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

© Dr. Todd E. Pickett
Biola University

Mt. 11:28-30 “... my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Luke 11:46, “And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry.”

I. Human persons were designed to be filled with the loving fullness of the empowering presence of God. While we come to have a reconciled relationship with God at conversion through faith in Christ and are indwelt with the Holy Spirit, there remains an ongoing spiritual growth process of learning to abide more deeply in God through Christ by the Spirit. This is to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is going to complete what he began in you” (Phil. 2:12–13)
   a. This is a spiritual, relational formation, of being filled with the love of Christ over time (Eph. 3:16-19), meant to connect us more deeply to “life” (Psalm 1, John 10:10, Eph. 2:1-5), and result in the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). Such a life, Jesus says, is an easy yoke and light burden (Mt. 11:28-30).

II. The Temptation of “moral formation”
   a. Sincere and earnest believers 1) have a great desire to grow and bear fruit for God, 2) but find they are not as mature or obedient as they would like to be, and so often bear the secret burdens of their failures, including shame and guilt.
   b. Among the many ways we cope with our failures, there is the temptation to relieve the burden of failure only in the power of the self—my (often unconscious) human attempt to use obedience, the spiritual disciplines, [dreams of] moral perfection, etc., to rid me of the shame and guilt of which only Christ can relieve me.

III. The Temptation of the moral self (Moral Formation)
   a. Most Christians are also tempted by the “moral self” in order to save ourselves from shame and guilt. I now idolize some goodness in myself—insight, kindness, selflessness, morality—that becomes the ideal and idolized self that will save me from failure, and its feelings of shame and guilt.
   b. This is even the temptation of most non-Christians. They want to be seen as good (in some sense) rather than have to deal with God.
   c. This is what angered Jesus about the Pharisees. They loaded people down with the burden of moral perfection and did “not lift one finger to help them” (Luke 11:46). This burden makes us more self-absorbed and, in doing so, cannot produce the freedom and life that Jesus offers.

IV. The weakness of the flesh and Paul’s autobiography (Gal. 3 and Phil. 3)
   a. The problem in Galatia: having begun with the Spirit, they were trying to relieve the burden of spiritual failure (shame and guilt) through the weak human power of “the flesh” to obey the law (become good!). (Gal. 3:1-3).
   b. Paul’s story: having seen the “rubbish” of trying to save himself through his moral self (the pharisee), he trades in his righteousness for knowing Christ’s righteousness (Phil. 3:1-9).

V. All people, even non-believers, experience the moral temptation.
   a. From our hearts and experiences, most people learn that a life of vice does not pay. Some rewards result from virtuous activities.
   b. At the least, moralism helps us cover and hide our brokenness and need, our shame and guilt, and this hiding and covering becomes the human’s instinctual and pervasive temptation and project.
   c. We learned this from our “first parents,” Adam and Eve (Gen. 2:7-8).
   d. To cope with this insecurity, we construct ideal selves, sometimes called “false selves,” by which we seek to save ourselves from the shame and guilt that come with our limits, failure and sin. These “false selves” might be any part of us that we turn into an idol (Isaiah 44): our intelligent self, achieving self, attractive self, athletic self, productive self, etc.

VI. Some points about spiritual formation vs. moral formation
   a. The cross and Christ’s atonement is the foundation of our spiritual formation.
   b. No amount of effort, work, or spiritual highs, will ever relieve us of our burden of shame and guilt. We can do nothing apart from Him (John 15:5).
   c. The Christian life is not fundamentally about being moral in itself, but about life in Christ (“in the vine” John 15). The life of moralism is, in fact, what we are saved from—trying to be good and pleasing to God in our self as a way to be accepted.
d. While moralism may be the life of the “beginner,” we are called to grow up into a life of obedience based on the gospel, a sanctification that “rehearses” justification.

e. We are not transformed in our deepest places (where autonomy and sin reside) merely by imitating Christ or following his commands (moral formation).

f. Rather spiritual formation will take place as our spirit receives more fully the love of Christ (Eph. 3:16-19—“the power . . . to know the love of Christ beyond knowledge.”)

g. However, we can and are called to cooperate with what God is doing in our lives (Phil. 2:12-13).

h. So, the Christian life is about a certain kind of obedience and effort that opens the heart to relationship: a participation in the Vine, a dependence upon the indwelling Spirit, and the need to abide in Christ

i. But Paul knew that moral formation would be an ongoing temptation for the believer.

VII. Two ways to know if you are a Christian moralist (seeking moral rather than spiritual formation)?

a. When convicted by sin, I repress, deny or minimize the knowledge of my failure.

b. When convicted by sin first, my first and abiding response is “I will do better.” However, the law was not meant to deal with shame and guilt, not does it have the power to give us life. (Gal. 3:23-25; 5:1-6).

VIII. This will require a biblical understanding of our conscience.

a. An unhealthy conscience will put us to work, trying to atone for and relieve us of the burdens of failure.

b. A healthy conscience will send us first fly to the cross, to Christ, to rehearse our justification as we pursue our sanctification.

Gal. 3:23-25: Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

IX. How did we get this way (moralists, hiders, coverers)?

a. Habits of the heart from original sin (hiding and covering; Gen. 2)

b. Early relationships: parenting
   i. Parenting by guilt: abandoned in my badness
   ii. Parenting by shame: unknown in my badness

X. How can we resist the temptation to become Christian moralists and live instead by the Spirit?

a. Flying to the cross: the double imputation: 2 Cor. 5:21—“He made him who knew no sin to become sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God.”
   i. Imputation #1 of my sin to Christ (Christ’s passive obedience)
   ii. Imputation #2 of Christ’s righteousness to me (Christ’s active obedience).

b. Experiencing forgiveness
   i. Ontological forgiveness: God has forgiven—past, present, and future.
   ii. Existential forgiveness: confession as revisiting our forgiveness (I Jn. 1:8-9)

XI. What will happen if I cannot resist the “moral temptation?”

a. A life without forgiveness, love and faith: “Christ will be of no benefit to you” (Gal. 5:1-3).

b. Sanctification will become a duty and not a relationship: Luke 10:38-42.

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<th>Excursus: ‘Flying to the Cross’</th>
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<td>c. Whenever we become away of our sin or failure, avoid the temptation first to come up with a strategy to fix the self (making a list, resolving on a course of action, getting busy for Jesus, etc.)</td>
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<td>d. Rather, speak with God about your sin or failure (“confess” means to “agree with”), knowing there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1), although there may be sadness (2 Cor. 7:8).</td>
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<td>e. Ask God, “Do you still love me? Is Christ’s atonement still for me, today?” Open to the love of Christ, even as you both are aware of your sin and failure (I Jn. 1:8-9).</td>
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<td>f. Then ask God, how would you have me cooperate (repent) with you? What is driving this sin (anger, anxiety, depression, wounding, fear)? What needs to be addressed or healed in me so that I might become more likely to abide with you next time?</td>
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<td>g. Ask God for the help you need in this.</td>
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