

Motivation From the Heart:
Exploring the *Why* Behind Spiritual Formation

“Motivation is the go of personality, and is, therefore, our most central problem.”¹
--G. W. Allport, psychologist

Motivation: A Great and Powerful Force

The paper considers the “Why?” of spiritual formation? Too often, studies on spiritual formation begin by asking “What?” and “How?” but never get to “Why?” The answer to question “Why?” is the crux of proper motivation.

At one point while working on this paper, I asked Google this question: “Why Spiritual Formation?” The first seven responses bypassed the question *why* and answered the question *what*: What is Spiritual Formation?

The eight response was entitled, “Why Spiritual Formation is Necessary for a Believer?” The first sentence of that paper read, “What is ‘spiritual formation’?” The paper went on to define spiritual formation, but did not speak about the *why* behind spiritual formation.

Why is too often the forgotten question. Yet, as we will explore in this paper, it is often the most important question because it is the question of proper motivation.

Our world contains many great and powerful forces that can change human life and shape the future. There is the force of belief. One person with great faith can move mountains. There is the force of love. Love can cause a person to do superhuman feats. Fear is a powerful force. When someone is afraid, they are able to accomplish things that they normally would not accomplish. Hate is another powerful force. Hate has fueled war machines to march across continents in order to extinguish the lives of the enemy combatant. Hope is another force. Victor Frankl’s study from the holocaust demonstrated that when people lost hope, they lost their will to survive.² But the converse was also true, hope fueled people’s ability to withstand adversity.

Each of these concepts—belief, love, fear, hate, and purpose—are part of what motivates a person. Motivation is our drive.

Motivation: The Roots of the Tree of Life

Motivation is the foundation of all that we are and all that we do as people. Think of motivation as the roots of a tree. A tree will only grow as tall as its roots allow. The roots provide the tree with a foundation, with nourishment, and with support. Without the roots the tree would not exist. And yet we usually never see the roots of a tree. All we see are the trunk and the branches. The trunk and the branches seem so important. But the equally important part of the tree lies buried underneath the ground—the roots.

In thinking about our spiritual lives, our roots are our motivation. Everyone sees our behavior (the trunk and branches). But underneath the behavior, buried in the center of our

¹ G. A. Allport, *Personality: A Psychological Interpretation* (New York: Holt, Reinhart & Winston 1937), p. 218.

² Victor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014).

hearts, lies our foundation for spiritual growth—motivation. Motivation is the *why* behind our behavior. Motivation is about attitude. Action is seen. Only God sees motivation. We know our motivation. But other's have to infer our motivation or wait for us to divulge our motivation.

When someone sees us give a person a kiss on the cheek, they might ask, "What motivation lies behind the kiss?" Is it the kiss of friendship? The kiss of romance? Or, like Judas, the kiss of betrayal? Motivation is the hidden root of the tree.

Defining Motivation

What is motivation? William G. Huitt, former Professor of Psychology at Valdosta State University, defines motivation by writing, "Motivation is an internal state or condition (sometimes described as a need, desire, want) that serves to activate or energize behavior and give it direction."³ This definition contains two parts. First, motivation is an internal state. It is the unseen root of the tree. Second, motivation activates our behavior. Huitt states that motivation helps, (1) "increase understanding of the purpose of one's life," (2) "connect self to the ultimate unknown," and (3) "appreciate self in relation to the universe."⁴

Edward Deci states a precise definition of motivation in the title of his popular book, *Why We Do What We Do*.⁵ Deci posits that motivation is the why behind our actions.

What Types of Motivation Exist?

Based on the work of Dr. Deci, there are primarily two types of motivation—extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation. I call these the Outer Way and the Inner Way.

1. Extrinsic Motivation.

Extrinsic motivation is often associated with completing a task to get a reward or to avoid a punishment. Sometimes my grandchildren come over to the house and ask me if I have any work for them to do. That's sounds like a tremendously benevolent offer. However, I know what they are really asking. They want to know if I have any job that I will pay them to do. They ask me this question when they have something they want to purchase and their parents won't give them money. The motivation to work is extrinsically motivated. That's not all bad. Much of what we accomplish in life on a daily basis has extrinsic roots behind it.

In 1971 Edward Deci conducted the SOMA cubes study on a group of students. Students were given cubes to complete as puzzles. First, Deci had the students play with the puzzles and noted their interest. Second, Deci selected one group of students to play with the puzzles, and he selected a second group which received a financial reward for every puzzle they completed. Third, after time passed, both sets of students were given free and unsupervised time to work on the puzzles without any incentive. When this happened, the students who had been paid to

³ W. Huitt. "Motivation to Learn: An Overview," *Educational Psychology Interactive*. Valdosta, GA: Valdosta State University, 2011.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Edward Deci, *Why We Do What We Do: Understanding Self Motivation* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996).

complete the puzzles were less interested in working on the puzzles. The monetary incentive undermined their intrinsic motivation.⁶

Again, not all extrinsic motivators are bad. However, in the wrong hands extrinsic motivators can become extrinsic manipulators. Richard Foster writes, “Now, the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees consisted primarily in externals that often involved manipulative control of other people. Instead of this sort of righteousness, Jesus points to an inner life with God that transforms the heart and builds deeply ingrained habits of virtue.”⁷

2. Intrinsic Motivation.

Intrinsic motivation is a matter of personal choice (autonomy), desire (purpose), and mastery (competency). R. M. Ryan and Edward Deci write, “Intrinsic motivation is defined as the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfaction rather than for some separable consequence. When intrinsically motivated, a person is moved to act for the fun or challenge entailed rather than because of external products, pressures, or rewards.”⁸

Consider running. When running is a mandatory part of athletic practice it can be a dreaded activity. Coaches sometimes use running as punishment for poor performance in practice or a game.

However, many runners run for the joy of running. In the movie *Chariots of Fire* the Olympian Eric Liddell was asked why he ran. His answer was, “When I run, I feel His (God’s) pleasure.”⁹ This is intrinsic motivation. I call this motivation from the heart.

Four Motivational Needs That Must Be Met For Intrinsic Motivation to Occur

Dr. Deci mentions three basic needs that must be met for intrinsic motivation to occur. The three needs he notes are: (1) The Need for Competence, (2) The Need for Autonomy, and (3) The Need for Relatedness. I will consider these three needs and add a fourth—The Need for Purpose.

I. The Need for Competence.

Competence is the ability to complete a job or task on one’s own. It includes the ability to self-manage and self-regulate one’s life.

⁶ A summary of this study can be found in a blog by Coert Visser entitled, “Progress-focused.” <https://www.progressfocused.com/2020/09/classical-research-edward-deci-1971.html>. Also see Daniel H. Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009).

⁷ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, Second Edition (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1988), 12.

⁸ R. M. Ryan and Deci E. L. “Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions and New Directions,” *Contemporary Education Psychology* 15, 54-67, 2000, 56.

⁹ *Chariots of Fire*. Screenplay by Colin Welland. Produced by David Puttnam. Directed by Hugh Hudson. Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2010.

For people to feel competent, they must learn to make their own decisions and own the results. This creates healthy independence.

Look at the ministry of Jesus. He taught his disciples. He equipped them. Then he sent them out on a mission (Matthew 10:5-ff.). He stretched them. When they had victories, they celebrated the victories together. When they failed, Jesus discussed the reasons why they failed.

Jesus said, "The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher (Luke 6:40, NIV). Jesus trained his disciples for three years so that they would be like him. This is an example of the process of spiritual formation in the ministry of Jesus.

Jesus walked with his disciples and taught them using the parapeitic method of training. He ate with his disciples and demonstrated the importance of hospitality and table fellowship. He taught his followers about kingdom life in his new kingdom.

After Jesus' resurrection, he continued to train his disciples. When it came time for his followers to carry on his mission, they were equipped. They weren't clones of Jesus; they had their own personalities, their own gifts, their own strengths and weaknesses. They weren't clones, but they were competent. Their competency enabled them to teach others how to become like Jesus.

One need for intrinsic motivation to occur is competency. Jesus met this need in his training of his followers.

II. The Need for Autonomy.

The need for autonomy is the need for choice. People need to feel that they have the ability to choose their path. This is the need of self-determination. With choice comes ownership. People must have the freedom to initiate their own actions. When people feel coerced, seduced, or cajoled, this destroys autonomy.

When people feel they have a choice, they deliberate about their choices. This creates intrinsic motivation to get the choice right. Without this ability to choose, people become automatons. Noting a study given by Sheldon and Kasser, Robert A. Emmons writes,

Having more autonomous reasons for one's strivings was positively associated with several measures of psychological well-being, including life satisfaction, vitality, self-actualizing tendencies, and self-integration. Extrinsic orientation was related to self-reports of anxiety and depression and poorer self-integration. Degree of self-determination may be especially important for goals in the spiritual domain, as often times individuals may feel compelled to engage in religious activities without intrinsic motivation.¹⁰

Note Emmons last point, in the spiritual realm people often feel like they don't have freedom to choose. This lack of freedom hampers intrinsic motivation and stunts spiritual growth.

Consider the story of Jesus and the rich man in Mark 10. The man asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus repeats six of the Ten Commandments, and the man says, "I've kept those." Jesus looks at the man and loves him. He respects the man's freedom to choose. He gives the man a tough choice, "You miss one thing. Sell everything you have and

¹⁰ Robert A. Emmons, *The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns: Motivation and Spirituality in Personality* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1999), 59-60.

give the money to the poor. ...Then come follow me.”¹¹ Jesus doesn’t coerce. He doesn’t browbeat the man. He doesn’t make the man any extrinsic promises. He lets the man make his decision.

The man’s face fell. He was sad. He walked away from Jesus. He chose his possessions over Jesus.

Notice what doesn’t happen next in the text. Jesus didn’t go running after the man. He gave the man a choice, and he let the man face the consequences of his choice.

Making choices for other people stifles their growth and maturity. It blocks intrinsic motivation. Collins and Porras in *Built to Last* write, “If you put fences around people, you get sheep. Give people the room they need.”¹² Dwight D. Eisenhower said, “You do not lead by hitting people over the head—that’s assault not leadership.” People will stumble. People will make mistakes. But their failures will be their own failures and will become an opportunity for growth. Give people room to grow. This room, this autonomy is crucial for intrinsic motivation to exist.

III. The Need for Relatedness.

Relatedness means feeling love and feeling accepted. It is the ability to care for others and to be cared for by others. A synonym is connectedness. This connected love, acceptance, care, and security ought to be the hallmark of the church. In John 13:35 Jesus says, “This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (NIV).

This concept of relatedness is beautifully illustrated in the image of the vine and the branches in John 15. The vine symbolizes connectedness. Jesus says, “Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me” (NIV).

In verse 12, Jesus says, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you” (NIV). When we are connected to Jesus, we are also connected to each other. We live in community together. We share communion together. We help each other. We strengthen each other’s weaknesses. We walk hand-in-hand and side-by-side. We experience mutuality. Edward Deci in *Why We Do What We Do*, writes, “In mature, mutual relationships, the one-up, one-down aspect that characterizes so many other relationships in life is not only absent in the structural sense but is absent in actuality.”¹³ We experience an interdependence that is based on our love for God and our love for one another. This gives us room to grow. It allows us room to use our own gifts for God’s glory and the mutual edification of the body of Christ. It creates a safe haven. It creates a happy space. It feels like home.

If Jesus is the vine and we are the branches, then this relatedness based on love for Jesus and love for each other ought to permeate the church. When that happens, the need for relatedness is fulfilled and intrinsic motivation has soil for its roots to grow and nourish the vine and the branches.

¹¹ My paraphrase.

¹² Jim Collins and Porras, Jerry I., *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (New York: CollinsBusiness Essentials, 1994).

¹³ Deci.

IV. The Need for Purpose.

Saint Augustine prayed to God, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” Why did Augustine pursue God? Because of his restless heart. He felt there was more to life than he was experiencing. This need for purpose and fulfillment in life, this desire to still restlessness in the heart, fuels intrinsic motivation.

Kenneth W. Thomas in his book, *Intrinsic Motivation at Work*, writes, “People suffer when they lack purpose.”¹⁴ When people discover purpose, they become driven to fulfill that purpose. Often this comes in the form of goal setting.

Dr. Robert A. Emmons, Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Davis, writes, “Human beings are by nature goal oriented.... The lives of human beings are structured around the pursuit of incentives—goals that we seek to obtain, maintain, or avoid.”¹⁵ Purpose, meaning, fulfillment, goals, personal incentives, and value are all closely knitted together. Emmons notes, “Goals provide a sense of meaning and purpose in life; without goals, it is difficult to imagine how one could lead a life that is meaningful and valuable.”¹⁶

Emmons finds that what is true of our personal life is also true in our spiritual life. Emmons writes, “When people orient their lives around the attainment of spiritual ends, they tend to experience their lives as worthwhile, unified, and meaningful.”¹⁷ Purpose in our spiritual lives quickens intrinsic motivation and flames the desire to become a more spiritual person.

Conclusion

In this paper we have discussed the importance of motivation in spiritual formation. We have delineated the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and demonstrated that intrinsic motivation is a qualitatively better form of motivation. We have looked at the four needs that must be met for proper intrinsic motivation to occur, namely, the need for competence, the need for autonomy, the need for relatedness, and the need for purpose.

Many books and classes on spiritual formation address questions like *what* is spiritual formation and *how* do we practice the spiritual disciplines, but rarely do they address the question—*why* spiritual formation? When you start with the *what* and move to the *how* without considering the *why*, these books can become mere self-help books, that leave God and the Holy Spirit out of the picture. Although this was never the intent of the authors, when we don’t ask the question *why*, it creates a trap where a reader’s motivation may become skewed.

There is a need for students, practitioners, and teachers of spiritual formation to keep asking the question *why* throughout the process of spiritual formation. As we have learned, the answer to the question *why* is the key to proper motivation.

¹⁴ Kenneth W. Thomas, *Intrinsic Motivation at Work: Building Energy & Commitment* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc, 2002), p.22.

¹⁵ Emmons, 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

