The gain motive of Christian service

Why do you serve the Lord? Every Christian is, or should be, a servant of the Lord in one way or another. Motive lies behind all that people do, good or bad, and serving the Lord is no exception. Motive is important in service because it very much determines the quality of service offered. Paul says in the first chapter of Philippians that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry; their motive is 'selfish ambition' and they are out to stir up trouble. Those who preach out of good will have love in their hearts and would support Paul. Jesus (Matthew 5:16), Paul (1 Corinthians 10:31), and Peter (1 Peter 2:9), all point to the glory of God as a motive for service. Indeed, all Christians ought to serve God so that his name will be glorified. Paul has other motives to add, one of which is simply obedience. The Lord has asked that we serve him and so we should. So Paul says, 'Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!' (1 Corinthians 9:16b). In this chapter, he goes on to say that even out of compulsion, involuntarily, he has to discharge that which is committed to him. However, he prefers to serve voluntarily so that he will get 'a reward'. This link between voluntary service and reward is also emphasised by Peter when he says to the elders:

'Be shepherds of God's flock ... not because you must, but because you are willing ... And ... you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.'

(1 Peter 5:2-5)

The gain motive is one which powerfully moves one to serve willingly and wholeheartedly. This seems to be the nature of man and it is not essentially evil. God delights in rewarding his children. Christ himself had a gain motive. Having given himself for our salvation, and having made himself lower than the angels by taking on 'the very nature of a servant', God, after his death and resurrection, 'exalted him to the highest place' (Philippians 2:9-11). Motive links Christ's self-humbling with his exaltation. Jesus promises reward even for so small a service as giving a cup of cold water to a disciple (Matthew 10:42).

Unfortunately, the human heart, yielded to Satan, is full of gain motives that are directed not to God but to self. Therefore having a gain motive for service is not enough. The question 'What gain?' must yield a biblical answer. The litmus test for the answer is, Does it glorify God? A number of gains which do not glorify God have become popular. These include:

1. **Position.** The search for titles is an old sin which still plagues many today. Leadership in itself is not evil. The Bible says that to desire to be an overseer is a noble task (1 Timothy 3:1). Besides, someone has to be a leader if the Lord's work is to progress. But when position is sought just for the recognition and name that it will bring, it becomes a snare. The sons of Zebedee and their mother asked Jesus to grant James and John leading places in heaven. It was too much of a demand. Today the quest for position is responsible for a lot of rancour and strife within the church of God. What matters is not the position one serves in but how faithful one is at whatever is done for the Lord.

2. **Man's applause.** In and out of the church there are those who serve so that they can be recognised and applauded by men. Such people easily get angered and their service becomes defective when they are not recognised and even applauded. This may have been one of the errors of the 'super-apostles' of the church of Corinth who 'measured themselves by themselves and compared themselves with themselves'. It was the sin of the hypocrites of whom Jesus said that they would receive no reward from God (Matthew 6:1, 5, 16). They had received their reward in full. The servant of God who seeks the reward of man's applause faces the danger of either consciously or unconsciously trying to share in the glory of God; or actually reserving for himself the glory which belongs to God. This sin caused Herod Agrippa to die a
miserable and disgraceful death (Acts 12:19-23). Let us not serve God that we may be seen or given a name by people. Let all the glory for all that we do be given to God. The glory is his and he has warned us repeatedly saying,

‘I will not give my glory to another.’

(Isaiah 42:8; 48:11)

3. **Financial gain.** Simon the sorcerer had boasted of his magical power and was thought by his fellow countrymen to be ‘the divine power’ (Acts 8:10). He gained man's applause. When he came to faith, he wanted to buy the power of the Holy Spirit from Peter and John. This was perhaps to have more grounds on which to boast: or, most likely, it was an investment, since the performance of magic was how the magicians of that day made a living. Profit is a blinding motive for service. He who seeks only after money will only spend time, energy and other resources to the extent in which he finds profit for himself. Such a person will hardly resist the temptation to extort, cheat or even steal when the opportunity is given. The case of Judas Iscariot proves the saying that ‘the love of money is the root of all evil’ (1 Timothy 6:10). Judas had in mind a financial motive for being a disciple of Jesus; so he made use of his position as the treasurer of the group and helped himself from the bag. In the end, he sold his Master.

Today the profit motive has crept into the church. Sometimes, alas, religion is big business. The financial motive is responsible for the shallow faith of many Christians who serve and give from a motive of self-interest.

More honourable are those whose service to the Lord carries absolutely no financial gain: the deacon, elder, secretary, Bible study leader, prayer warrior, encourager — the list is endless. All add to their normal jobs, or even unemployment, the worthy task of serving the Lord. If you belong to this category, continue to serve the Lord faithfully for truly ‘it is more blessed to give than to receive’ (Acts 20:35). On the other hand, there are those whose Christian service carries with it a deserved financial reward. Those in this group ought not to be ashamed, for 1 Corinthians 9:3f makes this acceptable. The caution to have in mind, however, is that salary should not be the overriding motive for service. In service the Christian ought not to be greedy for money but eager to serve for the glory of God. Besides, there is a better reward for which service should be rendered to the Lord.

4. **Heaven.** To desire to go to heaven is the greatest good in life, but to serve God in order to enter heaven is a great mistake. Service cannot open the way to heaven for anybody. Heaven is not for sale and so it cannot be bought with any kind of good works. Entry to heaven is a gift of grace. The Muslim and the Jehovah's Witness may preach heaven as a reward for cumulative good works. On the Judgment Day, however, even those who demand entry on the basis of good works done in the name of the Lord Jesus will receive the answer:

‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evil doers.’

(Matthew 7:23)

For the Lord, acceptable service is not that which comes from one in search of heaven but that which comes from one with heaven already in his heart (Luke 10:17-20; 17:21).

If position, man's applause or popularity, financial gain and desire to enter heaven are not the focus of the gain motive for Christian service, what then should motivate the Christian to serve for gain? There are two aspects of gain which the Bible gives as worthy for service:

1. **A heavenly reward.** Jesus, Paul and Peter all refer at length to the heavenly reward of service. In Matthew 16:27 Jesus says he will come with his angels and will reward every one according to what he has done. In 1 Peter 1:4, Peter uses the phrase ‘crown of glory’ for this reward. John calls it the ‘crown of life’ as well as the ‘crown of gold’ (Revelation 2:10; 14:14). Paul calls it the ‘crown of righteousness’ (2 Timothy 4:8). The use of this phrase may point to a crown to be worn in heaven. Most likely, however, the phrase is used in a metaphorical sense to give the picture of a victor’s reward. This had meaning for the Greek audience of the New Testament era with the Olympic games in mind.
The exact nature of the heavenly reward is not entirely clear but certainly reward awaits anyone who serves God voluntarily and wholeheartedly. This was a major motive that kept Paul and his friends in faithful service in spite of the hardships they faced. They focused their attention on the eternal and that gave them strength to serve. The Christian who focuses on the eternal perceives, rightly, that the glory of eternity outweighs the sufferings of this world, which are but momentary. Paul outlines some of the difficulties that he faced (2 Corinthians 6:3f). They are many and frightening but it is Paul who says about sufferings:

‘For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.’

(2 Corinthians 4:17)

David had such a view of life too (Psalm 30:5). As for Moses, it is because he was looking ahead to this kind of reward that he abandoned the palatial treasures of Egypt (position as prince, with money and honour), for disgrace for the sake of Christ (Hebrews 11:26). That enabled him successfully to lead God's children out of Egypt. Hebrews 12:2 says that Christ endured the Cross, scorning its shame, because of the joy set before him. This joy (the focus of Christ's gain motive) includes his glorification, the heavenly reward given by his Father at the resurrection and ascension.

The African and Latin-American Liberation theologians, as well as the Prosperity theologians, have ridiculed this 'pie in the sky' approach to the gain motive of service. However, their over-emphasis on worldly gain is responsible, not least, for the collapse of the faith of some who have not received the expected (or promised) financial or material reward for their service to God. Therefore, as regards the heavenly reward for service, Paul's advice is relevant for all who serve the Lord:

‘Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free’

(Ephesians 6:7-8)

The joy set before Christ (Hebrews 12:2), which enabled him to endure the Cross, was the joy of heavenly glory as well as a second gain also discussed elsewhere in the Bible. It is:

2. The joy of seeing souls saved. If Christ endured the Cross, it was to redeem mankind. The joy of seeing souls saved is a great gain to anyone who serves the Lord. The joy of seeing people liberated from sin is a gain motive that can lead us to sacrifice self in service to the Lord for the benefit of others. Paul even considers the saved as the crown, joy and glory that he and his friends will have when Christ comes (1 Thessalonians 2:19).

For some people within the Christian fold, the joy of seeing souls saved is experienced right here on earth, as they can see the tangible results of their service in terms of people being saved. Others may have to wait for heaven to know those thus saved, and to rejoice accordingly. The joy may begin now but it will climax when the Lord returns with the reward for things we did either with or without knowledge. On the day of the Lord, those like Paul who have led others to salvation shall have reason to rejoice (2 Corinthians 1:14).

Therefore, in his great or small corner, the Christian should serve the Lord wholeheartedly, for even if the reward is not seen now, there is great assurance that each moment spent in service for the Lord works towards the salvation of a soul. For that the servant of the Lord will be rewarded and he will rejoice together with the hosts of heaven over even one soul that is saved.

The gain motive of Christian service is essentially good. It is a great motivator; but it should be directed to the glory of God. The Lord Jesus told his disciples that the one who rules should be like the one who serves. He pointed them to himself as the great example. He was indeed God, yet he says to all his disciples: ‘am among you as one who serves’ (Luke 22:27).
Service to Christ is greatness. To be such a servant is in itself to be great; it is gain. However, Jesus did not end there. He focuses the minds of his disciples on heaven, where they shall eat and drink at his table and sit on the twelve thrones with him. What a gain!

As Christians, therefore, let us serve the Lord willingly and with gladness, in faith and with wholehearted commitment, for great is our reward in heaven, and this will redound to the glory of God the Father.