

Actions Matter – Not Thoughts and Intentions

I'd like to tell you about one of the most important calls I ever got on my radio show. It was a man of about 40-years of age and he called me and said, "Dennis, you've got to help me out, I'm a really bad son." So, I said, "You're a really bad son? Why?"

He said, "Let me tell you why; my mother is very sick; she's been sick for about ten years, and I am her sole financial support, her sole psychological support, and her sole emotional support, and to tell you the truth, sometimes I wish her illness would take her away. That's how hard it is on me."

And I said to him, "Sir, I want to tell you that you are one of the most beautiful and wonderful sons that I have ever had the honor of speaking to."

The guy thought I was kidding. He thought I was nuts. He didn't even think I was serious. "Dennis! Did you not hear that sometimes I would even want my mother to die?"

I said, "Yeah, but look at your actions. You treat her so well. You are an exemplary son. What matters is how you treat your mother, NOT how you sometimes feel about her. Your negative feelings are not what matter here, your kind and selfless actions are all that matter.

And that is what I want to talk to you about: In assessing good and bad, actions are what matter; not thoughts and almost never even intentions. Good intentions don't matter when bad comes, and bad thoughts don't matter if good is done.

Of course you're going to have bad feelings and bad thoughts. Who doesn't? What matters is what we do.

I'm going to give you example after example. Imagine you have two surgeons you have to choose from for your cancer; one has the reputation for being in it for the money, but he happens to be the best surgeon around. Another surgeon

is not as great but he's a big idealist who's in it not for the money, but to help people.

Which surgeon would you choose? I know which surgeon I'd choose – the one who's in it for the money; has the reputation for being the best surgeon. I don't care if he's in it for the money; that's between him and his conscience. It means nothing to me. I care what kind of surgery he performs.

I'll give you another example. People say, “Oh look, that guy, he wants his name on a building, that's the only reason he gave money to that hospital or school. But, hey, I'm very happy to have buildings named after people who give. If I'm being treated in a great hospital named after some donor, believe me, I bless that donor. I don't think less of him for having his name on the building.

And in the other direction of good intentions and bad results; well, every bad “ism” has had people who meant well: Nazism, Communism, Fascism. Most of those people didn't get up in the morning and say, “Hey, how can I hurt innocent people today. I love genocide.” They thought they were doing it for the nation, or for the working class, or for humanity. Very many of them had very idealistic intentions, but that hardly mattered, did it?

We judge actions by what people do, not what people intended.

I've spoken, for example, to many experts on Africa. Every single one, liberal or conservative, said that the vast majority of Western government aid to Africa has actually hurt Africans., that all it has done is to prop up corrupt governments.

Or take parental love. Many parents shower their kids with love and spoil them. Of course parental love is beautiful, but if that is all you give, no matter how much you mean well, you'll still hurt your kids.

So, what's the answer? There are two conclusions. First, goodness must be judged by results. And second, you have to use your head more than your heart to figure out how to do good.

Those are the two things that we have to understand. Goodness is what happens and we have to figure out what is right or wrong based on our head, not our heart. Then we'll make a much better world.

Sincerity is not what matters, actions are what matter.

And finally, don't feel guilty over bad thoughts. But, yes, you should feel guilty over bad actions.

I'm Dennis Prager.