



Published Dec. 13, 2019

I've been fascinated with the concept of motive for as long as I can remember. I think it has something to do with all of the crime drama shows I watched as a kid and that I find so interesting even to this day.

I realize I'm several years late to the party, but I finally got around to listening to the NPR podcast "Serial," which featured in its first season in 2014 the unusual case of Adnan Syed, a teenager at the time accused of killing his former girlfriend and classmate in 1999. Throughout all the twists and turns in the case — which still makes a few headlines these days thanks to appeals and other legal maneuvers — what still sticks with me is what to me appears to be a lack of motive to commit such a crime.

Indeed, motive seems to have a negative connotation — Why did someone do something bad to someone else?

That's an important word: Why?

It goes beyond simple answers sometimes. And it goes beyond just crime, thank goodness. We have everyday motives all the time. I don't eat a lot of sugar because as a Type 2 diabetic I don't want to harm my body. We tell fibs to protect the secret of a surprise party for a loved one.

Sometimes motives are entirely helpful. Take the character of Elsa from Disney's "Frozen." She barricades herself in her room for years out of a fear that she will harm someone with her magical powers to freeze people and things.

In the "Indiana Jones" movie series, Harrison Ford's character puts himself in danger time and time again out of a love of preserving historical objects.

In the wildly popular "Harry Potter" books and movies, Professor Dumbledore willingly dies at the hand of Professor Snape so that Snape would look powerful to Voldemort, something that becomes critical later in the series as a means of fooling the villain and protecting Harry Potter. And in a story appropriate for this Christmas season, remember the tale of Mickey and Minnie Mouse in "Mickey's Once Upon a Christmas." They each work hard to buy a gift to go with something each treasures, but they each have to sell that item to afford to buy the gifts for each other. It's sad that their gifts are useless, but it's a sweet story about love and a desire — a motive — to make someone else happy.

Motive can be complicated ... well, sometimes.

Since we're coming close to Christmas, I think we should explore why we even have this holiday. It's not really about buying presents, Santa Claus, Rudolph and other elements of the season. Christmas is a religious holiday when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Christ child.

Why did God send Jesus to earth? What was God's motivation? Let's explore and find out together.

In our last Bible-teaching episode, we talked about Jesus representing the Light of the World. And we used the Biblical text from John 1:1-18 as our foundation for that talk. We'll bounce around a bit today, but we're going to focus mostly on a verse that many people are familiar with: John 3:16 but we'll also read verses 17-19.

You may want to follow along in a Bible. Or you can read from an app, such as BibleGateway or the YouVersion app for your phone or tablet — both are found in the Apple App Store and on Google Play! We're on John chapter 3, verses 16 to 19. If you're unfamiliar with how the Bible is put together, this is actually the fourth book of what we call the New Testament — roughly two-thirds of the way back from the very front of your Bible. I'll be reading from the Common English Bible — I like it because it tends to use more contemporary language, which makes the Bible a little easier to understand on the first attempt of studying the scriptures. Here's what it says:

*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him isn't judged; whoever doesn't believe in him is already judged, because they don't believe in the name of God's only Son.*

*"This is the basis for judgment: The light came into the world, and people loved darkness more than the light, for their actions are evil.*

There is that concept of light again.

When we return to In Layman's Terms, I'll share what I think those verses are trying to tell us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We just read John 3:16-19, which ended with a verse that said *"The light came into the world, and people loved darkness more than the light, for their actions are evil."*

But what do all of those verses mean? Here's a brief rundown from my studies:

1. First, God loved the people of this world very much, so much so that God sent His only son into the world to live among us — like one of us — to experience life as we do.
2. Second, through Jesus we can have eternal life. It just requires belief that Jesus is the Savior for you, for me, for everybody.
3. Third, God didn't send Jesus to condemn sinners — that's all of us. God wouldn't have had to have done that. He could have just let us continue down our sinful journey. Instead, God sent Jesus as a way of saving us, to serve as our sacrifice — to die for our sins.
4. Finally, what is the basis for judgment? It's turning our backs on the Light. It's turning our backs on Christ. Instead of believing in Jesus and asking Him to take a place in your heart, people are judged when they shun Jesus and his teachings in favor of the things

that we think are more fun or that provide more pleasure or that put ourselves or something else ahead of God. It's when people choose darkness over the light.

This was all necessary because of the sinful nature of all people. I'm a country music fan, and singer Luke Bryan has a song that proclaims, "I Believe Most People are Good." I tend to agree. But while most people may be good, ALL people are sinners.

If you're interested, you can go to the very beginning of the Bible and read Genesis chapter 3 to learn how Adam and Eve failed God. Don't blame them, though. If they hadn't done so, someone else would have by now.

Anyway, sin enters the world, and it seems like humankind can't get enough of it. Just like now, people back then drank too much, hurt other people, marginalized people who weren't exactly fitting the description of "normal." They robbed. They committed sex crimes. They worshipped idols. In general, like today, people back then failed to live up to God's lofty goals for them.

So God sent the Law. There were no sirens. No handcuffs. No jails.

In this case, the Law means a code for living — how to worship God, how to build a strong relationship with our Creator, how to love, care and support each other, and how to stay healthy. Jewish people call the first five books of our Bible — Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy — the Law. Within those pages are 613 rules for conduct on everything from what you shouldn't wear to what you shouldn't eat to how to repay a person if you accidentally kill one of their farm animals.

With so many Laws, though the people tried hard — at least at times — they couldn't measure up. They broke those laws and couldn't escape the grip of sin in their lives.

One of the New Testament writers, Paul, tells us in his letter to the Romans — chapter 10, verse 4 — that "Christ is the goal of the Law, which leads to righteousness for all who have faith in God."

In other words, the whole idea behind the Law was to help the people realize how they could live together in harmony, caring for each other and loving God. Paul is telling us that belief in Jesus — and doing what Jesus stood for — fulfills the goal behind all 613 of those rules. By believing in Jesus, we are righteous, we are justified.

We are saved for eternity.

So let's go back to John 3:16:

*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life.*

The result is people who believe in Jesus as their Savior are promised eternal life in God's Kingdom of Heaven. But why? What is God's motive?

Because God loves us. Period.

That's all it is. It's not some long, drawn-out theory like we might find in one of those engaging Robert Patterson crime novels. It's not some high-browed political motivation like we may read in history books or hear about in documentaries.

"God so loved the world." It's short, just five or six words depending on your Biblical translation. It's simple.

It's refreshing and soothing.

This holiday season, you may be going through some tough times. You might not have a firm grasp yet on who, exactly, Jesus is or what role He can play in your life.

But you can know this: God loves you so much that God sent his only son, Jesus, to teach you, to die for you. To love you.

Next week, we'll go through the Christmas story, from about nine months before Jesus is born to a baby resting in a manger. We'll take the stories from Matthew, Mark, Luke and John — the four gospels — and will put the story together in one narrative, in order, so you can better understand what happens and when.

And as we review this holy, mysterious story, you can remember that through it all, God's motive was that our Creator loves us so much that God's only son was a price worth paying for all humankind.

If you're willing, please pray with me.

Gracious and loving God, thank you for loving us. Some of us may not have a strong relationship with you. Some of us may not yet believe in You. But we are learning and trying. Thank you for your patience with me. Help me to grow in wisdom as I grow in my faith. Thank you for this festive time of year and for the baby Christ child, whom we are preparing to celebrate. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.