

A woman in silhouette stands on a pier at sunset, surrounded by a large flock of birds flying in the sky. The scene is bathed in the warm, golden light of the setting sun, with the water reflecting the light and the birds creating a sense of movement and freedom. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

**Why Do Wrong  
Motivations Stunt Our  
Spiritual Growth?**

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## Matthew 15:1-20 (HCSB)

Then Pharisees and scribes came from Jerusalem to Jesus and asked, 2 “Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they don’t wash their hands when they eat!” 3 He answered them, “And why do you break God’s commandment because of your tradition? 4 For God said: Honor your father and your mother; and, The one who speaks evil of father or mother must be put to death. 5 But you say, ‘Whoever tells his father or mother, “Whatever benefit you might have received from me is a gift committed to the temple”— 6 he does not have to honor his father.’ In this way, you have revoked God’s word because of your tradition. 7 Hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied correctly about you when he said: 8 These people honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. 9 They worship Me in vain, teaching as doctrines the commands of men.” Defilement Is from Within 10 Summoning the crowd, He told them, “Listen and understand: 11 It’s not what goes into the mouth that defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man.” 12 Then the disciples came up and told Him, “Do You know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard this statement?” 13 He replied, “Every plant that My heavenly Father didn’t plant will be uprooted. 14 Leave them alone! They are blind guides. And if the blind guide the blind, both will fall into a pit.” 15 Then Peter replied to Him, “Explain this parable to us.” 16 “Are even you still lacking in understanding?” He asked. 17 “Don’t you realize that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is eliminated? 18 But what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart, and this defiles a man. 19 For from the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false testimonies, blasphemies. 20 These are the things that defile a man, but eating with unwashed hands does not defile a man.”

## Introduction

Have you ever misunderstood things? When I was in college, I had ideas in my head of clandestine meetings of wicked church leaders that would gather to determine how to destroy the work of God within their church. Now I had been in church all my life and had never actually seen one of these meetings, but for some reason that was my idea of why churches weren't everything God had called the church to be. As I began to pastor churches, I discovered that I was gravely mistaken.

Most church members want to grow in Christ and desire to see their church's make a difference for eternity in the lives of others. They are generally faithful, giving, and supportive to the work. Still many churches and believers continue to fall short.

[Matthew 15:1-20](#) helps us to develop a realistic view of why our church may fall short of its calling. As we have begun our journey through the book **Returning to Holiness**, the reality of our motivations comes to light as we allowed God to search our thought life this week. In these verses then, I want to respond to the question, "Why do wrong motivations stunt our spiritual growth?" and then I want to provide three practical steps that we can take to address our motivation problem.

## A Response to the Question

In these verses, like in much of the Gospels, we again see the Pharisees reaching out to challenge Jesus. This time the matter is ceremonial washing before meals. The Pharisees want to know why Jesus doesn't teach his disciples to follow the traditions of the elders and the previous generations of the Rabbis as it relates to showing proper honor and reverence to God. To the Pharisees this was not simply a matter of good hygiene, but rather a matter of what was acceptable worship to God versus what was not.

Jesus' turns this discussion around on these religious leaders. He asks, why they have chosen to teach what the elders have shared rather than what God has commanded? Then he calls the crowds together and instructs them about the reality of our inner life. We are not unclean because of what we eat or how we wash, but rather we are unclean because of what is within us.

The anger of the Pharisees and the confusion then of the disciples reveals the depth of Jesus' instruction for their lives and for ours. Both Pharisee and disciple misunderstood the reality of righteousness and of worship. In their minds, doing what is right is rooted in the actual action. Jesus makes plain that doing what is right is rooted in the inner self and in our motivations.

We are not immune to this same misunderstanding. Often, we attempt to tie the pursuit of holiness and the practice of Godliness that make up the Christian life into a series of external actions that result in faithfulness and spiritual growth. However, nothing could be further from the truth. The battle with sin and self is not waged from the outside action producing inner righteousness, but rather is won through internal righteousness resulting in external action. For the Pharisees, for the disciples, and for us Jesus turns our instincts and our understanding upside down.

Our worship, our witness, our prayers, and our service must be rooted in righteousness through the person and work of the Lord Jesus. Only through the inner work of the Lord Jesus producing righteousness in us can we truly produce fruit of righteousness outside of us.

Knowing that the change we need is rooted in an inner work of the Lord Jesus, what must we do? How do we experience this inner change through the Lord Jesus?

## Practical Step #1: Pray for Conviction of Impure Motivations.

The Scriptures are clear that we cannot truly know our inner self. Our most inner thoughts, our plans, our motivations, and our attitudes are masked and hidden from us. Often the wrong motivation hides beneath a veneer of right action within us. As a result, we often are far down the path of sin before we recognize just how far we have wandered. Therefore we must pray for conviction of impure motivations

[Proverbs 21:2](#) (HCSB) states, "All a man's ways seem right to him, but the LORD evaluates the motives." [Proverbs 14:2](#) (HCSB) declares, "There is a way that seems right to man, but its end is the way to death." [Proverbs 16:9](#) (HCSB) offers, "A man's heart plans his way, but the LORD determines his steps."

In each of those three occasions there is an emphasis on what we do not know. Then those absences in our knowledge are contrasted by what the Lord knows and what he is revealing. This unbridled knowledge from a loving God provides us the light we need to see who we truly are.

The truth we need then is found in God himself. We must turn away from our internal investigation of ourselves, and turn to God for his revealing power to bring our impurity of motivation and thought to the surface. This prayer most often will result in conviction through the power of the Holy Spirit revealing how far off course our sin has taken us.

## Practical Step #2: Confess Our Sin and Rely Upon the Lord for His Cleansing.

Knowing the presence of our impurity then provides us the opportunity to do something about it. Not knowing the reality of our impurity leaves us a victim. Jesus describes the Pharisees as blind guides leading other blind people who all fall into the ditch. This is the same state we find ourselves in before the reality of our impurity is brought before us. Now having experienced the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit and encountering his convicting work, we can do something. However, we must make sure that we do the right thing. As we seek God's revealing work in our lives, we must commit to confess our sin to Him and rely upon his cleansing.

While both the Pharisees and the Apostles were mistaken in our text, we see through the Gospels that the Apostles were willing to accept Jesus' instructions while the Pharisees were not. The Christian life is not a game a Bible trivia. The reality of knowledge in the Christian life is to produce life change from the inside out. We cannot simply know that we have impure motivations, but we must be willing to embrace the change the Lord Jesus desires to bring into our lives.

The LORD invites us to come to him in order that there may be a change. Jesus says in [Matthew 11:28](#) (HCSB), "Come to Me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." Knowing the reality of our condition and the circumstances that we face provides each of us with an opportunity come to Jesus and experience the change we need regarding our sin.

1 [John 1:9](#) emphasizes the essential nature of confession in the face of our sin for cleansing and forgiveness from the Lord Jesus. Apart from his work within us, we have no hope for spiritual growth and maturity. Confession is agreeing with God about the reality of our sin and committing ourselves to a new direction for our lives. Once the Lord reveals our impurity to us, we must be willing to confess that impurity to the Lord Jesus and trust him to provide the forgiveness and the cleansing that we need.

### **Practical Step #3: Slow Down!**

Life moves at us with tremendous speed. We are constantly assailed by information, commentary, events, and circumstances. For many we live in a whirlwind of action. However, if we are to reign in our wrong motivations, then we must slow down.

How many of us have ever read our Bibles in order to just check the box on our list of things to do? How many times have we prayed over our meals because that is our habit? How often we do pray what are seemingly right prayers with a selfish desire motivating the prayer?

These are no different than the ritual washings the Pharisees were asking Jesus about, and in many ways, they are brought about by a constant busyness in and around our lives. As a result, we act based on ritual and habit rather than a genuine desire to worship.



## Why Do Wrong Motivations Stunt Our Spiritual Growth?

We must slow down and contemplate what we are doing? We must ask ourselves, why am I doing this? What motivates me to do this thing? [Proverbs 19:2](#) (HCSB) reminds us, "Even zeal is not good without knowledge, and the one who acts hastily sins." The rush of life and the desire to get things done often find their roots in our impurity and they push us further and further away from God and his plan for us.

Step back!

Slow down!

Breathe deep!

Ask questions!

Do I share the Gospel because I want a bigger church or because I genuinely care about the eternity of that person? Have I allowed my emotions to drive my response to this time of adversity rather than looking to how God is molding and shaping my character in this situation? Am I submitted to the sanctifying work of the Lord Jesus in my life as I deal with this circumstance?

My love for professional wrestling is not a new development; I have been a fan since I was about 4 years old. In many ways, I have a long-term and wide-spread expertise from all of the wrestling I have watched from various promotions over the years, the books I have read, and the podcasts I have listened too. Wrestling has changed a lot over those years and it has done so for the better in a lot of ways. But if watch with me two phrases you will hear over and over again is, "They are going to fast," or, "They need to slow down." I watch matches over and over again where I see these people working so fast that they cannot do their moves right and the affect of those moves for the audience is lost because they are rapidly moving to the next thing.

This is no different than what happens in our lives. We move so fast that the reality of our situations and the instructions from our Lord are often lost in the hurry. We are so busy we don't have time to hear God speak or to respond to God's leading. As a result, our motivations get muddy and we arrive at the wrong destination. Take a breath. Slow down.

## Conclusion

The right motivation is critical to righteousness. A true relationship with God through Jesus Christ grows from the roots of our inner being. Much like a garden, we must constantly tend to our inner self so that our external actions grow from the right motivations. As we submit to God's searching and confess our sins, we clear those thorny bushes and brambles from our lives. Then as we slow down and begin to contemplate who God is, what He has called us to do, why He has called us to do it, and how He has called us to do it, we begin to cultivate the soil of spiritual growth within our lives.

Pray for God to search us and convict us. Confess our sins and trust in the cleansing power of the Lord Jesus to bring about change. Then slow down as you go about your day-to-to day activities. From these three steps, we can fight back against our wrong motivations and continue to grow into all that God has created us to be.

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