



SPIRITUAL FORMATION

by

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Lesson 1 ■ Resisting the Temptation of Moral Formation (part 1)

SECTION OVERVIEW

We become moralists when we try to do good things in order to please God and relieve our guilt.

A. INTRODUCTION

Dedicated believers and those in the ministry:

1) have a great desire to grow and be used of God yet

2) often struggle with a secret/great burden of guilt and shame that they are not as mature as they should be, that their lives are dry and withered at times. They wonder “Where are the rivers of living water?” and “Why do I struggle so with growth?”

What they may not know is that they may be in the grips of a great temptation.

(1) to despair, tune out, accept spirituality of “dry bone” (the “Gentle Christian”),

(2) to act out immorally and

(3) (particularly for the leader) the **Moral Temptation**: the attempt of the hidden heart (not conscious) to try to perfect oneself in the power of the self, the attempt to use formation, the spiritual disciplines, being good etc., to relieve the burden of spiritual failure, lack of love and the guilt and shame that results. To try to relieve that burden that Christ alone can relieve.

B. MY THESIS OR CONCERN FOR THOSE BELIEVERS STRUGGLING IN THEIR FAITH.

- 1. That no amount of effort can ever relieve them of their burden of shame and guilt except Christ.**
- 2. That the Christian life is not fundamentally about being moral in itself or being a “good boy or girl.” It is not fundamentally about obedience to a set of principles, it is not most deeply about character or about imitation of Christ as a model external to my soul. It is not fundamentally about doing spiritual disciplines.**

This life of *moralism*, in fact, is what we are saved from: a life of trying to be good and pleasing to God in the power of the self as a way to deal with our guilt and shame.

Rather, the Christian life and spiritual formation are about *denouncing* the moralistic life as a way to find happiness and please God, though it may have been the way as a beginner in the faith. However, there is a time to grow up

So the Christian life is about a certain kind of **obedience** and **effort** of opening the heart to a relationship. It's about a participation in the Vine, a dependence upon the indwelling Spirit, the need to abide in Christ. This is our obedience, this is what the disciplines are about.

I don't want to be a good boy any more, I don't want to fix myself – I can't fix myself- I want to learn to give up on the project and open more deeply to Christ's work and the Work of the Spirit in my deep.

But I am still daily tempted by "moral formation." Paul the Apostle know we would be tempted by this:

Galatians 3:1-3 "You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit (a relationship by faith) are you now being perfected by the flesh?"

C. FIVE QUESTIONS ON MORAL TEMPTATION

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

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

1. We see at the very beginning in Adam and Eve, the human answer to sin and guilt was to:

(a) cover shame and badness (Gen. 3:7) and

(b) hide from guilt and God and blame others.

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

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

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

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

Two Tests:

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

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

Lesson 2 ■ Resisting the Temptation of Moral Formation (part 2)

LESSON OVERVIEW

Parenting by guilt and shame encourages a child to do good to avoid consequences and cover their bad, rather than pursuing a relationship with God in order to let Him change their motives by transforming them from the inside.

B. MY THESIS OR CONCERN FOR THOSE BELIEVERS STRUGGLING IN THEIR FAITH, CONT.

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

1. The first and primary explanation: Habits of the Heart from Original Sin

2. Added to this problem: Most of us were parented to be moralists. Two ways:

(a) Parenting by Guilt: When the child does bad, the parent cannot endure the bad of the child and becomes condemning, punitive and splits off relationally from the child. This is the rejecting parent who cannot tolerate, love, discipline and correct the child in their bad.

(b) Parenting by Shame: when the child does bad, the parents are unable to help the child enter more deeply into experiencing their badness in the context of parental love and discipline. Rather, the parent merely moves the child into covering their bad by being good.

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

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

Three Prayers of Intentions:

1. Lord, I no longer want to deal with my guilt in the power of the self, to be afraid of seeing myself as I really am, to hide from seeing my badness, sin and failure. I do not want hide anymore from my guilt. I want to come out into the open with you who forgive me entirely.
2. Lord, I no longer want to deal with my shame in the power of my self. I do not want to fix myself anymore, to grow myself, to cover my badness with good works, with regimens of formation. I want Christ's righteousness to be my covering. I want to learn to obey and engage in formation in the light of my badness and sin, not as a cover of my sin.
3. Lord, I no longer want to live the Christian life alone, in the power of myself. I want You, to depend upon you, to be filled with Your Spirit, to abide in the Vine.

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

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

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

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

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Take counsel in your own soul and with the Lord regarding the degree to which you are tempted by moral formation, to use obedience and spirituality to cover your shame or hide from personal guilt. Enter into this deeply with the Lord to experience the truth as to what degree this permeates your life. Be not afraid, for He knows and accepts you in Christ.

2. Take counsel in your own soul and with the Lord regarding the degree to which you struggle with “neurotic guilt,” that is, the degree to which your first and abiding response to personal awareness of sin are as follows:

- a. “I will do better” -- rather than opening more deeply to forgiveness/Cross, or
- b. General frustration and self-condemnation -- rather than allowing awareness of sin to be a door into love and a meaningful conversation with the Lord.

Enter into this deeply with the Lord to experience the truth as to what degree this permeates your life.

3. Read Luke 10:38-42. Take counsel in your own soul and with the Lord regarding the degree to which you are a Martha and/or a Mary as discussed in the lecture and from the gospel account. Open to God in the truth of this, for He loves you.

4. Open your heart deeply to the reality of the Cross and the Spirit. Meditate on the following Scriptures and pray the following prayers of intention for several minutes each.

- a. Read 2 Cor. 12:9-10. Pray: “Lord, I no longer want to deal with my guilt in the power of my self, to hide from the truth of myself. I wish to come into the open with you about the truth of myself. I want to open to you in weakness, in my neediness so that I may depend upon Christ and the Cross to deal with my guilt. Teach me about this.”

b. Read Phil. 3:7-10. Pray: "Lord, I no longer want to deal with my shame in the power of myself, to cover my sin and badness by being good. I no longer want a righteousness of my own derived from obeying the law but that which is through faith in Christ. Teach me about this."

c. Read John 15:5. Pray: "Lord, I no longer want to live my life alone in the power of the self. I want to learn to depend upon your Spirit, to be filled with your Spirit. Teach me about this."

Open your heart in prayer to whether these prayers really are the desire of your heart. If so, open to this. If not, then talk with God about what really is going in your heart.

5. If a spiritual friend is doing this prayer project as well, share together what each has learned and what happened in the prayer time. After each shares, pray for one another regarding what you heard the other share.

Lesson 3 ■ Why We Sin When We Know So Much (part 1)

LESSON OVERVIEW

What is in our heart determines how we act. There is more going on in our heart than what shows on the surface. In our hidden heart, we often have negative beliefs and desires that affect our actions.

A. INTRODUCTION

Why is spiritual change sometime so difficult and slow? How is it that a believer can know so much truth & desire the good and yet so deeply struggle with sin, with being loving, with obedience, etc.

The Problem:

The Incontinent Person: Knows the good, desires good, chooses good but fails to do the good.

The Continent Person: Knows the good, desires good, chooses good, does the good with no joy

The Virtuous Person: Knows the good, desires good, chooses good, does the good with joy.

B. THE CHRISTIAN FAITH IS FOREMOST ABOUT THE HEART

Mk. 12:29, "Thou shalt love the Lord your God with your whole heart."

Prov. 3:5, "Trust in the Lord with all of your heart."

1 Sam 16:6-7, God looks not at the outward like most men but at the heart.

1 Tim. 1:5, the goal of all instruction is love from a pure heart.

1. "Heart" is used for the real or core person: Nexus of Will, Affect, and Intellect

Prov. 27:19, "As in water face *reflects* face, so the heart of man *reflects* man."

1 Pet. 3:3-4, Women are not to adorn the outward only but "the hidden person of the heart."

Lk. 16:15, Pharisees looked good on the outside but "God knows their hearts."

Prov. 23:7-8, Heart is what he really thinks and is about: "As a man thinks in his heart, so he is."

2. The heart directs our life: What is in the heart determines our whole of life

Prov. 4:23, "Guard over your heart with all diligence, for from it flows the springs of life."

a. Externally:

b. Internally:

Principles:

1. In general, what comes out of one's life is not by accident but is already in the heart.

2. The degree to which one is surprised by what comes out of one is the degree which one does not know his heart.

C. WHY IS THE HEART IS SO IMPREGNABLE (AS A FORTRESS) AND SLOW TO CHANGE? (BIBLE'S VIEW OF THE HIDDEN HEART OR UNCONSCIOUS HEART)

Jer. 17:9-10, "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick, who can understand it. I, the Lord, search the heart"

Prov. 16:2, we think we are clean but God alone knows and weighs inner person.

Prov. 14:13, "Even in laughter the heart may be in pain, And the end of joy may be grief."

D. THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE HIDDEN HEART (BIBLE'S VIEW OF THE "UNCONSCIOUS"):

1. There is always more going on in the hidden heart than what is on the surface. This explains why we often do not know why we do what we do and the contents of our heart – what we really think. Our heart's motives are often hidden.

2. The degree to which we have a hidden heart of negative beliefs and desires that have not been dealt with is the degree to which we are not in control of that material and it can control us.

Lesson 4 ■ Why We Sin When We Know So Much (part 2)

LESSON OVERVIEW

When we sin, it's often the result of sin in our heart that has deep relational and historical roots. God wants us to pursue Him so he can transform us from the inside.

D. THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE HIDDEN HEART (BIBLE'S VIEW OF THE "UNCONSCIOUS");, CONT.

3. Thus, most Christians do not intend to sin; rather, they just leak. This leaking of sins of the heart does not excuse the believer from responsibility, for one is as responsible for his character as much as intended actions, despite the complex manner in which character is formed.

4. This "leaking" is all about warring beliefs and desires in the heart. This explains for why we so often act against our better intentions, why we sin when we know so much.

5. Thus, most sins are not intentions of the moment but are merely the tip of the habitual iceberg where beneath the surface is perhaps a glacier of sin and vice that has deep relational and historical roots.

6. Thus, beware of “prayers of magic” or avoidance to have God take away sins; be open to letting God teach you in humility about these.

7. No amount of (a) surface correcting of deep sinful beliefs (or overlaying the beliefs by the truth alone) or (b) immediate behavioral change in conformity to the Word will transform the heart or resolve or alter the deep beliefs and desire behind the sins of the heart (2 Cor. 3:4ff).

E. HOW DOES GOD OPEN THE HEART AND BEGIN THE PROCESS OF CHANGE-TRANSFORMATION:

Someone is going to have to help open the heart (1) to bring out the heart, (2) to apply love and truth to the heart and (3) to begin to assist the person in new habits of the heart. This involves both a:

Negative process of Formation (“Putting off” or Detachment): opening the heart to Biblical truth with others and with the Spirit in prayer to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ and expose idols of the heart (2 Cor. 10:5) and

Positive process of Formation (“Putting on” or Attachment): opening the heart to Biblical truth as well as the love and truth from others in the Body and the Indwelling Spirit who is able to penetrate into the heart in love to convince the believer to trust God that all one’s needs are met in God’s love.

Practically speaking, transformation will involve:

1. The Word (Heb. 4:12)

2. Trials and “Thorns in the Flesh” (2 Cor. 12: 7-10)

3. Opening to God’s Sovereign Work of Transformation in all Circumstances (Romans 8:26ff)

4. Fellow Believers (Eph. 4:15)

Incarnational Knowing of the Heart (Opening the heart with a Soul Friend)

1. Know the other hears from the “Hidden Heart”

2. Provide others with a context of safety and acceptance:
3. Bring out the hidden heart: ask questions or articulate the heart for the other.
4. Speak truth and love into the heart: interpret defenses etc.

5. Prayer and Soul Work

Divine Knowing of the Heart (Opening the heart with God in Prayer)

God alone is the master Soul Surgeon (“Divine Therapist”) and is in the business of exposing men's hearts and transforming them by love and truth. All the one-another passages are to model this (encourage, love, rebuke, help one another etc.). His goal is to make our heart His home.

Ps. 139:23-24 “Search me O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way.”

1. God’s Knowledge: God knows that we hear him, pray to him, hear his Word from the “Hidden Heart.”
2. God’s Acceptance: We are justified by faith; there is no condemnation (Rom. 8:1).

3. God's Invitation: The Spirit invites the believer to fellowship with Him in the weaknesses of our heart (Rom. 8:26) that the power of Christ may be real (2 Cor. 12:10).

4. God's Interpretation and Healing of the Hidden Heart: In the context of love and self-awareness, God wishes to speak the truth into the heart: to interpret our deep sinful beliefs motivating defenses and us and to lead us into a free life in Christ. etc.

F. THE RESULT: A BROKEN AND OPEN HEART (THE BEGINNING OF THE PROCESS OF GROWTH)

Ps. 51:15-17, God delights not in sacrifice but a broken and contrite heart.

Joel 2:12-13, "return to me with all your heart, rend your heart and not your garments."

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Take counsel in your own soul and with the Lord regarding three characterological sins or struggles you are experiencing. Enter into these deeply with the Lord to experience the truth as to what degree these permeate your life and affect others. Be not afraid, for He knows these already and accepts you.
2. Read Ps. 139 thoughtfully, paying particular attention to vs. 23-24. Ask the Lord to search your heart regarding these three characterological sins, to open you deeply to the

knowledge that He has of your heart. Ask the Lord to “try” or test your heart, to show you the deep desires, feeling and beliefs that are driving those sins.

3. Read Romans 8:1 prayerfully. Allow the Lord to take you into your deep neediness and weakness in light of your understanding of those three characterological sins. Bring those sins and your weakness to the Lord and the cross, to once again open to the fact that “there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.”

4. Read Rom. 8:26-29 thoughtfully and prayerfully. Then open your heart to the Lord regarding something in your life that bothers you, that is a trial or a hassle. Allow yourself to see how this has affected you and the way in which you have responded to it. Now open deeply in prayer to discover and discern what God is doing in this, what good he intends for it in your growth.

5. If a spiritual friend is doing this prayer project as well, share together whatever one is comfortable sharing regarding those deep beliefs and feelings. Pray for one another regarding what was shared.

Lesson 5 ■ Drawing Near to God When God Seems Far Away (part 1)

LESSON OVERVIEW

When we choose to become committed followers of Christ, we are one spirit with Him, but we still experience times when God seems distant. Sometimes this is a result of going through a developmental stage in our spiritual growth. God gives us the "bottle" of consolation. At first, we seek God in order to get pleasure. God's goal is to make our heart His home. The next stage is the love of God for love's sake.

INTRODUCTION

A. DEVELOPMENTAL SPIRITUALITY: BIBLICAL DATA (I JOHN 2:12-14)

¹² I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake. ¹³ I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father. ¹⁴ I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

Spiritual Children:

Spiritual Maturity (Fatherhood/Motherhood): Middle: Spiritual Adolescence/Early Adulthood: Corresponds to Three Loves:

1. Beginner: Love of God for Pleasure's Sake

a. This stage corresponds to Children whose sins are forgiven, having a “relationship with God” (1 John 2:12-14)

b. Characterized by Spiritual Pleasure:

(1) As mother gives milk to an infant, God feeds us as spiritual babes where we are at in our love of pleasure.

(a) 2 Cor. 5:17: We are a New Creature with a New Affection for God at the Core of our spirit or heart by the Holy Spirit

(b) God gives the believer the “bottle of spiritual pleasure” with out any labor on our part.

(c) God gives spiritual pleasure by means of the same psychological structures as in one's non-Christian days. The only difference is a new object of pleasure

(d) Thus, the soul is moved to spiritual things due to the consolation of pleasure that we get from them.

(2) Some spiritual strength begins.

(3) Vices take on a religious dimension; vices become mixed with Spiritual disciplines and exercises.

2. Sins of the Beginner:

a. Our spiritual “change” deludes us to think that the self made the changes

b. Our appetite for pleasure has as its goal to feel good in our spirituality.

(1). Spiritual Gluttony

(Def): Our drive to do the spiritual disciplines is more for spiritual pleasure (the bottle) than for purity.

Test:

(2) Spiritual Pride

(Def): The deep belief that in some way we are making our spiritual life work.

Test:

(3) Spiritual Greed/Avarice:

(Def): The deep belief or discontent with the Spirituality that God has given us.

Lesson 6 ■ Drawing Near to God When God Seems Far Away (part 2)

LESSON OVERVIEW

The point of the dark night is to cure us of wanting God on our terms. It is an intensified movement of the indwelling spirit to fill us, rather than to just give us consoling love. When we experience dry times, God is showing us where our treasure really is and is calling us to a journey of the soul. It will often feel more psychological than spiritual.

A. DEVELOPMENTAL SPIRITUALITY: BIBLICAL DATA (I JOHN 2:12-14), CONT.

3. Dark Night of the Senses:

- a. Biblically this stage is likened to Young men: wrestles with the evil one, overcomes him, you are strong, the word abides in you. (I John 2:12-14)
- b. God withdraws spiritual pleasure
- c. The Experience: Equipoise in the heart (ambivalence over loves)
- d. Signs of Being in a Dark Night

e. The Temptation = certain road to spiritual burn out

(1) to feel guilty, that some particular sin is responsible for God feeling distant.

(2) to engage in the spiritual disciplines in order to make religion feel good again (fleshy works righteousness).

(3) to despair of doing the spiritual disciplines, or

(4) to despair of experiencing God

f. Remember: This dryness is a new, more profound work of God in our deep in order to have a true, honest relationship. The Spirit is attempting to reveal the truth of ourselves in neediness, to help us despair of ourselves and independence and open us to declare our dependence on the Spirit (= “**purgative contemplation**”).

B. THE POINT OF THE DARK NIGHT:

1. Brokenness

2. Need of the Cross

C. WHAT TO DO/NOT TO DO:

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Talk with the Lord regarding the degree to which you have exhibited and experienced the sins of Spiritual Pride, Spiritual Gluttony and Spiritual Greed.
2. Discuss with the Lord the degree to which and in what ways you have experienced spiritual dryness, how you responded to this in the past and how this has affected your spiritual life. Explore with the Lord some better ways for you to respond to this dryness?
3. Discuss with the Lord or a spiritual friend each of the following suggestions given by Coe regarding how to respond to spiritual dryness when in a dark night of the soul. If you do this with a spiritual friend, pray for one another over each point.
 - a. The need to resist the temptation to spiritually fix oneself in the power of the self and rather to open up to the truth of what God is trying to show you.
 - b. The need to resist the temptation to make something happen, to generate a spiritual experience or bring on a spiritual feeling.
 - c. The need to let go of all expectations of what you should experience in prayer and the spiritual disciplines and rather to want only what God would give.
 - d. The need to enter deeply into the dryness and what the Spirit is trying to teach you about your life, about your neediness and about His goodness, and to wait for Him who is always present within.

Lesson 7 ■ Going On With God in Dark Nights (part 1)

LESSON OVERVIEW

God wants us to move from the love of God for love's sake to the love of God for God's sake. Our training in virtue and character helps us lead a life that is beneficial to ourselves and others. God wants us to rely on the Spirit, not just patterns of behavior we have learned. God sometimes uses the experience of dark nights to help purge us of our virtues as well as our vices.

INTRODUCTION

Teresa of Avila says that our greatest struggle in prayer is when God feels silent. (1) In consolation, the Christian life works despite the vices and “stuff” in the heart. Go with the flow. (2) But in times of desolation, our “stuff” comes out, we are faced with it and *we do the craziest things*: we work harder, answer our own prayers, despair of working harder, try to get back the loving feelings, resign our self to dry bones, try to fix ourselves, or think that this is no more to the Christian life than what we have experienced.

My real concern in this talk is for the “maturing of the saints.” It is for those who have been a believer a good while, have heard so much, are committed to the Lord and have developed a general good character and good disciplines, have been churching for 20, 30, 40, 50 years and are faithful, but secretly wonder in their deep: “Is this all there is?”

The older saints may not know that perhaps they are in the grips of a great temptation. **The Ministerial Temptation:** the temptation to turn *from* the task and call of growth, putting off the old self, and hungering for God *and turn to* the task of ministry, to bypass the dark nights, to misinterpret the darkness for the absence of God and believe that God is not present in the darkness, to avoid the journey into the deep, to think that introspection is not a good thing and to resign the self to ministry as what the life of maturity is about. Now it is a good thing to minister to others, especially as we get older in the faith. However, ministry is not to become a *defense* against the pursuit of God.

My hunch: in those who are in their 40s, 50s, 60s and 70's there is a storehouse of potential for growth if they are willing to journey into the cauldron of the sins of the heart to discover a deep love beyond what we can imagine or think. *However, this journey is being swapped for a pottage of ministry in dry bones*

A. REMINDER: PURPOSE OR GOAL OF DARK NIGHTS IN GENERAL IS TWOFOLD:

1. Development of Spiritual Hunger and Purging of the Heart (Deut. 8:1-5)

God let his people go hungry for the purpose of testing them, humbling them, to see what was in their heart (if they love the world or God). They were fed manna (God's food and not their own) to see whether they would depend upon God or self.

2. Union with God in love as the power for change in the spiritual life (Eph. 3:16-19)

The telos or goal of the Xian life is not a dark night but full love, being full of the presence of God right in our psychological structures. This is not just the goal but it is what transformation is all about, how we are transformed into the image of Christ by being filled entirely with His Spirit.

B. KINDS OF DARK NIGHTS FOR THE SAKE OF DEVELOPING HUNGER AND LOVE

1. Initial Dark Nights

Recall the beginner stage: a Wonderful time of consolation – God so gracious

Meets us right in our need (could be something other than pleasure: safety, security etc.)

This was more a time for spiritual disciplines to be encouraged and reinforced than true transformation of the deep.

Thus, sins of the former manner of life come right into our spiritual life, the doing of disciplines and spirituality much in the power of the self.

As a result:

God turns out the light on the sensual spirituality to begin the work of filling us with the Holy Spirit – result is a “purgative filling of the Spirit” to the degree one can at that place.

Stages go from dark to pitch black (“3:00 a.m. dark nights” in which spiritual disciplines are almost painful to do).

But if one will stay in the weeds, watch for God, continue to resist fixing oneself and enter truth of oneself with Him, something may begin to happen -- a new sense that God is here despite the lack of felt presence.

2. Ongoing Dark Nights (our present topic)

When God thinks I am ready for more growth, for receiving more of him and for more purging for this purpose, then new types of dark nights will begin to cycle in and out of my life.

a. Ongoing Dark Nights are a Further Transition or Movement in Love by the Spirit:

The movement here is from the love of God for love's sake to the love of God for God's sake.

b. The Nature of Ongoing Dark Nights:

1. Ongoing seasons and process of purgation:

The Spirit continues cycles of seasons of consolation to encourage, then cycles of seasons of dark nights to purge us initially of our sensual spirituality, to let go of relying upon feelings of spirituality to measure the presence of God, to open to love and the filling of the Spirit in darkness

Further movement to dark nights that take us deeper into purgation that open us to look into the whole of character – even to purge us of good character done in the power of the self – to move us from the fruit of the self to the fruit of the Spirit.

2. Deep purging of beginner's natural character (vices and *virtues*) to develop fruit of the Spirit: (to deal with our "consciousness of goodness")

The Spirit thinks we are ready for a deeper purging of the former manner of life in terms of the vices – impatience, envy, excess anger, jealousy, wrath, selfishness, pride etc.

Importantly, the Spirit will not only purge us of our vices but the *virtues* that we developed as unbelievers and as young Christians that was much in the power of the self.

3. This involves a "stripping away" of our dependence upon our training of the psychological faculties in order to open them to the work of the Spirit of God:

(a) Darkness in the Intellect:

For Beginners:

Ongoing Dark Nights

New Virtues

(b) Emptiness in the Memory-Character:

For Beginners:

Ongoing Dark Nights

New Virtues

(c) Dryness in the Will:

For Beginners:

Ongoing Dark Nights

New Virtues

Lesson 8 ■ Going On With God in Dark Nights (part 2)

LESSON OVERVIEW

In a dark night experience, we realize that even though we have good character, we are more filled with ourselves than we are with God. God may be more present to us when he seems absent than when he seems present. It is often helpful to have a mentor to walk with us through dark nights.

B. KINDS OF DARK NIGHTS FOR THE SAKE OF DEVELOPING HUNGER AND LOVE, CONT.

2. Ongoing Dark Nights, cont.

c. The Experience and Signs of being in Ongoing Dark Nights:

(1) Deep sense of one's own inadequacy of character.

(2) Lack of zest from one's character and former accomplishments and even future endeavors.

(3) A distrust in life's promises that seek to satisfy the heart, a new sense that this life is an inadequate home.

(4) A renewed sense of loneliness as a result of your good character.

(5) Ministry may be good and functional for the sake of others, but it does not satisfy the soul, it does not provide the rivers of living water.

(6) A deep dissatisfaction in theological knowledge alone as well as our general knowledge and wisdom-base for life.

(7) A sense that you will not be loved in awareness of the truth of oneself – a feeling that one is unacceptable.

(8) A deep knowledge in my will that I am more filled with myself than God.

d. Temptations in Ongoing Dark Nights:

The issue has to do with knowledge, character and our treasures in the will and heart. Perhaps at the bottom is the deep belief that I will not be loved in the truth of myself, that dark nights will end in rejection and abandonment. It is this deep rejection point that keeps us from dark nights – we will be tempted to show and experience our good alone to be loved. This reflects the deep belief that there is no one down at the core of the self, that we will only be alone in the truth of our self = a major problem.

(1) to hold onto our goodness and character.

(2) to despair of the Rivers of Living Water and do the spiritual disciplines without openness to the heart and Spirit.

(3) to defend against opening to the heart's desire for the rivers of living water and spiritual hunger due to unrequited love.

(4) to resist entering dark nights by giving oneself to ministry as a defense against introspection and painful self-awareness.

(5) to create Ministries of Consolation and Strength:

e. How to Experience/What to Do in Ongoing Dark Nights:

Regarding Early Dark Nights (reminder)

(1) First, be open to fact that the spiritual dryness may be a sign of God working inwardly in a dark night of the senses and not merely the causal result of one's own sin.

(2) The spiritual disciplines have changed in terms of their purpose or function in the believer's life during a dark night from being "felt" nourishment to that of a mirror into the reality of one's sinfulness and deepening need for the Cross.

(3) In a dark night, there is a need to resist the temptation to spiritually fix oneself in the power of the self, which is precisely what the dark night is trying to cure one of.

(4) Believers in a dark night should expect and want nothing from God (particularly a feeling) in doing spiritual disciplines except what He has to give.

(5) Believers in a dark night must resist the temptation to use spiritual disciplines to generate a spiritual feeling, to "make something happen" or to make more of their religious experience than it is.

(6) Leaders in the church (those who counsel, preach, teach and lead congregational worship) need to resist the temptation to generate an experience for their people, but only assist others in being open to the truth of themselves in relationship to God, in being open to what God has for them.

(7) Those in a dark night need to be faithful to present themselves in doing the spiritual disciplines despite the fact that practice of them may feel spiritually painful and lonely (Rom. 6:13, 12:1-2).

(8) Believers in a dark night need to consider that their spiritual dryness and boredom may be God's way of getting their attention inwardly in love, to attend less to a feeling and more to what the Spirit is praying for and attempting to transform by teaching them (Romans 8:26-30).

Regarding Ongoing Dark Nights

(1) Learn to sit amongst the weeds with God as Gardener, not the self – open the heart to the truth of oneself relationally to God. Matt. 11:28ff.

(2) Let go of one's goodness, let go of one's integrity, otherwise this creates such fragile believers. Begin to open to the freedom to be a failure in oneself to find oneself in Jesus.

(3) Let go of one's character as the road map you trust in for getting around in the world. Open to being "spiritually dizzy," to seeing through the sham of trusting oneself and open to wanting to trust God.

(4) Continue to be diligent to present oneself for obedience and the spiritual disciplines, to do one's duty but from the heart and not as a way to "bite the bullet" in being good as a way to perfect oneself in the power of the self.

(5) Be willing to open to a new power for ministry – reliance upon the Holy Spirit, to wait, to listen.

(6) Resist ministries of consolation, resist "falling asleep" to what really is going on in one's soul versus what one believes and teaches, lest you deceive yourself and others that your words are easily and readily true in your life. In this case, others will not be helped.

(7) Join together with others who are willing to go on this journey together into the darkness, our cluelessness, the truth of ourselves in His love and acceptance.

f. Concerns and Qualifications about ongoing Dark Nights:

(1) Depression distinguished from Dark Nights = important.

(a) From an objective standpoint, the dark night is a movement of the Spirit on behalf of the believer, whereas clinical depression has a more historical and/or biological etiology.

(b) From the subjective viewpoint, clinical depression may involve no particular object or focus other than a diffused sense of loss of pleasure, a difficulty in sleep, and a generally depressed mood with a physiological edge resulting in overall energy loss. On the contrary, the dark night has a more fine focus, namely, upon one's relationship with God, which is particularly brought into view in the practice of the spiritual disciplines (prayer, reading the Bible, fellowship, hearing preaching, worship etc.). That is, the individual may not experience any of the symptoms of clinical depression in general, and only experiences

depression, loss of energy, anxiety, guilt and a general sense of uneasiness when one is consciously aware of God and the religious life. If there is a diffused depressed mood or uneasiness while in a dark night, it can be brought into fine focus by attending consciously to one's spiritual life. In fact, the believer in a dark night may feel quite energized in life's activities in general and, as a result, repress the religious dimension in light of the fact that this is the objective focus of the internal turmoil. It is helpful for a spiritual mentor and therapist at least to be alert to these issues.

(2) Dark Nights and the need to have a mentor:

(3) Remember: Dark Nights are what it is go be filled with the Spirit to the degree that we can experience this and to the degree God wishes us to experience his work in the depths of our heart and vices.

(4) Caution: Beware of thinking that sin separates you from God and His holiness and that this is the explanation of dark nights – so that if you confess sin, you will experience consolation again.

(5) The Demonic and Dark Nights: No doubt the demons will be involved in dark nights, but their goal is quite different to God.

Demonic goals are to get you to work harder to deal with your guilt, get you to strive for spiritual feelings over truth and God, to move you to despair.

God's goals are transformation and love: to move you into true self- awareness of the former manner of life in the presence of the cross, your neediness and His love.

(6) Dark Nights versus external trials:

(7) When Dark Nights and trials are very painful:

g. Results or Fruits of Ongoing Dark Nights

(1) Greater freedom from grandiosity in ministry and attachment to our being successful.

(2) Greater freedom from arrogance in spiritual life and attachment to our goodness.

(3) Greater freedom from domination by emotions.

(4) Purification of our infantile idea of God.

(5) Development of the theological virtues in the Spirit:

(a) Moving from theological knowledge to Faith in God

(b) Moving from hope-trust in character to hope-trust in God

(c) Moving from the love of loving God (as experiencing God) to loving God as God (despite my experience) – letting God be the center and not my need-to-experience-God as the center of my life.

Conclusion:

What will keep us from opening to God in a dark night? The deep belief that if I enter into the truth of myself, that I will be alone, that I will not be loved, that I will lose something. However, the truth is that God is here: what I have learned in life is that nothing can separate me from the love of God.

The journey is, first, to be who you are in his presence, and from there to become all you can be in Him. We will lose much in the journey into the dark nights (our sense of goodness, our faithfulness, our ability to love), but we have so much to gain in the Spirit – and we cannot lose His love.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Read thoughtfully and prayerfully Eph. 3:16-19. Take counsel with the Lord and your soul regarding the degree to which the text reflects or does not reflect your present experience of the love of God and being filled with all the fullness of God. Do not try to muster up any experience; be open to the truth with God.
2. Talk with the Lord regarding the degree to which some of your good traits or virtues (kindness, friendliness, patience etc.) were generated more in the power of the self than the Spirit? Explore with the Lord the degree to which they tempt you to depend upon your own strength and hinder deeper dependence upon God. Open to your need for the Lord that lies even behind your strengths.
3. Discuss with the Lord the degree to which you have experienced the love of God in the context of your badness and sin. Ask the Lord whether you find within yourself a temptation to hide your badness from yourself and God in prayer? Briefly open to your sin and neediness with Him.
4. Talk with the Lord regarding the degree to which you have experienced “darkness in the intellect.” In this case, the Spirit is less giving consolation to your intellectual knowledge of the faith but more is leading your heart to want the God who is “behind the written page.” Open deeply to this desire and open to the indwelling presence of the Spirit.

5. Read prayerfully John 15:1-5. Discuss with the Lord the degree to which you are no longer impressed with or even experience a deep distrust with your character being sufficient to fuel your Christian life. Ask the Lord to show you the degree to which you really believe that apart from Him you can do nothing. Is this evident in your behavior? Come to him in the truth of this and your need of Him.

6. Take counsel with your soul and the Lord on the following: if you have a ministry of some sort, to what degree are you tempted to have what Coe calls a “ministry of consolation” in which you are tempted to minister out of your strength. Ask the Lord what it would look like to minister out of weakness so that His strength could be perfected in you.

Lesson 9 ■ How to Put on Christ (part 1)

LESSON OVERVIEW

It is important to do spiritual disciplines from the heart in the Spirit. The Christian life is what you do when you realize you can do nothing. In discussing spiritual disciplines, it is helpful to emphasize the importance of how we hear the commands of God. It is not in our power to change ourselves, but we can choose to practice spiritual regimens and rhythms that help us open up to what God wants to do. Spiritual intentions are how we respond to the Word of God.

INTRODUCTION

We are to put on Christ and here is where obedience is crucial to the Christian life, in fact, it is a given! It is expected. It is your minimal service to present your self in obedience. Eph. 4:22-24:

Spiritual disciplines are merely intentional ways to respond to the call of obedience, intentional ways to respond to the Word and Commands of God. So that is what we are talking about tonight: Obedience to the commands of God and their place in transformation.

The truth is: the Word of God is full of commands. What it asks of us, we are to do! Thus, it is important to get clear on how we hear the commands of God and what we do with them. And it is important to feel the confrontation of the Word, that is calling us to something and it is not to be repressed. It is crucial to get clear on this point, or we can get lost for much of our Christian life.

A. HOW DO WE HEAR [IN FACT] THE COMMANDS OF GOD

According to Dallas Willard, there is much magical thinking going on in Evangelicalism: that if we just hear good teaching long enough and believe it, it will transform our life.

How have you responded to the Word-command of God lately?

What are the possible ways to hear the Word:

B. THEOLOGY OF OBEDIENCE AND SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

1. According to Paul: the whole life is a training in Godliness or obedience to the will of God.

1 Tim. 4:7, bodily discipline is of some value, but discipline yourselves for the purpose of Godliness, for this is profitable for all things in this life and the next.

1 Cor. 9:27, I discipline my body and make it my self lest I am disqualified from the ministry.

2. The call of God to obey and train to become Godly is of two kinds:

- a. General call of God (Word-command) to obey.
- b. Specific-circumstantial call of God (Word-command) to obey. Obedience to the call of God (Word-command) in specific circumstances.

Point:

General Principle: we are to train ourselves in the General Call of God for the sake of developing a character that is ready to obey when called upon in the Specific-circumstantial call. (And some commands are for all the time, e.g., loving God, praying without ceasing etc.)

3. What is the relationship between this training in Godliness and the spiritual disciplines?

Spiritual Discipline: a specific training of the Heart by the Spirit to the General Call of God in order to develop a habit of heart to obey the Specific call of God at all times.

4. In spiritual disciplines and training, what do we lead with, where do we begin?

We always lead with the body to open the heart to the Spirit. “lead with the body:” the focus is “do it.

“to open the heart” to the truth of oneself in relation to God. We don’t wait for the heart, but we don’t just bite the bullet.

“to the Spirit”

5. How to identify a spiritual discipline or an opportunity for training:

Structure:

1. Take any command (e.g. “Love your wife”) or
 - any vice trait to be put off or virtue to be put on (patience)
 - any reality to be experienced (in Christ, pardoned etc.)
 - any example to be modeled (Paul, Jesus in retreat or fasting)

2. According to Willard, it is magical thinking that just by a good intention, this will become a reality from the heart.

3. The question you must ask: “What kind of person must I become to live out this command from the heart by the Spirit as a habit?”

4. If you take this seriously, you must now discern with the Spirit what you must do, give yourself to in order to become that kind of a person.

• Note:

**6. What kinds of training can we give ourselves to, how to decide which to do?
As you hear the General Call of God:**

a. Ask yourself whether you are being called to Putt off the Former manner of life or Put On the New:

Some disciplines are designed to put off the old man or former manner of life. Often solitude, meditation on passages addressing vices and soul work in prayer help us explore the vices of the heart with God. These are also **disciplines of detachment** from inordinate loves and vices.

The putting on disciplines are the most practiced, which attempt to develop Christ like character in the Spirit (meditation, study, worship, celebration, adoration, silence). These are also **disciplines of attachment** to what is good in God.

When “putting-on” disciplines are felt as purgative in desolation (that is, they expose how little our heart is interested in meditation, celebration etc.), *then these “putting-on” disciplines by intention become “putting-off” in reality by the Spirit.*

Lesson 10 ■ How to Put on Christ (part 2)

LESSON OVERVIEW

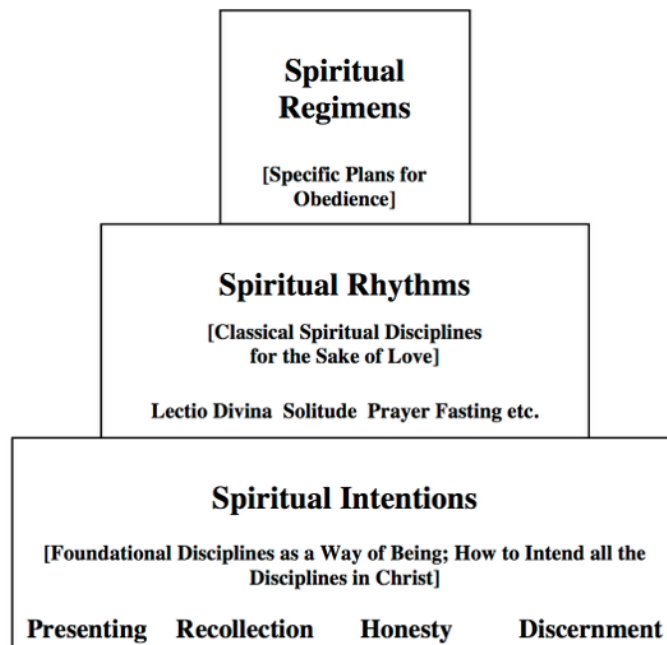
How do I listen to God's voice? What do I do when I walk away from reading the Word or hearing a sermon? The prayer of recollection is to remind me of who I am in Christ so when I hear the Word, I am open to Him. It's also to help focus my thoughts by detaching from false identities and attaching to my true identity. *Lectio divina* brings together the commands to "be filled with the Spirit" and "let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly."

B. THEOLOGY OF OBEDIENCE AND SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES, CONT.

**6. What kinds of training can we give ourselves to, how to decide which to do?
As you hear the General Call of God:, cont.**

b. Ask whether I am to give myself to an Intention, a Rhythm or a Regimen (cf. Schema and notes on next page):

Spiritual Disciplines



1. First, a Description of each:

a. Spiritual Intentions

These Spiritual Intentions are foundation-disciplines to protect all the spiritual disciplines and obedience from moralism and inordinate effort or under-effort.

1. Presenting Oneself as a Sacrifice: the spiritual discipline of allowing the self to be confronted by the Word and command of God for the sake of a conscious response to the Will of God.

This protects the will from falling asleep to the will of God.

2. Prayer of Recollection: the discipline of reminding the self of its true identity “in Christ” (full pardon and full acceptance) and “Christ in me” (the Spirit is present).

This protects our life from moralism and making decisions out of false guilt, shame and my own power.

3. Honesty or Truth-telling in the heart: the spiritual discipline whereby upon presenting oneself to God, one opens oneself to what is truly going on in the heart so that this can be brought to God.

This protects the presenting of ourselves from arrogance, closed heartedness, superficiality etc. Let the heart be a mirror to the truth and open this to God.

4. Discernment: the spiritual discipline whereby we learn to watch what God is doing in us, what His will is versus our own or the devils, how we can better cooperate. Here we seek wisdom on how to respond to His work that is ongoing

within us.

This protects us from responding to false calls of guilt concerning what to do in our life, to fantasy, to the demonic, to our grandiosity. Here we learn to wait on God and watch His work more than our own.

b. Rhythms of the Classical Disciplines:

These are the classical spiritual disciplines such as solitude, silence, meditation (*lectio divina*), petitionary prayer, contemplative prayer, fasting etc. for the purpose of developing a rhythm in life of attachment to God, turning the heart to the love of God and loving God.

This training of the character helps insure that regimens and obedience in general do not reduce to mere moralism and natural fortitude (Aristotle and the pagans could do “spiritual” regimens).

c. Regimens for Transforming the Character in the Spirit

This involves the training of the person’s capacities with the Spirit into the fruit of the Spirit and a way to take seriously the commands, virtues, and realities of God.

Structure: Take a command, example of or reality etc.):

1. It is magical thinking that just by a good intention, this will be kept from the heart.
2. The question you must ask: What kind of person must I become to live out this command from the heart by the Spirit as a habit?
3. From there, you must set forth a short term plan to begin to try to practice this with the Spirit – a short term project as with the development of any new skill.

E.g. “Love God with all your heart”: I can spend 20 minutes each day opening my heart to adore, love, be with and treasure my Lord (or be open to how little I care for this = an opportunity for truth talking with God). You can develop a regimen like this for any command, practice, reality etc.

E.g. “Pray for one another”: you can take 20 minutes a day for petitionary prayer.

2. Second, how to Hear and Respond Reasonably to the Word from the Heart:

Willard’s Point: If you shoot for nothing, you will surely hit it.

In General: Spiritual Intentions as the foundation-disciplines are how we are to hear and respond to the Word from the heart by the Spirit:

a. Presenting the Self as a Sacrifice:

Intention: “God, I hear your Word; Here I am.”

b. Recollection:

Intention: “God, what ever I am to become or do, I want to do this in Christ and I don’t want to do this alone but abiding in You.”

c. Honesty or Truth-telling:

Intention: “God, what is going on in my heart regarding this truth/command – where am I about this, lest I deceive myself.”

d. Discernment regarding what to become:

Intention: “God, what is that that you want me to become if I am to do your will?”

e. Discernment regarding what to do in light of what He is doing:

Intention: “God, What are you doing and what are you asking me to do?”

Ask:

(1) Lord, should this only be an intention?

(2) Lord, should this be a rhythm?

(3) Lord, should this be a regimen?

f. Discernment regarding a plan:

Intention: Plan and do it. Lead with the body to open the heart to the Spirit.

3. Third, the temptation to do the Spiritual disciplines in the flesh versus doing these in Christ and in the Spirit:

a. We will be tempted to use spiritual disciplines and obedience to create a Christian character by our effort and fortitude rather than open to the Spirit to do this in us.

b. We can be tempted to do spiritual disciplines motivated by the habits of the heart in original sin rather than as a way “In Christ” to counter these habits. That is, we can be tempted to

(1) use spiritual disciplines to appease conscience; rather, let obedience and spiritual disciplines reveal a need to fly to God.

(2) use spiritual disciplines to hide from our guilt; rather, let obedience and spiritual disciplines expose you to your sin and fly to God in pardon.

(3) use spiritual disciplines to cover our shame; rather, open to Christ's cover of righteousness in the midst of your sin and shame.

(4) use spiritual disciplines to fill the deep loneliness with consolation; rather, let obedience and the spiritual disciplines open you to what the Spirit would give and teach.

c. We may be tempted to not want to feel the confrontation with the Word or Command of God at all.

4. Fourth, Things to Consider and Remember about this Training:

a. Spiritual Disciplines are relationally understood and defined.

b. The spiritual disciplines are not a set of esoteric practices only for a select few Christians but reflect a reasonable and sincere intention necessary for all believers if they are to become not merely hearers but doers of the Word from the heart, that is, as a habit of the heart.

c. The Spiritual disciplines are not intended to fix the self or transform us but are opportunities for presenting ourselves to God in obedience for the Spirit's transformation work (Rom. 12:1-2, 6:12- 13).

d. The Spiritual disciplines begin as acts of fortitude for the beginner or child and over much time may be transformed by trials and dark nights into fortitude in the Spirit, in neediness, open to the Spirit.

e. Though, the spiritual disciplines are what the mature person would do in the right circumstances, they start as intentional trainings of the human spirit at any time in order to set in motion a habit that will emerge when appropriate.

f. We will experience spiritual disciplines where we are in our spiritual development. For beginners, they may be joyful, exciting, encouraging. For others they will be all love and good. But for those in dark nights, they may be dull and dry– but still good for looking into the mirror of one’s heart.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Ask the Lord how it is that you hear the Word or respond to the commands of God in recent times. Are you excited, bored, frustrated, despairing with the Word or wonder why you are not further along in your spiritual life? Open your heart to the truth of this.

2. Read prayerfully 1 Tim. 4:7. Discuss with the Lord the degree to which you have in the past and are now disciplining yourself for the purpose of Godliness.

3. Take counsel with your soul and the Lord the degree to which you are tempted to use spiritual disciplines and obedience to create a Christian character by our effort and fortitude rather than open to the Spirit to do this. Just be open to the truth of this with the Lord.

4. Discuss with the Lord the degree to which the disciplines of “spiritual intentions” of honesty, presenting, recollection and discernment are at work in your life. Briefly prayer the following prayers of intention and open to God:

Presenting: “God, Here I am. I am open to you and your will. ” Recollection: “God, what ever I am to become or do, I want to do this in Christ and I don’t want to do this alone but abiding in You.” Honesty or Truth-telling: “God, what is going on in my heart regarding the truth of myself in relation to You and others.

Discernment : “God, What are you doing in my life and what are you asking me to do?”

5. Ask the Lord whether there are any particular areas of your life that He might like you to establish a short-term regimen for the purpose of transformation.

- a. Discuss with the Lord whether there is any temptation towards magical thinking that this area could be resolved by mere self-effort and natural fortitude.
- b. Ask the Lord, “What kind of person must I become to live out this command or put off this sin from the heart by the Spirit as a habit?”
- c. Ask the Lord for wisdom regarding establishing a short-term plan to begin to try to practice something that will assist you in becoming that kind of person in the Spirit. This should be a short-term project appropriate to the issue (possibly 2 hours over a week’s time).