

RESISTING THE TEMPTATION OF MORAL FORMATION: OPENING TO SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN THE CROSS AND THE SPIRIT



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Abstract. There are many dedicated Christians who are in the grips of a great moral temptation, which attempts to deal with spiritual failure, guilt and shame by means of spiritual effort and disciplines in the power of the self. This article theologically-psychologically explores this moralism as a type of legalism similar to what Paul confronts in Galatians in order to address: (1) why we are tempted to be moralists on account of original sin and early parenting; (2) How to determine whether one is tempted by moralism in light of a theology of guilt and conscience; (3) How to avoid moralism by opening the heart to our Justification and the ministry of the Holy Spirit; and (4) What will happen to us if we fail to resist moralism. The goal is to clarify the implications of the Cross and the Spirit for daily Christian living in resisting moralism and moving from moral to spiritual formation.

A number of writers in the spiritual formation movement have expressed a concern for what they call the *consumer Christian*.¹ This is the person who comes to the Christian life much like we might go to a shopping

¹ According to Dallas Willard, "Consumer Christianity is now normative. The consumer Christian is one who utilizes the grace of God for forgiveness and the services of the church for special occasions, but does not give his or her life and innermost thoughts, feelings, and intentions over to the kingdom of the heavens. Such Christians are not inwardly transformed and not committed to it" (Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our Hidden Life in God* [San Francisco: Harper, 1998], 342.). Along the same line, Eugene Peterson writes, "The major American innovation in the congregation is to turn it into a *consumer* enterprise [my addition]. . . . If we have a nation of consumers, obviously the quickest and most effective way to get them into our churches is to identify what they want and offer it to them. . . . We are the world's champion consumers, so why shouldn't we have state-of-the-art consumer churches? . . . There's only one thing wrong. This is not the way that God brings us into conformity with the life of Christ. . . . The cultivation of consumer spirituality is the antithesis of a sacrificial, 'denying yourself' congregation. A consumer church is an anti-Christ church. It's doing the right thing—gathering a con-

mall, browsing the stores looking for what suits one's fancy and felt needs. The expressed concern is that these persons do not seem to demonstrate a serious commitment to a life of obedience and transformation, that they do not have a deep commitment to being a disciple of our Lord. Their temptation is to use Christianity for the sake of the good life now, and as insurance for the life to come.

No doubt there is a bit of the consumer in all of us, that we are all tempted to use the faith to serve our ends. However, the "consumer Christian" is not the person I have in mind in this article. Rather, my aim is the *dedicated* Christian, the believer in the Christian university, seminary, church and the ministry who are very serious about their spiritual life, who have a most sincere desire to grow and be used of God in service and ministry. These are hardly consumers but are, what I call jokingly, the "dedicated neurotic," who possess a deep desire to grow in their faith and are in this for the long haul regardless of how it feels.

What I have discovered, however, is that these same dedicated persons often struggle with a secret, and sometime not so secret, burden of guilt and shame that they are not as mature as they should be, that their lives often feel spiritually dry and withered, that the Christian life feels more like work than joy. They wonder at times, "God, what is wrong with me? Where are the rivers of living water? Why do I still struggle with the same sins year after year? Why is my spiritual life so dry?" And so they might pick up a Dallas Willard or Richard Foster book or come to our Institute for Spiritual Formation with a hunger to grow, hoping to find something that will make their spiritual life work.

What I want to tell them and what they may not know is that they are in the *grips of a great temptation*. There are a number of temptations we might fall into. For some, there is the *temptation to despair of their spiritual life*, to despair that God will come, to tune out, to accept a spirituality of "dry bones." For others, there is the *temptation to act out immorally*, so that when frustrations mount in the Christian life, the temptation is to say in one's heart, "I can not take it anymore, I just want to escape for a while." These temptations are serious indeed.

However, I want to address a peculiar temptation, one especially relevant and (I think) universal to those who are dedicated to the Christian life and to ministry. It is what I call the *moral temptation*. The moral temptation is the attempt to deal with our spiritual failure, guilt and shame by means of spiritual efforts, by attempting to perfect one's self in the power of the self. It is the attempt of the well-intentioned believer to use spiritual formation, spiritual disciplines, ministry, service, obedience—being good in general—as a way to *relieve the burden of spiritual failure, lack of love and the guilt and shame that results*. It is the temptation to try to relieve a bur-

gregation—but doing it in the wrong way (Eugene Peterson, "Transparent Lives," *The Christian Century* [November 2003]. <http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=1195> [accessed February 24, 2008]).

den that Christ alone can relieve. To carry such a burden is an awful load to carry. And those of us in the professional ministry have a particular professional, and even financial, temptation to be moral and bear such a burden.

My thesis or concern for my students and those believers who want to give themselves to a life of growth and ministry but are struggling with their faith, is two-fold:

1. That no amount of spiritual effort on their part can ever relieve them of their burden of shame and guilt in the Christian life except Christ. That no amount of effort in spiritual formation or the doing of the spiritual disciplines can grow them or fix them.
2. That, in fact, the Christian life is not *fundamentally* about being moral in itself or about being a good Christian boy or girl. It is not fundamentally about obedience to a set of principles or doing spiritual disciplines; in fact, spiritual disciplines do not grow us. It is not even about character formation or imitation of Christ as a model person “out there,” whom I can look at and model external to my soul (as in the motto “What would Jesus Do?”).

What I have just described is what the secular moralists of all the ages have attempted to do from the Egyptian and Babylonian sages, to Plato and Aristotle, to the Stoics, to Kant and Mill; namely, to use morality as a defense against seeing their need for a savior. I speak knowingly and sympathetically about this matter, for my Ph.D. at the University of California is in the area of the history of ethics and Aristotle’s virtue ethics. However, as much as I have learned from these secular moralists, this “moralism” or *moral* formation that they espouse in various forms is the very thing that the gospel saves us from: a life of trying to be good, of trying to deal with our guilt and shame, of even trying to please God *in the power of the self, by means of moral and spiritual effort.*

Throughout this paper, then, I will be using the term “moralism” and “moral” in a certain pejorative manner in order to make a point. What I mean by *moralism* is any attempt on the part of the believer or unbeliever to deal with guilt and shame before God and others or to try to grow oneself *by being good in the power of the self, to live the moral life in autonomy from the transformative power of the Spirit.* Now in one sense, the Christian has the possibility of being the most “moral” in the fullest and best sense of the term. That is, it is possible for the believer to be good and grow in virtue not as a way to deal with failure, guilt and shame in the Christian life but to do so in freedom, on the basis of the Cross and in the Spirit.

My theses above insist that the Christian life and true *spiritual* formation *denounce* the moralistic life as a way to find happiness and please God; they denounce moralism as the way to deal with one’s failure and subsequent guilt and shame. Now it may be true that moralism is a fine way to grow as a beginner in the faith, for it is impossible to avoid spiritual effort

in the power of the self while we are still in the process of learning to depend upon the Spirit, still learning how to deal with guilt and shame “in Christ.” However, there comes a time to grow up and consciously let go of this moralism.

As we grow older in faith, we discover that the Christian life is *more about Christ and less about our efforts*. It is about what *He* has done, and about our life “*in Christ*,” and how to *open the heart* to this New Covenant life dependent on the Spirit. This is an obedience of abiding in the Vine and opening to the Life of God living within. It is an obedience, but not one of moralism. In fact, true obedience is a movement away from moralism to an obedience of trust that opens to Another person to live through us *based upon* the work of Christ on the Cross. As we will see, it is more about *participation* in a new life than *imitation* of that life, though the latter is involved as well. Thus, the Christian life is about Christ *and only then, and on that basis*, is it about what we do in Him—or what He does within us. This is the whole point of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:31ff and Ezekiel 36:26ff in which the *Spirit as the agent of change*, points to the radically *relational* nature of the Christian life, which is the ground for true morality and makes possible the *movement from moral to spiritual formation*.²

I do not want to be a good boy any more. I do not want to fix myself—I can not fix myself. My natural fortitude served me well as a young believer and it was inevitable given that I was habituated from birth to live in the power of the self. But as I grow older in the faith, I find that I am invited by the Spirit to learn to give up on the project of moralism, of trying to fix myself by my spiritual efforts. Rather, I want to open more deeply to Christ’s work on the Cross and the Work of the Spirit in my deep for my daily bread.

² Critics of the spiritual formation movement sometimes assert that it has not done a very good job of theologically grounding spiritual formation in a robust theology of the Cross and the Spirit. This may be true. However, I also agree with some of the advocates of spiritual formation who criticize theologians and evangelicals who may have a robust theology of the cross but a non-realist pneumatology or theology of the Indwelling Spirit of Christ and His role in transformation. That is, they fail to make explicit the Bible’s claim that it is not theology but rather the *reality* of theology-being-applied-to-the-heart by the Spirit, a “pneumatological realism,” that truly transforms. In that sense, *the movement from moral to spiritual formation* in our lives is not accomplished primarily through the *intellectual activity of theologically grounding* formation in the truth of the cross and the Spirit, important as this is. Rather, only the *reality of the Spirit opening the heart* of the believer to the work of the Cross and His indwelling ministry of love is capable of moving us from a moralistic to a relational Christianity. This does not minimize doctrine; but it does mean that *only truth applied to the heart by the Spirit transforms* and spares us from the yoke of moralism. I shall touch upon this further under the “Fifth Question” below.

However, the truth is that I am still daily tempted by moralism or “moral formation.” Paul the Apostle—one who was deeply acquainted with moralism—knew that the believer would be tempted by this and addresses this problem to the Galatians.

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? (Gal 3:1-3)³

There is currently a controversy in New Testament studies from the “New Perspective” regarding the nature of legalism and justification in Paul.⁴ N. T. Wright and others insist that it is a “gross oversimplification or confusion” to insist that first century Judaism promoted a legalism of a “works based salvation;” rather, they affirmed that entrance into a relationship with God was based upon grace and YHWH’s covenant commitment to his people.⁵ According to Wright, the legalism of first century Judaism that Paul is attacking was the adherence to a “works based present justification” as a badge of being in the covenant. Rather, Paul wants to affirm that “present justification” or sanctification is through faith in Jesus Christ.

Now there are many complex exegetical and theological issues involved in this New Perspective on Paul that take us beyond the purview of this paper.⁶ However, whether the New Perspective is correct or not, it seems uncontroversial (or at least less so) that Paul’s concern with the *Galatian believers* is *not* that they are embracing a legalism of turning back to works in order to be saved. Rather, they are pursuing legalism as a way to grow spiritually, as a way to perfect themselves in the covenant. In Paul’s

³ All Scripture is quoted from the New American Standard Bible version unless otherwise noted.

⁴ For advocates of this New Perspective on Paul (NPP), cf. James D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul* (Eerdmans, 2007) and N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

⁵ For Wright’s clarification of the New Perspective, see R. Alan Street, “An Interview with N. T. Wright,” *The Criswell Theological Review*, (2/2 Spring 2005): 2–3.

⁶ For reviews and responses to the New Perspective of Paul, see Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul: A Review and Response* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2004); John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Crossway, 2007); D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, Mark A. Seifrid, eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism, Vol. 1: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001); D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, Mark A. Seifrid, eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism, Vol. 2: The Paradoxes of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

terms, they started with faith but now are trying to be “perfected [Gk. *επιτελεισθε*, perfected or ending] by the flesh,” that is, by the autonomy of human weakness, by the best that humans can muster in their own power (Gal 3:3).⁷ The Galatians are tempted by to go back to observance of the works of Torah not as a way to be saved but as a way to go on in growth and please God.⁸

As in the case of the Galatians, I think that the problem of Christian legalism is *not* the temptation to think that one is saved by works. The unbeliever may be tempted to think this, but few evangelicals I know struggle with this. Most believers are convinced, as I think the Galatians were, that their sins are forgiven and that they were saved by the work of Christ on the cross. Rather, the legalism that we struggle with seems to be this: though we believe that one is saved (justified in the past tense) by grace working through faith, we are tempted to pursue sanctification (being made righteous in the present tense) by *our own efforts* (1) to obey the commands of God, (2) to assuage the guilt and shame that comes in our failure, (3) to make ourselves more acceptable to God and (4) to grow ourselves by the righteousness that comes from works.

Paul knew that the Galatians, who started by faith, were tempted to go back to the old patterns of works righteousness, a kind of autonomous moralism to live the Christian life. What happened to the Galatians is not restricted to a first century phenomena. The central element of the Galatians’ moral temptation can be universalized down to the present as to how believers start the Christian life by faith and the Spirit and yet have a tendency or can be tempted to slip back to moralism in order to perfect the self. Paul’s words have just as much benefit for us today.

For the remainder of the article, I want to briefly address 5 questions regarding this moral temptation and how to deal with it.

⁷ According to Richard Longenecker, Galatians 3:3 contrasts the way of beginning and completing the Christian life by either the *Spirit* or the *flesh*, “whether the ‘flesh’ (*σαρκι*) signifies ‘human effort,’ as with the Judaizers, or ‘sinful passions,’ as with the libertines” (Richard N. Longenecker, “Galatians,” in *Word Biblical Commentary* [Word Books: Dallas, 1990], 103). He continues, “The main point of Paul’s rhetorical question here, however, has to do with the incongruity of beginning one’s Christian life on the basis (“with the Spirit”) and then shifting somewhere to another basis (“by human effort”). What Paul wants his converts to see is that the Christian life is one that starts, is maintained, and comes to culmination only through dependence on the activity of God’s Spirit . . .” (*ibid.*, 103–104).

⁸ Perhaps Paul’s distinction elsewhere between the “righteousness of works” approach in Judaism in contrast to the “righteousness of faith” of the believer (Rom 9:30–33) may have more to do with two contrary approaches to acceptance from God in ongoing growth than about acceptance from God at the inception of salvation. Again, these are relevant, though complex exegetical issues beyond the scope of this paper.

THE FIRST QUESTION: WHY ON EARTH WOULD A CHRISTIAN OR ANYONE BE TEMPTED TO BE MORAL—ISN'T THE TEMPTATION TO BE IMMORAL?

Certainly there is a universal temptation, even amongst believers, towards immorality and acting against the commands of God and the way we were created (i.e. natural law). However, it seems that most humans throughout history have learned that a life of rampant immorality does not work in the long run. In the first place, rampant immorality destroys lives. A life of drugs, illicit sex, brutality and character vice may give one pleasure for a season but over time it often destroys one's own chance for happiness and ruins families and relationships in general. No doubt there is a picking and choosing of which vices and immoral behavior will be endured or even enjoyed and which will be shunned by a particular society, social group, family or individual. However, it seems apparent that humanity at least since after Babel have tended to congregate in social communities with some wisdom or moral codes for the sake of human flourishing—a kind of encouraged moralism.⁹

More importantly, I think the reason why human beings have been tempted to be moral and why they have rejected a thoroughgoing immorality is that this is the most effective human strategy to hide from God. To say the same, moralism—doing the right thing, being good or even “spiritual” in the contemporary and secular use of the term—is probably the most common human solution and seemingly effective way to *avoid* dealing with the problem of sin, shame and guilt before God. From the ancient sages to Aristotle to the modern moralist, the project of morality and the claim that “I am good, I am moral” has been the most used defense as a way to hide from God and the need for a Savior. It has been this way from the beginning, since our first parents.

⁹ It is unclear whether this social consent of moralism has been from the beginning after the Fall or whether it became more normative later on. There is some indication that from the time of Cain's “fallen” city to Lamech's rule to the Flood, that perhaps there was more rampant immorality than is present today (“... the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continuously” [Gen 6:5]). It is difficult to determine whether this evil and wickedness was only with reference to the heart's private disposition towards God or whether it corrupted all of human life in general. However, it does seem that with Babel or at least after Babel with the spreading of the nations in Genesis 10 and 11 that nations begin to develop moral communities around stories, myths and a moralistic-wisdom literature of the Ancient Near East. There are many interesting issues to explore regarding the history and etiology of morality, the degree to which social groups and individuals are partly moral and immoral and how Christianity particularly affected western civilization in its affirmation of morality, etc.

The first responses of Adam and Eve after the Fall are almost paradigmatic, moralistic reactions to shame and guilt before God. The very heart of moralism can be seen in their *human, autonomous* response of

1. *covering* their shame and badness (Gen 3:7) and
2. *hiding* from their guilt towards and fear of God (Gen 3:8ff.).¹⁰

Recall the sad story of the Fall in Genesis chapter 3: “Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves and made themselves loin coverings” (Gen 3:7). The first human experience after sin and the Fall was not guilt towards God but *shame*, an “eye opening” experience of their own corruption or badness in the presence of one another, a self-consciousness that something was wrong inside and outside and that they did not want to be seen by the other or even by themselves. Whereas earlier they were naked and not ashamed (Gen 2:25), now in their shame they cannot bear being seen. The true distortion in their nature, however, is seen in their first response to their shame: rather than fleeing to God for a solution to their problem, *they took it upon themselves* to find an appropriate *cover* for their disturbing nakedness.

Adam and Eve’s second experience after the Fall was to experience guilt and fear towards God resulting in hiding from Him. Genesis informs us that upon becoming aware of God’s presence in the garden, “. . . the man and the woman hid themselves from the presence of the Lord among the trees of the Garden” (Gen 3:8). When asked by God where they were, Adam responds with perhaps one of the saddest statements in the Bible: “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself” (Gen 3:10). Rather than running to their God to seek forgiveness and mercy, Adam and Eve respond in Fallen-typical fashion by *hiding* from God due to guilt and fear experienced in His presence.

The experience of *guilt* and *shame* in our first parents becomes the universal and standard reality and experience for humanity born in original sin. In Romans, Paul informs us that all humans are born with *inherited guilt* and *inherited corruption*. As Paul says,

So as through one transgression there resulted *condemnation* [inherited guilt working through fear] to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through one man’s disobedience the many were *made sinners* [inherited corruption resulting in shame], even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous. (Rom 18–19, italics mine)

¹⁰ For a similar discussion of Genesis 3:1–10, and this *hiding* and *covering* activity of Adam and Eve and its impact on humanity, see Richard E. Averbeck, “The Human Spirit in Spiritual Formation” (paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society International Annual Meeting, San Antonio, TX, November, 2004).

From Adam's sin, all humans are born with inherited guilt resulting in fear of condemnation. Furthermore, all are born with inherited corruption resulting in shame or the awareness of one's corruption.¹¹

Combining Paul with the Genesis account of the Fall and observation of human behavior in general, the disposition of the human heart born in guilt and corruption seems to take after our first parents in the following ways:

1. by hiding from God and defending against personal guilt due to fear of judgment and condemnation, and
2. by covering human shame and the awareness of our corruption by means of something that appears to be adequate to deflect being truly seen by others and oneself.

Inherited corruption and guilt certainly lead to immoral living. However, shame also moves persons to use morality as a fallen, human attempt to cover one's corruption and hide from God, often by being moral at least in part. In that sense, the human attempt to "be moral" apart from God ironically is also a form of sin, a kind of immorality.¹²

Simple observation of human nature, particularly in more refined and advanced cultures, reveals that natural morality or moralism seems to be

¹¹ For a more in-depth and thoughtful discussions of original or inherited guilt and corruption (pollution), see William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, ed. Alan W. Gomes, 3^d ed. (Philipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1894, 2003), 557–570; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 494–498; and Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1938), 245ff.

¹² The attempt to be moral apart from a relationship with God gets at the *essence* of sin but not the *fullness* of sin. Sin is both a violation of (a) one's relationship with God, which is the essence of sin and with (b) how God intended for humans to live in accordance to His commands and the way he created their natures (natural law). The good works of the unbeliever are still sin, in fact they reflect the *essence* of sin, insofar as they are not done "in relationship to God" but in autonomy, pride and the absence of faith (the "flesh" in Paul's usage against the Judaizers). However, moralism or natural morality still reaps the benefits of natural goods and, to that degree, is at least partly in harmony with the way we are created (though even here, it is a violation of natural law insofar as we were created to do good works "in God."). Thus, the life of natural morality may be according to natural law in part and, thus, represents a life that is not as bad and destructive of human nature as a life of rampant immorality. In the case of rampant vices, such as lust or envy, they are sins in both senses of the terms—a violation of one's relationship with God and natural law. Consequently, "moralism" fails to be *moral* in the fullest sense of the term but is not sin in the fullness of the terms either. I do not have the space here to flesh out more fully the important distinction between "partial (natural) morality" and "full morality," the "essence of sin" and the "fullness of sin." These distinctions are crucial for a properly Christian understanding of ethics, psychology, theology and spiritual formation, but take us beyond the scope of this paper.

the primary way that unbelievers hide from God and guilt and cover their badness as a way to not experience shame. In that sense, *morality has become a monolithic defense* against seeing oneself truly and opening to one's need for God. Moralism reaps natural benefits and enables one, at least for a time, to keep at bay feelings of guilt and shame. It is interesting how Christians often take note of the immorality of secular society when, in fact, most unbelievers are not as blatantly bad as they could be. More to the point, *they* do not think they are bad at all. And just try to convince them otherwise!

It seems that humans generally have a deep seated need to not feel guilty, evident in their insistence on their own goodness, that they are not as bad as the criminal, and that their efforts at being good is evidence that that they do not need a savior. As Dallas Willard once said, we are all born legalists. What a waste of a life to spend it trying to be good just to keep from seeing the truth of oneself. The price tag to all of this is that we develop habits of the heart of hiding and covering, unable to fully and truly see ourselves as we are and unable to find full freedom within ourselves, God and others.

The relevance of this discussion of original sin to the temptation of moral formation should be clear. For the believer, sin and flesh habits of the heart die hard and can come right into the Christian life. Thus, the believer can be tempted (unknowingly) to use obedience, regimens of spiritual formation, spiritual disciplines, religious experience and ministry as a way

1. to hide from feelings of failure and guilt by repression of the truth of oneself (or even by quick confessions) and
2. to cover deep feelings of shame over one's sins and failures by trying to be good.

In this case, we are tempted in our *Christian life* to work out our failures and sin by the power of works and devotion in the flesh, that is, in the power of human weakness and autonomy. *Thus, for well meaning believers, prayer and spiritual disciplines can become a way (1) to hide from seeing our sinfulness in order to avoid feelings of guilt and (2) to cover our sin by being moral in order to avoid feelings of shame.* However, *prayer is not a place to be good—it is a place to be honest*, to come out of hiding, to experience in the truth of my sin that Christ has covered my bad and taken away my guilt (as we shall discuss below). *If you want a boring prayer life, just spend time being good in it.* This “good boy or girl” approach to prayer may reflect more one's childish conversations of hiding and covering with one's parents than a real conversation with the true God who already knows all that is in your heart and still loves you.

As we will argue below, it is utterly unhelpful to obey or do spiritual disciplines as a way to cover my corruption or in spite of it or as a way to hide from it. Rather, we obey and pray in *light of our badness*, in light of the truth of what is in our heart because of who we are in Christ. To do oth-

erwise is a waste of time; or at least there is a time to grow up in prayer. Of course, this hiding and covering is typically not part of our conscious theology and motivations. We do not intend this; it is often done unknowingly on our part. These sin habits of hiding and covering are so deeply ingrained as hidden habits of the heart that they deceive us. We think we are obeying God when in fact we are using obedience as a way to hide and cover what is really going on inside. How we can become aware of this false motivation and temptation leads us to the next question.

SECOND QUESTION: HOW DO YOU KNOW WHETHER YOU ARE A CHRISTIAN MORALIST; HOW DO YOU KNOW WHETHER YOU ARE SUSCEPTIBLE TO THE MORAL TEMPTATION?

There are two tests that can help determine whether you are a Christian moralist and tempted by moral formation. These tests are most telling in how we respond or what we do when we become aware of our sin, badness, guilt and shame.

The first test is regarding guilt. Whenever you are convicted by sin (e.g., from a sermon or the Scriptures, etc.) and your first and *abiding* response in conscience to guilt is “I will do better, I need to work on that,” then you know you are a moralist. Then you know you are trying to fix yourself as a response to guilt. It may be fine and normal to have this as our first response to what true morality would do. However, if it is the *abiding* response, then you know you are a moralist insofar as you think that *you* should have fixed this problem in the first place, that you are capable of fixing the problem, and that you should fix it now by your effort at being good. However, this response to sin and conviction is, in fact, unhealthy and contrary to what is prescribed in the Scriptures. It signals the presence of an unhealthy (neurotic or ill-trained) conscience.

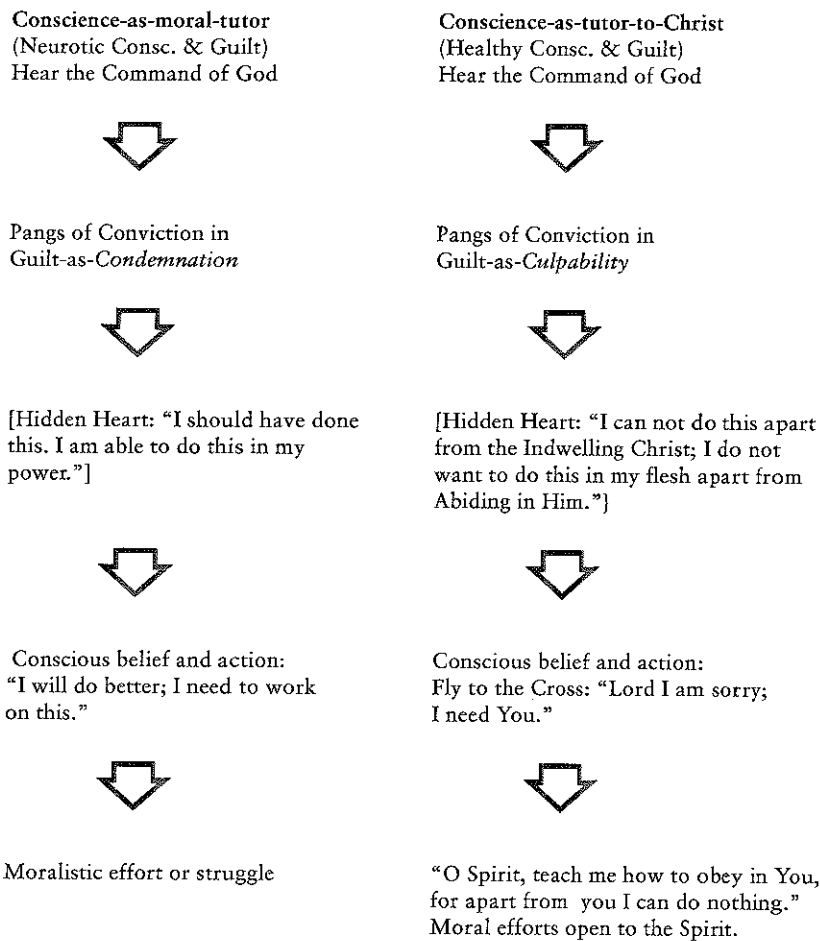
In his letter to the Galatians, Paul tells us that the law of God was a tutor to lead us to Christ, not to morally train the believer.

But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith that was later to be revealed. Therefore, *the law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ*, that we may be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. (Gal 3:23-5; italics mine)

The law and commands of God are intended to *tutor or lead the conscience to Christ*, to awaken us to our moral *inability* and to show us our need for forgiveness and the work of God on our behalf. *The law was not to be a moral tutor to train or lead believers to becoming better people.* The importance of this point cannot be overstated, for the Scriptures turn the entire history of ethics’ view of the conscience on its head.

This model of the “conscience-as-tutor-to-Christ” is contrary to that which is evident in most of the ancient pagan sages, secular philosophers and common sense parenting throughout the ages, which imagines the conscience to be a moral guide or tutor into right action. This latter view of the “conscience-as-moral-guide” that has been promoted by ethicists and parents alike, when joined with our habits of heart in original sin of hiding and covering, cement the conscience into being the slave of moralism. *The sad truth is that this same moralistic, neurotic, ill-trained conscience can follow us right into the Christian life.*

This unhealthy “conscience-as-moral-tutor” ravages the unbeliever and believer alike in their attempt to find freedom from moral failure, guilt and shame. Notice the two different kinds of responses to conviction of sin in the unhealthy (neurotic) and healthy conscience (cf. chart below).



Conviction of sin and pangs of conscience in terms of feeling guilt-as-culpability, that *I am responsible* for my sin, is normal and healthy. However, the neurotic, moralistic believer does not experience conviction as mere culpability but rather experiences conviction in terms of guilt-as-condemnation in their “hidden heart.”¹³ This feeling of condemnation is not that they will be damned but that *though they may be forgiven, they are unacceptable* as they are, they should have better in their own power, and they should be able to do this even now if they tried. Consequently, they consciously exhort themselves to work on this to do better. The truth of the matter is that their will has partnered with a distorted conscience-as-moral-tutor, which persuades the self that they can keep the commands of God in their own power. What an incredible burden to carry in the flesh.

The healthy conscience-as-tutor-to-Christ, on the contrary, has been re-trained by the Word and Spirit to respond well to the commands of God, so that the self is ultimately led back to the person of Christ, His work on the cross and His indwelling Presence. In this case, pangs of guilt are experienced as *culpable*, not condemning, like that of a secure child feeling *responsible* for having disobeyed a loving Father. The heart of a healthy conscience has been re-trained in the deep *to believe through experience* of the Spirit’s loving conviction *that one is incapable of keeping the commands of God in the power of the self*, which, in turn, has convinced the heart of its need for continual forgiveness and acceptance from God “in Christ.” He is our only hope.¹⁴

Thus, the truly healthy conscience/heart no longer even wants to submit to the conscience-as-moral-tutor, for this is bondage. It wants Christ alone. The Spirit of God uses the commands of God and conviction as a *tutor to teach the conscience to fly to Christ*, to the Cross, to experience once again the forgiveness and acceptance of God in Christ. Here alone in weakness is our freedom; here alone the conscience is safe. And on the basis of being “in Christ,” the healthy conscience and heart appeal to the Spirit, to

¹³ I will be using the term “hidden heart” to refer to the deep beliefs and desires of the person that are often hidden from our surface awareness but become evident in the behavior that is contrary to our better surface-intentions. For example, I may not intend to be impatient, I desire to be otherwise but I may find myself getting impatient in a particular situation against my better intentions. This reveals that there are deeper desires and beliefs in the “hidden heart” that are part of the sin habit structure of the heart. For more on this crucial subject, see John Coe, “The Hidden Heart in Spiritual Formation: Why We Sin When We Know So Much” (paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society International Annual Meeting, San Antonio, TX, November, 2004).

¹⁴ For a very thoughtful and helpful account of guilt, shame, the conscience and godly sorrow, see S. Bruce Narramore, *No Condemnation: Rethinking Guilt Motivation in Counseling, Preaching and Parenting* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984). I appreciate the many discussions Bruce and I have had on these topics over the years, which have helped lay some of the groundwork for the ideas expressed here.

learn to obey in the Vine, for apart from the Indwelling Christ “you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5).¹⁵

This “conscience-as-tutor-to-Christ” reflects the very heart of the gospel-to not be afraid of sin, shame and guilt but allow them to lead us to Christ and a deeper dependence upon the Spirit. When we were converted to Christ, we did not say, “God, I can obey your commands; I think we can work this out so that I can be better.” No, I came without one plea, except that Christ’s blood was shed for me. It is the same for daily Christian living. Recall Christ’s instructions to the disciples for how they must live when He no longer will be with them in body but only in Spirit.

I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in you, he bears much fruit, *for apart from Me you can do nothing.* (John 15:5; italics mine).

Jesus was preparing the disciples for Pentecost when they would need to embrace the truth that they cannot fulfill the commands of God in their own power, that they would need to learn how to live in the reality of the New Covenant, dependent upon the Indwelling Spirit of Christ. One of the most profound things I have heard on this subject was from Dallas Willard: “*The Christian life is what you do when you finally realize you can do nothing.*”¹⁶ I would only add that for most of us, it will take a lifetime to really believe this, for we are so convinced in our deep that we can do the will of God in our power. This is the habit of heart in original sin and it was the way most of us were parented. If we did not think this, we would not carry the burden of guilt-as-condemnation and attempt to obey God in our power as a way to hide from our guilt and cover our shame.

On the practical side, of course, this re-training of the conscience will not take place in a day. We have been seduced too long by our own conscience-as-moral-tutor along with the many voices around us, so that our heart has been habituated to hide and cover. This re-training can begin

1. by speaking the truth into the heart with the Spirit about the *inability* of the heart on its own to keep the commands of God,
2. by letting God search the heart to see how much this little Jiminy Cricket conscience-as-moral-tutor is still at work in our heart and
3. by meditating deeply with the Spirit on the sufficiency of Christ alone to deal with deepest issues of guilt and shame.¹⁷

¹⁵ For a fuller discussion of what it is to be “in Christ” and the relevance of this to guilt and shame, hiding and covering, forgiveness and acceptance, see my discussion under “Fourth Question” below.

¹⁶ Dallas Willard, “Spiritual Formation and Soul Care Lecture Series,” (lecture, The Institute for Spiritual Formation, Talbot School of Theology, La Mirada, CA, 2002).

¹⁷ See “Question 4” below for a more detailed account of the work of Christ as the antidote to the unhealthy conscience.

We can do this as a spiritual discipline any time of the day. We can make this a spiritual rhythm of our life, a form of praying without ceasing. We can also do this in the midst of conviction of sin, as the groundwork for opening the heart to forgiveness and obedience in the Spirit. In general, we need to allow the Indwelling Christ to be our moral trainer, not ourselves.¹⁸ This is at the heart of moving from moral to *spiritual* (relational) formation.

The second test for determining whether one is a moralist is as follows: Whenever awareness of failure, sin and guilt result in overwhelming and *abiding* feelings of frustration, sense of failure and self rejection so that you do not want to feel these things but, rather, want to repress them from awareness, then you know you struggle with being a moralist. Why? Because the moralist cannot bear the awareness of being a moral failure, and the experience of guilt and shame. Moralists are *defensive* by nature, that is, they cannot *bear* to see themselves as they really are, and they work desperately hard to be good in order to keep the lid on their badness. Being defensive in nature, they often become offended, hurt, frustrated and even despairing when they are confronted with their sin. Thus, they are in the grips of a great temptation to use morality as a cover to keep away such painful self-awareness.

Sadly, the moralist has missed the point of conviction and awareness of sin. Whereas he thinks the point of conviction is to do more work, in truth, awareness of sin is a door that leads into greater grace, into deeper humility, weakness, to the Cross as the fountain of forgiveness, into the acceptance and love of the Indwelling Christ, and the daily reminder that God alone, and not our actions, can atone for sin. As Thomas Keating has wisely said:

“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.”¹⁹

Recall your conversion in which awareness of sin and failure was in fact a door to freedom and love. So this continues in the Christian life. The voice of the ancients spiritual writers cry in unison, “O blessed vice, for it was you who taught me to cling to Christ.” May we not be afraid of hearing the

¹⁸ These spiritual disciplines do not take away the need we have for “one another” in this process of transformation. It may be that a skilled “soul doctor” or Christian therapist will be needed to help uncover this deep-seated moralism and to open the heart to the love of God. Furthermore, it may be that this feeling of guilt as “condemnation” is not in response to the Word or commands of God, but in response to the internalized commands and ways of parents or culture (e.g. when we feel *ashamed* that we are not wealthy, important, a great preacher, beautiful etc.). In this case, a therapist or prayer with God can help reveal the irrational nature of these deep beliefs and habits of the heart evident in our feelings.

¹⁹ Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love: The Way of Christian Contemplation* (New York: Continuum, 1992), 67.

commands of God, of seeing the truth of our sin, for they are our freedom as tutors that lead us to life in Christ.

THIRD QUESTION: HOW DID WE GET THIS WAY; HOW DID WE BECOME CHRISTIAN MORALISTS?

The deepest explanation for moralism can be found in the sin dynamics of original sin working in the heart as we discussed above. A Christian psychologist once said that God gave us many abilities in creation but this did not include the ability to deal with our badness and corruption adequately *in our own power* after the Fall. Because of this incapacity, we are tempted to minimize or hide from it and then to cover it by morality, success, and achievements. But it is never fully dealt with until it is brought to the Cross and the Spirit.²⁰ This motivation from original sin is ultimately behind all moralism and is at work in the heart even prior to the impact of others.

However, a second profound explanation for moralism is that most of us were parented to be moralists, though not purposively. Whereas parenting was to offset or counter the effects of original sin of hiding and covering, it typically exacerbates the problems.²¹

There are two ways that parenting can add to the problem of hiding and covering in moralism. First, there is *parenting by guilt*. This is the situation in which the child does wrong, 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. Why is this guilt parenting? Because the *condemning* attitude of the parent towards the child's badness typically sends the child into a life of *hiding* from self-awareness, parents and others. The deep-belief that emerges in their heart and drives their behavior is something as follows:

²⁰ God has provided the unbeliever some ability to deal with their badness by means of natural fortitude, viz., the ability to endure a difficulty or a bad for the sake of a good. However, *natural* fortitude alone does not deal with personal corruption *fully*, for it does not provide the power of the Spirit and the forgiveness and acceptance available in the Cross, which alone are capable of overcoming the *deepest* dynamics of sin and guilt towards God and shame with others. The Medieval theologians developed the idea of "*supernatural* fortitude" which had to do with our capacity to embrace difficulties *with the Spirit* for the sake of the glory of God and the human good.

²¹ My discussion of parenting that follows has been gleaned from both my experience as a parent and also in my role as a philosopher-theologian teaching alongside clinical psychologists over the past 22 years at Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola University. I cannot thank them enough for their influence in my life and thinking on these matters.

“My parents can not handle seeing me as I am; they can not handle the truth of my badness. Thus, I must hide my heart from them and others. I do not even want to see it myself. I will just try to please (or I will pretend to please until I am out of here).”

Children may not be aware of these developing “deep beliefs,”²² but they become evident in their behavior. Many children parented by guilt, hide by desperately trying to please their parents so they will not feel the separation when their badness is in the open. However, they often feel that they can never do enough to please their parents. This, in turn, may be transferred to their relationship with God in which they are tempted to waste their life trying to please Him and others as a way not to be seen, always working and feeling like it is never enough. On the other hand, some children parented by guilt despair of ever pleasing their parents and just go into a life of hiding or pretending, biding time until they can get away from home.

In both cases of guilt parenting, the child develops the deep belief over time that he will not be loved for who he is and must therefore, hide. The child believes in his deep “I will not be loved in the truth of myself and my sin, so I will hide and not show my heart, I should not show it.” Though the parents may be caring parents, able to attach to the child when he or she is good, it turns out that it is difficult to stay attached to the child when his or her badness is out in the open. In this case, the parents are not in control of themselves, and their impulsive anger, impatience or withdrawal of love actually exacerbates the child’s already existing problem of hiding in original sin. The child now actually has *evidence* from his parents’ behavior for his deep belief that he must hide to survive and be loved. Sadly, this belief can even be transferred to God unknowingly so that in prayer we hide by trying to please a God who is not interested in our heart but only in our service that is never enough. Or we hide in prayer by going through the motions, faking it and keeping what is really going on in our heart away from the conversation. What a waste of a relationship between parents and children; what a waste of a relationship with the One who already knows all that is in our heart and still loves us.²³

²² I will be using “deep belief” as well as “deep desire” to denote the psychological dynamics that lie embedded in and drive the habits of the heart. For example, I may want to be patient as a surface belief and desire, but in the action of impatience I become aware of deeper beliefs and desires that are embedded in and drive the habits of the heart. For more on this, see John Coe, “The Hidden Heart in Spiritual Formation: Why We Sin When We Know So Much,” presented at the Evangelical Theological Society International Annual Meeting, Nov. 2004 (San Antonio, TX).

²³ Most parents do not intend to parent by guilt in the way I have discussed. I suppose there is another, more *conscious* kind of “parenting by guilt” in which the parent actually seeks to *make the child feel guilty*. This overt instilling of guilt and condemnation is reprehensible and even more exacerbates the same dynamics of desperately pleasing or faking as a way to hide, while also inciting resentment in the child towards parents.

The second way that parenting can exacerbate the heart habits inherited from original sin is *parenting by shame*. These parents are often caring and kind, but do not know what to do with their children's badness (and their own for that matter) except to exhort or train their children to be good. In this case, the parents are unable to help the child experience more deeply the truth of his or her badness and what is really going on in the depths of the child's heart in the context of parental love and discipline. In fact, most of these parents do not want to know what is in the heart of the child, let alone their own heart. Rather, the parent merely moves the child into *covering* their bad by being good. "John, do not hit your brother. That is not good. Do what is right and kind."²⁴

Even though this parenting style tends to be more caring and reasonable than "parenting by guilt," it is still "parenting by shame" insofar as it does not assist the child into really dealing with their heart and the source of the badness in the context of parental love and training. Rather, it merely sends the child into a life of *covering* their badness by trying to be good and pleasing others in the power of the self as a way to be more lovable and loved by parents and others. The deep beliefs that results in the child look something like the following:

"I should not be bad. No one can love me in my bad. And no one can handle my badness but me. I am supposed to deal with my badness by being good. Being good will make me more acceptable and loveable."

These deep beliefs are often unknowingly transferred to our relations with others, which become evident in our temptation to cover our badness and to be accepted and loved for being good. Sadly, we can even transfer this to God in our temptation to cover our badness and gain more acceptance and love from Him by being good. This is the moralistic temptation to waste our prayer life by trying to be good rather than being honest with God and have a real conversation. Our actions betray us by revealing that, despite our good theology, we really believe that God is like our parents and is not interested in knowing the truth of our heart, but only in our being good.²⁵

²⁴ Of course, sometimes we as parents get so frustrated with our children's poor behavior that we would not mind even a bit of moralism on occasion! This does raise deeper questions, that I cannot address here, about the developmental appropriateness of combining early childhood moralistic training with gradual and age-appropriate ways of bringing out the internal desires and beliefs that drive disobedience, sin, hiding and covering in the child.

²⁵ Most parents do not intend to parent by shame. I suppose there is another, more *conscious* kind of "parenting by shame" in which the parent actually seeks to *make the child feel ashamed* with no offer of a relational remedy. This overt instilling of shame is reprehensible and often exacerbates the same dynamics of covering one's badness by trying to be good, to please the other or be accepted and loved by the other. Moreover, this conscious instilling of shame may even inhibit proper development of the child's capacities insofar as the child feels bad or ashamed about exercising his or her humanness.

Many of the people I speak to in Christian colleges and seminaries, as well as those in the church, report that they were parented by shame. They were taught about Christ's work on the cross, about the forgiveness of sins, and that God loved them unconditionally. However, the love that was *modeled* and *experienced* at home was a kind of conditional love. Their parents did not intend this, and they even *told* their children that they loved them unconditionally. The truth, however, was that their children typically experienced *more love from their parents when they were being good than when they were being bad.*²⁶ Moreover, their families unknowingly projected a kind of "consciousness of goodness" in which there was a need to think of the family as good and pursuing the good Christian life. However, the internal life of the children, their heart and the badness in it, was not explored in the context of insight and love. Rather, the child was merely told, or pleaded with, to be good.

As a result of shame parenting, the child feels loved but not known. This is the product of the "consciousness of goodness" family that is very fragile and unable to see the truth of itself and the problems, neediness and deep vice of its members. Rather, it is continuously bent on experiencing itself as being good. This becomes a way that parents unintentionally promote familial hiding and covering. It may look good to others and ourselves but it does not promote intimacy or provide freedom from the burden of moralism. These are families of people connected by their goodness but isolated from one another in those parts of the heart that are dark and sinful. *There is no place to freely come out of hiding to find God and one another in one's weakness and need.* The Christian life slowly becomes a burden of work, even though we know it should be about freedom and love. This is the trap of moralism.

Healthy parenting involves modeling the love and ways of God to our children that seeks to counter the effects of original sin by bringing our children out of hiding and covering. As we adults have experience being loved by God in the truth of our hearts and badness "in Christ," so as parents we need to provide our children with just as powerful an experience of loving them in the context of their badness as in their goodness so that they will have every reason to want to come out of hiding and be known as they are, to experience love and truth in their actual self. I pray that my daughters say to me one day,

"Dad, I am glad that you morally trained me, for I am enjoying the fruit of a good life. However, I am even more thankful that you took

²⁶ The notion of parental "unconditional love" is a complex discussion. Let me merely say here that many well-intentioned parents do often love their children apart from conditions being met; however, we see the *limit of our love* when our children's badness is on the table and we are unable to be with them in this as we explore, instruct, discipline and love them in their bad and, instead, merely command them to be good out of our impatience or fatigue.

me on a journey into my heart so that I now know that no amount of my being good can deal with my badness. I need Christ every day.”

Perhaps I am dreaming. God have mercy on my family.

A question for the reader: Did you feel more loved or accepted by your parents when you were being good or being bad? Think about it. If it was when you were being good, then this might have slipped into your prayer life, so that you are trying to be a good boy or girl in prayer. In that case, the spiritual disciplines are being used to hide and cover your bad rather than to open up your bad to the truth and the love of God. This is a sure path to legalism and a boring prayer life. However, we have an opportunity in prayer to be loved right through the heart in the context of our badness, to come just as we are and allow Him to clean us daily so that we might depend upon Him.

FOURTH QUESTION: HOW CAN WE RESIST THIS TEMPTATION TO BE A CHRISTIAN MORALIST AND LEARN TO DEPEND UPON THE CROSS AND SPIRIT?

The remedy to our moralism lies in the Spirit’s application of the reality of the gospel to our hearts in daily experience. To put it another way, we resist the temptation of moral formation by opening our heart and mind deeply to (1) the reality of Christ’s work on the Cross in justification and (2) the ministry of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and in-filling.

Paul the Apostle informs us of our justification in the following words:

“He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor 5:21) and “. . . that I may gain Christ, and may be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, *the righteousness that comes from God* on the basis of faith . . .” (Phil 3:8-9; italics mine)

Embedded in these two texts are the great truths of justification and the truths of what the Reformers called the “Double Imputation,” in which certain realities are imputed, attributed or ascribed to the believer by the will of the Father. The two imputations that make up the heart of Christ’s work on the cross for us are as follows:

1. All of my sins (past, present and future) are imputed or ascribed to Christ so that there is no condemnation towards me, resulting in my *full pardon* and acquittal from guilt.
2. All of Christ’s merited, *alien* (it is His, not my own) righteousness is imputed or ascribed to me so that God relates to me on the basis of

His Son's perfect obedience and righteousness, so that I am *totally accepted* by the Father "in Christ" and not on the basis of my own merit.

These truths are not merely stodgy old doctrines but reflect *realities* that are the very heart of the liberating power of the gospel and the only remedy for moralism: *full pardon and full acceptance*.²⁷ This is almost impossible for the heart to believe due to the shame and guilt of original sin and the resulting habits of hiding and covering that are further exacerbated by unhealthy parenting.

The implications of the Double Imputation for the Christian life cannot be more dramatic.

1. If all your sins are truly imputed to Christ so there is no condemnation, *then come out of hiding in your prayer life and be honest with God*. You have nothing to lose but to open more deeply to your need of Him and the daily forgiveness of the cross.
2. If Christ's *alien* righteousness, not your own, has really been imputed to you so that you are totally accepted by the Father as in the Son, *then stop trying to cover your badness by being good*, but in full confession of your badness and failure, obey in *light* of your failure and what He has done for you.

One of the most important spiritual disciplines for daily resisting the temptation of moral formation is to open and center the heart with the Spirit on these two realities of full pardon and full acceptance. Sometimes our moralism has to do with not really accepting the reality of our full pardon from the condemnation of sin. In this case, we seek to hide from our sin by being good, for it is too painful to see our sin as it is insofar as we experience guilt as *condemnation*. As an antidote to this malady, we must come out of hiding in prayer and open deeply to the truth of our sins and how these have been imputed to Christ—that there is no condemnation for those in Christ (Rom 8:1)—so that we may open deeply to the Spirit applying forgiveness and love in our experience.

At other times, our moralism seems to be linked to a deep belief that we are *unacceptable* because of our sin. It is insufficient for *full* moral freedom to merely affirm that I am totally *forgiven* in Christ. In fact, I find it very common in my own life and those I minister to that we may feel *forgiven* for particular sins and failure but not *acceptable*. In that case, we feel we need to *work harder to feel acceptable to God* and good about our efforts at growth. This explains why many believers do not experience libera-

²⁷ For more in-depth and helpful accounts on the doctrines of justification and imputation, see W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 724–729; G. T. Shedd, *Systematic Theology*, 793–800 and Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 953–959.

tion through awareness of sin: they feel forgiven but unacceptable, and thus, they must work harder at being good to become acceptable. *This is the true heart of moralism.*

Consequently, in prayer we must learn to *open to the full justification by God* and the unbelievable truth that I am not only fully pardoned but also *fully acceptable* to God on the basis of Christ's merited righteousness that has been imputed to me and not on the basis of what I have done. Unless we have been parented this way, we have few other analogues in experience that would encourage us to believe this. Everything else in my culture and in my heart informs me that I am acceptable for what I do. This is the whole point of Christ's active obedience in life, such that his merited righteousness would be imputed to me so that "in Christ," I am totally accepted by the Father.²⁸

However, this opening to our justification is not merely an intellectual meditation on doctrine that I can do in my own power but it requires the *work of the Spirit* applying this to the heart. Both our *regeneration* and *transformation*, our spiritual formation, are the result of the *Spirit of God* at work in the heart of the believer.

"He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit." (Ti 3:5)

"And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Holy Spirit." (Eph 5:18)

"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing." (Jn 15:5)

It is the Indwelling Spirit of Christ that regenerates and transforms, not our own efforts. Our actions work in synergy and participation with the Spirit, but *He* is the *agent* of change.²⁹ My obedience and doing of spiritual disciplines do not transform me, but are means that allow me to be filled or

²⁸ Theologians distinguish between the "passive obedience" of Christ on the cross in atoning for sin so that our sins could be imputed to Christ and the "active obedience" of Christ throughout his life, meriting a righteousness before God that would be imputed to the believer. Cf. W. Gruder, *Systematic Theology*, 570–577 and W. T. Shedd, *Systematic Theology*, 799.

²⁹ What is needed is a detailed account of the complex dynamics of how the Spirit transforms the various body-spirit capacities and structures of the soul into the image of Christ, which requires more time and space than this paper allows. It is clear, though, that New Covenant transformation involves the *Spirit* as the agent of change, writing Torah on the heart; that is, transforming the thoughts, desires, joys and hopes, etc. from our autonomous functioning to that of a synergy of the Spirit's joys, hopes and desires, etc., working right within our own (Jer 31:31ff.).

acted upon by the Indwelling Holy Spirit.³⁰ In Jesus' words, I can do *nothing* for the sake of transformation apart from abiding in His Indwelling Presence through the Spirit (cf. Jn 15:5). Thus, our transformation is the result of the Spirit of God opening our hearts more deeply to Christ's work on the cross and the judicial or forensic realities of justification in love.

Consequently, we are to live in the realities of both our justification in Christ and our regeneration and the in-filling of the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit is the agent of change, then my acts of obedience are merely opportunities of presenting myself to the Spirit who transforms me into the image of Jesus. Adding this reality to our justification, the implication of regeneration and the in-filling of the Spirit are also dramatic.

3. If it is the Holy Spirit who has made you alive by attaching you to God in regeneration so that He is also the source of spiritual life apart from Whom you can do nothing in the Christian life, then stop trying to grow yourself in the power of the self but learn to open to and depend upon another Person in obedience.

This movement from a life of trying to transform ourselves and deal with guilt and shame in the power of self, to a life of dependence upon the Cross and the Spirit is at the heart of *moving from moral formation to spiritual formation*.

This centering or recollecting the heart in the Cross and the Spirit will not come in a day or by mere assent to these truths. There are other places in our heart that militate against these realities; deep beliefs that drive us to feel guilty, condemned, unacceptable and needing to be better by our efforts. These deep beliefs betray us in our feeling frustrated and unacceptable rather than liberated in the awareness of sin.

Consequently, with the Spirit's help, we need to retrain the beliefs of the heart as well as the conscience by these great doctrines and realities. We can *begin* by the daily *practice* of meditating upon and speaking these truths into the heart with the Spirit. This can take the form of even such small steps as daily praying the following Prayers of Intent:

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

³⁰ Part of Paul's pneumatology is that we are to "be filled" with the Holy Spirit, with the force of the verb "be filled" (πληρουσθε, present *passive imperative*) signifying a *command to allow yourself to be acted upon*, to allow yourself to be filled (passive mood) by the Holy Spirit. The Christian life does not primarily consist of our effort alone but in opening to the influence, control and in-filling of Another Person.

- my weakness, that the power through dependence upon Christ may become realized in my life (2 Cor 12:9ff).
2. Lord, I no longer want to deal with my shame and vice by trying to cover it by being good in the power of myself. I do not want to fix myself anymore, to grow myself, to cover my badness with good works, with regimens of formation. I want to be found in Christ, having *His* righteousness as my covering alone (Phil 3:9). I want to learn to obey and engage in formation *in the light of my sin and Your work*, not as a way to cover my sin.
 3. Lord, I no longer want to live the Christian life alone, in the power of myself. I want to open to You in the truth of who I am, in Christ and in need of Your life-giving presence. Thus, I want to learn to depend upon You in my weakness and need, to be filled with Your Spirit to the degree that I am able, to abide in the Vine, apart from Whom I can do nothing (Jn 15:5).

Of course, not even these prayers will transform you. As I tell my students, doing spiritual disciplines do not transform; they only become relational opportunities to open the heart to the Spirit who transforms. However, these prayers are a good beginning for our souls to open to the truths and realities that ground our whole existence and freedom in Christ. This is the only safe ground for our life of obedience. At the very least, these prayers may reveal the truth of how much I still act like a moralist, how little I feel forgiven and accepted by God, how little I depend upon the Spirit. But even this realization of my sin and dysfunction is capable of pointing me back to the Cross and my need for Christ and the Spirit, which is an invitation once again into love and forgiveness. I cannot lose. In either case, prayer can become a way for God to re-parent the heart in truth.

FIFTH QUESTION: WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ME, MY SPIRITUAL LIFE, IF I DO NOT RESIST THE MORAL TEMPTATION?

If I do not resist the temptation of moralism, then, first, Christ will be of no benefit to me in the spiritual life. As Paul says,

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. (Gal 5:1–3)

Paul's point to *believers* is this: if we are tempted to try to use good works in the Christian life as a way to grow ourselves, as a way to deal with the daily issues of guilt, shame and being acceptable to God (consciously for the Galatians, and perhaps unintentionally for us) then Christ's work on the Cross will be of no benefit to our Christian living. Why? Because we are do-

ing all the work, even that which Christ and His Spirit were intended to do on our behalf!³¹ As Hebrews says, “For the one who has entered His rest [salvation] has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His” (Heb 4:10). If we choose to pick up a righteousness of works again rather than a righteousness of faith, then the Christian life will become just that: all work and no power, freedom or love. But it was for this very freedom that Christ set us free.

Second, if we do not resist the temptation of moral formation, then we will be tempted to *minister* out of our strength rather than weakness. The Christian moralist is tempted to live in the power of his strength alone and, thus, develops ministries of strength. These may look and feel good, but have no sustaining power of the Spirit for the long haul and abiding fruit. It is only through opening to our weakness that we see the need to open to His strength, which results in a deeper dependence upon the Spirit (2 Cor 12:9ff).

Third, if we do not resist this moral temptation, then we will become more like a Martha than a Mary and we will slowly dry up and wither in our service and attempts to be spiritual. Martha was a true woman of faith (Jn 11:27), but had her moments of moralism. Recall her experience in the kitchen. She had her moments of when she became morally “distracted in her many *preparations* [Gk, διακονιαν or ‘deaconessing’]” (Lk 10:39). Jesus words perfectly penetrate through her (and our) moralism.

Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only a few things are necessary, really only one, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her. (Lk 10:41–42)

Those of us who are serious about our faith and service to God are, as Martha, in the grips of a great temptation of moral distraction. The remedy is Christ, which Mary seemed to understand in this moment.

The life of moralism, of hiding and covering, of using “obedience” or spirituality as a means to avoid painful self-awareness is an awful burden to bear for a human being. And it is a dreadful waste of time for a believer. Rather, let us be open to the Spirit, unafraid of seeing our sin and the daily need for Christ’s love and work on the Cross. And *on that basis*—in the light of our sin and His righteousness, in the light of full pardon and acceptance—let us freely give ourselves to a life of obedience and regimens of spiritual formation. As in our conversion, let us *daily* fly to the cross, to the Spirit, to forgiveness, to where love and its transforming power awaits.

³¹ R. N. Longenecker observes on Galatians 3:2 the “severer tone” with which Paul addresses those tempted to turn back to legalism than prior in his letter and adds, “For Gentiles to revert to the prescriptions of the Jewish law as a necessary form of Christian lifestyle is, in effect, to make Christianity legalistic rather than Christocentric, and so, not to have Christ’s guidance in one’s life” (*Galatians*, 226).