

Limited incentives

Incentivizing good behavior can suffocate morality.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [June 3, 2021](#) issue



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I've only fired one Sunday school teacher in my life. *Fired* is probably too strong a word to use for a volunteer, but it's what came to mind when I told Bob that he either had to alter his incentive-based teaching method or be done with our fifth-graders. When he refused to alter his method, I asked him to excuse himself from this voluntary role. Bob and his wife, who had only been church members for two years, summarily quit the church. Eight years elapsed before I'd see him again, this time a headshot of him in his obituary in our local newspaper a few weeks ago.

Bob's teaching strategy was to dole out dimes and quarters to students who successfully memorized Bible verses he had personally selected. I was miffed to learn that he had jettisoned the set curriculum and decided payments to kids were an effective way to teach the gospel, all done without the awareness of the children's ministry staff. Upon further probing, I learned that one fifth-grader in the

class had taken home upward of eight dollars.

It's no secret that many elements of our society are built on incentives. Bonuses, profit sharing, and pricing are fundamental to economic theory. Trophies and medals await athletes who outperform their peers. Parents sometimes pay their kids for getting good grades. Incentives to motivate human behavior are everywhere. In fact, a standing assumption is that in order to get people to do something, you have to inspire their psyche and make it seem worth their while. The very root of the word *incentive*, from the Latin *incendere*—"to set on fire"—suggests as much.

But is offering an incentive the surest way to get people to behave in a certain way? Might incentives actually create the opposite effect and cause people not to do the right thing? If we don't believe people will do the right thing without incentives, we may end up cheapening the moral integrity of what we set out to accomplish in the first place. There is, at times, a demoralizing effect that incentives can have on human behavior.

Take, for example, the case of an Israeli day care center. Barry Schwartz, in his book *Practical Wisdom*, describes this center where more and more parents began showing up late to pick up their kids at the end of the day. The center resorted to levying a fine for tardiness. Surprisingly, the number of parents arriving late for pickup didn't decrease with the introduction of the fine; it increased—because the parents understood it to be a worthwhile price for showing up late. "The fines *de-moralized* what had previously been a moral act," notes Schwartz. "The moral dimension of [the parents'] behavior disappeared. It was now a straightforward financial calculation."

Incentives can do this. They can cause us to change our question from "Is this what I ought to do?" to "Is this worth the price?"

When the apostle Paul uses the generosity of the struggling Macedonian churches as incentive to inspire the Corinthians to support the church of Jerusalem, he speaks only of the gracious workings of God among the Macedonians, not of any achievement on their part (2 Cor. 8). We give not to get or achieve something, but only because we have received. We love because we have been loved. Such is the power of grace at work in lives of faith, thriving not on extrinsic reward but on intrinsic joy.