

## The Elements Of Motivation (Part Seven): Fear Of Judgment

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The motivating element covered in this concluding article is probably the one we hear of most often. It is also the only one with a strong negative flavor. It is a desire *not* to do something that provides impetus to do something else instead. This impetus can be so strong as to drive us immediately to face sacrifice and emotional and sometimes physical pain because we know that to go the way of human nature—while it may be immediately pleasurable—will in the end have far more disastrous consequences. This element is our need to have a very real, almost palpable fear of sin and judgment.

Much of the force of the kind of message that might instill respect for the consequences of our actions has been blunted in the last half-century because of the increasing reluctance of ministers to preach about sin, judgment, and hell. A recent news article in the Holland, Michigan, *Sentinel*, July 6, 2002, stated:

The tendency to downplay damnation has grown in recent years as nondenominational ministries, with their focus on everyday issues such as childrearing and career success, have proliferated and loyalty to churches has deteriorated. "It's just too negative," said Bruce Shelley, a senior professor of church history at the Denver Theological Seminary. "Churches are under enormous pressure to be consumer-oriented. Churches today feel the need to be appealing rather than demanding."

This attitude disagrees with the preaching of the One they claim as Savior. He strongly believes in both judgment and a fiery hell—the Lake of Fire. He teaches that we should be very concerned about the far-reaching consequences of sin and make every effort to please God by yielding to Him to avoid that fiery end (Matthew 5:22; Mark 9:43-47)! Christianity is a forward-looking way of life that operates by faith in our Savior's words, not by following a consumer-oriented, "feel good" religion aimed at living the "good life."

### The Opposite of Love

We have all heard this message of the fear of God's judgment before, but it bears repeating because we need to realize the damage sin eventually does. Most sin is deceptive because it is often pleasurable to human nature. However, this short-term pleasure obscures the fact that its effects are ultimately devastating. In most of us, though, human nature is willing to gamble that sin's effects will somehow manage to miss us. This thought was pithily captured on a Methodist church sign near our church offices: "Are you willing to gamble that Jesus was wrong?"

Those preparing for God's Kingdom live a way of life in which human nature and its way of sin do not belong. Human nature is antagonistic to that way of life (Romans 8:7). It is divisive, uncooperative, and rebellious. It thinks it knows more and better than others do. It is assertive, controlling, deceptive, and critical. The evidence for this is readily available in the histories of all the world's cultures past and present. Chaos, confusion, sickness, despair, and violence follow in sin's wake.

Perhaps it could be made clearer, but despite the record of history, human nature is hard to convince. Of all people, Christians must be convicted that the way of sin pays off over time only negatively. All the good things we anticipate in the resurrection of the just hinge on whether we are overcoming human nature's proclivities toward self-centered non-cooperation with God, His laws, and His people (Revelation 21:7). This means we strive to overcome sin's seductive pulls, the world and its attractive but distracting temptations, and the onerous trials of life to show God that our faith is firm and steady.

II Corinthians 5:10 reminds us, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." It does not matter how much prophecy we know, whether we can recite from memory large portions of Scripture, or know perfectly every doctrine's technicalities (I Corinthians 13:1-3). In terms of judgment, what matters is whether we are striving to live what we know to be the way God lives because it is how those in His Kingdom will live. His way is the way of love, and love is something we do.

Humanly, the opposite of love is hate. This is because we judge things largely according to the senses. Love, therefore, is a strong feeling for a person or thing; hate is a strong feeling against. However, this definition is not biblical. Biblically, the opposite of love is sin. Like love, sin is also something we do. According to I John 5:3, love is keeping God's commandments, and sin, then, is the breaking of His commandments. Though feeling is certainly involved in biblical love, the will of God and truth play a far larger part.

Seriously consider this: If we sin, then biblically, we do not love God, our fellow man, or for that matter, ourselves, because sinning means we have taken steps toward committing spiritual suicide! If we do this, it also means that we do not appreciate that God has given us life and has given His life so that we can claim His awesome promise of living eternally with Him.

Stripped of all possible nuances that might affect God's judgment, this is the stark reality of what faces us since God has opened our eyes and revealed His purpose to us. It brings to the fore that, if we love what He has revealed, then we must hate sin because it destroys everything God's wonderful revelation stands for.

### **Sin's Effects**

The following illustration of how sin affects relationships is perhaps an over-simplification, but it fairly describes sin's effects. Suppose that, at sometime in a person's life, he reckons that two plus two equals five. Obviously, no math problems involving these figures will ever work out correctly. Every time this combination of numbers arose, he will get a wrong total. No matter how sincere and well meaning he is, they would not add up right!

Suppose that besides his addition error, other people, just as sincere and well meaning, believe three plus three equals seven, and still others believe four plus three equals six. Before long, people are angrily suspicious of one another, feeling they have been taken advantage of, squabbles arise, tension fills the air as they try to sort out their differences either through violence or compromises. Each group argues for the strength of its position, but meanwhile nothing really works out to anyone's satisfaction.

There is an additional factor. This well-meaning mathematical mistake, this deviation from a correct standard, this sin, has an addictive power not only to make one hold on to his position, but also to make more math deviations. Meanwhile, everybody else is insisting to one degree or another that his answers are correct, and no one can agree on what the right standards should be. The competition gets fiercer, and they go to war against each other to impose their answers to life's math problems on everyone else.

The reality is that, in the world of mathematics, there are rigid standards that nearly everyone agrees upon, and so no wars are fought over mathematics.

There are also standards regarding relationships. Even though there is almost universal agreement as to what many of these standards are, people ignore them because they cannot or will not control themselves to submit to their authority. This is largely attributable to the human drive to compete and control for their own benefit or satisfaction being too strong for most people to overcome. In this world, self-interest rules the day. No good culture will exist until each person controls himself within the right standards. God has summoned us to learn and believe in the right standards and take strong steps to master ourselves to submit to them.

If we are ever going to overcome sin, it will be because we are motivated to take strong measures against it. The fight is difficult because human nature sees sin as an alluring and appealing possibility. We must come to see it as a pernicious, persistent, and destructive enemy that desires to leave us without hope and to inflict us with as much pain as possible along life's path. To hate it, we need to see why we must come to respect its power, so we can be motivated to fight it with every fiber of our being.

The Bible views sin as a malignant power absolutely possessing mankind. So basic and pervasive is its grip that it is not merely an external power, but it resides in our every fiber and deceives a person into thinking he is in control when, in reality, sin is! Talk about being brainwashed!

Jesus' comment in John 8:34-35 underscores this: "Jesus answered them, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever.'" A slave is one who is at the disposal of his master. He has no right to choose his path in life or, in fact, even his daily routine. The master makes those choices since he owns the slave. Verse 35 reveals how spiritually serious this is in relation to God, sin, and everlasting life since the slave does not abide in the house forever. "The house" implies God's house. From a statement like this, John later infers that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him (I John 3:15). This is very serious business.

## **What Is Sin?**

As early as Genesis 4:6-7, God reveals that this problem must be met and overcome. "So the Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.'"

We can interpret this two ways. First, from the beginning of God's dealings with mankind, He shows a major objective for man is to be accomplished by overcoming, mastering sin's desire to control and manipulate. Sin's desire is always lurking within man's moral and ethical choices, and he needs to be aware of it and have the drive to conquer it.

Second, it is a warning contained in a prophecy to all but given specifically to Cain. God perceived in him a strong proclivity to sin, so much that he would become a master of it. In today's parlance, Cain would become a real "pro" at sinning. The warning is not to allow oneself to follow Cain's example, which gives the impression that he nurtured sin dwelling in him.

We all know that I John 3:4 says, "Sin is the transgression of the law," a broad definition. However, there is an unfortunate tendency to apply it very narrowly, defining sin strictly in terms of law. Modern translations render it, "Sin is lawlessness," a stronger interpretation suggesting that sin simply ignores the rules as if they do not exist. That, though, just scratches the surface. The Bible's overall approach to sin is much more specific.

Ephesians 2:1-3 provides insight into why sin can be viewed as a living and malignant power:

And He made you alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.

Sin is generated through inspiration and persuasion of the living and malignant "prince of the power of the air." Because sin's source lies in a living being, the Bible considers it dynamic rather than static. Verse 1—"[we] were dead in trespasses and sin"—is especially enlightening. God calls things exactly what they appear from His point of view. Up to the time of our calling, we thought we were alive, but that is how wrong our thinking is. God considered sin to have already killed us, but in His mercy He made us alive so we could overcome it.

Of course, we were alive as far as animal life is concerned but dead to the kind of life God desires for us. We were dead to holiness and spiritual life. A corpse is insensible; it cannot see, hear, smell, touch, or taste. So were we in regard to the beauty of holiness and godly spiritual life.

Sin is not something the ministry invented to hold people in its thrall. The first sentence of Ephesians 2:1 includes the terms "trespasses" and "sins," both of which illustrate simply and clearly why sin is such a universal problem. "Trespasses," the Greek word *paraptoma*, means "to go off a path," "fall" or "slip aside." When applied to moral and ethical issues, it means "to deviate from the right way," "to wander from a standard."

"Sins" is translated from *hamartia*, a military shooting term that means "to miss the mark," "to fail to achieve a bull's-eye." In terms of morality and ethics, it means "to fail of one's purpose," "to go wrong," "to fail to reach a standard or ideal." The New Testament always uses *hamartia* in a moral and ethical sense, whether in commission, omission, thought, feeling, word, or deed.

Defining sin as lawlessness, while certainly true, tends to make one think of it only in legal terms. We can readily agree that the robber, murderer, drunkard, child-abuser, and rapist are sinners, but in

our hearts we think of ourselves as respectable citizens. These two terms, however, bring us face to face with sin's breadth. The Ten Commandments alone cover broad areas within which many specific sins lie.

Commentator William Barclay cogently catches the essence of sin: "Sin is the failure to be what we ought to be and could be." The Bible contains numerous specific standards, and Christianity is a way of life that touches upon every aspect of life. The central notion contained within these two terms is *failure*—failure to live up to the standards of this way of life as established by God and revealed by His Son, Jesus Christ. As such, sin reaches into marriage relationships, childrearing, cleanliness, clothing, cosmetics, hospitality, health, and work. Ephesians 2:3, speaking of sin swaying us to "[fulfill] the desires of the flesh and of the mind," exposes it as reaching into our very heart, involving itself in vanity, pride, envy, hatred, and greed.

## Convicted of Sin

Ephesians 4:11-15 reveals the Bible's lofty standard:

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness by which they lie in wait to deceive, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the Head—Christ.

Jesus Christ is the standard and example, the pinnacle of all things a human should be. Not only was He legally sinless, He was also humble, meek, merciful, sacrificial, kind, encouraging, positive, and patient. When considering what He was in His total personality for the purpose of comparing ourselves to Him, we need to recall Romans 3:23: "All . . . fall short of the glory of God." None of us measure up to His standard in any area of personality, and this is what *hamartia* and *paraptoma* describe: falling short of the ideal. Together, *hamartia* and *paraptoma* directly tie what we might think of as minor, unimportant, and secondary issues of conduct and attitude into the Ten Commandments.

If sin did not do negative things to us, God would not be concerned. However, its effects go beyond death, its final enslaving act. Its impact varies according to one's awareness and conviction of it. The greater these are, the greater sin's impact. Thus, God states, "Whatever is not from faith is sin" (Romans 14:23). When we fail to live up to what we know and believe is righteous, integrity is destroyed, and the greater the knowledge of the standard, the greater sin's destructive power psychologically. Not only does it produce a guilty conscience but also an addictive power that tends to motivate us to repeat the sin until the conscience is so defiled that it no longer feels guilty! In the end, it develops a heart of stone.

The apostle John writes:

My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him. For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. (I John 3:18-21)

If an act, even a lawful one, is not done with the conviction that it is right, it becomes destructive to character and self-esteem. If what we do does not measure up, we know it! Conversely, when we know to do good and perform it convicted it is right, it produces confidence, joy, and peace.

We can broadly conclude that sin does two things simultaneously, and both are bad. It produces and destroys. In his commentary, William Barclay lists a number of devastating characteristics we should understand and fear, and we will use them as an outline for the remainder of this article.

### **Sin Destroys Innocence**

Innocence is being free from blame, pure, virtuous, above suspicion, simple, fresh, undefiled, and harmless. An innocent is one around whom others feel no threat or competition. Instead, there is a sense of openness, warmth, and union.

Genesis 3:7-10 illustrates how no one is ever quite the same after sinning with knowledge:

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings. And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. Then the Lord God called to Adam and said to him, "Where are you?" So he said, "I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself." And He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat?"

Notice their sin occurs after God had instructed them (Genesis 2:16-17). Nobody had to tell them they had done wrong—they knew! Now they looked at things differently than they had before; a sense of wrong rushed in on them immediately. Just moments before, all had been friendly and joyful. All of nature seemed obedient to their every wish, and life was good. Suddenly, however, they felt guilt and fear, and it seemed as if every creature in the garden had witnessed their act and condemned them. Feeling exposed, they sought to hide, illustrating that separation from the purity of God began immediately. The virtue of their innocence began to lose its luster.

David writes in Psalm 40:11-13:

Do not withhold Your tender mercies from me, O Lord; let Your lovingkindness and Your truth continually preserve me. For innumerable evils have surrounded me; my iniquities have overtaken me, so that I am not able to look up; they are more than the hairs of my head; therefore my heart fails me. Be pleased, O Lord, to deliver me; O Lord, make haste to help me!

Sin creates a sense of estrangement from God, leaving a tarnishing film on a person's mind. Paul reminds Titus, "To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled" (Titus 1:15). Sin perverts the mind so that one does not look at life in the same way as before. Jeremiah 6:15 describes a sickening end to repeated sin: "'Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? No! They were not at all ashamed; nor did they know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time I punish them, they shall be cast down,' says the Lord."

Some children are adorable because we love to see the beauty of their innocence. But what happens on the trip to adulthood? Sin alters the way a person looks at life and the world. With maturity, people become distrustful, sophisticated, competitive, cosmopolitan, cynical, suspicious, sarcastic, prejudiced, self-centered, and uninvolved. It is sin that drives people apart and creates fear.

### **Sin Destroys Ideals**

An ideal is a concept or standard of supreme value or perfection, something perceived as the ultimate object of attainment. It is indicative of this world's cynical attitude that it often calls a person with high ideals impractical, a visionary, or a dreamer. This is interesting because most of us had high ideals in our youth. What enters to destroy our idealism? We meet the world, and sin enters to a degree we have never before experienced.

A tragic process begins when we become involved in sin. At first, we regard it with horror. Then, if we repeat the sin, we feel unhappy and ill at ease about it. Yet, if we continue to commit it, we will soon do it without a qualm. Each sin makes the next one easier because the ideal is gradually being lowered. Along with it, one's conscience also adjusts downward, and it will quit working at its former higher level. Like a drug, sin has an addictive quality that pulls a person down each time a he surrenders to it.

Mark 10:17-24 relates the story of a young man who greatly desired to be in the Kingdom of God. But when Jesus, who loved him, told him what was required of him, his sin of coveting trumped his desire for the Kingdom, persuading him to lower his ideal to the things of this world! Such is the fruit of sin. It causes us to adjust our standards, hopes, and dreams downward and convinces us to settle for something far less than what could have been.

Jeremiah 4:22 shows what happens as we repeat this scenario: "For My people are foolish. They have not known Me. They are silly children, and they have no understanding. They are wise to do evil, but to do good they have no knowledge." Eventually, godly ideals are gone. The people Jeremiah speaks of had practiced sin so frequently and fervently that they had lost the knowledge of godliness. What is the result? A person blind to truth. Like a slow suicide, this process destroys the standards that make life worth living.

### **Sin Destroys the Will**

The will is the power or faculty by which the mind makes choices and acts to carry them out. At first, against his will, a person engages in some forbidden pleasure because he wants to, but if he keeps it up, he soon finds that he has no strength to resist it. This process does not happen anymore quickly

than an addiction to alcohol, but in the end, he keeps sinning because he cannot help but do so! Once a thought or act becomes a habit, it is a short step to being a necessity. The old saying is true: "Sow an act and reap a habit; sow a habit and reap a character; sow a character and reap a destiny."

Hebrews 3:12-13 reveals a worrisome characteristic of sin: "Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today,' lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." Sin is seductive, enticing, deceitful, and hardening.

Sin's deceitfulness is that it cannot deliver what it promises. It deludes a person into thinking he can "have it all" or "take it or leave it." It promises pleasure, contentment, fulfillment, and life, but what it delivers in those areas is fleeting, which leads to its addictive quality. The pleasure is never quite enough to produce the desired contentment and fulfillment. Sinners are forced into greater perversions until it kills them.

Sin offers rationalizations and justifications. It puts on a plausible appearance and can even seem to be virtuous, as in situation ethics. However, sin's drug-like quality always demands more because what formerly satisfied no longer will. The person in its grip gradually becomes its slave, and all along the way, his heart becomes hardened as well.

In Hebrews 3:13, *hardened* is translated from the Greek word for a callus. A callus forms around the break in a bone, on the palms of hands and on fingers from constant hard use, or in a person's joints, paralyzing its actions. In a moral context, it suggests "impenetrable," "insensitive," "blind," or "unteachable." A hardened attitude is not a sudden aberration but a habitual state of mind that shows itself in inflexibility of thinking and insensitivity of conscience. It can eventually make repentance impossible.

Jeremiah 9:1-5 describes people in this state, so inured, so enslaved to sin that they weary themselves pursuing and doing it:

Oh, that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people! Oh, that I had in the wilderness a lodging place for wayfaring men; that I might leave my people, and go from them! For they are all adulterers, an assembly of treacherous men. "And like their bow they have bent their tongues for lies. They are not valiant for the truth on the earth. For they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know Me," says the Lord. "Everyone take heed to his neighbor, and do not trust any brother; for every brother will utterly supplant, and every neighbor will walk with slanderers. Everyone will deceive his neighbor, and will not speak the truth; they have taught their tongue to speak lies, and weary themselves to commit iniquity."

### **Sin Produces Slavery**

A slave is a person whose liberty to make many choices in life has been either given or taken away. Virtually all people want to be free to make, at the very least, the most critical choices in life. Slaves feel a distinct and sometimes emotionally painful loss of control. Nobody wants circumstances or another person dictating what they should or should not do. But slavery of the worst sort, spiritual slavery, follows in the wake of sin.

Jesus Himself asserts in John 8:34, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin." When a person sins, he is not really doing what he likes but what sin likes. Even though a person may enjoy his sin while he is doing it, the person is not in control but sin is. This is doubly so when one sins with knowledge. I Corinthians 6:12 shows that Paul clearly understood this: "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any." He is proclaiming that he would not be the slave of any practice that might corrupt his mind or his witness and destroy his liberty to do his job well.

As seen earlier, Genesis 4:7 gives us God's directive regarding what we should do about sin. "If you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it." Our responsibility is clear. We are not to allow sin to dictate our choices. To do so ensures yielding our liberty to make right choices. This requires not only knowledge but also the will to exercise vision, love, duty, and the fear of God in the form of self-control.

### **Sin Produces More Sin**

We saw in Jeremiah 9:3 how God describes the people as proceeding from one sin to another in an unbroken chain. Genesis 37:1-35 describes in detail how Jacob's unwise favoritism of Joseph developed into the sinful interaction between Joseph and his brothers, leading from one sin to another. The initial sin, Jacob's favoritism, falls under the umbrella of respect of persons. The brothers' irritation from this grew into jealousy and hatred. Soon they were conspiring against him, during which they deceitfully plotted to kill him. Selling him into slavery instead, they then lied to their father to cover their guilt.

Each sin may not produce such a convoluted mass of other sins, but the potential is always present for one sin to lead directly to others and to affect the lives of people not involved in the original sin that began the sordid mess.

### **Sin Produces Degeneracy, Sickness, and Pain**

Multitudes of scriptures provide evidence of the truth of this painful fruit, but a few will paint the general picture. Jesus says in Mark 2:5, when healing a paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven you." In John 5:8, 14, He clearly connects a man's paralysis with forgiveness of his sins: "Jesus said to him, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk.' . . . Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, 'See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you.'"

### **Sin Produces Death**

In death, there are no ideals. No exercise of our will can overcome it because our will has been totally overcome. Degeneracy has reached its nadir and ended in the ultimate slavery. According to I Corinthians 15:54-56, death is the last enemy to be destroyed in God's plan. James 1:13-16 provides us with a brief overview of the course of sin, telling us succinctly where everyone not under the redemption of Christ ends:

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.

We must see sin for the enemy it is, or our attitude toward it will be tolerant. We must regard it as a formidable and devastating opponent. However, it is not so formidable and devastating that God in us cannot conquer it. We, of course, must do our part. If we do not fear its power and hate its evil fruit, our sins will be acceptable to us because they are ours. We cannot afford to have this approach because we will not be motivated to overcome it. We will have the apathetic, Laodicean approach that we are rich and increased with goods and need nothing (Revelation 3:17).

Sin is responsible for the pain in our lives, and it does not matter whether it was our sin. Sin caused it. Sin is not selective about whom it seeks to destroy. We can do nothing to change others who sin, but our responsibility is to work on changing ourselves. We also need to work hard to understand how sin has caused our pain. Once we do, it becomes far easier to be motivated to take positive steps to avoid having it happen again.

Eternal judgment is upon us now (I Peter 4:17). This is our one and only chance to show God by our works that we hate sin and are loyal to His way.