

Resisting the Temptation of Moral Formation

By John Coe

Speaker 1:

Well, good morning. If you want to come and stand and join us in worship.

[guitar starts to play]

Before we start worship, I just wanted to, uh, read you guys some verses. Just get our hearts focused. First Peter two twenty-four says, he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds, you have been healed. Philippians three eight and nine says for his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things. Count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law. But that which comes through faith, and that in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. That's the righteousness that my savior bought for me when he died on the cross. Not a righteousness that comes from me doing good things, good works, but through faith in his death on the cross. That's the righteousness my savior bought for me. So let's climb to the cross this morning. Sing with me, sweetly broken, to the cross I look to the cross I cling.

[worship set plays]

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for giving us your son. For giving us a righteousness that comes through faith and his death on the cross. We ask now that as Dr. Coe comes to speak,

that you would just use your Spirit to open our hearts, our minds, to what you have to say to us this morning. Lord and that you would give him the words that you would have him say also Lord. We thank you so much. Amen. You can be seated.

Speaker 2:

When Jesus, that's hot. Whoo. Good morning. Hi, you too right there. Hi. When Jesus was uh, talking to his disciples in the upper room discourse, the last one, he gave them, he, they were bugged. They were nervous. They were anxious because he was talking about going away, and he says this to them. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away. Well, that was counterintuitive. Uh, he says, no, it's to your advantage that I leave. For if I don't go away, the helper, the Holy Spirit, will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you. Well, the disciples didn't quite understand at that moment what was happening. But later they would understand that it was better that he go because while he was loving them from the outside, the Holy Spirit was going to be sent to love them and teach them and guide them from the inside. That their spirit would be in a relationship with the Holy Spirit. And that that was even better than having Jesus on the outside to have Jesus on the inside. Well, we're in a two week series on spiritual development. And whilst words like spiritual development, spiritual formation can be confusing, the concept is actually quite simple. The spiritual part of spiritual development means that our spirits are being led by the Holy Spirit. That is the spiritual part. That the Holy Spirit is within us, teaching us, guiding us, bringing us along in our sanctification. In our growth in abiding, in our growth in being in Christ. So that's the spiritual part. And those steps and patterns by which we grow, by which we understand our growth, that are very

particular to each of us but also are in common to many of us, that's the development part. So this week, we're looking at spiritual development, in other words, how can we cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit in developing us to abide more deeply in God? That is spiritual development.

Todd Hall spoke with us last week for a couple times, talking about the relational nature of our life with God, and Dr. John Coe has been speaking with us last week about the role of constellation desolation, the feelings. And today he comes again to speak with us. John has been here for twenty-two years or so, he was a undergrad like you at Biola, way back when, he got an M.A. here in theology. He went on to get a philosophy Ph.D., and came and taught at Talbot, and, for many years, and then Rosemead School of Psychology. And out of that was birthed the Institute for Spiritual Formation at Biola, which is eight years old now, with about one-hundred and thirty graduate students. Many of you have received spiritual direction or group direction from the Institute for Spiritual Formation. And by the way, that is available to you. For those of you who are interested in having a spiritual director, a discipler to help you learn what it means to abide more deeply, those connections can be made over at the Institute for Spiritual Formation, which is by the tennis courts, those portable buildings over there. But John has been the director and founder of the I, of the Institute for Spiritual Formation, all of which is a great gift to our campus. So please welcome Dr. John Coe.

[applause]

John Coe:

Well, welcome uh, to chapel, or maybe you should say welcome to me. I don't get an often, a chance to speak to the undergraduates, and uh, this is a great opportunity. I remember when I was here, uh, back in 1976. My wife and I, we to sit right in the back over there. And uh, so it's a great thing to speak here. I want to start with prayer, and open our hearts. Father, we come to you. We come on the basis of the cross of our Lord Jesus. And so just take a moment to come to the Lord Jesus Christ. And I want you to, to ask your soul and ask the Lord. Lord, have I been experiencing freedom in you? Do I experience freedom? Or you might ask, or Lord, do I feel like the Christian life is, is a lot of work. Or am I frustrated with my Christian life or am I excited? Want you to for a minute open and ask those questions to the Lord, what is going on in my life with you? Lord, we ask that you teach us by your spirit. So that what we do would be continually open to what Christ has done in our life. And what he did on the cross for us. And we bless you in Jesus' name, Amen Those who are often writing in the area of spiritual formation, perhaps you've heard some of their names, Dallas Willard, Richard Foster. Their audience is what they actually call the consumer Christian. And the consumer Christian is the person that, they feel looks at the Christian life, kind of like shopping at a mall. Kind of, you go to the mall and you pick out what you like and what you choose. But people like Willard are really concerned of whether some believers are really interested in serious discipleship. And so they write about that. They write to encourage people to be serious about their life.

But the audience that I am with, I think is quite different. I'm with Talbot students, people who are preparing for the ministry. I'm with Rosemead students, people who want to give their life to, to helping others in their problems, especially believers. I'm with Biola students. And I, I think of

you as kind of the dedicated neurotic. I mean, here you are, at a chapel. Now, here's what I find about my audience. These are dedicated students who have a real desire to grow. They have a real desire to be used of God. When I speak at pastors' conferences or theologians, I don't feel like I'm around the consumer, although maybe there's a little that in all of us. But I'm around individuals who really want to grow. But here's what I've noticed in my life, and now in the lives that I'm around. There's often a struggle with a secret and sometimes great burden of their, on their back. And it's the burden of guilt and shame. That they feel that they're not as mature as they should be. They feel that perhaps they should be further along in the Christian life. They feel that, you know, maybe my life's a little dry. It's a little withered. We talked about that Friday, and they wonder, God, shouldn't I, given where I started, shouldn't I, I love you more, shouldn't I pray more? What's wrong with me? And it sometimes, and this is my, my audience is now even older people. People who've been in the faith twenty, thirty, forty years, and sometimes how they feel is you know, John, I, I continue to hear on Sunday morning, or for you, you continue to hear in your classes or in chapel, you hear the, the model of where we should be and what we should become.

All the great things that Paul says that we should do, we should love our spouses as Christ loved the church, or respect them. We should love God with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength. And, and, some people say, John, it feels so high and I have a sense of where I am, and I feel like I'm looking up at the goal, and I'm starting to get really frustrated. And so what they may not know, what we all may not know is that we may be in the grips of a great temptation. Now, there are different temptations. For some, after they look up at the, what the goal is in the Christian life, where they are, some begin to despair. Some begin to tune out. Some just say, you know, I, I

don't get it. Maybe the pastor gets it, the pros get it. But for me, it's just the, the, the, the goal just seems further away. Or maybe some begin to just act out immorally. That's another temptation. Like ah, just forget it. But I want to talk about a peculiar temptation. And it's what I call the moral temptation. The moral temptation. And here's what I mean by the moral temptation. It's the attempt of the heart to try to perfect one's self in the power of the self. Or get this, it's the attempt to use service. It's the attempt to use ministry. It's the attempt to use prayer, it's the attempt to use all of these things, being good, as the way to deal with your failure, and the feelings of shame and guilt that we experience even in the Christian life. The title of this time is going to be Resisting the Temptation of Moral Formation. And I have a, I have a concern when students come to ISF, the Institute for Spiritual Formation, our master's program, that they're coming and they're thinking, or they're reading a Dallas Willard book and they're thinking, you know, I, I'm struggling in my Christian life I, I, there is shame and guilt in my life, ah, maybe this is it.

Maybe this is the answer. Maybe Dallas Willard, maybe, maybe going on retreats. This, [unintelligible], loving the Lord. Moral obedience. This is the answer to this. And there are some things now at fifty-three that are becoming more and more obvious. There's a story about the obvious. This is about Sherlock Holmes and Watson. They're on a camping trip. And at the end of the day, Watson and Holmes come in and they're sliding into their sleeping bags, and Holmes says, Watson, look up. What do you see? And Watson says, I see a beautiful night sky with thousands of lights and, Holmes says, Watson, what does that tell you? Watson says, Well, astronomically, it tells me there are billions of galaxies out there and meteorologically, it tells me

we're gonna have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you, Holmes? And Sherlock Holmes looks up and says, someone has stolen our tent.

[audience laughs]

That's the obvious. Here's my thesis now about this moral temptation. First is this. That the answer to our failures in the Christian life, the answer to our guilt and shame is not to work harder. That is not the answer. The answer is not to obey more, God, I need to work on that. It's so easy when we hear sermons, or we read the scriptures and it does say to obey. It says to do many things. And our first response is, I need to work on that. And that's a way maybe to then deal with the shame and guilt. And my second thesis is this, Christ alone. Christ alone and his work on the cross. That alone can daily deal with your Christian experience of failure, guilt and shame. But we're going to be tempted. We're going to be tempted, and here's the temptation, is we're gonna be tempted to start the journey. 'Member, I converted at nineteen, just a year before I came to Biola. When we come to faith, we come solely, Christ, I need you. But something is going to happen. As we go on in the Christian life, when we're faced with our failure, when we're faced with guilt and shame that's in our life, we're going to unknowingly slip back to a life of obedience as a form of works, rather than the obedience of faith. And I want to say this, working harder to deal with my failure in the Christian life, that's exactly what the Christian life is going to denounce. That's exactly what I'm gonna be safe from. And I think Paul was dealing with the same problems in Galatia. If you have the scriptures, it, turn to Galatians chapter three. And I will read from this as well. I don't have it on PowerPoint, I don't use PowerPoint. I'm, I still live

in the thirteenth century with Thomas Aquinas. We, we'd [unintelligible], we would be, be still passing the torch of fire, 'cause if it goes out, oh my gosh, we're in trouble.

So, no PowerPoint. He says this, Galatians, chapter three, verse one to three. 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? That is, did you start by the Spirit hearing, by faith, faith in the work of Christ? Are you so foolish, having begun by the spirit, having begun by faith in Christ? Are you now being perfected by the flesh? Paul is saying this: Who's bewitched you? Who, who has changed your mind? He says, remember, when he says Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified, what Paul means there is, when I was with you, I preached the cross. I explained all of the work of Christ on the cross. I explained the whole matter. And now, Galatians, let me reason with you. Did you start this path of salvation? Did you receive the spirit by works, by your energy? By working harder? Or was it by hearing with faith? That is, opening to the good news of what Christ has done on the cross, and the answer was obvious. It was by hearing with faith, and now his concern in verse three. If that's so, then why are you trying to perfect yourself? Why, now you think about this for your own life. Why are you trying to mature yourself by the works of the law? The works of the law. Now, there's much going on there, but one way we're gonna look at that is, the works of the Law are going to be that approach to life that is apart from faith in the work of Christ. It's that approach to life that sees your work, your energy, as the way to deal with the deepest issues of failure, guilt and shame.

See, here's the situation in Galatia. Paul had now been a missionary. He had planted the church in Galatia, right, that's in, in present day Turkey area. And then he had gone on. Well, at this time, there are these individuals from Jerusalem, probably they were called Judaizers. And the Judaizers would literally fall Paul around in his missionary journey, and they have now come to Galatia, and Paul is elsewhere and he's heard that the Judaizers have now come to Galatia and are teaching their particular doctrine. And here's what the Judaizers are trying to persuade the Galatians. And they're gonna do it throughout the New Testament, when we see the other letters of Paul. They're going to say something like this. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Perhaps Paul is right that faith in Jesus is sufficient for salvation. Yes, faith in Jesus is sufficient for starting this new covenant in Christ. It's dealt with your guilt and shame and salvation. However, there's more. If you're going to really go on, if you're going to grow to perfection, that's chapter three here, and if you're really going to deal with the, the passions and the licentiousness of your flesh, if you're really going to become holy, if you're really going to deal with failure and shame in your Christian life, then you're going to have to work. You're going to have to keep the law of God. It's almost like there's a two step. Yes, you've been forgiven of your sins, and now it's your time to work. And that's these Judaizers trying to bring back parts of the Old Covenant, or at least their view of the Old Covenant into the Christian life. And Paul's response is really shocking.

He says the Judaizers' way of dealing with sin and the flesh is just another form of the flesh. That, that's shocking. See, Paul was a Pharisee, and, and that the road to Damascus experience turned Paul upside down. It made him think, what really is the nature of the gospel? And now Paul in Galatians is says, you know, there's two forms of the flesh. There's the flesh where we live out our passions in sin. But he says, you know, there's another form of the flesh. It's where

we try, in our humanness, in the weakness of our humanness, to try to grow ourselves. To try to deal with our failure. And Paul is appealing really back to the Old Testament view of sarx, in the Greek, or flesh, because sarx meant the weakness and the incapability of the human being apart from the spirit of God. It's the weakness of our humanness, whether it's in terms of just the outright sin of the flesh, or it's the sin of trying to obey God in the power of our flesh. And so in Jeremiah chapter seventeen, verse five to seven, it says, cursed is the man who trusts in man, and makes flesh his arm. Blessed is the man who trusts in Yahweh. Or another text. Isaiah thirty-one, verse thirteen. Woe to those who go down to Egypt, and rely upon horses and trust in chariots. The Egyptians are men, they're not God. And their horses are flesh. Their horses are just weakness. And so the relevance to our life is this. Your flesh, that, that weakness of your humanness. It can manifest, according to Paul, in Galatians, in two ways. It can manifest itself in just the passions of sin. Right, this is Galatians five. The deeds of the flesh are immorality, impurity, sensuality, lust, greed.

But your flesh can also manifest in the Christian life. It's when you take it upon yourself to work out your failures and your guilt and your shame, to try to perfect's yourself in your weakness. And so in the Christian life, we begin with this great, this sense of a great burden. And I think sometimes with those who are not converts, they may not experience that as a great burden. But I at nineteen, I felt this burden that I could not deal with this. And when I came to Christ, I came to him alone. God only you can take this burden of my failure. Of my shame and my guilt. But then here is the concern of Paul, and I've seen this in my own life. That as time goes on in the Christian life, when we continue to sin, and we continue to be aware of our flesh coming out in sinful ways rather than pondering and acknowledging our sin, rather than coming back to the

cross and saying, God, I need you. We can be tempted in the flesh to deal with our flesh. That is, we can be tempted in the weakness of our human effort to go back to our works, to try harder as the way to deal with the failure. You know, I think this is what the moralists of all the ages have done. My Ph.D. at the U.C., at U.C. Irvine was in ethics. And as I studied Plato, Aristotle, all the way through the history of ethics, to Emmanuel Kant, to the present day secular psychologist, they're all engaged in this same agenda in different ways. And that is, we're going to deal with our guilt and our shame and our moral failure by trying to perfect ourself in the power of the flesh. Because it's going to turn out that, you know one thing that humans have discovered?

Morality is probably the best way to cover shame and guilt. And I want to say as a Christian, I am no longer interested in being a good little boy. I don't want to use my obedience as a cover. Now, let me ask you this, how do you know, how do you know in the Christian life, if you are tempted to perfect yourself in the weakness of your humanness, how do you know if you're tempted? I'll, I'll, here's one test. This is regarding guilt. Whenever you're convicted by sin, you know, and it's not hard to get convicted, you hear a sermon about praying without ceasing and you're going, do you pray without ceasing? [in timid voice] No? Do you love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength? [in timid voice] I, kind, no, kind of? It's not hard and I don't mind guilt. I do not mind shame. What I do see in some preachers is they don't know what to do with that stuff, and so they sometimes lower their preaching because they don't want to raise this. Oh, no, no. I say, oh, let's raise it. Let's stir it up. Mmm. This is good. But here's the, here's the test. Whenever you're convicted by sin. And if your first, an abiding response to conviction in conscience is, I'll do better. I'll do better. I need to work on that. Yeah. You hear a prof talking about prayer, or a sermon. Ah, you're convicted. That's cool. Your conscience is going off. That's

wonderful. And then you say, I'll do better. Then you know that you're a moralist. You know you struggle with legalism. Because now you're, you're tempted to fix the problem by your moral effort. Galatians chapter three, Paul says later in verse twenty-four to twenty-five, he says this, that the law was a tutor. It was a tutor. Now, what was it a tutor to do?

Was the law a tutor to make you a better person? Was a law, a tutor, so that it would inform your conscience to do better? No. Paul says the law was a tutor to lead us to Christ. To lead us to Christ. As I look at the history of ethics, unfortunately, the history of Western ethics and even in Western society, we have developed the conscience, the concept of the conscience as a moral tutor. That, that's a neurotic view of the conscience, the conscience. Yes, it's supposed to go off when you're doing the bad. But it is not supposed to send you into work. That, that's the conscience according to Pinocchio. Remember Pinocchio? How many of you've seen Pinocchio? Yeah, remember little Jiminy Cricket? He was supposed to be the conscience. Here he is,

[audience laughs]

Jiminy Cricket. And my daughters bought me for this for a reason, and you'll see. But Jiminy Cricket is, it's really been the West's view of what they think the conscience is. 'Member Pinocchio, uh, Jiminy Cricket's trying to explain to Pinocchio, when you do the right thing, you do the, you should do the wrong thing. You should do the wrong thing, uh, he's kind of not getting himself. And then Pinocchio says to his conscience, I'll do good. And Jiminy says, that's a boy, that's a boy, Pinoc. You know what the conscience was there for? It was there to lead you to Christ. As Luther talks about this, he says, when you're in a sermon and you're, and you're

reading the scripture and you're convicted, you're reading a book and your soul's convicted about things, the first thing is not, I need to work on that. Luther says that's the first move of the flesh. You know what the first move is? Fly to Christ, he says. Fly to Christ. As I'm hearing a sermon and I'm struck by it, I, I need to re-educate this conscience, because here's what it wants to do. The conscience really wants to take you back to the cross. And God, that's why I'm forgiven. God, that's why I'm accepted in you. You see, your work, your efforts cannot deal with your shame and guilt. That's Christ. But I know in my spiritual life, much of my energy to work and to do things was really a way to keep guilt and shame at bay, and to feel better about my Christian life. And so that idea of the conscience as moral tutor, a little Jiminy Cricket, you know what really we should do? Next time you're convicted by sin and your first and abiding responses is, God, I should do better, you need to take out a gun, grab little Jiminy by the throat,

[audience laughs]

Boom!

[audience laughs and cheers]

That's my daughter's. Speaking of daughters, um, well, I was going to, no I better not. I, I was going to tell you about their crushes, but uh, Orlando Bloom, the Beatles, uh, one of my daughters, actually wrote a little thing called My Hundred and Eight Crushes. And I love it. I love talking with my daughters about crushes. You know what she said? I, I looked at this list,

you know Orlando Bloom, Steve McQueen, uh, Harrison Ford, then, now the Beatles, they're really [unintelligible]. Then I saw the random faun in Prince Caspian.

[audience laughs]

What? Well, we saw Prince Caspian, and that random faun, he was on like two times for a second. And she has a crush. Oh, Lord, help my daughters.

[audience laughs]

A second test about this moralism, is whenever we're overwhelmed by our failures, wherever we're overwhelmed by our struggles, and we get to a point where we're overwhelmed. I don't want to look at it, I don't want to deal with it, you know, you're a moralist. Because the moralist cannot stand to see its sin. The moralist has forgotten that awareness of sin, you know what it is? It's just a door back into grace. It's just a door back into love through the cross, as Augustine said in the confessions, oh vice, oh blessed vice, oh blessed sin. It's you who are my friend. Because it's you who always takes me back to Christ. Oh but, oh virtue. Oh virtues, oh, you strengths. Some of you lead me back to myself. Be careful. What is the answer to our legalism? It's the cross. It's the work of Christ. It's, it's the great truth of justification by faith. It's what Paul is saying, who bewitched you away from the cross? This is Second Corinthians five twenty-one. This is the essence of what the cross was. He made him who knew no sin to become sin on our behalf, o that we would become the righteousness of God. Now just bear with me. This is a little theology. Inside that verse is what we call the double imputation, that is, God attributed or

imputed two things, and here's what he did. He took, this is hard to believe. He imputed all of your sins. He took all of the sins that you will ever commit. Past, present and even future, the ones that you will do today. And he put them all on Christ. And the result is this: You are fully, fully forgiven. There is, there is no condemnation to you. Forgiveness is always there as you come to him. But here's the second imputation. This is the one that Luther in the Reformation said. This is what Catholicism had not believed. And that is Jesus' righteousness, all that life that he lived in being righteous, it says this. That was imputed to you. It's what the theologians like Calvin called alien righteousness, not alien that it's from Mars, but alien that it's not yours, it's not mine. It was his.

And it was imputed to me so that when the father looks at you and me, you know what he says? I accept you totally. I accept you totally. Not because of you, but because of my son. I accept you just like my son. Full forgiveness. Full acceptance. What is it then to perfect oneself in the power of the Spirit? What is it to do what Paul says are the works of faith? The works of faith. You see, it's so easy to think that I'm saved by faith but perfected by works. But here's the truth. We're saved by faith, and we're perfected by a life of faith. You hear that? We're perfected by a life of faith. We're perfected by daily, as you're engaging in the Christian life of trying to obey, trying to open to God in prayer, trying to love your neighbor. Here's what it is to do it in faith. God, I do these things not to deal with my shame and my guilt. You've done that. God, that, that monkey, you're taken care of, I just come here. It's to daily do it in the sense of, he has dealt with all of that. And I can be free. This is what freed Martin Luther, he said, my gosh. I'm really, there is no condemnation anymore, I'm totally accepted. I have come to see this. With my students at I.S.F., in my own heart. Most of us evangelicals believe that we're forgiven. But, you know what we

don't believe? That we're really accepted by God in Christ. We believe that we're forgiven, but we're not very acceptable. We believe we're forgiven, but we're not a very good person. We should be further along. And so we pick up our works rather than, no, I am accepted, not because of these works at all. Totally because of, in Christ. The works of faith really look like this. It's to come out of hiding. It's to do the opposite of Adam and Eve and it's to say, God, of course I've sinned, of course I've been a failure.

Yes, this is, this is part of my life. God, you've dealt with my shame and guilt. Here I am. And I bring my, my works. 'Cause there are works. I bring them on that basis. You must continually remind yourself throughout the day: I'm in Christ. Lest that little, that little Jiminy Cricket comes up. [in deep voice] Bad. Bad girl, bad boy I. You need to work harder. No Jiminy. Boom!

[audience laughs]

Christ. Luther's fly to Christ. God, I need you. God, I need you. As Augustine said, do not be afraid of seeing your sin. Oh, blessed vice. Oh, 'cause you're the one who taught me. I could not do this without my Christ. I want you to pray with me. Want you just take a moment and again, open your heart, just open your heart to the Lord. Present yourself. Like Romans twelve says. Here I am, Lord. Might make this the prayer of your heart. This has become the prayer of my heart. Is it God? God, I don't want to hide or cover anymore. I don't want to hide from my sin, I don't want to cover it. God, I, I can't deal with my shame and my guilt on my own. Just tell the Lord that. God, I can't deal with that. That, that is not my business. And tell the Lord, Lord, on the basis of Christ, that's his business. Full forgiveness, full acceptance. No condemnation. This

is why we can confess our sin, and he is faithful and righteous to forgive. It's always there. And just tell your soul in real, in, in relation to the Lord. Lord, I want to obey on the basis of faith. Paul says it was for freedom that Christ set us free. Paul is the apostle of hearts set free. You are no longer condemned. You are accepted. In the beloved. On that basis, Lord, that's why we come to you. Oh, Lord. We need you every day. Continue to apply the work of Christ in our life, that we might present ourselves to you on that basis, on the basis of faith. God, watch over these students, you know them watch over these faculty, you know them, you love them so dearly. Be gracious that they might find freedom in the Christian life. And we bless you in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen. Have a good day.