

**Don't Impute Negative Motives**  
**Romans 12:3; 1 Cor 13; 2 Cor 10:5**

**The One Anothering Commands ARE NOT About What God wants FROM US, But What He Wants FOR US.**

Years ago I heard a talk at a Campus Crusade for Christ summer conference on VAIN IMAGINATIONS (VI) and it really hit me. It was the summer of 1975 at a conference in Myrtle Beach – Steve Keown was on a beach project that summer at Myrtle.

It was so practical in that it explained issues of my own heart and that of others. It also gave clarity about how to avoid a dangerous trap in relationships.

**The relational trap of imputing negative motives.**

Once again, this is an area where the church needs to get it right because the world gets it sooo wrong.

EX: What does this look, or sound like? Someone from the “left or the right” expresses an opinion or policy idea and almost immediately the rhetoric from the other side imputes a negative motive and they start name calling.

EX 1973 movie

Woman character: (she's defending the hunky rebel leader): “You mean Erno, “he's brilliant. Are you jealous?”

Male character: “Give her a few books and she's a pseudo-intellectual, Neo-fascist, Hegelian, Freudian, Marxist.”

He covers most of the bases in that string of insults, but in the story, it's not about ideas- it's about jealousy and emotions, and it becomes personal. It was funny in a movie in 1973, but today that kind of thing is the daily headline in the news. Someone somewhere on twitter is calling someone else a fascist, racist, a “phobe” of some sort, or a pinko, commie, liberal. For some reason the news outlets report it.

This is what happens when God becomes small in the hearts of a people. The result is that man becomes big, along with his/her agendas. Identity is shaped around our agendas rather than God. When that happens, then the next step is to impute negative motives.

The danger is that people stop talking about ideas and start demonizing each other and name calling. It is the evidence of the Fall and the brokenness of this world. It starts in pre-K and continues right on through to adults in politics and the media.

The truth is that it's not new; it's just that we're exposed to it so much more. Back in the days of Alexander Hamilton personal insults and imputing negative motives were also quite common. In those days, such things even led to duels and death. The sitting Vice-President shot and killed Hamilton, former Sec of Treasury.

Go Way back in human history to the Garden of Eden and we see the first example of imputing negative motives as Adam, speaking to God, said, “That woman you gave me.” He was blaming god.

\*\* Note – Ultimately, when we complain and point the finger of blame, we're pointing at God. When we honk the horn at the “crazy” driver on the road, we're honking at God.

Over the years, I've seen in my own heart and in the hearts of others that relationships break down and grudges break out when one, or both, parties are guilty of imputing negative motives.

It is quite likely that this is connected with some degree of unmet expectations – the two issues easily get intertwined.

Just to be clear, **expectations are often unmet because they are NOT communicated or they are unrealistic.**

EX: One spouse to the other – “Did you pick up milk today?”

NO, was I supposed to?

Well, I was sort of expecting it (but never really communicated- telepathy)

“I'm sorry, I didn't know.”

“That's ok”

Oh that most conversations went that way.

What does it sound like when VI come into play? Negative motives are often imputed:

“He didn't get milk because he knew I wanted to make custard, and he hates my custard”

Or “She didn't get milk because she knew I'd ask her to make pudding tonight and she's probably mad because I forgot to put the trash out.”

That is a silly, but maybe real, example of how it works. It can be over something that simple and small, or it happens over much greater issues.

EX: “He/she forgot our anniversary because he's/she's unhappy in the marriage and wants a divorce.”

The most likely explanation is that he/she simply forgot- there has been a lot of stress and busyness. It's sad, yes, but it's not the negative motive you're imputing.

**Imputing negative motives moves the conversation from the most likely explanation to one that assumes a devious, negative, and hurtful motive.**

EX: At work there may be differing views on how to get the job done, but it gets really detrimental when people start imputing negatives motives –

“He just wants to get attention”;

“She just want to be in control”;

“They want all the credit for their team”, etc.

This keeps friends and foes from having rational discussions. When you are judging someone's motives, not just the actions, you are judging their heart. You are judging him or her.

“I know why you did that.”

“If I'd come and told you, you would have just said, done, or thought.....” (that is prejudging a hypothetical motive – pre-judging = prejudice.

Our hearts are really broken and disoriented. Who can know their own hearts? How can we expect to know the heart of another, or for them to know our own hearts?

While this is not an explicit command in a specific verse, it is a way of living out different commands:

- Don't judge one another Rom 14:13
- Love one another Jn 13:35
- Accept one another Rom 15
- Don't grudge against one another Lev 19:18
- Forgive one another Col 3:12

For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. Rom 12:3

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, 2 Cor 10:3-5

This issue is bigger than we think: it is part of the spiritual warfare in the Christian life. If we don't do battle in our own hearts, then we will allow the flesh to build fortresses in our minds.

#### EX: OUR MISSION TEAM IN FRANCE:

We found the need to create a relationship agreement – “Group Norms”, and that was one of the items. We agreed to not impute negative motives to one another.

It gave rise to a practical way of speaking up if something bothered us – “I'm sitting on a tack”

Could we disagree on team plans, strategy and policies???

YES, but in doing so we would stick with the facts and even specific ideas or behaviors.

Trying to “discern” the motives of someone or some group is counterproductive – unless they tell you. In which case you have “discerned” anything.

We tend to over-estimate our powers of Intuition, discernment and mind/heart reading.

Even a person with a “gift of discernment” is not capable of mind-reading.

EX: there are too many people who claim a “gift of discernment who are simply critical negative people.”

We think we can judge the motives of others because we give ourselves too much credit.

<https://www.paultripp.com/articles/posts/more-highly-than-you-ought>

**“Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment.”** (Romans 12:3, NIV)

We think we're smarter than we really are.

We think we're wiser than we really are.

We may think that our success in certain areas give us some extra ability to read the hearts and minds of others.

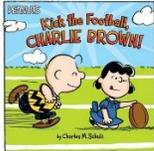
<https://dougwils.com/books/imputing-motives-and-justice.html>

Not imputing negative motives may not be a cure all for a broken relationship, but it will help keep things from getting worse.

Imputing negative motives won't ever make it better. Unless you've got a clear track record that proves otherwise

EX: CHARLIE BROWN should know that Lucy has impure motives when she offers to hold the football for him.

When you see this, you know what will happen, right?



Typically, imputing negative motives does not help. How has it worked for you in the past??

A refusal to impute motives does not automatically fix everything — but frequently it is a great help in not making things worse.

Doug Wilson...

What is it to impute motives? I am judging the motives of others when I not only accuse them of wrong-doing, but I also publicly declare the internal heart reasons they had for doing it.

People do all sorts of things and we don't know why. The call of love is to "believe the best" when we don't truly know the motives.

(It's a different issue and sermon when the person's motives have been revealed by words or consistent behavior).

Sometimes honest intentions are transformed into a hopelessly anti-productive potpourri of extremely nasty situations.

Imputing motives in the destructive sense happens when a simple difference of opinion or a failure to communicate gets twisted into a series of negative motives. The wrong diagnosis leads to wrong reactions:

EX: this may be too simple, but quite common:

*A woman hears her husband answer her questions with monosyllables only. She knows that if she answered him that way it would be because she was ticked off at him, and since he is answering her that way, he must be resenting her.*

NOT SO FAST... It may well be that he is answering her this way because he is a blockhead. And she now has a worse situation because she imputed negative motives — she is now dealing with what she thinks is malice when she ought to be dealing with cluelessness.

In marriage, parent/ child, co-workers, etc it plays out like this:

"I know why you did that"

"What are you talking about"

"You know what I'm talking about; you were trying to \_\_\_\_\_"

"Honestly, that wasn't it at all. I had no idea that \_\_\_\_\_"

"How could you not have known?"

"I'm sorry, I may be stupid or clueless, but I honestly didn't know."

**The motives of others can be known, but not through what I call great experiments in telepathy. Doug Wilson**

If someone tells you what his plans are, and then systematically goes about implementing them, then it is not hubris to think you know what is happening.

So how do we relate to and approach someone who has a differing way of thinking or behaving without imputing negative motives?

Andy Stanley on questions to ask when you disagree

**If someone has a view that you can't imagine holding, or has done something that you can't understand, then it means that you don't know something. You don't know what their perspective is, so first be a learner, not an imputer of negative motives. Put on a heart of love, humility, and compassion.**

A key phrase we learned in cross cultural training was **"Help me understand"**

***What lead you to that view or to that action?***

***Tell me about the process that got you to this view. How did you come to believe this? How did you come to think that this would be the best course of action?***

This gives understanding and usually lowers the heat

***Have you always held this view? Were you ever on the other side?***

The reality is that we all have mixed motives for the things we do. No one is perfectly innocent, except for Jesus, who did all things for the glory of god.

Only God knows our hearts and He sent His son to die for us anyway, so shouldn't we be gracious to others?

**KEEP THIS IN MIND**

**- Something is coming that will render all of our DIFFERENCES useless -  
DEATH.**

When that time comes, will you be found following the path of Christ through the power of His Holy Spirit?

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