

When Motives Just Aren't Enough

“The End Justifies the Means” said Ovid in 10 B.C. That’s a creed many live by. Why you do something, its ultimate purpose, is often seen as more important than how you do something. Reaching the destination is all important, the route taken seemingly is not. It is the world and age of **pragmatism**. In a pragmatic world, this is a popular way of thinking: whatever you need to do to reach your goals, do it. This has bled over into the church. Christians perform music scarcely recognizable from the world, but the cry is: “They’re doing it for God! They’re trying to win the lost! Yes, it is a bit unorthodox, but people are really getting saved! Look at their heart, not at their hair!”

Or churches bring in comedians, stage performers or presentation methods similar to a cabaret in Las Vegas, but the cry is: “This is what the unsaved relate to! We mustn’t quibble over how we do it, so long as we do it!” So the end justifies the means.

What does God say about this? Today we’ll look at three examples where God shows what He thinks of this kind of thinking.

Our first stop is in I Samuel 15. Here God told Saul through Samuel to go and completely eliminate the Amalekites. Saul goes off, but decides during the battle that it is a waste to destroy so many good things. He destroys the worthless and keeps the good. He has not obeyed God. His was a partial obedience. To obey part of God’s commands and disobey the rest is disobedience. God tells Samuel of Saul’s disobedience and he goes off to confront the king. Saul meets Samuel with a hypocritical, spiritual greeting in verse 13. Samuel asks if Saul has truly obeyed God’s command, “then what meaneth this bleating in mine ears?”

Listen now to Saul’s responses in verse 15.

- 1) Firstly, it’s we and the people. It’s not my fault, it’s the people’s fault. Saul doesn’t take responsibility as a leader should.
- 2) Notice the ‘spiritual’ motive. Oh, we kept these animals to sacrifice to the Lord. Saul was saying, “No, we haven’t really disobeyed, I mean, instead of just destroying these fine animals, we can sacrifice them to God. In other words, I improved on God’s idea.” But read between the lines here. Do you really think that that is what Saul and his men were thinking? “Let’s not kill these, let’s take them home and kill them on God’s altar!” Nonsense, Saul’s stomach was growling, and these looked good to eat.

What was really happening is that Saul felt that if he could supply a good motive for his actions, his methods didn’t matter. If he could justify disobedience, it was as good as obedience in his mind.

This is exactly how some Christians behave today; as long as we disobey for good reasons, it’s as good as obeying. It’s really insulting God’s Word” ‘Lord, Your prescribed methods are not important. I can use my own, so long as I do it with a good motive.’

But God clearly sees it differently. He tells Saul, “Wherefore then didst thou not obey the voice of the LORD, but didst fly upon the spoil, and didst evil in the sight of the LORD” Saul remains self-righteous: “And Saul said unto Samuel, Yea, I have obeyed the voice of the LORD, and have gone the way which the LORD sent me, and have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. ²¹But the people took of the

spoil, sheep and oxen, the chief of the things which should have been utterly destroyed, to sacrifice unto the LORD thy God in Gilgal.”

Listen to Samuel’s reply.

“And Samuel said, Hath the LORD *as great* delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey *is* better than sacrifice, *and* to hearken than the fat of rams.”

To obey is better than sacrifice. In other words, to obey My explicit commands is better than doing things for Me which I have not sanctioned. I want worship on My terms, not on yours! Man does not set the terms of worshipping God, God does. And this incident teaches us that God was not impressed with a good motive; he punished Saul for his ungodly methods. He tore the kingdom away from him that day. Saul’s motives, even if they were sincere, did not save him. God certainly did not agree with ‘the end justifies the means’. In essence Saul said, “I disobeyed for the right reasons”. But God said, “Doing wrong for right reasons is still wrong”.

Our second example jumps ahead a few years to the reign of King David. I Chronicles 13 has the account. David has achieved a certain level of peace in his kingdom, and now he wished to return the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. After having been captured by the Philistines and then returned after they were plagued, it had remained at a place called Kirjathjearim for 20 years. David felt it was time for the Ark to return. He gathered just about the whole country for the ceremony. The Ark is loaded onto a new cart, and Ahio and Uzza have the privilege of driving the cart. Off they go with singing, and musicians playing with all their might -- a huge celebration. Then trouble hits. The ox stumble, the Ark begins to topple, and Uzza reacts by reaching out to stop the Ark from falling. He touches the Ark, and God strikes him dead. What went wrong?

Honestly, how could God do this? All Uzza was doing was stopping the Ark from crashing to the ground, and who would want that? I mean, surely God did not want the Ark of the Covenant to crash to the ground, possibly breaking?

No, the issue here was not Uzza’s good motive, but his poor method. As a priest trained thoroughly and diligently in the Law, he knew better. He knew God’s prescribed method for carrying the Ark was not on a cart. Numbers 4:15 made this clear. It was specifically built with rings for staves to fit into, to be carried on the shoulders of the priests. Uzza no doubt knew this. Why did he disobey? Perhaps he thought to himself, “Those commands about carrying the Ark have to do with its transportation. We are transporting it, just with a different means. It doesn’t matter how we do it, so long as we do it. Besides, on so great a day of celebration, the Ark needs to be high and visible for everyone to see. God doesn’t mind, I mean He will surely be pleased that we are trying to make the Ark so clear to all.”

Uzza was saying, God will overlook my disobedient method because of my honourable motive. But God disagreed. I believe He caused the oxen to stumble. He forced Uzza to face his own disobedience. Because not only was the Ark to be carried on staves by the

sons of Kohath, it was also never to be directly touched by anyone. So as the Ark toppled over, Uzza was cornered: he could either let it fall disgracefully to the ground and admit he had given into pragmatism and they shouldn't have carried it that way in the first place, or he could be twice disobedient, and reach out to stop such an incident from occurring by disobediently touching the Ark. He chose the second one. He showed that he probably had little faith that God means what He says in His Word and so tempted God by such public, gross disobedience. Uzza thought that motives were enough. But his example shows that though the motive may be right, God also looks at the methods. The methods reveal whether we love God enough to honour His Word and worship Him on His terms or whether, like Saul and Uzza, we think we can bring a sacrifice with disobedience or ungodly methods, put it on the altar and expect God to be pleased.

Our final example comes from Leviticus 10:1-2. Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's sons were priests. They go in to make their offering to the Lord. However, they are killed for offering strange fire.

What happened? Well, Leviticus 6:12-13 tells us that the altar of burnt offerings was to have a continual fire burning. Incense offerings were to be presented to God by pouring the incense on top of a coal taken from the altar of burnt offerings. There is strong typology here, a person's prayers (represented by the incense) are made acceptable to God by Christ (the altar of burnt offering). But Nadab and Abihu did not follow this procedure. Perhaps they felt, "Fire is fire, who cares where you get it from?" They did not follow God's exact commands and God struck them dead.

It is especially serious when you consider that the Law had just recently been given. It was fresh in their minds. Clearly, like Saul and Uzza, they felt it was all the same anyway, the ends justify the means, and so they improvised. They were careless with God's Word. God used them as an example.

Nadab and Abihu were not involved in Baal worship. They weren't creating a golden calf like their father did. They were busy serving God when this happened. But they made the same mistake many make today in thinking, "If I'm at the altar of God, He'll accept whatever I put on it." "If I song for God, it doesn't matter if the music is ungodly." "If I preach for God, it doesn't matter if my doctrine is not 100%." "Whatever I do in service for God, He will accept it".

Nadab and Abihu prove this thinking wrong. God sees the motive. But He also sees the method, because the method shows whether we are truly in submission to God or not. It shows how high we hold up His Word in our hearts. Proud people think they can serve God on their own terms, and God will be obliged to accept it and reward it.

Humble Christians say, "My service for God must be for Him, and if for Him, then by Him; and if by Him, then it can only be done in a way that pleases Him".

So we have seen three examples of how God cares sincerely about methodology. In fact, we've seen how in these instances, God rated the methodology as more important than the motive. The methods, in these examples, overrules the motives, not vice-versa, as pragmatists tell us. Remember, God does not tell you to do anything for which He will not provide the power necessary to accomplish the task. That is why God can and will

scrutinize not only our motives but also our methods at the Judgement Seat of Christ. He is entitled to look at both *why* you did something and *how* you did it, since it is His Holy Spirit that provides both 'to will and to do' of His good pleasure. I Corinthians 3 shows us that if the motive and the material do not meet God's standard, they will burn up on that day of judgement. The works will be found to have been invalid. If the motive and the material is not rooted in Christ , it will be burnt up.

So worship must have music that is Christlike in style, not only in direction. Evangelistic methods must be those that reflect a changed life and do not confuse the message of Christ. Whether it be missions, Church growth, ministries , they must all use methods that glorify Him. People say, "Oh, but God sees the heart". That's right. Only God can see the heart. The onlooking world can only see what we do. The Bible tells us, "Do not let your good be evil spoken of". Our methods are not to be contradictory to our motives. Often God has not spelt things out as clearly as it was for Saul, Uzza and Nadab and Abihu , but there are always enough principles and precepts to judge safely when an unscriptural method is being used.

So, in God's eyes, Ovid was wrong. The ends don't justify the means. In our lives, may our means , the methods, accomplish the ends , to love God with our whole being.