

# Motives

Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31

Psalm 128

1 Thessalonians 5:1-6

Matthew 25:14-30

This weekend, I had the opportunity to lead a retreat for college students. The topic that they asked me to preach on during the retreat was “Discerning God’s Will.” Throughout the retreat, we looked at several ways we hear God’s “voice,” namely—our Christian anthropology (i.e. our being body, mind, and soul), our desires (most importantly our deepest, wholehearted desires), and motives, which can tell us a lot about our desires. Our Scripture readings this weekend give us a wonderful opportunity to look more closely at our motives.

I remember in seminary, our president-rector, Bishop Gregory Aymond, told all of us that no one has perfectly pure motives. Even men preparing for the priesthood do not have perfectly pure motives. Bishop Aymond explained that it’s important for us to be aware of our motives and aware of the imperfection of our motives. Ultimately, the process of life includes letting God purify our motives through our relationship with Him. God never waits, however, for our motives to be pure before He works in our lives; He can use even our most imperfect motives to draw us to Himself, as well as His will.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus told a parable about a servant who was motivated by *negative fear*, more specifically, fear of punishment. We read—

The [servant] who had received the one talent came forward and said, “Master, I knew you were a demanding person, harvesting where you did not plant and gathering where you did not scatter; so out of fear I went off and buried your talent in the ground. Here it is back.”

-Matthew 25:24-25

Negative fear can come in several forms, for example, sometimes we act out of fear of punishment, like the servant in the parable, and sometimes we act out of a fear that something bad will happen to us physically, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually. This kind of motive often manifests itself in excessive worry, anxiety, and self-preoccupation. While it’s not a perfect motive, negative fear can be particularly helpful for those who are still spiritually immature. Just as a small child can learn to make good decisions through the motivation of fear of punishment, negative fear can help to teach the spiritually “young” how to make good choices.

Another common motive is *guilt*. Sometimes, you and I do things simply to avoid feeling guilty. Similar to negative fear, this form of motivation is often used by God for those who are spiritually “young.” This motive often manifests itself in scrupulosity.

A much more elusive motive is our *ego*. Our ego, or pride, motivates the majority of our day without our being conscious of it. So many of the things we say and do are merely manifestations of our desire for other people’s approval and respect. I frequently will finish a conversation with someone and think to myself, “Why did I say that?” or “Why did I tell that story?” Often, I have to admit to myself and God that my words were merely a manifestation of my ego. Despite such an imperfect motive, God uses even our ego to draw us closer to Himself and eternity.

In our Psalm today, we heard another common motive—*positive fear*, “Blessed are you who fear the LORD” (Psalm 128:1). The Old Testament frequently talks about the importance of our “fearing” God, but a more accurate understanding of this concept would be the English words, “wonder and awe.” What I am calling, “positive fear,” then, is the wonder and awe that we feel for God as we marvel at His amazing love and graciousness.

Very closely related to wonder and awe is *gratitude*. We are the most grateful to those who offer us something that we could not, in any way, accomplish and possess ourselves. In this way, the more aware we are of our poverty, the more grateful we are for the blessings that eliminated our poverty. For example, if someone gives me a glass of water just after I finished drinking a glass of water, I’ll be slightly grateful—mostly for their thoughtfulness. However, if someone gives me a glass of water when I was literally dying of thirst, then I will be *overwhelmed* with gratitude. The more that we get in touch with the fact that God has saved us through Jesus Christ, despite our unworthiness and in light of the fact that we could not save ourselves, the more we will be motivated to respond to God.

The last, and perfect, motive is *authentic love*. Authentic love is our *desire to do what is best for another person*. In the case of our relationship with God, love is our desire to do His will free from negative fear, guilt, ego, etc. An example might help us to better grasp the perfection of this particular motive.

James shared with me his spiritual journey several years ago. Oversimplifying what he told me, he explained that as a child and teenager, he attended Mass each weekend because his parents made him. In college he quit attending Mass and praying altogether because they interfered with his favorite sins. As a young adult, however, James reestablished his relationship with God and found himself attending Mass mainly because he feared the punishment of hell. As he got older, he noticed that he was faithful to attending Mass mainly because he would feel guilty if he missed. As he got more involved in the parish, he noticed that he didn’t want to miss Mass because of what others might think about him—they would definitely notice his absence since it was a small parish. Eventually, James came to a place in his spiritual life where he realized that his desire to attend Mass was motivated primarily by his love for God and their intimate relationship. Mass was the best that he could offer to God and he understood that God appreciated his worship and prayer. Having come to know God’s love for him, James wanted to return that love in any and every way he possibly could.

Regardless of what motivates us spiritually, God can and does use it. He desires to use anything and everything to draw us more intimately to Him. Understanding our motivations can be yet another avenue for discerning our deepest desires and God’s will.

### **SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:**

- ✚ Read 1 John 4:7-12 and then share with God what this Scripture passage teaches you about motives. Where in your life do you most frequently experience the motive of authentic love?