

Where is Your



Heart?

B y A m a n d a S m i t h

Picture this: "Sept 11, 2001. Breaking news—We interrupt this broadcast to report that two planes have crashed into the World Trade Center in New York City. Police on the scene estimate a death toll in the thousands. It seems that a New York air traffic controller had a stroke, lost consciousness, and misdirected these two flights, leading to the collision with the skyscrapers. The President has called for a major investigation into air traffic controller health."

Can you imagine how differently we would view the 9/11 tragedy if it had been an accident? Even if the same number of lives had been lost, it would somehow be less disturbing if it hadn't been the plan of an evil mastermind, if we hadn't suddenly awakened to the realization that evil forces had been at work for years, plotting our overthrow. Somehow the motive behind an action affects how we view an action. The hands of a man might commit the deed, but his heart's motives shape our interpretation of it.

Children learn this important lesson at an early age. When a mother finds her toothbrush in the toilet and a wet two-year old nearby, her first question should be, "Was this done on purpose or accidentally?" Our children quickly learn that the punishment is much lighter if the toothbrush was knocked in acci-

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dentally. Our laws allow for this distinction too. For example, the penalty for manslaughter can be as light as five years probation, while the penalty for pre-meditated murder is life imprisonment or death.

Fooled by Appearances

And yet sometimes Christians forget to allow for the difference between actions and motives. We are quick to label actions as sin without a thought about the motives behind them. Many Christians, on being asked to define sin, first think of the 10 Commandments or the apostle Paul's vice lists and begin compiling a list of their own: adultery, murder, theft, and add contemporary favorites such as Internet pornography and drug abuse. But they have missed the point. Throughout Scripture we see that the heart is where sin really takes place. Adultery and drug abuse are merely symptoms of the real sickness. It is possible to have a serious disease with few obvious symptoms. In other words, we can sin while sitting in church on Sunday or visiting the poor and lonely. Doing the right

thing is good, but that is not the end of it. We have to work on doing the right thing for the right reasons. For example, do we include in our lists of sins "being nice to my loved ones in order to manipulate them" or "quoting Scripture to a suffering friend in order to impress him"?

A Few Stories

I have a friend with whom I'm quite polite. Our friendship looks very cordial and pleasant, but recently when he was experiencing a challenge I felt my conscience tweaked. He was telling me about his situation and I found myself saying the nice thing: "Oh, I know! I know! You poor thing!" while deep down I was thinking of the part he had had in his problem and how he really needed to change his approach before he could get healing. I decided not to say anything, telling myself I didn't want to hurt his feelings. But after some reflection, I realized I wasn't as interested in saving his feelings as I was in making sure he didn't dislike me. So while I fooled myself that I was being nice, I was actually being selfish. Where was my heart?


People have commented that they've never heard me speak behind someone's back or gossip about someone. I have proudly thought, "Yes, I don't gossip. I'm a good person!" But on further reflection I must admit that goodness is not my only motivation. I know that when people speak negatively about others, it also reflects poorly on them. So again, while looking very nice and Christian, I'm actually just making sure I'm liked. Again, my motivation is selfish. Where is my heart?

Perhaps you've said "I'll pray for you" in an effort to look spiritual. Perhaps you've given something to others so they'll be indebted to you. Perhaps you've made friends with others because being with them makes you look good. Perhaps you've told someone "I love you" because you want him to say it back. Where was your heart?

On the other hand, sometimes we have the right heart and things still don't work out. There are times when we are motivated to do the right thing and end up doing the wrong thing.

As an Australian who has lived in both Britain and America, I have come to understand this principle in a new way. I have offended others and been offended by the words of others, only to discover that perfectly harmless terms in Australia are offensive in other English-speaking cultures and vice versa. This has taught me that it is possible to scandalize other Christians, all the while acting out of pure motives. Where was my heart?





Or imagine that during a worship service at your church, a furious man started throwing things and yelling and making a scene. Would your first thought be that he was an unusually righteous man? Would you assume that he was a Christian? What about Christ himself? When Jesus threw the money changers from the temple it must have been an outrage to some. I'm sure many questioned Jesus' dedication to God and his principles. And yet it was that very dedication which motivated him to act in a way that seemed so rash. Where was his heart?

Perhaps you've tried to encourage or challenge others in love and ended up offending them. Perhaps you've tried to help someone move in and ended up breaking her grandmother's heirloom dishes. Perhaps you've tried to make much-needed changes at church and ended up making someone angry. Where was your heart?

X-Ray Vision

Jesus never lost sight of the real issue. He knew that sin is not just an action but a thought that prompts an action. He told the story of two sons, one who said he would not obey then did obey, and the other who said he would obey but did not (Matthew 21:28-32). He taught that wanting to murder is as bad as murder itself, that adultery can be committed in the mind as well as the body (Matthew 5:21, 27, 28). He called the Pharisees all kinds of names because they were only obedient on the outside (Matthew 23:27, 28). Jesus knew the ideal is to have a good heart and good actions to match, but he knew if he had to choose one, it would be the good heart. It is the heart that is the source of good or bad (Mark 7:21-23).

We've heard people say, "Her heart is in the right place." But where is the right place? How do we get our hearts right to ensure our actions follow? The truth is, our hearts should be in Heaven even while our bodies are on this earth. After all, our hearts are already in God's presence. As 1 Samuel 16:7 reminds us, "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." In spite of our attempts to fool others, God sees the heart of the matter. He sees our good motives when others are annoyed or offended and says, "My child, I know you wanted to do the right thing." And he sees our bad motives when others praise us and says, "My child, where is your heart?" ■

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How do we get our hearts to Heaven when our bodies are still operating in this world?

Inner motivations can be transparent—they are so much a part of the way we make choices that we are unconscious of them. But rest assured that if you ask God to reveal your uglier motivations, he will. He knows you better than you know yourself, so he will also provide ways for you to grow.

- Start by knowing that no matter how bad your motives, God already knows them and loves you anyway. But also know that he wants to work on them and that he can't do that until you turn them over to him.

- Pray as David did: "Create in me a clean heart, O God" (Psalm 51:10, NKJV).

- Think back on times you've made mistakes. Was that your intention? Think back on times you've been praised. Was your motive always pure? Patterns in your past may help you avoid future mistakes.

- Get to know God's heart by surrounding yourself with people who know him and reflect his ways. You can hang around with Jesus and Moses and all the greats any time just by reading Scripture. Soon their purity of heart will start to rub off on you! Devotional books, worship music, and the company of mature Christian people will also be a great help. As you start to know him more, you will naturally begin to know how to reflect his interests in your own life.

- Be comforted by the knowledge that, since God sees the heart, he is proud of you for wanting to have the right heart, even if you sometimes fail. You will never have perfect motivations all the time, but the fact that you have made a commitment to getting them right means you're well on your way.

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