

Resisting the Temptation of Moral Formation: Moving from Moral to *Spiritual* Formation

Dr. John H. Coe

Director, Institute for Spiritual Formation, Talbot School of Theology

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A. Introduction:

- Dedicated believers and those in the ministry: 1) have a great desire to grow and be used of God yet 2) often struggle with a secret/great burden of guilt and shame that they are not as mature as they should be, that their lives are dry and withered at times. They wonder “Where are the rivers of living water” and “Why do I struggle so with growth.”
- What they may not know is that they may be in the grips of a great temptation (1) to despair, tune out, accept spirituality of “dry bone” (the “Gentle Christian”), (2) to act out immorally and (3) (particularly for the leader) the **Moral Temptation**: the attempt of the hidden heart (not conscious) to try to perfect oneself in the power of the self, the attempt to use formation, the spiritual disciplines, being good etc, to relieve the burden of spiritual failure, lack of love and the guilt and shame that results. To try to relieve that burden that Christ alone can relieve.

B. My Thesis or Concern for those believers struggling in their faith:

1. That no amount of effort can ever relieve them of their burden of shame and guilt except Christ.
 2. That the Christian life is not fundamentally about being moral in itself or being a “good boy or girl.” It is not fundamentally about obedience to a set of principles, it is not most deeply about character or about imitation of Christ as a model external to my soul. It is not fundamentally about doing spiritual disciplines.
- This life of *moralism*, in fact, is what we are saved from: a life of trying to be good and pleasing to God in the power of the self as a way to deal with our guilt and shame.
 - Rather, the Christian life and spiritual formation are about *denouncing* the moralistic life as a way to find happiness and please God, though it may have been the way as a beginner in the faith. However, there is a time to grow up
 - So the Christian life is about a certain kind of **obedience** and **effort** of opening the heart to a relationship. It’s about a participation in the Vine, a dependence upon the indwelling Spirit, the need to abide in Christ. This is our obedience, this is what the disciplines are about.
 - I don’t want to be a good boy any more, I don’t want to fix myself – I can’t fix myself- I want to learn to give up on the project and open more deeply to Christ’s work and the Work of the Spirit in my deep.
 - But I am still daily tempted by “moral formation”: Paul the Apostle know we would be tempted by this:

Galatians 3:1-3 “You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? 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 (a relationship by faith) are you now being perfected by the flesh?”

First Question: Why on earth would a Christian or anyone be tempted to be moral - isn't the temptation to be immoral?

Answer is simple: morality or being good is probably the most common human solution and seemingly effective way to avoid dealing with the problem of sin and guilt before God.

1. We see at the very beginning in Adam and Eve, the human answer to sin and guilt was to
 - (a) cover shame and badness (Gen. 3:7) and

(b) hide from guilt and God and blame others

2. For the Christian, the flesh habits of the heart die hard and come into the faith. Thus the believer can be tempted to use the regimens of formation and spiritual disciplines unconsciously as a way to

(a) cover deep feeling of shame over spiritual failures by trying to be good, by regimens of formation and

(b) to hide from feelings of failure and guilt by repression of the truth of oneself and unwillingness to experience one's failure

Second Question: How do you know whether you are a Christian moralist, that you are susceptible to moral temptation?

Two Tests:

- (1) Regarding guilt: whenever you are convicted by sin and your first and abiding response to conscience and guilt is “I will do better” then you know you are a moralist, you know you are tempted to fix yourself by your own effort.

- (2) Second Test: Whenever awareness of failure, sin and guilt result in overwhelming and abiding feelings of frustration, sense of failure, self rejection so that one does not want to feel these things and represses them, then you know you struggle with being a moralist.

Third Question: How did we get this way, how did we become Christian moralists?

1. The first and primary explanation: Habits of the Heart from Original Sin
2. Added to this problem: Most of us were parented to be moralists. Two ways:
 - (a) Parenting by Guilt: When the child does bad, the parent cannot endure the bad of the child and becomes condemning, punitive and splits off relationally from the child. This is the rejecting parent who cannot tolerate, love, discipline and correct the child in their bad.
 - (b) Parenting by Shame: when the child does bad, the parents are unable to help the child enter more deeply into experiencing their badness in the context of parental love and discipline. Rather, the parent merely moves the child into covering their bad by being good.

Fourth Question: How can we resist this temptation to be a Christian moralist and learn to depend upon the Cross and Spirit?

- By Opening the heart to the reality of the *Cross* (our Justification by Faith) and the *Spirit* (our Regeneration and the Filling by the Spirit)

Three Prayers of Intentions:

1. Lord, I no longer want to deal with my guilt in the power of the self, to be afraid of seeing myself as I really am, to hide from seeing my badness, sin and failure. I do not want hide anymore from my guilt. I want to come out into the open with you who forgive me entirely.

2. Lord, I no longer want to deal with my shame in the power of my self. I do not want to fix myself anymore, to grow myself, to cover my badness with good works, with regimens of formation. I want Christ's righteousness to be my covering. I want to learn to obey and engage in formation in the light of my badness and sin, not as a cover of my sin.

3. Lord, I no longer want to live the Christian life alone, in the power of myself. I want You, to depend upon you, to be filled with Your Spirit, to abide in the Vine.

Fifth Question: What will happen to me, my spiritual life, if I cannot resist the moral temptation.

1. First, Christ will be of no benefit to you in the spiritual life.

Galatians 5:1-3 "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore, keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you."

2. Second, we will become more like a Martha than a Mary- you will slowly dry up and wither in your service and attempts to be good. Luke 10:38ff.