if they do not perform as we expect. Far from motivating us to love them, ungratefulness tends to make us despise others.

Clearly, as Christians, our gratefulness to God should motivate us to obey him, and to help those he loves. We can never repay God for the gift of Christ, so the good works we do are not a form of repayment to him. They are simply the loving responses of those who appreciate what God has done. Those who are truly grateful for what God has done could never express that gratitude by bowing to false gods, or by taking his name in vain, or by doing anything else that displeases him. We have received the greatest gift imaginable. How could we not give ourselves wholeheartedly to our covenant Lord?

Having seen how gratefulness should motivate us to good works, we can now address the fear of God that is part of our love for him and that motivates our good works.

Fear

In the modern church, Christians often don't talk about fearing God. And perhaps the reason is that the concept is so misunderstood. When modern Christians think about fear, we usually associate it with terror and fright. We fear things that can harm us, things that intend evil against us. And without a doubt the Bible often uses the word "fear" this way. But this kind of fear of God has no part in the life of a believer. As the apostle John wrote in 1 John 4:17-18:

Love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love (1 John 4:17-18 NASB).

Love is perfected in Christians, and this perfect love casts out fear because God will never harm us. Therefore, this is not the kind of fear that Scripture intends when it speaks of the fear of God in a positive way. The kind of fear we have in mind is described by Moses in Deuteronomy 10:12-13. Listen to what he wrote there.

And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good? (Deuteronomy 10:12-13).

While there are slightly different nuances between the obligations Moses listed here, they are all essentially the same thing. Fearing, walking, loving, serving, observing — they all refer to rendering wholehearted, loyal, active obedience to God and his commands.

For the sake of simplicity, we can define the fear of God as "awe, reverence and honor for God that produces adoration, love and worship for God." In some measure, this kind of fear characterizes every true believer in Christ. For instance, in Isaiah 33:5-6 we read this exhortation:

The Lord ... will be the sure foundation for your times, a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge; the fear of the Lord is the key to this treasure (Isaiah 33:5-6).

Notice that far from being an expression of terror, reverential fear is associated with confidence in God as our sure foundation and salvation.

In Isaiah 11:2-3, we find that this fear also characterizes the Messiah. Listen to the prophet's words:

The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him — the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of

knowledge and of the fear of the Lord — and he will delight in the fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11:2-3).

Reverential fear is not a cowering, threatened response to God. On the contrary, it is a delight. Moreover, as we read in Acts 9:31, the same fear characterized the early church. Listen to its account:

The church ... enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord (Acts 9:31).

Once again, fear is associated with feelings like peace, strength and encouragement, and not with terror or alarm.

Reverential fear of God is the sense of living in his constant presence. It is the understanding of who and what God is, and of what he requires of us. And as such, it is both an aspect of love and a motive to perform good works. It is an aspect of love because it is an affirming and appreciative response to God's grandeur and goodness; it is a strong affection and admiration for his character. And it motivates us to good works through our desire to honor and glorify the one we love.

When we lack this perspective, it is easy to become apathetic and lazy about Christian ethics. It is easy to think that God is far away and that we don't need to worry too much about the obligations he places on our lives. Instead of seeking God's kingdom, we focus only on the earthly world. And as a result, we feel no compulsion to regulate our lives according to God's revealed will.

But when we have a proper reverential fear for God, it motivates us to please him in many ways. Scripture mentions the results of this motive in many places. But we find the greatest concentration of them in the Old Testament wisdom literature. For example, the book of Proverbs teaches us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge in 1:7, the beginning of wisdom in 9:10, and a fountain of life in 14:27. It adds length to life according to 10:27. It helps us avoid evil in 16:6. And it brings wealth and honor and life in 22:4. All these and many other good results flow from the fear of God. Listen to the way Ecclesiastes 12:13 summarizes true wisdom and ethics:

Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole [duty] of man (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

The fear of God should and does motivate us to think, speak and act in ways that please our God and King. It should motivate us to keep his commandments, and to do good to the creatures that he loves.

So, we see that love functions as a motive for good works in many ways. In allegiance, it motivates us to fulfill our duty to God and to our neighbors. In action, it motivates us to do what glorifies God and benefits our neighbors. And in affection, it motivates us to please our beloved Lord by serving him and caring for our neighbors.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on intending good, our discussion of the existential perspective has focused on the concept of motive. We began by looking at the importance of motives, seeing the role motives play in the process of making biblical decisions. Next, we focused on two very important motives that are part of every good decision: the motive of faith, both in our initial salvation and in our ongoing Christian lives; and the motive of love, which includes allegiance, action and affection.

Christians are faced with many, many ethical decisions every day. In many cases, it is hard enough to figure out what our duty is and what the facts are, let alone to be introspective about our own persons. Even so, if our decisions are to be truly biblical, we have to make the effort to explore our intentions. We have to make sure that everything we do really is motivated by our faith in God and by our love for God and neighbor. When we keep our intentions clearly in view, we will be better prepared to make decisions that honor and glorify our Lord.