

Doing Right for the Wrong Reasons

I remember years ago reading a verse in the Bible that taught me some important things about prayer.

James 4:2 — Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. (NLT)

This verse says that we should ask God for the things we want. Boy, I have a long list of things I want. I'm gonna get started right now. Hold on! Let's read the next verse.

James 4:3 — And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure.

You mean we can do the right thing for the wrong reasons? Yes! And this passage teaches us that the reasons we do things are just as important as the things we do.

I was under the impression that Christianity was about doing the right things and not doing wrong things. This began to change my understanding. Christianity is much more than just what you do! Though interested in what you do, God is even more interested in why you do it.

That means that we need to work on two aspects of what we do. We have to be careful to do the right things, and we must do them for the right reasons. Both are important.

So, how can you do something right for the wrong reason?

Examples of Wrong Reasons

A problem with wrong reasons is that the focus is wrong. It's all about me. It asks questions such as: What's in it for me? What will it cost me? How long with I have to do it?

Often, you do the right things because of some perceived benefit to you. You will stop doing it if it no longer benefits you. If you ever stopped doing something right after awhile, you were probably doing right for the wrong reasons.

God is not fooled. He looks beyond your outward actions into your heart.

1 Samuel 16:7 — But the LORD said to Samuel, "Don't judge by his appearance or height, for I have rejected him. The LORD doesn't see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

While self-focused reasons can motivate us to do right, there is a better way.

1 Corinthians 12:31 — So you should earnestly desire the most helpful gifts. But now let me show you a way of life that is best of all.

Let's look at a few of the wrong reasons that people do right things.

Fear

Fear avoids injury, discomfort, or embarrassment. It can be a very strong motivator and is very common. However, it is self centered. The focus is wrong. It's all about me! Also, God does not want us to operated in a spirit of fear.

2 Timothy 1:7 — For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.

Therefore, fear is not the right reason for doing right things. (More about fear later.)

Recognition and Approval from People

We all do some things to impress others or win their approval. How often have you thought, “I hope they noticed my sacrifice or efforts”? As with fear, this is also a self-centered reason for doing things.

Matthew 6:1-5 — “Watch out! Don’t do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. When you give to someone in need, don’t do as the hypocrites do—blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I tell you the truth, they have received all the reward they will ever get. But when you give to someone in need, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Give your gifts in private, and your Father, who sees everything, will reward you. “When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get.

The people were doing right things, helping the poor and praying. But they were doing them for the wrong reasons. They wanted to appear good to other people. You cannot be a servant of God if your reason is to look good to others.

Galatians 1:10 — Obviously, I’m not trying to win the approval of people, but of God. If pleasing people were my goal, I would not be Christ’s servant.

Lusts

Not just sexual lusts. Anything that feeds the fleshly nature and desires. We can do right things to gain stuff that feed our fleshly appetites.

1 John 2:15-17 — Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that *is* in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

Manipulation

I will do this, then I expect God or others to do something I want in return. Bargain with God? There are strings attached. Doing right is simply a tool to get what you really want.

Understanding the Reason for What We Do

It helps to understand that there are four approaches to what you do and the reasons you do it.

1. Doing wrong for the right reasons
2. Doing right for the wrong reasons
3. Doing wrong for the wrong reasons
4. Doing right for the right reasons

Doing Wrong for Right Reasons

There’s only one “right” reason for doing wrong things.

That’s if you are dead in your sins, cut off from life in God and fellowship with Jesus—you are not born again. Oh, you may do a lot of right things, but ultimately, you are spiritually dead and your actions are going to reflect that death.

If you belong to God, there is never a right reason to do wrong. And ignorance is no excuse! Just try that the next time a policeman pulls you over for a traffic violation. It is not okay to do wrong if you don't know better. Wrong is still wrong!

Luke 6:46 — “So why do you keep calling me ‘Lord, Lord!’ when you don't do what I say?”

James 1:22 — But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves.

Doing Right for Wrong Reasons

This is where a lot of people live.

Doing right for wrong reasons can actually help others. The hypocrites in the earlier verse gave to the poor to make themselves look good—a wrong reason. But the poor who received the money were still helped.

There is some value in doing right for wrong reasons. In all cases, doing right for any reason is better than doing wrong for any reason. However, much of the potential and benefit is lost when doing right for the wrong reason. And there is danger if you become satisfied operating at this level.

Doing Wrong for Wrong Reasons

Sometimes, people take this approach when they realize that they have wrong reasons for living right. Rather than do right for the wrong reasons, they quit trying. Oh, they're good people and do good things in a lot of areas, But doing right in that area is just not who they are. They don't want to be a hypocrite, and they sound noble in their refusal to do right things for wrong reasons. But it's a lie! It's an excuse to do what you want—and feel justified and even good about it!

2 Corinthians 5:17 — This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

As a Christian, you have the God of the universe living in you. It is the nature of your new person to live a godly life. But your mind wants to live selfishly. So the battle is on!

Living honestly is good. But I learned early in life that two wrongs don't make a right. If your motive for doing right is wrong, then change your motive. Don't quit doing right.

Doing Right for Right Reasons

This is the goal. No one is perfect in this. We probably all have areas where we do right for the right reason. We all also have areas where we do right for the wrong reasons. And we all have areas where we do wrong.

Successful Christian living is working to renew your mind so that you make more and more right choices out of more and more right thinking—*doing right for right reasons*. It's a transformation process that takes place in your innermost thoughts—your heart.

This is where we are called to live.

How Can You Switch to Right Reasons for What You Do?

Evaluate what motivates you to do what you do. This will be different for different areas of your life. Where you find bad motives, choose to switch to better motives.

Get to know God and His ways—why He does what He does. We often know what God has done, but don't have a clue why He did it. Therefore, we don't know what God would do in a particular situation. One of the most marvelous things about the infinite God is that He has chosen to make Himself known to us. And He does that through His written revelation—the Bible, His general revelation—all of creation, and His Holy Spirit—God Himself living in personal connection with us.

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

As we begin to see God's great love for us, it changes us to love Him and others. It is important to study the Bible, letting it transform our fundamental ideas and thoughts.

Romans 12:1-2 — And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.

Like water, the Word of God can wash out the old ways of thinking and replace them with God's ways.

Ephesians 5:26 — to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God's word.

It is the Truth of the Word of God that purifies and sanctifies us.

John 17:17 — Make them holy by your truth; teach them your word, which is truth.

GIGO – Garbage in, Garbage out – a computer term. If the information going into the process is bad, then the conclusions will be bad. That's true of life, also.

We often make bad choices because we have believed bad information—lies! The critical requirement in achieving right living is to have right thinking. The critical requirement for right thinking is properly sorting between truth and lies. The critical source for obtaining the necessary information to distinguish lies from truth is God's Word—the Bible. That's why there is so much attack on the Bible. If people can get you to ignore the primary source of objective truth, then they can get you to believe almost any lie. And then they can derail your life.

thing to do.

Don't beat yourself up when you get it wrong. That's the devil's job, don't do it for him. When you do it wrong, figure out what went wrong and fix it. That's the way you grow.

Remember that it is important to keep the goal in sight when working through the process. That helps keep you on track and motivated. Otherwise, you can get bogged down in the process, lose your direction, and lose your motivation.

Why Bother?

There's much more to Christianity than just avoiding hell, going to heaven, and getting blessings. There is a joy that defies description. The reality and joy of relationship with Jesus is so strong that many have been willing to suffer extreme torture and death to keep from losing what they found. Since they have found that such a valuable treasure, then we can, too! That kind of relationship with God is worth pursuing with everything you have.

Matthew 13:44-46 — “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure that a man discovered hidden in a field. In his excitement, he hid it again and sold everything he owned to get enough money to buy the field. “Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant on the lookout for choice pearls. When he discovered a pearl of great value, he sold everything he owned and bought it!

If you haven't found that kind of joy, maybe you are doing right for the wrong reasons.

2 Corinthians 3:6 — ..., not of the letter [of the Law] but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (NKJV)

Growth is a Process

When I was young, I couldn't wait until I was a teenager. Then, I couldn't wait until I was 18. Then it was 21. Then I wanted to put off getting older. In time, I learned that living is a process, not arrival at a particular goal.

I remember times when I was wishing for Christmas. As I got older, I was wishing for 4:30, or the weekend, or payday. One day the Lord spoke to my heart, "Sonny, you are wishing your whole life away. Learn to make the most of each day."

I made a choice that day and began to enjoy life more as I began to cooperate with the process of living. Goals help direct the process, but most of life is spent in the process, not at the goals.

In dealing with your actions, you must deal with both aspects: What you do and why you do it.

Seldom is your motive pure—unless it is for selfish reasons. We often can be purely selfish in our reasons. But in most cases, we do some things for right reasons, some things for wrong reasons, and many things for mixed reasons.

I remember one time when I was much younger that I talked back to my mom. My dad helped me understand that this was not a wise thing to do. For several years after that, I was motivated by fear to not talk back to Mom. There were times I wanted to, but fear kept me doing the right thing. The motive was wrong, but I was in process. In time, my heart changed. Now I don't talk back to my mom because I love and respect her. And there's a world of difference between the two approaches.

While fear is not the best motivation, sometimes it's the one thing that will stop you from making a very bad choice. For example, many Christians are tempted to indulge in pornography. For less mature Christians, fear of bad consequences is the only thing that keeps them from doing wrong things. So appreciate the fear, but realize that you will never be free from the power of the temptation until you move to a higher level of motivation. Fear cannot solve the core problem. There has to be a fundamental change in the way you see the issues before you will walk in true freedom. And that freedom is well worth the effort!

For growth, it is important to...

- reinforce where you do right things for right reasons,
- fix your thinking where you do right things for the wrong reasons,
- and quit doing wrong things for any reason.

The best way to change your motives is to see things the way God sees them. You need to get to know God and His ways. It changes you!

God is not just interested in you doing the right thing. He is also highly interested in why you do what you do. Work on both—doing right and for the right reasons. That's character!

The progress from lowest to highest is as follows

1. You do what you want, regardless – selfishness, pride, and lusts rule your life

2. You do right because you fear consequences – selfishness still rules. It's still all about how things affect you. This is smarter than just doing what you want, but it's not much better character.
3. You do right because it is right – that's much better, but you're still somewhat immature, self centered, and prideful. Fortunately, you are beginning to shift to an outward motivation that overrides your own selfish ambitions.
4. You do right because you care – Love for God and others begins to motivate you more than your own self-love. There can still be self-centeredness in your life, but your love overrides it.
5. You do right because it's your nature – highest level. This is the realm that God operates in. You begin to see and think like God does. It requires fundamental changes to your thinking processes, which is no less than transformational.

We are usually at different points of progress in various areas of our lives. The goal is to move each area higher up the ladder.

When your motives are right, you will much more consistently do what is right.

It's all about character development. Our American culture focuses a lot on reaching goals. That is not a bad thing in itself if the goals are worthy. However, we often believe the lie that "the end justifies the means." This says that you can use questionable or unethical methods to get to good goals. With God, how you get there is at least as important as getting there. You must not use ungodly methods to reach godly goals.

Let's all work to do the right things for the right reasons!