

A QUESTION OF MOTIVE LUKE 7:36-50

Why did you come to Church today? What was it that persuaded you to get out of bed, put on your coat, pick up your offering, get on the bus or in the car and come into the building today? Maybe you did it because you always do it, as part of your Sunday routine and it has always been that way and you see no reason to change that! Maybe this is your first visit to our Church and you're not really sure why you came; maybe you've been wanting to come for a while but never plucked up the courage, but today you did and here you are; I hope you have no regrets! Maybe you do this out of a sense of duty – its something you ought to do and because ought to do it, you are here, not every Sunday, but as often as you feel satisfies that sense of duty. There are lots of motives for being here today.

I was leading a discussion lately with a large group of people, some of whom were ministers and one of the questions we had them discuss was 'why do I go to Church?' There was a great babble of noise as they talked to one another about their motivation and I overheard one person say 'because I have to!' I told him that I didn't think that was right answer, but he responded by saying that was how he felt. To begin with, I thought he was joking, but the more the conversation went on, the more I realised that he was actually serious; and he was a minister. He goes to Church, he feels, because he has to! Maybe you are here today because you feel you have to be here; you're on a rota or something! Surely there are higher motivations than that! This whole question touches lots of different parts of life: why do we live in a Christian way? Why do we give money to Church? Why do we give time to serve Christ and the Church? It seems to me, and it has always seemed to me, that Christians ought to be *the* most highly motivated people on the planet, but it not always that way! So why?

In Luke 7 today, we read the story of a woman whose motivation to see Jesus and worship Him was extravagant. Some people questioned her motives and questioned the way in which Jesus responded to her, but the story is told in such a way that she comes out best! Why did she do what she did? She had a very clear reason – she behaved in the way she did because of what Jesus had done for her. Her behaviour was a reaction and response to the grace and love of God shown to her by Jesus when they had met before.

Jesus had gone to dinner with a Pharisee. We're not really sure why Simon invited Him – was he looking for time to ask Jesus all kinds of trick questions? Was he genuinely trying to understand Jesus and what He was doing? We don't know, but Jesus went. There was no such thing as 'private life' in the Middle East then; the house was open to the street and when people were sitting at dinner in Simon's house, others could look in at the windows or even come into the house and wander round watching the people eat, listening to their conversations. So the woman comes into the dining room: Luke describes her as 'a woman who had lived a sinful life' – was that code for a prostitute? We're not sure, but it is of that order; then he describes what she did: "*she brought...*" (7:37f)

There was consternation in Simon's mind. He knows who this woman is, and what this woman is and says to himself: *"if this..."* (7:39) It turns out that not only does Jesus know who and what this woman is, He also knows what Simon is thinking – how frightening is that for Simon! So he tells Simon a story: *"Two men..."* (7:41f) There is an obvious answer – the one who had the bigger debt cancelled will have the higher regard for the man, will love him more. It is a simple fact of human behaviour. Then there's a sting in the tail because Jesus contrasts Simon and woman in their reactions to Him: *"You did..."* (7:44bf) The contrast in their behaviour begins with the contrast in their hearts, their motives, their relationship to Jesus. Simon wanted to meet Jesus so that he could ask him awkward questions, perhaps; the woman wanted to meet Jesus to say 'thank you' for what He had done for her.

"I tell..." (7:47) We need to get the order right here: the woman did what she did for Jesus because He had previously brought her forgiveness. What she did for Him in Simon's dining room was an act of love to say 'thank you' for the forgiveness of her sins. She was not forgiven because she poured ointment on His feet; she poured ointment on His feet because she had already been forgiven. The woman must have met Jesus before; perhaps she had been in the crowd when He had spoken about forgiveness and His sermon had touched her heart and brought grace to her, and so God's forgiveness became her experience. However this happened, it had happened and now she comes to show Jesus just how much He means to her. She had believed: she had come to believe Jesus' words, trust His promises; she had come to trust Him and that faith had opened the door for her to experience forgiveness and what we read today is her expression of extravagant, strong love for Jesus, inspired and motivated by, and responding to, her faith and what Jesus had done for her.

J.C.Ryle was the Church of England bishop of Liverpool at the end of the 19th century; he writes about this story; I have to say that while these words are over 100 years old they could have been written yesterday; his question remains to be answered. "Why is it that we see so little of this strong love to Jesus among Christians of this present day? How is it that we seldom meet with the saint who will face danger and go through fire and water for Christ's sake?" Is he right? How motivated are we? Before we answer that question and say 'yes, we are highly motivated; I would do that' let me ask you a question that only you can answer. When you are asked to do something in Church, what is your first thought? Is it 'Yes, I will do this; that's fine.' Or is your first thought 'how can I get out of it? What excuse can I think of?' Be honest with yourself and your answer. Why is it that we struggle to find people to do a number of jobs in Church? Is it because we don't have the people? Or is there a motivation question that we need to address? Are there so many other things that come first?

Here is Ryle's answer: "There is only one answer. It is weak faith and a low sense of obligation to Christ which so widely prevail. A low and feeble sense of sin will always produce a low and feeble sense of the value of salvation. A slight sense of our debt to God will always be attended by a slight sense of what we owe for our redemption. It is the man who feels much forgiven who

loves much.” Why would even consider that Jesus Ryle might be right? Is there so little ‘strong love’ among Christians today?

What has God done for us? Let’s make a list. What would be on that list? What might you bring to that list? God has brought forgiveness for our sins; hope, including the hope of heaven; peace to our hearts that we need not be anxious or afraid of anything; help and strength for living life every day, providing for us all that we need; the gift of faith, faith being the key to open the door to these other blessings; above all His Son has come into our world, has lived amongst us in all that meant and then He gave His life for us on the cross, the ultimate gift of love; there is no greater love that anyone could give to us, and Jesus has given it, His life. One of these gifts on its own should inspire us to love God back with strong love, but all of these gifts...? Have we taken them for granted? Have we stopped feeling love for God who has blessed us in these ways?

Why do we come to Church? The highest motive for coming to Church Sunday by Sunday is to worship God and say ‘thank you’ to Him for all that He has given to us. We use the words that we sing and the words of the prayers to give thanks to God who has loved us so well. Worship should be the overflow of joy, of gladness, of a sense of gratitude in our hearts, but so often we sing with glum faces as if we don’t feel the force of the words we sing.

Why do we live in a Christian way? Paul in Colossians 3 gives the Christians a whole list of qualities to put into practice: *“Therefore, as...” (Col 3:12)* Always there is a motive: ‘because you are God’s people, this is how you are to live; because of the way in which God has blessed us this is how we are to live.’

Why give to Church? The highest motive for giving to Church is another way of saying ‘thank you’ to God who has given so much to us. I have been involved in all sorts of discussions in the past about stewardship plans and campaigns to persuade people to give to Church, but it always comes back to this: “We can never separate how much someone gives with how much they love the Lord Jesus.” These are bound, linked, joined together.

Why serve God through Church? The highest motive for Christian service in any shape or form is as response to God; He has given much to us; we want to give something back to Him; so we give of our time and energy to serve God in Church, in the world, in all sorts of ways and places. This kind of service at its best is never a duty, but is a way of using the gifts that God has given to us to serve Him in return.

Why take a stand on Christian faith? Why make a Christian commitment? The highest motive for all of these is love for the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is all a question of motive. Where would we have been in Simon’s dining room? Would we have been with Simon – ‘what is this woman doing? Why is Jesus letting her do this? What a waste!’ Or would we have been with Jesus, understanding her motive, loving much because she had been much loved,

showing her love and gratitude to someone who had blessed her immensely? This is a huge question for us: is J.C. Ryle talking to us and about us when he talks about “a low and feeble sense of salvation... a slight sense of our debt”? Is that us? Or are we here to say ‘thank you’ to God because He had loved us so well and so lavishly? Do we give generously for God’s work in the world because God has been generous to us? Do we give unstintingly of our time, talents, and energy because God has given to us and held nothing back? Christians should be the most highly motivated people on planet because God has given so much to us. Why is that not always true? Do we take Jesus for granted? Do we take His grace for granted? Are we looking for reasons not to worship, not to give, not to serve? Is our love for Jesus strong love, so that we are highly motivated people? There is a world of a difference! It is all a question of motive!