

What Are You Hiding In Your Heart?

The apostle Paul makes it clear that in every action we perform our intention should be to glorify God: “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31, NKJV). When we observe this rule, every action of nature becomes religious, and a meal is as much an act of worship as is an act of prayer—and shall have its reward in its proportion. By God’s grace, these works of nature are capable of becoming acts of virtue, so that throughout our lives we may serve the Lord.

This grace is so excellent that it sanctifies our most common actions, and yet it is so necessary that, without it, the very best actions of our devotion are imperfect and vicious. For he who prays out of custom, or gives offerings for praise, or fasts to be accounted religious is a Pharisee in his devotion, and a beggar in his offerings, and a hypocrite in his fast. But a holy end sanctifies these and all other actions that can be made holy, and gives distinction to them, and procures acceptance.

Just as to know the end distinguishes a man from a beast,

so to choose a good end distinguishes him from an evil man.
Hezekiah
repeated his good deeds upon his sickbed and obtained the
favor of God,
but the Pharisee was counted insolent for doing the same
thing. Why?
Because the latter did it to upbraid his brother, the former
to obtain a
mercy from God.

Zacharias questioned the angel about his message and was
made speechless for his incredulity; but Mary questioned too
and was
blameless; for she did it to inquire after the manner of the
thing
prophesied to her. Zacharias did not believe the thing itself:
He
doubted God's power or the truth of the messenger, but she,
only her own
incapacity.

Intention is what distinguished the mournings of David
from the exclamation of Saul and the tears of Peter from the
repentance
of Judas. As Seneca, the Roman philosopher, said, "The praise
is not in
the deed done, but in the manner of its doing."

If a man visits his sick friend for charity's sake and
because of his old affection, we approve it; but if he does it
in hope
of legacy, he is like a vulture waiting for a carcass. The
same things
are honest and dishonest: The manner of doing them, and the
end of the
design, makes the separation.

Holy intention determines whether the actions of a man are

sinful, or unprofitable and vain. The poor farmer who gave a dish of cold water to Artaxerxes, king of Persia, was rewarded with a golden goblet; and he who gives the same to a disciple in the name of a disciple, shall have a crown: but if he gives water out of spite, when the disciple needs wine or a cordial, his reward shall be to want that water to cool his own tongue.

Purity of Intentions

There are several steps you can take to help ensure the purity of your intentions:

1. In every action you undertake, reflect upon the end; consider why you do it and what you stand to gain.
2. Begin every action in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The purpose for doing this is threefold: (1) to ensure that you have the permission of God; (2) to dedicate it to the glory of God; and (3) to secure God's blessing so that what you intend for innocent and holy purposes may not, by any chance, or abuse, or misunderstanding of men, be turned into evil or made the occasion of sin.
3. Begin every action with prayer, asking God not only to bless the action, but also to sanctify your purpose; and make the action an offering of worship to God. Well-intended actions are the best

presents we can make to God; and when we offer them up to Him, He will keep the fire on the altar bright and shining.

4. As you perform the action, focus on your purpose by offering up short prayers such as, "Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Your name let all praise be given" and "Now I am working the work of God; I am His servant, using His talents, and all the gain must be His." Then you can be sure, as the glory is His, so reward will be yours.

5. Take care that, while the altar is sending up a holy fume, you do not allow the birds to come and carry away your sacrifice. In other words, do not let that which began well and was intended for God's glory decline and end in your own praise, in temporal satisfaction, or in sin.

A story told to represent the vileness of sexual impurity is well begun; but if your listener is pleased with your language and begins to like you more than to dislike the crime, watch out. The goodly head of gold may descend in silver and brass and end in iron and clay, like Nebuchadnezzar's image; for from the end it shall have its name and reward.

6. If any accidental event which at first you did not intend can come to pass, do not let it be taken into your purposes or at all made use of. For example, if by telling a true story, you

can do an
ill turn to your enemy, do not by any means do it; but when
the
temptation is found out, turn all your enmity upon that.

7. For every more solemn action you undertake, determine
many good ends so that the consideration of them will
entertain all your
affections. In this way, when any one end ceases to be a
motivating
factor, the purity of your intention may be supported by
another supply.

If, for example, you undertake to fast only to tame a
rebellious body, you may be tempted to leave off fasting as
soon as you
have a remedy. But if instead you fast to gain victory over
every unruly
appetite, accustom yourself to bearing the yoke of the Lord,
develop a
contempt for the pleasures of meat and drink, humiliate all
wilder
thoughts, grow in obedience, humility, austerity, love and
devotion, and
perform an act of repentance, then whatever happens, you will
have
reason enough to continue in your purpose and to sanctify it.
The more
good ends are designed in an action, the more degrees of
excellency you
obtain.

8. If any temptation to interfere with your purpose
presents itself while performing a spiritual duty, do not omit
the
action but strive to refocus on your intention and thereby
nullify the
temptation.

9. In all actions which are of long duration, let your holy and pious intention be expressed; let it be, by a special prayer or action, by a particular act of resignation or offering, given to God; but in smaller actions, secure a habitual intention. Let it be included within your general care, that no action you perform will have an ill end, and stated in your general prayers, in which you offer yourself and all you do to God's glory.

10. Do not consider every temporal end a defiling of your intention, only those that contradict the ends of God. Sometimes a temporal end is a part of our duty, whether our employment is religious or civil. For example, we are commanded to provide for our families, and this is good.

But if a person becomes a minister for covetous or ambitious ends or does not seek the glory of God principally and especially, he has polluted his hands and his heart; and the fire of the altar is quenched, or it sends forth nothing but the smoke of mushrooms or unpleasant gums. It is a great unworthiness to prefer the interest of a creature before the ends of God.

Judging Our Intentions

How can we know that our intentions are pure? The Word tells us that a man's heart may deceive him, and he may not well know

what is in his own spirit; but the following signs can help us to judge

whether our intentions are pure and our purposes holy. It is probable

our hearts are right with God and our intentions pious if:

- * We esteem those things that are necessary for our soul's health more highly than those that are needful for our bodies; we are

eager to serve the necessities of the spirit before the needs of nature;

we choose any temporal inconvenience rather than commit a sin and

choose to do a duty rather than to get gain.

- * We have no regard for the opinion of men, but look to God for approval.

- * We seek virtue, not glory; the pleasure of God rather than the praise of men.

- * We trust God with the results of our actions once they have been commended to Him, remaining indifferent about the outcome—whether a success or a failure.

- * We desire that the work of God be carried out no matter who His chosen instrument is. We are not covetous of the virtues or

gifts of others—or of the reward and reputation that attend them.

- * We despise the world and its vanities.

- * We are more intent on the end of God's glory than on our own convenience or temporal satisfaction and are willing to use

whatever means God provides for us to perform our duties.

- * We are able to graciously accept the failure of a

temporal end that is conjoined with, and supposedly subordinate to, a spiritual end, as long as God's glory is secured.

In all of this, we must remember that no intention can sanctify an unholy or unlawful action. Saul, the king, disobeyed God's commandment, sparing the cattle of Amalek to reserve the best for sacrifice to the Lord; and Saul, the Pharisee, persecuted the church of God, with a design to do God service; but their actions were nevertheless unhallowed in spite of their good intentions. When there is both truth in election, and love in the intention; when we go to God in ways of His own choosing or approving; then our eye is single, and our hands are clean, and our hearts are pure.

Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667) was an Anglican minister who served as chaplain to King Charles I. He was also the bishop of Down and Connor in Northern Ireland. Adapted from Holy Living and Dying: With Prayers by Jeremy Taylor. Published by George Bell and Sons, London, 1897.