

Moral Integrity For Individuals

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In our last article, we looked at the pitfalls in marriages that lead to moral failure. But, of course, moral integrity is not simply an issue for those of us who are married. Moral integrity is a condition of the heart, and singles struggle with moral integrity, too. In this article, we are going to look at pressures we all face, especially when we are single, and discover how each of us can overcome those pressures and walk in intimacy with God daily.



In my own life, by the time I became a Christian as a college student, I was already familiar with paths of moral failure—addicted to pornography and masturbation, finding comfort in alcohol, and ready to see what other ways I could find to ease the pain of an empty heart. Although my family was full of love, I did not know how to “tune in” to receive that love, and so I had grown painfully isolated and self-absorbed. If Jesus had not found me early in my college days, I shudder to think the path I would have taken.

But when I was saved, my baggage did not disappear overnight. I still struggled with the same hidden sexual sins, used relationships to try to meet my need for acceptance, and became adept at “looking good on the outside”, until I began to discover that God wanted to deal with me “on the inside” through a process of exposing and healing the wounds in my heart.

The heart of the issue is the issue of the heart

All of humanity is created for relationship—deep relationship with God and also with family, then at a shallower level with others. What the Bible calls our heart is the seat of our emotions and it is part of God’s unique creation of mankind. The heart was created to strengthen relational bonds with emotional “glue.” My heart is to love God (see Deuteronomy 6:5) and those around me (see 1 Samuel 18:1; 1 John 3:17) and not be drawn astray by wrong relationships (see Proverbs 7:3,25).

But many of us have “heart disease” and our hearts do not function in the way God intended—drawing us into intimacy with Him and transparency with others. Instead, the pressures of life strain our hearts and cause them to operate in judgment, self-defense, denial, and isolation.

Pressures on us all

In all societies, especially today in the Western world, there are pressures on us all resulting from the fall and all humanity’s sin. The values of the world reflect satan’s values, as he seeks to twist, steal, and destroy intimacy with God. Primarily, these values come down to one—selfishness. Roy Hession, in *The Calvary Road*, calls it “The Big I”, and it is at the center of sin (sIn). We see this in the “American dream” and in

the sayings of other cultures and groupings: "Do your own thing", "Be your own boss", and so on.

We are taught from an early age that success equals owning things, from the latest toy to the newest technology, the best car, the most attractive spouse, and the biggest house with the newest appliances. The message is, "Success is the way to be happy", and we are bombarded with it.

Selfishness is also used to twist relationships, with satan teaching us (through his influence on the world's values) that relationships are all about what we can get for ourselves, that we must be in a relationship to meet our needs so we can be happy. When this is our priority, we tend to believe that happiness is found in being "attractive" because that will help us "find a soul-mate" so that we can receive and express love by having sex. This "logic" pervades popular culture and surrounds us everyday. It is not just Hollywood movies that sell us this lie, but TV shows, advertising, and the whole society, which takes its values from those sources.

Pressures on Christian singles

There is a small degree of shelter from these pressures for Christian couples. At least they fit the world's model in one way—they are together, even if they are influenced by the mirages of "success" and "happiness" to the detriment of their relationship with each other. A single Christian cannot enjoy even this small shelter. Singles typically have fewer possessions than couples, partly because they need less, but mostly because it takes two incomes to afford a "good" car or any house these days. A single who does not accept satan's lie that sex is the way to receive and express love is outside of the accepted norms of society. The pressure, often from the church as well as the world, is to "find a mate", and this is backed up by the message that it is necessary to be "attractive" (the church version of this is that one should fit the appearance norms of his/her chosen church fellowship). If I am single, whenever I watch a movie or TV show, or even look at a roadside billboard, I am bombarded with the message, "You are single, so you must be an unhappy failure." Even in church, I can find that I don't fit the programs offered, except the singles ministry. Being on my own, I can easily fall into "The Big I" by focusing on myself alone and be tempted to compromise my moral integrity.

True intimacy

The best answer to the pressures around us is a heart which is open and intimate with God. I was created for true intimacy with God, but my heart could not bear to be open until recently. There were several reasons for my closed heart, and they form a downward spiral that many of us will recognize in our lives.

1) I put up defenses. We all experience wounding from our families—often it is unintentional, but it is always painful. When my family wounded me, the real problem was not what was done to me, but my reaction. I reacted wrongly to each hurt, with judgments ("they don't love me"), inner vows ("I'll never let myself be hurt again"), and other ungodly beliefs ("I must work to earn acceptance and love"). All these wrong reactions are lies from satan, but by agreeing with them, I gradually built a wall of self-protection in my heart. This is what God calls a "heart of stone" (see Ezekiel 36:26). When we look at that phrase closely, we find that it refers to a heart which is built,

block-by-block, into a defensive fortress. Now here's the catch—my fortress of self-defense makes me feel distant from God and others. It robs me of the very intimacy that would be the answer to my pain, surrounding me instead with loneliness that sets me up for moral failure.

2) I became dependent on others. "Church is family, but I don't fit" is often what I hear when I speak with single Christians. The church can add to the pressure from the world if you are single. I know from personal experience that I give that argument strength when I am focused on "me" and not on others. The truth is when I began to look for a deeper personal relationship with God, I began to fit better in the church. However, it is so easy to slip into belonging to the family of God for what I can get out of it. I look for my needs to be met by others and so I am still trapped in sin, because "I" am at the center again. I become dependent on others (co-dependent), often on specific others such as my pastor, small group leaders, or a close friend, because I am not looking to God to meet my needs. These dependencies fuel the lies I have believed and agreed with, allowing Satan to strengthen his deceptive hold on my life.

3) I was deceived. If we don't deal with our dependencies, they become self-deceptions and we end up saying to ourselves, "No one meets my needs", when the truth is that God has promised to meet ALL our needs. We may recognize the danger of relying on others, but unless we can come to rely on God instead, there is a danger that we can become self-sufficient (independent). I had made myself an island, using busyness and ministry to hide my lack of receiving from God. I ministered to others, but found it hard to receive ministry myself. There was a hidden core of pain which I kept "off-limits" with hidden defense mechanisms (strongholds). I deceived myself about my spiritual state, pretending I was "OK" when I was not. This resulted in outward holiness but inner darkness. I substituted God's true comfort with false comforts (mine were mainly pornography and masturbation, but others include drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, sex, fantasy, TV, possessions, and food, to name a few). When this happens, we wreck our lives with moral failure.

Traditionally, the church has been harder on "gross sins" than on "acceptable sins." But I believe it is time for us to recognize that religious striving and moral failure are both symptoms of a lack of intimacy with God—as such there is little difference between them. Both are dungeons of deception which, once entered, are hard to escape.

4) I became trapped in dungeons. The foundation of these dungeons is the original sin, independence, leading to hurt and hidden core pain, masked by self-deception. In these dungeons, we are so trapped that moral failure can be easier than escape. When one fails morally (whether alone through defiling himself or by sinning with another), he becomes burdened with shame, which hinders him from becoming all that God wants him to be.

Self-deception can take the form of justifying false comforts. A man might say, "Pornography and masturbation simply meet my legitimate sexual needs", or a woman may live in a fantasy world, anticipating her "Prince Charming" will one day rescue her from her hurt and pain, calling this her "vision for the future." These are both justifications of false comforts. If God gave sex as a gift only to married couples, it is hard to justify sex as a universal need. I believe that what we have labeled "sexuality" is really that part of our hearts which God created to bond to another (eternally to Him and, in many cases, also to a spouse), but our society has twisted that into selfish

independence and self-satisfaction and called it "sexuality." Likewise in the woman's case, Jesus is the answer to her pain, her rescuer. "Prince Charming" is only a twisted, no-change-required version of Jesus. Both the man and the woman are deceived and justifying false comforts. The same is true with religious striving—we work at looking "OK" because we have missed the truth that we always need to trust Jesus to forgive our sins and be our righteousness; we cannot become pleasing to God by our efforts.

Self-deception is a strong prison, and it takes teamwork to break free. We need God's help, and often the help of Christian friends we trust. So how can we break free and begin to enjoy true intimacy with God?

Breaking free

To break free, we need to begin to demolish the lies that we have believed. This is no simple task because many are powerful strongholds built and strengthened over years. But freedom is possible when we realize that this is why Jesus came—to destroy the works of Satan (see 1 John 3:8-9). John writes that whoever is born of God cannot sin because God's seed is in them. That leads us to a key verse in John's gospel (John 8:32) where Jesus says, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." I used to think that meant that I would become freer if I read my Bible, listened to teaching tapes, and memorized verses. Perhaps you, like me, have tried that and found that it is good, but it alone doesn't bring freedom. Well, the reason is that it is the wrong kind of "knowing." Head knowledge like that is very useful for teaching or for doctrine (see 2 Timothy 3:15, Colossians 3:16), but the word Jesus uses for "know" refers to intimate, relational knowledge, not facts and scriptures. The same word is used for sexual relations (see Matthew 1:24-25). So when John writes, "God's seed is in them", he is showing us the result of allowing God to plant His truth in us, setting us free. This is a process we need to follow for each lie we have believed. There are four steps to getting free.

- 1) Recognize the lie you have believed. Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, helps us in this as He leads us into all truth (see John 16:13).
- 2) Repent for believing the lie. This step would include forgiving others who contributed to our ungodly beliefs, as well as receiving God's forgiveness for our independence and unbelief.
- 3) Renounce the lie. Satan is a legalist, so renounce the lie you previously believed and break your agreement with the powers of darkness, breaking Satan's legal right to hold you captive.
- 4) Receive God's truth. After you have renounced the lie, wait quietly for God to speak His truth to you and write down whatever you receive so you can check it with scripture (and the counsel of your pastor or a Christian friend). Often, God will speak to me in such a personally appropriate way that I immediately feel freedom from the power of the old lie. My part is to choose to receive the truth God shows me and to affirm that truth daily until my new godly belief becomes part of my belief system. This usually takes at least 30 days.

These are the first steps toward moral integrity. Wherever we start from, God will lead us into deeper intimacy with Himself and with the family of God if we will embrace these steps.

How does one stay on the path of moral integrity?

We can develop and maintain intimacy with God and trust with others by taking each of the following steps.

- 1) Recognize that God is the God of ALL comfort (see 2 Corinthians 1:3). Look to Him for comfort, not to other people or activities. As God's truth sets us free from lies, we will be able to turn to God for comfort rather than to the false comforts that lead us into moral failure.
- 2) Actively seek open, accountable relationships where others have the right to point out self-deception and hidden defenses. Take initiative to give close friends permission for that kind of input; don't just assume that they will point out your faults. My friends help me to guard my heart by watching for defenses, dependencies, or self-deception.
- 3) Watch for words or thoughts that indicate you may be drifting into self-effort, legalism or religious striving. I call them warning flags, and they include phrases with the words "must" "should" or "ought", such as, "I must pray more," or "I ought to be more spiritual."
- 4) Seek to walk in the light. Take opportunities to disclose faults to trusted, mature friends and confess sins to them or to your pastor. God is close to us when we walk in the light.
- 5) Seek to live like a son/daughter to someone in ministry. This would usually be a pastor or church leader. Biblically speaking, sonship is not a gender role (for males only), but a relational role. I demonstrate my submission to Father God in my support for another's mission.

Which of these steps is God telling you to take? We encourage you to act on His promptings today, to seek moral integrity through intimacy with your loving, heavenly Father.

In Father's love

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