Resisting the Temptation of Moral Formation: Part 1
By: John Coe

You know, two years ago I could not have given you a reasonable definition of spiritual formation. So I am both honored and overwhelmed to be standing before you tonight introducing John Coe and introducing this lecture series. John is the director of the Institute for spiritual formation at Biola University. He is, I have discovered, a very brilliant and devoted scholar. He holds a bachelor's degree from Biola in Bible and theology, a master's degree in theology from Talbot Theological School of Theology. It's changed since I was there, hasn't it John. Holds a master's degree in humanities from Western Kentucky University.

He holds a master's degree and a doctorate in philosophy from the University of California in Irvine. And as we recognize him and his many degrees, I think it's only appropriate that we recognize his wife who traveled with him through these many degrees, and Greta, if you are here and not too embarrassed to stand up, where are you Greta? Thank you back in the corner. Greta, thank you so much. Thank you for being here. And just, just reminding myself that you two married like, pretty soon after high school, you have walked with him through a bachelor's degree, three masters and a Ph.D.

And our hat is off to you, Greta. Well, in addition to directing the Institute for Spiritual Formation which we call ISF, John also teaches and writes in the areas of Spirituality, Theology, psychological maturity, gender issues, as well as the integration of theology, psychology, philosophy and ethics. And despite what Scripture tells us about the accumulation of too much knowledge that can puff up and make one arrogant, I'm here to tell you that John Coe is a very humble man. He has a passion to know the Lord more deeply. He has, has a passion to be fully engaged with the work of the Spirit in his life.
He cares for souls. In addition to educating, and for the past couple of years he's taken several of us under his wing and has ministered to our hearts first as he has stretched our minds, and under his tutelage we have grown in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ for which we are very grateful John, and I trust that those of us here tonight and for the next few weeks will also grow in the same way. So I want us to welcome Dr. John Coe. Would you do that with me?

And I think it's only appropriate that Dale, our senior pastor, opened this session with a word of prayer and we'll commit this time to the Lord.

Dale:

Let's pray together, would you join me?

Father God, we thank you for the chance to just sit together as members of your body and learn. Father, thank you for what you've been teaching our staff through John and through the faculty, through the program. Father, thank you for what you've been building into John's life. Thank you for the stewardship he has, and wanting to share that with others. So Father, we, we want you to surprise us with the knowledge of Christ and a deeper awareness of how we can build mature Disciples of Christ. Father, we know that's your will, you tell us Father, we pray knowing, Father, that you tell us through the Apostle Peter that grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, seeing that his divine power has been granted to us, has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness through the true knowledge of him who called us by his glory in excellence; for by these he has granted to us his precious and magnificent promises so that, so that by them, we may become partakers of the
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divine nature. Father, what a, what an overwhelming thought, to think that you want us to
partake in your divine nature, that you've created us in your image.

Father, we just confess how far short of that we are. And to think that we have the honor
of helping others grow to be like you. So, Father, help us learn. Use, use John. Thank you for
Doug and his hard work and his team putting this together. And we look forward to all that you'll
teach us this month. Use it to transform us first and help us in the transformation of others. All
God's people said, Amen.

John Coe:

Okay well, welcome. I am, I'm honored to be here, I especially am so thankful to have
gotten to know Doug over these last two years. And right now we are, we have a pastor's training
program and there are I think, around seven pastors and spouses, and we have just enjoyed
getting to know them. But I especially, with Doug, these last two years. What he said about my
being married at 19, that is correct. I got married at 19 but then I invited my wife to 18 years of
college. Is that incredible? And, in fact, when I was, when I was finishing my Ph.D. in
philosophy, I said to Greg, "You know, let's just finish this all up, I'll go get a Ph.D. in theology
now."

And, and she looked at me and said, "You're going to what?" "Heck, why not?" And
after a few conversations, she persuaded me from that, she basically said "if you want to do it on
your own, John, that's fine." But. And so I did. But just to show you how fallen and puffed up I
really am, I actually thought in my mind, you know what I'm going to do? Since I study all the
time anyways, I'm going to go get a Ph.D. in theology at Fuller, Greta won't even know it. And
then, when graduation comes, I'll just say "Well, why don't we drive down to Pasadena?" The Lord redeemed me from that plan.

And I also say I have two daughters that are in the, the bride's dressing room. And now I told them, they're both eleven, and I told them, now don't get any ideas. This is, this is for way down the line. And you know what, of course, they always say to me? Oh, but Dad, you did it at 19. And so I told them that well, no, you can't marry until you're at least 30. And here's what you have to do. You're either going to be a Protestant nun who will give your life to prayer or you're going to marry a very wealthy businessman, Christian businessman who loves the Lord with all his heart and will give all his money to the Institute for spiritual formation.

Well. I know what's going to happen is they're going to go to Biola. And they'll probably meet some bohemian artist and they'll marry at 20 and.

That's what will happen.

Well, I am often asked when I come to speak to a Christian college or seminary or just any audience.

I'm asked the question by my colleagues, Professors, pastors, students and others: Dr. Cole, What is this spiritual formation all about? What is this, this new movement that's going on? Why has it emerged? Is it a passing thing? Is it a Catholic thing, is it, is it a fad, or is it a radical thing? Now I always, I'm always a little disconcerted when I, when they say "well is this a fad?" I think wow, I've just given my career to a passing fad. But then I also am interested when someone says well, this is kind of a radical, kind of new cutting edge thing.

I always like to tell my daughters that because my daughters think I'm so old now. I'm 50 years old and my daughters say to me, every time I make a comment about music or clothes they always say to me, Oh Dad, you're so old, that's so 60s or 70s. I'm like wow, that's old? And then I
tell them, you know, your dad was young once, and then I remind them that when Greta and I were going together in high school, that's where we met. You know, I used to be a handsome athlete and I'd tell them, I used to be shaped like a V.

And they said, no, dad, no. You were born with glasses on. You're, you're born like a Poindexter. And now, Dad you look like a pear.

So I, ok.

But I like the idea that OK, maybe I'm into something radical. But, but these are real questions. Why has spiritual formation emerged? Is it a Catholic thing? Is there. People have asked me Is it something we're adding to the Gospel? Why haven't we heard that word for some time? Why is it coming up, and is it new? Is that a good thing? These are questions that I've thought about a lot and as we go through the series, I'm going to answer them a little bit later. I want just in the beginning tonight, I want to say just something about that last question of is this new?

Because, my answer is well, if it is, then something's probably wrong. If it's totally new, then I probably don't want it, because the gospel is old. The gospel is very old, but there are, there's an alive-ness to the Gospel.

There's a freshness. And so as we go through these weeks together, I think my hope is not that you'll say Oh wow, now that, that's a novel idea. Wow that, that's new. I hope more it will be: "Yeah. Gosh, that's so true. God, that's right. That's so true." Or "you know, I haven't thought of it quite like that way but gosh, that is so obvious." Because what I've come to as I'm getting older, I'm coming to see, I've been a Christian now for 31 years, that I'm just entering more deeply into understanding what the faith is about.
I'm just entering more deeply into experiencing what this gospel really was about. And so there are times when I understand yeah, that's a, that's a new insight, but really it's a new implication of an old truth. And so what I'm going to do in this next five weeks is, this will not be a systematic kind of exploration into spiritual formation. Rather what this is going to be is, I'm going to raise what have become for me some central issues, some central concerns that, that have really taken me more deeply into my own life, into the heart of the gospel, into the heart of the Faith, and things that now have benefited some others.

And that's especially true for tonight, because tonight I want to talk about something that is so fundamental, it is so foundational. When my students come to the Institute for spiritual formation, this is where I start with them. And it's especially going to be the case for the audience that I'm speaking to tonight.

And generally the audience I speak to. If you read any of the spiritual formation literature, people like Dallas Willard or Richard Foster, you'll come to recognize that there are, there are different audiences they're speaking to, and one of the audiences that you can pick out.

And I'm, I'm part of kind of this movement, and so I go to conferences and speak and, and listen and there's a term that's called the consumer Christian. And that's a, that's a concern that I know some of the writers have, and the consumer Christian is the person in their mind that, that comes to the Lord and that's about it. They come to the Lord, they have their fire insurance policy, and then they just, it's kind of like them being a shopper at a mall. You're just wandering through and seeing what goods you can accumulate.

And maybe what things you can entertain yourself with. And so the concern is for this consumer Christian: is there a serious commitment to the Gospel? Is there a serious commitment to discipleship?
And so books are written on this, this element of, how can we help them enter into the process of being a disciple? How can we help them enter into the training of being a disciple?

And I have no doubt that there is a little bit of a consumer in all of us, that's just part of how the fall hit us.

But that's not the audience that I'm going to generally be addressing. That's not the person that I'm around. The people that I'm around at Biola in the seminary, at the School of Psychology, and here, myself, we're what I call the dedicated neurotic. We are individuals who, we have a serious commitment to Christ. There is a desire to grow. There's a desire to serve. That's, that's part of now our heart.

And yet here, with that, that deep desire to grow, as the years go on—And now I'm in the notes, so if you want to grab the notes--my wife cautioned me about telling too many jokes in the beginning, so, we're in the notes now. The first bullet. For those of us who have been in the faith awhile and have this serious desire to grow, there often might be a secret burden if, and maybe not so secret burden of guilt and shame that we're not as mature as we should be, that we feel like, maybe God, I should be further along.

We've heard now many sermons and 'member when, when we were a younger believer, we heard a sermon, it was like, "yes", you know, Pastor Dale would speak. "That's it! I'm going to go out and do it!" Well, now you've heard a sermon like that 15 times. And you realize that you're not necessarily just going to go out and change totally.

In a moment.

And you begin to wonder, God, at times my prayer life is dry, at times, at times. Lord, you just feel distant, God at times, the Christian life just feels like work.
God, where are these rivers of living water? I know that very well in my own life. I came to the Lord at 18. My wife Greta actually led me to the Lord through many consternations and trials. I came to the Lord at 18. We got married at 19, wise age, right? I told her, I love you. She said, let's get married. Okay, why not. Not much thought. And that led this 18 year journey into education and then into ministry, teaching at Biola and Talbot and Rosemead and during that time, something began to happen.

When I came to the Lord at 19, there was such an explosive power of love I felt, an excitement for the Lord and I'm going to be talking about this, later in the series, what that was. And as the years went on, I think it began maybe in seminary, although I don't think there was a causal relation to seminary and my dryness, but maybe there was.

But at some point, something began to change, and I began to say, God, I used to be so excited about you. God, where are those rivers of living water you talk about? The Christian life began to feel like work. I remember, I would memorize texts like in Galatians, "to walk in the Spirit," and I'd say, Lord, I get the walk part, where's the Spirit part? Right here, John 15:5, and it would be, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me and I in him, he's the one who bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." That text really bugged me about 15 years ago, because I really was at a point. I was then, I had just coming to the end of my Ph.D. and I was teaching now, full-time theology, and I would say "God you know, apart from you I can do nothing, God, I feel like I'm doing it all."

That's how I felt. At that time about 12 years ago, the Lord took me on a retreat and it took me to a whole new place. But I know that feeling. I know the feeling where God, something's wrong with my life.
Now, for that person, and these are the students that I get who come to the Institute for Spiritual Formation, these are not generally consumers. These are dedicated folk, but they are now carrying a bit of a burden on their back and they're saying, John, I want to grow, John, I want the rivers of living water, what, what can I do? And what I tell them is, they may not know it but they, and this kind of person, is in the grips of a great temptation.

Now there's all kinds of temptations. There's one temptation where I'm sure, if I could read hearts. Wouldn't it be interesting to have a, having in the church a little like X-ray machine, and it was God's kind of looking into the heart and you just walk up to it and you just see what's all in the heart. You know, maybe it's a good thing we can't do that, but I will bet there are some who come through the doors here every week where they have felt these things: God, I should be further along, I've been a Christian now 30 years, I was so excited when I was a high scholar and a college student, and now I've been a plumber for 20 years and God, it's just dry bones.

The pastor gets it. The pastor teaches passages, he seems to understand and seems to be true in his life.

I don't get it. And that person's in a certain temptation, that person's in the temptation of becoming what Soren Kierkegaard called the Gentle Christian, and I'm going to talk about this person later, at another night. But you know what the gentle Christian is? The gentle Christian is the one who's realized, I don't get it any longer, I don't understand how the Christian life works, and they've resigned themselves to a life really, without the living waters of Christ. And so when the pastor says, let's pray, they bow their head but inside they say, I just don't understand what's going on.

And they become gentle, they become kind, and they don't stir the pot of their life because they don't want to be reminded, something's not working here, and that person in the
pew is slowly dying and withering, and I'm going to be interested in that person later. For another person, they might say, you know I, I just can't take it, and they might start acting out more immorally.

But what I'm interested and this is particularly for the leader, I'm interested in a very peculiar temptation and it's what I call the moral temptation. The moral temptation. And here's what I'm going to define as the moral temptation. You can follow along.

It's the attempt of the hidden heart. It's not something we're going to consciously wanted to do, but it's the attempt of the hidden heart to try to perfect oneself in the power of the self. It's the attempt of the Christian to use spirituality, obedience, spiritual formation, service, ministry, the spiritual disciplines, being good. It's the attempt to use all of these things to relieve the burden of my spiritual failure.

So we hear a sermon and the sermon is to love your neighbor, or it's to pray without ceasing. And "oh. Oh God, I don't do that enough."

I need to do that more." And I want to say that to try to relieve this burden that Christ can only relieve is to enter into an incredible burden to carry through your life. And I think that we who are in the professional ministry are going to have the deepest financial and occupational motivation to do this.

Times that were dry times that we don't know what's going on. Times that we know there are just struggles in our life and we, we say OK. [sigh] Get up! You must do something, you must get up. Dale must say to himself, you must go to church!

This is a great burden to carry. And so I titled this: resisting the temptation of moral formation. Moving from moral to spiritual formation.
And my thesis in B is this, and again I think of especially my students, because they're coming and they want so badly to come to the institute and begin to engage in certain activities and rigorous regimens of Spiritual Disciplines, because they're hoping this will finally grow them. They're hoping this will be the answer to some of the unresolved guilt and shame they have in their own life that they're not as mature as they are. So I just want to say to them right up front. Number one, and this is, these are my theses, I guess, that no amount of effort can ever relieve us of this burden of shame and guilt except Christ. That spiritual formation that doing spiritual disciplines, service, ministry, mission.

It will not work as a self-help program to fix ourselves, to grow our self or to take away the shame that we have. And that shocks them. As I'll be saying tonight, I tell them "when you do spiritual disciplines, the spiritual disciplines do not grow you, they do not transform you." What are they doing?

And the second thesis I say is this: that the Christian life is not fundamentally about being moral in itself. It's not fundamentally about being a good boy or a good girl. It's not fundamentally about obedience to a set of principles written in a book right here. It's not most deeply about character development, it's not even most deeply interested in imitation of Christ as Christ is out there as a model to the soul. It's not fundamentally about doing spiritual disciplines.

In fact, everything I just said is what all the moralists of all the ages have said we're to do. My Ph.D. is actually in ethics, it's in Aristotle's virtue ethics. And I've studied individuals from Plato, Aristotle to Kant, all the way to Freud, and all the moralists of the ages have given us some regimen going back to the very early stoics. They said yeah, the way you change character is you take a wonderful great person and you model that person, and so you take a great person
in a community, a citizen, a hero, and you model externally those virtues and you can transform
yourself.

And I want to say to my students and to you and myself: this is in fact what we're saved
from, we're saved from that life.

It's a life of trying to be good and to please God and to try to deal with our guilt and
shame in our own power. Now I'm going to be using the word moral in a certain way here,
because, in one sense, the Christian is going to be the most thoroughly moral of all.

He has the opportunity to really be moral, but it's going to be a change of the character
through another person. I'm going to be using the word moral in a certain way here, and it's any
attempt to grow the self. It's any attempt to try to fix yourself, it's any attempt to try to transform
yourself and deal with your guilt and shame, and the power of your being good. Remember that,
that book, it's an old one.

It's called In His Steps. I don't know if you remember, it was a old kind of classic and the
town began to ask the question, What would Jesus do? And so now it's, now it's made into a
wristband. I mean, there's going to be something right about that, but there's something going to
be quite wrong. Because it's going to turn out in the Christian life, you can't do what Jesus did.

Unless you learn to abide in the Vine. Only see, it, it's not going to be about character
imitation.

That's not what formation in the Christian life is about. It's going to be about rather
participation in a new life. Another person who has invaded, and now the task of formation is
how to open up to what that person is doing inside. And so the Christian life, as I say in one of
the dots here, the bullets, is about denouncing the moral life as a way to find happiness and to
please God.
And I will say this, and this will be, this will come back to us in the third night. The Lord used quite a bit of our moral, moralism, early on in the Christian life, he used your efforts, he used your works, he used what you gave him to grow you. But there comes a time in the Christian life when it's time to grow up, and that time to grow up is usually when the Spirit is beginning to do something else, and the Spirit is beginning to show you, you know, it's not working like it used to.

Remember back here? It was all working, your prayer life worked, your meditation life, everything was kind of working. Now it's kind of dry bones, now you're beginning to see other parts of yourself. That's a time in my life I used to get really frustrated. That's the time I said, God, what is wrong with me? Where now, when my students go through that, I say, this is wonderful. This is wonderful. When the dryness comes, when the Christian life starts feeling like a burden, what I would like you to say is [lick] mm. Yum.

Because you know what the Spirit is doing now? The Spirit's drawing, he's saying, I'm going to take you on a journey. I'm going to take you on a new kind of journey into the deep of yourself with my Spirit. That will be the journey of a lifetime.

And so the Christian life, as we start to talk about this tonight is a certain kind of obedience. And it is going to be a certain kind of effort. But it's going to be an effort that is opening the heart to this new relationship about participating in the vine, about what is it to depend upon another person in what I'm doing? You know, none of us were born this way. We were all born what I would say, spiritually challenged, because we were born without the Spirit of God. Theologically we call that spiritual death.

I was born with a hole in the middle of my chest where the Spirit of God should have been. That's when Paul says that we were born and are dead in our trespasses and sin.
And so in the power of myself, I have been leading and guiding my life, and that even came into the Christian life. At some point, the Spirit now says John, I want to take you on a whole new journey. Thank you for all your efforts, John. It's been good. Now I've got a different turn for you, and it's going to be the ride of a life, because I want to take you into places where you're going to discover that apart from me you can do nothing. I want to take you into a new place of dependence. So none of us are born this way. We're all challenged. So I want to say here just in this introduction that, I think it's the last or second to last bullet, or maybe this is just mine.

I don't want to be a good boy anymore. I don't want to try to fix myself. I can't fix myself. I now at 50, 30 years into the faith, am learning every day, because he's having to teach it to me every day: John, would you give up on the project?

Would you give up on the project of trying to reconstruct John Coe so that you can feel OK about John Coe being a disciplined good Christian? and would you rather open more deeply to my work?

Open more deeply to what my Spirit is doing.

I don't want to live the Christian life alone anymore. I want to learn to abide in the vine. This is, this is what the whole New Covenant is, I'll just reference the text. We won't look at them now, but this is Jeremiah 31 and this is Ezekiel 36. This is the New Covenant, where Jeremiah and Ezekiel say through God, that God is, I'm going to give you a New Covenant. And this covenant is not going to be like the old where, where it was written on stone and you were trying to obey it.

But this new covenant is this: I'm going to put my Spirit in you. And by my Spirit, I am going to write Torah. You know that's "law". By my Spirit, I'm going to write Torah in your
heart, meaning, I'm going to begin to enter into deep places where my joys, my hopes, my loves are going to become slowly transferred into yours.

And my Spirit will cause you to obey. So theologians say this: the agent of change and transformation in the Christian life is the Holy Spirit.

That's what we assert biblically and theologically. We are an instrument, a participating, cooperating instrument in this process.

And I want to open up to that more deeply, of what it is to, to open, not to being a good moral boy but open to a new relationship that I have. But Paul the Apostle know that he, that we would be daily tempted by this, and I'm daily tempted.

Let's read Galatians. I think I put that in the notes for you. Here Paul is writing to believers in Galacia. He had planted this church. He's been away. He preached Christ crucified and all that the cross meant that we'll talk about later tonight.

And he writes to them this. So these are believers: you foolish Galatians. Who has bewitched you before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? That is, who has bewitched you because you came to know what the whole point of Christ's crucifixion was in your life? This is the only thing I want to find out from you. Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law?

Or by hearing with faith?

Are you so foolish, having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Having begun by, a relationship by faith through the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? And the flesh is the idea of the weakness of human autonomy, the weakness of what a human can do. And so Paul recognized that the believer is going to be tempted to start the
Christian life by faith and the Spirit. And yet, something is going to go on to cause us to slip back into moralism. Something happened here in the short time that he had been away.

The people have slipped back and Paul's saying, who's bewitched you? What's taken place? Well, what I want to do with the rest of this night is, I want to just, in the briefest of terms, look at five questions about this moral temptation and how to deal with it. The first questions is this: why on earth would a Christian or anyone be tempted to be moral? I mean, wait a minute, John, isn't the temptation to be immoral? Right, anybody experience any immoral temptations out there? Yes! Certainly, there are universal temptations to immorality.

But you know, there's two things about a life of immorality that work against you. The first one is, if you give yourself to rampant immorality, because of natural law it will probably destroy your life. There's no, there's no benefit in the long run. But secondly, giving your life to a rampant experience of immorality is a really bad way to hide from God.

That's a really bad way to hide from guilt and sin. The answer, I think, is going to be simple. Morality, or being good, has always been, from the beginning of time, the most common human solution to the problem of guilt. And it's the most seemingly, in, an effective way to deal with the problem of sin and guilt without God.

Who is the one who is going to be more easy to win into the kingdom? Is it the harlot or the Pharisee? It's the pharmacy who thinks, I am good. I have done what is good. It's the moralist. But what I'm interested is we see this right at the very beginning. We see it right at the beginning with Adam and Eve that here our first parents, they provided their answer to sin and guilt right in Genesis.

So if you want, you can turn to Genesis 3, verse 7 and 8.
I'm just going to kind of refer to it, but in that text we see that in Genesis chapter 2, Adam and Eve were naked and they weren't ashamed. But now in Chapter 3, they sin. They violate the command of God. They violate their relation to God. And notice the first things that happen: it says in verse seven, and the eyes of them were opened, and they knew they were naked. This eye-opening experience. This, we say historically, this is when the fall occurred. This is when Adam and Eve became corrupted.

This is when Adam and Eve all of a sudden had a sense: something's wrong with me. This is the first experience that humans have ever had of shame. Shame is this internal sense, something's wrong with me, I'm not right. I don't like to be looked at.

I don't want you to see me. I don't want you to look at me, Eve. And notice the first thing they did. They sowed fig leaves and loin coverings.

The first human response to "Something is wrong". Notice it is not "Oh God, what happened to me?"

Wouldn't that have been cool?

I don't know what the history of redemption would have been if they had made that move. But that wasn't their move. Their instinct was immediately, now get this. This is the instinct of moralism, the instinct of moralism is when you become aware of your bad, you immediately turn inward, you immediately turn inward and say, what do I need to do? Now we're going to ponder that later when you hear sermons, when you hear Pastor Dale say something. When Pastor Dale says, you know, do you, you need to pray without ceasing. Are you praying without ceasing?

No, no I'm not.

What's our first response? Ah, God, I need to do better. That's going to be the moralist.
The first response to shame, and this will become now part of inherited corruption that everyone gets in original sin. But the first response is when I'm aware of my bad.

So here, if I could put this up here, [drawing] so here in conscience, I've become aware of bad, the first thing I do is I turn inward.

And then my task is to cover. They immediately sewed fig leaves, and then the next verse is even sadder. See here is shame, where they know something's wrong with them and they're immediately covering, they are now out of relationship with God. They've become moralists. And now verse eight, it says, they heard the sound of God walking in the garden, and they hid themselves from the presence of the Lord.

Some theologians have said "that's the saddest verse in the Bible, that's the saddest verse." Our parents, God their lover has come, and they hid themself. And later he says why? And they says, for we were afraid. Notice, this is, this is when theologians say Adam and Eve, when God comes, this is the first experience of guilt in the human race. And this is something that we are going to all inherit, Paul says in Romans 5. And what is Adam and Eve's response to guilt? Right? So here in their conscience, it's pricked, they feel guilt, they feel fear, and now they hide.

These two here, these become the ubiquitous, it's everywhere, it's everywhere at the same time. It's the ubiquitous flesh habits of the heart, of the unbeliever. Born in original sin, we inherited Adam's corruption, we inherited his guilt, and now what do we do?

We turn inward to cover, to hide. You know, most unbelievers that I know are not as blatantly bad as they could be.
I mean just, just go to a neighbor next door and just tell them, "By the way, did you know the apostle Paul says that there is none good, no, not one. Not one seeks the good at all. You know that you're actually conceived in sin?" I doubt if they'll say well, thank you.

You know you're right. I really sense that.

I live right next to Biola. I walk through a gate and on my street, there's a lot of nice people who don't know the Lord. And if I told them this, in a very straightforward way, they'd say, John, I'm a nice person. Isn't that amazing?

Why on earth do humans care to be a nice person and to have you think of them as a nice person? Because if they really open to the truth, then they're going to have to deal with the deepest stuff in their life, their badness, their shame and their guilt. And who can do that?

And so morality is just one way of covering and hiding. It's one way of having a defense against opening to a need for God, and it reaps natural benefits too. You can have a good life as a non-Christian.

My next door neighbor, he has a very nice life. As Dallas Willard has said, we're all born legalists because we're just like our original parents and we develop a habit in our heart where we don't want to see ourself as we really are. We don't know what to do with our badness. And so humans spend so much of their time wasting their life to try to convince themself and others that they are lovable or good enough.

Trying to convince themself in their deep that everything is fine.

You know, I see this in my children. You know, those of you who are parents, you know what it's like when you're trying to discern who started it. Right, have you ever tried the game, who started it? You have to be the Trinity to figure out what went on. They will go on for five
minutes and I... fine, it's lost. You know, I'm waiting for the day one of my daughters will say, Dad! I did it.

I did it! I'm the one to blame. I loved it. I hit her first. And I loved it. I haven't heard that, but take myself. I can speak my own problems to myself, but just let Greta to try to speak those same problems. 'Member Star Trek, "shield's up, captain."

John just went into hiding. Well, here's what is important for us. For the Christian, see I'm saying that these are the habits of human nature apart from God. Humans apart from God are going to become habituated in a life of hiding from their bad, hiding the bad from others.

And trying to cover the bad by looking good in some way.

And I want to say for the Christian, these flesh habits of the heart, I didn't become converted until 19.

My daughters were converted at five and yet those habits were already part of them, right? Isn't it amazing when my daughter's hands, you know, she's 3 years old. We told her no cookies. Her hand's in the cookie jar and then all of a sudden I walk in.

Krista, what are you doing? I don't know. Krista, is your hand in the cookie jar? I don't know. Wow. Well unfortunately, these habits of the heart come right into the Christian life and the believer can be tempted. Now here's my point for my students coming to the institute. They can be tempted to use obedience, ministry, regimens of spiritual formation, spiritual disciplines as a way to run, cover these deep feelings of shame, they're, that I'm not as far as I should be, I should grow more. Well, maybe this will help me grow. Maybe, maybe this is the regimen that will help me. So they'll pick up a Dallas Willard book and say, God, this is it.

God, if I only had more silence and solitude. Yes, this is the way to freedom. This is the way where I'll finally, I'll live the Christian life. Or they'll use these to hide from their feelings of
failure. To hide from their guilt by repressing this, by trying to be good. And thus for well-meaning believers, you and me, prayer and obedience and the disciplines can actually be a way to hide from our sinfulness. We become aware of our sinfulness and rather than enter into it deeply and say "God, there it is! God, this is so good, take me on a journey!"

Rather it's "God, that's bad. I need to be good, and so I use prayer and the disciplines as a way to hide from the sinfulness to avoid the feelings of guilt, to cover the feelings of shame, to try to fix the self." I'll just say this: you know, prayer is not a place to be good. Prayer is not a place to try to be a good boy or a good girl. Prayer is not a place to clean yourself up or to fix yourself.

Prayer is a place to be honest, prayer is a place to come out of hiding. It's to come out of hiding because as we're going to see later, Christ has already covered my bad. He's already covered that, he's already taken away my guilt. Then doggone it, come out of hiding, John. I know this personally.

If you want a boring prayer life, practice being good in it. That's just what will happen.

And so this isn't part of our conscious theology.

But these are the deep motivations of the flesh that can come right into the Christian life, and God allows this, he says, Fine, just, John, I'll take whatever you have as, you know, a little baby, that's just, keep going John, this is great.

And then at some point, He'll want to begin to open my heart to my failure. To see myself as I really am and again, I think those of us in the ministry are especially tempted here, because there is nothing worse. You know, I used to preach uh, some time ago. There's nothing worse than, you know, you come to Saturday night and you're, you're studying and it's dry bones and there's nothing going on and you're just, your, the text is as dry as dust and you're hoping God
will even give you a joke, or something, to, to do anything. And then Sunday morning comes and you have to teach Sunday school or you're preaching, and you, and you just are flat. What you do you do?

Well, it almost is like, remember, I remember I was a little kid. Remember we had these inflatable little dummies you know, that you'd inflate up and then you could box them?

Well, that's kind of what you do, you just [blows]. OK I can go to church now. Wow.

See we have, in the ministry, I have a financial motivation for this. But if I'm a plumber out there, and I feel the same way on Sunday morning, I have no motivation to try to pump myself up. Moralism gets really tiring after a while. Well, here's a second question: How do you know? How do you know whether you're a Christian moralist?

How do you know whether you're susceptible to this moral temptation? I mean, clearly none of us want to be what I've been talking about! Are we?

Is it possible? Well I want to say this: you won't see the motivations when things are going well. You're going to see the motivations when things are breaking down. Now here's the first test. I'll give you just two simple tests, we can. We can do a number of these. But here's the first one. It's regarding guilt. Here's how you know whether you might be struggling with moralism. It's whenever you're convicted by sin, you know that's not very hard. Right? I mean, do you pray as you ought? No. Do you love your neighbor as yourself? No. Do you love your wife as Christ loved the church? No.

It's not difficult to be convicted. Almost all you have to do is open the text. Here's the test. Whenever you are convicted by your sin, you hear something Pastor Dale says, God it's good, oh yeah. And if your first and abiding response to conscience being pricked and guilt is this: God, I'm going to do better.
God, I'm going to work on that. You hear a sermon on prayer. God, you know I haven't been praying that much. I know, I know it's good, I've, you know, I've been a Christian 20 years, 30 years.

I'm, I'm going to pray more. If that's your first and abiding response, then you know you're a moralist. You know that you are perhaps in the grips of a temptation to fix yourself by effort.

This is what I would call neurotic guilt of trying to obey the law's commands. Galatians chapter 3, verse 23 to 25 says this, I'll just kind of say what it is: says that the law was a tutor to lead us to our need for Christ. That, that's what the law is. The law was to awaken conscience. And then, you know what it was to say? I can't do it.

See, a healthy conscience is one that says, I, I can't. In Romans 7:9, it says that when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. When the commandment came, the self-realized, I can't do it. Do you remember how you came to the gospel? When I converted at 19, I didn't hear the gospel and say "God, I think I can do this. I really, I'm going to try." Is that how you and I came to the Gospel? And that, and that ground that we came to the gospel without one plea. God, I can't do this. God, I cannot live the moral law on my own power. I can't do this. That's the same ground for growth. If there is any concern that Paul has and that I have for my students, is that we're saved on the ground of "God I need you. I am a moral failure."

Right? I want to declare that. John Coe, moral failure! That's where the cross became meaningful and it's going to be the same in growth. The concern is that I'm going to shift ever so subtly to a different ground and I'm saved by Christ's work. I'm saved in my need and now I'm living a good life. That was God's part. Now this is my part. The response of true guilt is at some point, at some point, hearing the sermon, reading the text and saying "God I can't do that. God, in
my own power, I can't." Now Aristotle thought he could. Emmanuel Kant, all the moralists, they thought they could keep the moral laws.

I can't do it. And if I'm, if I'm preaching and teaching, I want to help usher my congregation into a place where there's a re-. I can't do that. That, it's too high. That's the whole difference between the old covenant and the new covenant. The old covenant was written on stone, no one could do it. When the commandment came, we died.

And so the healthy guilt, if you want to say healthy guilt or healthy conviction, is going to say, God, I can't do this without you. God I need you. And now my plea is becoming God, I don't want to do this without you anymore. I don't want to love my neighbor without you. I don't want to learn to love my wife as Christ loved the church just by mustering hard effort. God, I want to learn what it is to rely on you in this process. I want to open to another person.

It's just like when you came to the gospel without one plea. I think of John 15:5 here. I am the vine and you are the branches. He who abides in me and I in him, it's this abiding. He bears much fruit, for apart from me, you can do nothing. Dallas Willard was commenting on this text and he said, about that last part, that the Christian life is what you do when you learn that you cannot do anything. Now just think of that: the Christian life is what you do when you finally learn that you cannot do anything. And for most of us, that's going to take us a whole life to really believe that. Because many of us have come and I'm a great one at this.

I did play football in high school I was going to even think of playing college ball. I actually was a V, now I am a pair. I, John Coe had much fortitude. Do you know what fortitude is? It's that thing that you call upon.

Right, Greta asked me to massage her tonight. Should I? Um. I will find it to do it. Now, some don't have fortitude. Fortitude serves you very well in life in general and fortitude even
serves you well as a young believer. As you go on in the faith fortitude becomes your greatest nemesis because fortitude is the very thing where I grab on the power of myself to try to do some and now how to go on a new journey to discover that I cannot do anything apart from the vine. That verse bugged me to no end 13 years ago.

What do you mean I can't do anything? I am doing everything. I'm doing a whole lot and so we think of again guilt leads to this idea of condemnation, fear and now I'll do better. I'll do better, ah, I'll do better. We're conviction if I'm open to that. It can lead me to a need that could open me to love. God I need you. God is your love that's the transforming power, God I want to open to that love in this.

Here's a second test. Second test is this. Whenever, let's say you're in life having a quiet time just driving and where awareness of your own failures or your own sin begins to result in overwhelming and abiding feelings of frustration, you just, Oh God just, God I don't know what is wrong in my life. Feelings of failures, self-rejection so that you don't want to feel these things. Have any of you ever not wanted to feel those things? Then you know struggle with being a moralist. Now again, how shaking you moralists down there.

Of course we were we were born in original sins this way, to cover and hide. And of course I don't want to be exposed. And of course I don't want to meditate and ponder on that. Because you know what I'm going to really believe? I'm really going to believe this that nobody down there in my bad is really going to love me. That is going to be the deepest belief of the sinner. That no one is going to be able to journey with me into the truth of what I am and really loved me there, so I'm not going in there and no one else is going in there.

The moralist, and I struggle with this daily, cannot bear the awareness of being failure. They cannot bear the awareness of the truth of their motivations, what really drives them in life.
How much ego, how much pride, how much of us is in this, but in such cases then we've missed the whole point of self-awareness. We've missed the whole point of awareness of sin because for the believer only you know what the weirdness of your bad is? It's adorned the love, it's a door into grace. Just think back to the gospel.

When you became aware of God I can't do this, you open that door, that's where love was. There's actually someone who wants to love us right at the place of our bad. That's what the cross was all about. Thomas Keating says this, "That nothing is more helpful to reduce pride than the actual experience of self-knowledge. Nothing is more helpful to reduce pride than the actual experience of self-knowledge. If we are discouraged by it we have misunderstood its meaning."

If we're discouraged by our failure, if I say I don't want to see the bad, I just don't want to see that then as I've come to see in my own life I've misunderstood the meaning of it because you know the meaning of that is? The meaning is to enter once more into how great the cross is. How great God's love and forgiveness is, and so the response is we're going to talk here in the second part when I become aware of my sin the first response is not, why I need to do better. The first response is God I need you, I need you.

That's the movement from moral formation to spiritual formation. And you know what it means to, I don't need to hide. I don't need to hide from myself. Why not open up, why try to cover this crap. Now when we talk next time, we're going to talk about the hidden heart, you're going to see that you can't cover your crap. It's leaking all over. So if you can't cover it by being good then doggone it let's open deeply to him.

Let's go on a journey and say God take, take me into like kind of the cops you know take them down. When students come to ISF, that's in part why I say. I say this is not going to be a gentle walk with Jesus. The Lord is going to take you down and it's going to be the love. It's
going to be the most loving takedown you've ever experienced. Because God just hit the cross he loved you and all your crap. You know what the difference was you didn't know all your crap and now you have an opportunity in the Christian life to experience all your crap in total love. That is the transformation of your crap. That's the transformation of the heart. And we have a God who's saying "Come on down John, come on down. I have a journey of love that will blow your mind. To what, let's take a break here and ah so maybe 10 minutes or whatever you want to do. OK.