



## **Lesson 5            Address Behavior**

Address behavior, not speculated motive. Once, in my school principal days, a teacher asked me to sit in on a session in which he wanted to confront a student about some behavior. During that session, he brought up her behavior but then proceeded to address the supposed motive behind her behavior. "I know what you are up to," he said, and laid forth her secret intent. Whether or not his accusation was correct, the only thing he accomplished was to make her defensive and distrustful of him.

It is one thing to be confronted with a behavioral issue; it is quite another to receive a conspiracy theory about one's motives. If I speak rudely and you bring my rudeness to my attention, I am likely to admit my wrong and seek reconciliation. But if you then attribute motive, such as I am out to harm you, then I become wary of you. I may ask forgiveness for my behavior, but I will be on guard around you.

There is a place for dealing with motive, such as in a counseling context. If you have gently brought to attention a brother's sin (cf. Galatians 6:1), it is not uncommon for him to confess his motive. But if you assert motives while confronting sinful behavior, you will likely escalate whatever trouble you are addressing. You are raising the stakes, so to speak, for the other person. He must now react to a charge of what's in his heart rather than behavior. And what is in his heart is what he will most aggressively protect.

I've made my biggest mistakes in attributing motives for behavior before I really understood the situation. I can't think of a time when I've correctly accused a person of a negative motive. The sour looking face had nothing to do with being resentful towards me, but was due to bad news at home. What I thought was desire to show who had control was actually the result of being reprimanded by someone else the night before. Indeed, I've discovered that my projection of motives on others has more to say about what's going on in me rather than in the other person.

I cannot see another person's heart. And what I do see, I see from my own heart's perspective. Your frown I interpret as having something to do with me. Or I interpret your frown as being about the same thing I am thinking about. The reasons of the heart I attribute to you are the reasons that are limited to what I can think of. It does not occur to me that you have reasons and are going through experiences that I haven't a clue about.



Be cautious in attributing motive, if only because that is what you are least likely to be sure about. It is easy enough to recognize offensive speech and call someone on that. It is far more difficult to perceive the reason behind the speech. If you are wrong about the motive, you then lose the willingness of the offender to hear you about the behavior.

Attributing motive complicates reconciliation. A staff member comes to me with a grievance about a colleague. She presents the issue and then adds, "She wants control." A member involved in a ministry complains about the ministry leader and concludes, "He feels threatened by my success." I hear all kinds of motives:

"He wants to be the boss."

"She's acting out of low self-esteem."

"She acts that way because she's frustrated about being single."

"He acts that way because he's a hen-pecked husband."

"He's got something against me."

Commonly, I will hear a statement like this: "I can't think of any good reason why Lou said what he did, so he must have intended to" (and then Jane offers her speculation of a dark motive). Now the situation gets messy. Even if I can get Lou to apologize for an insult, Jane will accuse him of trying to manipulate the situation since she knows Lou's "true motive." Lou, meanwhile, sets himself on guard. He is careful with his words; he clearly sets boundaries on their relationship, which then makes Jane even more convinced of his ulterior motives.

Now no doubt, there are motives below the surface for why we sin the way we do. But it takes great wisdom to explore the heart, and the offended person is in a poor position to gauge the offender's heart. He cannot think objectively and will invariably attribute motives that are exaggerated or off the mark altogether.

Labeling the other party with an unsubstantiated motive also lets us in a sense dismiss the person who has offended us. We say, "He has a desire for control; that's just the way he is going to be. So don't let him be on that committee" or teach that class or whatever it is we want him off. We claim, "He says that about me because he has a problem with authority," And thus we dismiss what he says, denying him the right to be



heard and denying ourselves the opportunity to examine ourselves. Even if we guess rightly the other person's motive, we still need to consider before the Lord what he may have to say. Say Mark criticizes me for too forcefully running a meeting. I know that Mark has "authority issues" stemming back to how he was raised. I may be tempted then to dismiss his comment since I supposedly know what is really behind his remark. What I need to do is examine myself in light of his comment before the Lord.

There it is a proper time for addressing motive. For example, if the teacher mentioned earlier had restricted his concern to the student's behavior and then put the matter behind him, he possibly could have drawn out her motive either then or later. Or if the behavior had continued, I, as the principal, may have needed to address her motives. But that meeting was not the time.

When addressing behavior, present the effect of the behavior. Instead of saying to Lou, "The way you spoke at the meeting showed that you wanted to take control," or "You were domineering at the meeting," present the behavior this way: "The way you spoke at the meeting had the effect of keeping others from expressing themselves." "I felt intimidated by the way you ran the meeting."

Now, when I caution against addressing motive, I mean to avoid attributing motive as a charge against an offender. The previous two messages about listening and asking questions are actually tools for getting to motive, but they are tools for helping, not for prosecuting. They are to be used to promote empathy, not to throw the other person off his guard or put him under a bad light. It is one thing for me to ask Mark if he is feeling okay, considering remarks he has made; it is another for me to say, "There goes Mark again bucking against authority." In the first response, I am demonstrating concern for Mark; in the second response, I am demonstrating disregard for him.

The issue in this matter is really about knowing your goal...your real goal. Is my goal with Mark to build him up in Christ or to get him off my back? I will always say it is the first, but I know that the latter motive is as least as likely. It is instructive how this all works out. I am quick to attribute motive to the person who offends me; but I really need to be examining my own motive. My response to offense shines a penetrating light in my heart. If my goal really is Mark's good, I will listen to what he has to say. Even if I disagree with him, I will make the effort to speak with him privately and courteously to



address the matter. If he really does have an authority issue, then taking him seriously and loving him sincerely is what will help him overcome it.

Do you see what happens? In making myself – not Mark – the chief concern about motivation, I am more effective in helping Mark deal with his own motivation issues. By restricting the issue with Mark to his criticism of me – and not offering my speculation on why he says it – I can be more discerning in addressing his comments in a way that is helpful to both of us.

Address behavior and you are likely to get not only to motive but to get to it in such a way that both you and the offender are effectively dealing with it. If Mark has authority issues, he most likely is aware of them and will willingly admit and discuss them with an authority figure who is patient with him. If Lou really is struggling with being controlling, he is more apt to see it for himself if Jane restricts herself to expressing how his behavior affects her performance or makes her feel.

As I've noted before, because we are Christians filled with the Holy Spirit, we are likely to see and be convicted of our sins once we have lowered our defenses, which we will do when we perceive that whoever is having to speak to us is doing it out of love for truth and for us.