

Maturity and Motivation

The Meaning of Motivation

Abraham Lincoln once said that he liked to hear a man preach like he was fighting a swarm of bumblebees. I think what he was trying to say was that he wanted to hear someone who was motivated! He wanted to hear someone who was working with every ounce of their ability.

Some time ago I went with some friends on a little hike. As we were walking along, we accidentally stumbled onto a yellowjackets' nest, and I was stung several times. It is truly amazing to me how my purpose in life at that moment became so crystal clear. I was instantly motivated to get as far away from there as I possibly could. I didn't stop until I was half-way down the mountain.

I was motivated then, but it is much harder for me to become motivated about really important things, such as the Love of God. Perhaps we all need to consider for a moment the question: what does it take to motivate me to obey and serve the Lord?

Four Phases of Motivation

Let us look now at what I think are four significant phases of growth in Christian motivation.

The first phase is fear. I can remember so well feeling the fear of going to hell when I was young! Although this fear of everlasting punishment may be an acceptable way to initiate our relationship with God, the perfection of the relationship eliminates it. We are to be motivated by our reverence and awe of God and his power, not just a fear of punishment. We read in 1 John 4.18 that 'There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The man who fears is not made perfect in love'.

The second phase that I think most people go through is guilt. As we begin to understand more about right and wrong, we are moved to try to make up for our sins. This is an improvement, but there is still fear involved. We can't 'work our way to heaven'. We must come to a better understanding of God's grace and his forgiveness. God tells us in 1 John 1.7 that we are continually cleansed if we have the right relationship, and these sins are covered (Romans 4.7) and remembered no more (Hebrews 8.12).

The third phase is that of being motivated by the prospect of reward. 'A star in our crown' is a common expression for our desire to be rewarded for each good work that we do. Even in Christ's day there were those who wanted to be first in the kingdom as their reward. It is not that we should not want to be rewarded, for we are told that 'every man shall receive his own reward' (1 Corinthians 3.8), and we are told to 'lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven' (Matthew 6.20); but this is not to be our prime motivation. We should do Good for its own sake, not just for ours. As in Matthew 25 we should do Good unconsciously – it should just flow from us.

But the ultimate motivation that we can have, the fourth phase, is love. We should be motivated by a true and giving love for God and his Goodness; a simple response to the great love that God has shown to us. Christ gave Love as the root of the two greatest commandments, which would determine all of our behavior, and we must embrace it with all of our strength. As we grow in this love, we become more and more like God, acting on the basic principles which are now an integral part of us. We become motivated just as God is motivated.

How do we get to phase four? The road is not very easy. We never escape entirely the initial phases; nor do we ever fully grasp the final one. But we must continue to reach upward. An essential element is that we have to be able to absorb some understanding of the immeasurable power of God. And we have to agree with his Goodness; it has to be what we want forever.

Snapping God into Focus

The two thieves that were crucified on each side of Christ were both criminals, worthy of death, but they had radically different viewpoints about Good and Evil. One thought only of the misery of his own life, and in his bitterness even chose to insult Jesus. But the other was able to see through the fog of his own humiliation and imminent death to the fact that Christ was, in contrast to himself, not guilty. This is so amazing, because as far as we know, he had not known Jesus. Like one of those visual puzzles we stare at sometimes, the image of Christ snapped into place and the thief was able to focus clearly on the Goodness of Christ.

I believe that Peter had a similar experience as he walked with Jesus, and when Jesus asked him who the Christ really was, Peter realized with awe, "You are the Christ, the Son of God." And then Jesus emphasized that those who were able to truly see Him made up His church.

Comprehending the Magnitude of Love

J.B. Phillips wrote that "unless the conception of God is something higher than a Magnification of our own Good Qualities, our service and worship will be no more and no less than the service and worship of ourselves." We must understand that God is so much greater than we are.

I think that most of us recognize that our saying that heaven has streets of gold is just a hint of the overwhelming spiritual reality, but even the cross may be only a mere scratch of the surface of God's love. There's no need for another revelation to give us a more complete picture, but we must keep pursuing a better understanding of what we have been given. We must keep climbing the mountain to meet God, even though there are great views along the way.

How can we "get our arms around" the magnitude of God? I think of Him as the personification of Good, and sometimes it helps to think of Good as a substance. Have you ever seen a TV episode where a kid puts ten times too much soap in the washer? The house is filled with suds as the kid, slipping and sliding out of control, frantically tries to stop the volcanic flow. But rather than try to limit the growth of Good (and God) we should welcome it and actually try to pump up the growth.

Paul tries to show us the limitless expanse of God in Ephesians 3:16-21:

*"I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to **grasp** how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*

First Paul asks God to prepare room in our hearts for Christ. Then he tries to show us how big that room must be. Finally he confirms that the magnitude of God is far beyond anything our imagination can achieve.

God's love of sinful man is even more awesome to me than the "perfect creation", and His Grace is much bigger than even the undefinable limits of the universe. But though there is a cosmic struggle for our souls, Paul says in Romans 8:35-38 that no power in the universe can separate us from the love of God as shown in Christ Jesus our Lord.

God is Light (and in Him is no Darkness at all)

Another concept that helps us think about the Glory of God is that of light. Thomas Merton has written that "We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all of the time." We must be ready to see it. Paul talks about understanding God in the sense of seeing the light in 2 Corinthians 4:4, 6:

*The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the **light** of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his **light shine in our hearts** to give us the **light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.***

Overwhelming our Senses

But the light can overwhelm our senses. From the angel with the flaming sword at the entrance (or exit) to the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:24) to the light of the face of Christ in Revelation (Rev 1:16), we find that we cannot stand up to the brilliance of God. Many desire to see God's glory, like those in the Indiana Jones movie who wanted to look into ark, but they fail to realize that the true Glory is in God's character – His Love. There is a difference between being dazzled and illuminated (see Phillips).

How can we possibly commune with something that is infinite like God? That's why God came to earth in the form of man. God is infinite, but reachable – but we need a bridge, and that is Christ.

Peephole into the Glory

Remember that when God passed by in front of Moses, he was hidden in a crevice in the rock because he could not withstand the Glory. Also think of Paul on the road to Damascus – directed at Paul it blinded him until God healed him. We squint and our irises shrink when we are exposed to bright sunlight. Paul describes God in 1 Tim 6:16 as living in “unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see.” But God has given us a full representation that we can continually gaze on. As we read in Hebrews 1:3, “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being...” Christ becomes a peephole through which we can see what we need to of God.

I'm just trying to expand our minds about God in His Glory. J. B. Phillips writes in Your God is Too Small about trying to see the Greatness of God, “Some of the gods we have considered are nothing more than artificial; some of them are inadequate pin-hole glimpses of the true Light. What we are going to try to do, then, is not to light fresh candles but to take down the shutters.”

The Complexity of Spiritual Rules

David says in Psalm 34:8 that we should “Taste and see that the Lord is good.” I don't think that this is talking about tasting your particular ‘blessings’, but understanding the overarching “Goodness” of God. Many claim that a Good God could not allow evil to exist in the world. All I know that Goodness is something that I embrace as the Greatest thing I know. Evil exists in the world and the rules of spiritual existence are something I do not understand. Why do we need the sacrificial blood of God's unique Son? To claim that God could not allow evil with our human understanding is like trying to do higher math with Roman Numerals. It is as if I told Tommy or Ray that being a pharmacist was simple – all you have to do is count pills and put them into bottles. Perhaps God is just as insulted when we claim that His Supreme Power is so simple.

Our Purpose is to Magnify the Lord

Not only do we need to keep growing in our understanding of the Glory of God, our purpose as His people is to magnify Him (or the understanding of Him to each other). David would not accept my idea about a motivational program called “The Sphere of Cheer”, but a similar principle would have us trying to expand our projection of God and His Goodness throughout the world. C. S. Lewis once wrote that God gets bigger as we grow up. This doesn't make sense, unless you understand that it has to do with maturity and not size.

The Psalmist says (Ps 34:3), “Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together.” If we place a drop of ordinary water or a speck of dust under a powerful microscope, we will observe marvels we never dreamed could exist in so small a space. The same is true when we focus our attention on God; the more we magnify the Lord the more we minimize our troubles. Magnifying the name of the Lord is to do Good so that we make God, the Sum of all Goodness, even bigger.

The Definition of Maturity

I may not be very mature, but I have learned that a vital part of Maturity is recognizing the true value of things, such as the Magnitude of Good (God). A measure of maturity might be how well our faith stands up when we suffer loss. You must supply everything for a baby – they cannot do without things very well. As we get older we can go for longer periods without food or drink before we start crying.

To put in on a more personal level, would you still love someone if they lost their looks, their wealth, or their ability to be intimate? It was an important moment for me when I realized I loved Soozie enough that to hang around even if she never married me. It helped me wait the seven years I chased her before she quit running.

Job was a great example of maturity; he kept his faith as things kept getting subtracted from his life until he basically lost everything. It reminds me of the Black Knight from Monty Python and the Holy Grail. He lost both arms and legs and was still calling on his enemy to fight!

Christ gave up even more. We know from Philippians 2:6-7 that He, "being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing..." He is the most mature of all because He completely understood the Greatness of God.

Now I am not trying to get people to give up things like their boat or big screen TV. We are talking about being able give it up or to suffer its loss without losing our faith. If we are mature we realize that God will meet all our needs (Philippians 4:19).

So, then maturity is a combination of the recognition of the Greatness of God, and the comparative worthlessness of anything on earth. Paul says in Philippians 3:8, "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ..."

Motivation or Inspiration?

We are **motivated** by fear, guilt, reward, and love. Inspiration, however, resides at a higher level. We are **inspired** by something greater than ourselves, by a power that enables us to go beyond our normal capacity. Perhaps you remember Aesop's fable of the hare and the hound:

One day a hound, out hunting by itself, flushed a hare from a thicket and gave chase. The frightened hare gave the dog a long run and escaped. As the disappointed hound turned back home, a passing goatherd jeered, "You are a fine hunter! Aren't you ashamed to let a little hare one-tenth your size give you the best of it?" "You forget," replied the hound, "that I was only running for my supper, but the hare was running for his life!"

The hound is motivated, but the hare is inspired. The point here is not that we should respond as though we were running for fear of our spiritual lives, but that we should be acting at a level beyond the basic phases of motivation. God's love should inspire us into this higher level. This is how the Spirit works mightily within us.

There is something about being inspired that makes us temporarily forget the pain and the limitations that we normally feel. The Bible talks about how that after the child is delivered the memory of the pain is somehow erased (John 16:21). It is as though we are running as hard as we can, and then we are inspired to have a burst of extra speed. We might say that:

The law motivates you, but grace inspires you.

As we mature in our faith we should operate more from inspiration, from the spirit living inside us. I am talking about something that makes our soul tingle with God's love and goodness. Whether we are motivated or inspired (or not) will be very evident in our lives. The thrilling feeling of being inspired in this way is something that I want to have forever. And I truly believe that we will feel like that in heaven!