

Psalm 119

Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

Blest are the undefil'd in heart,
Whose ways are right and clean;
Who never from thy law depart,
But fly from ev'ry sin.

Blest are the men who keep thy word
And practice thy commands;
With their whole heart they seek the Lord,
And serve thee with their hands.

Great is their peace, who love thy law;
How firm their souls abide!
Nor can a bold temptation draw
Their steady feet aside.

Then shall my heart have inward joy,
And keep my face from shame,
When all thy statutes I obey,
And honor all thy name.



In the Nick of Time is published by Central Baptist Theological Seminary.

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October 23, 2026

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Actions, Intentions, Motivations

Kevin T. Bauder

They say that actions speak louder than words. Maybe that is so, sometimes. But often, judging actions on their own proves difficult or impossible.

One day I was walking down a residential street. Ahead of me, three women were talking on the sidewalk. One of them had a toddler with her, and she was paying very little attention to him. Suddenly, the tot decided to break jail. With surprising speed, he headed for the space between two parked cars and was about to dart into the street. A car was coming down the street in his direction. The car was traveling at a reasonable speed, but the driver could never have seen the child in time to stop. I shouted and waved. The mother saw the child, raced over, and grabbed him at the last instant. Then she stood on the curb screaming and cursing at the car as it drove past, its driver still oblivious. She clearly considered the near tragedy to be the driver's fault.

Imagine that the worst had happened, that the driver had struck the child, and that the child had died. A news report would probably just say that the driver had run over a child. People would blame the driver. But from what I saw, the real blame lay with the mother. Her neglect—her failure to fulfill a responsibility—would have been the most proximate cause of the death. The driver's actions would not necessarily speak for themselves.

Even when you think you are judging actions, you are often judging something else. Imagine yourself in a crowded room. Someone treads on your foot, causing you real pain. But then, he immediately apologizes. Chances are you will accept the apology. You recognize that this is just one of those things that happen in crowded rooms. It is unavoidable. Assuming that no greater harm has been done, you will most likely dismiss the event from your memory.

You have not judged the action. The action was treading on your foot and causing you pain. You have judged the intention. Both the situation and the apology let you know that this person meant you no harm. He probably was not even negligent. He may have been jostled, or you may have unwittingly moved your foot into his path at the last instant. He was only trying to cross the room. In spite of momentary pain, you judge the intention and shrug off the episode.

On the other hand, imagine that someone in the same room swings his clenched fist at your face. He misses, and you experience no pain. Nevertheless, you are instantly on alert. Why? Because you judge that this person is trying to harm you. He is likely to try again. You must be ready. But again, what you have judged is not the action, but the intention.

A man's (or woman's, or child's) actions are what he actually does. His intentions are what he is trying to do. Under many circumstances, it is impossible to judge his actions without first judging his intentions. Judging intentions is an important moral task.

There is a deeper question that might be asked. We know what a person has done. We can judge what he was trying to do. Then we want to know why he was trying to do what he was doing. When we ask *why*, we are no longer dealing with the intentions. We are dealing with motivations. Should we judge motivations?

Even judging intentions involves a bit of guesswork. After all, a person who steps on our foot might be trying to cause us pain, and his apology might be false. A person whose clenched fist just misses our nose might be trying to swish away a wasp. But these alternative explanations are so unlikely that we will scarcely entertain them.

Motivations, however, are genuinely a matter of the heart. And they are not simple things. They occur in layers. The person who tried to punch us may have been angry with us. That's a motivation, but it only leads to a further question: why is he angry? Is he just irascible, or have we done something to offend him?

Even our own motivations are not transparent to us. We need God's Word to help us understand the thoughts and intents (in this context, motivations) of our own hearts (Heb 4:12). Our hearts are deceitful beyond understanding (Jer 17:9). How much more should we hesitate to cast judgment upon the motivations of someone else's heart? Only his own spirit is in a position to make that evaluation (1 Cor 2:11).

The foregoing are important considerations when it comes to extending forgiveness. An apology, for example, may be an expression of regret that admits no wrong intention (as with the person who steps on our foot). If we judge that there was no ill intention, we can welcome the apology and go on.

A confession involves more than an apology. It acknowledges the intention behind the action. It entails an admission of wrongdoing, of sin against us. In confession, one takes responsibility not only for what he did, but for what he was trying to do.

What if the person's statement of what he was trying to do does not match our judgment of his intention? Under normal circumstances, I think we are obligated to accept his statement of intention unless there is compelling reason to reject it. We must extend forgiveness.

I am leaving aside the debate over whether we should already have forgiven. That is a biblically defensible position, though it is not unassailable. But I do not here intend to address the question of whether we should or even can forgive another in the absence of a confession.

For now, I am asking what we have a right to demand when that person does make the confession. And the short answer is that we most normally take his word for his intention—for what he was trying to do. We must take his word unless we have compelling reason to reject it.

What we must never do is to insist upon a confession of motivations that matches our preconceived impressions of why the transgressor did what he did. We can barely judge our own heart motivations. We are conspicuously poor judges of the motivations of others. A confession of wrongdoing may or may not include a confession of motivations. Sometimes, it is better that motivations not be confessed. Motivations are a godward element in any wrongdoing.

Remember, our hearts are deceitful and wicked above all things. One of the things that our wicked hearts do is to weaponize the motivations of others. We shall forgive them, we say, only if they confess to this or that evil motivation. Until they have groveled sufficiently, we have a right to withhold forgiveness.

The truth is that when we judge other people's motivations, we are usually judging what we cannot know. Our insistence upon a confession of motivation reveals more about our own hearts than it does about theirs. Actions may speak louder than words, but sometimes we must accept the words that are given to us.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
