



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Irrigating Deserts with Moral Imagination
(*Inklings of Glory*, pp. 20-28)

Suggested Article:

📖 Back to the Future
(*Inklings of Glory*, pp. 38-43)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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Christian Reflection

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Irrigating Deserts with Moral Imagination

Without imagination, moral education is a wasteland of abstract reflections on principles that we might never put into practice. With imagination, we connect principles to everyday life and relate to the injustices others face when we picture what they experience. Stories develop our moral imagination and nurture the judgments of our heart.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 119:9-16

Responsive Reading†

Jesus told them a parable: “Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit?

A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher.

Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye?

You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.

“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush.

The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.

Reflection

Moral education is as much about shaping students’ hearts as training their minds. Becoming morally attuned to other people and the natural world involves more than merely coming to understand our obligations toward them. It requires our loving them as they deserve to be loved, taking offense when others deliberately abuse them, and feeling remorse if we’ve purposely harmed them. Qualifying for a moral ‘diploma,’ therefore, is more akin to being deeply and steadfastly in love, than to earning a perfect score on the toughest math exam. As moral ‘graduates’ we will experience joy, indignation, and shame when we should and for good reasons.

Just as it takes a lover to teach about love, only a person whose heart is morally attuned can provide effective moral instruction. Or, as Jesus quips, “Can a blind person guide a blind person?” (Luke 6:39). He warns us to remove the logs from our own eyes before we try to improve our pupils’ moral vision.

This truth about teachers comes out in response to the psalmist’s query, “How can young people keep their way pure?” (119:9). The answer turns out to be intensely personal and confessional: “I, the



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teacher, must treasure God's word in my heart, so that I may not sin against God" (11). To be good teachers, we must first be pupils before God—"teach me your statutes" (12)—and our truthful speech requires that we not only meditate on, but also take deep joy in God's precepts (14-16).

In *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis explains that young people will develop practical reason, or become skilled at discerning what they should do, only when they:

- ▶ *learn objective standards*. They should embrace norms and values that are true regardless of our opinion about them.
- ▶ *develop proper emotional responses*. They should learn "to feel pleasure, liking, disgust, and hatred at those things which really are pleasant, likeable, disgusting, and hateful," Lewis says. These properly trained emotions become an essential, powerful ally of the intellect in molding their behavior.

Young people's practical reason continues to develop as they read and respond to literature. "The imaginativeness of stories enables children to form and internalize 'sentiments,' those complex combinations of feelings and opinions which provide a basis for action or judgment," Schakel observes. "In 'On Three Ways of Writing for Children,' Lewis wrote that a writer should not impose a moral lesson upon a story: 'Let the pictures [i.e., verbal images] tell you their own moral.' Here, in sum, is Lewis on the moral imagination: the moral of the story must be embodied in the images and the images can be perceived only through the imagination."

Study Questions

1. Do you agree that it is important for a teacher to be a moral exemplar, to be a person whose emotions and intellect are properly attuned? Can children and young people learn to be moral if they have immoral teachers?
2. In the context of this study of moral education, discuss Jesus' saying: "A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher" (Luke 7:40).
3. What does Lewis mean by "sentiments"? Why is the formation of proper sentiments so essential to moral education?
4. What stories have shaped your moral imagination? What images of virtues like self-control and generosity, or vices like pride and cowardice, have stayed with you after reading or hearing a story?
5. In the late medieval period, Christians valued legends like *St. George and the Dragon*. What sentiments would it encourage in readers?
6. Does your congregation tell stories about "local saints"—women and men in the church whose exemplary discipleship continues to shape the faith of members today?

Departing Hymn: "Imagination's Stream"

†Luke 6:39-45.

Irrigating Deserts with Moral Imagination

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	James 3:11-18
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Discuss role of stories in moral education
Questions 1 and 2, or 4	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions 4, 5, and 6
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching goals

1. To consider how the proper sentiments, which are rich combinations of appropriate emotional reactions and beliefs, are essential to being morally attuned to other people and the world.
2. To understand the complex role of the teacher in moral education, as exemplar as well as instructor.
3. To explore the role that stories play in moral education.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Inklings of Glory (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Comment

"The educational system of the 1940s, [C. S. Lewis believes] has misread the need of the moment: fearing that young people will be swept away by emotional propaganda, educators have decided the best thing they can do for children is to fortify their minds against imagination and emotion by teaching them to dissect all things by rigorous intellectual analysis. Lewis says in reply, 'My own experience as a teacher tells an opposite tale. For every one pupil who needs to be guarded from a weak excess of sensibility there are three who need to be awakened from the slumber of cold vulgarity. The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts.' Children's and adolescents' imaginations need to be fed, not starved" (*Inklings of Glory*, p. 22). How well do we nurture the imagination of children and young people today?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that God will lead members to be wise parents and teachers who nurture the moral imagination of children and young people.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 119:9-16 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Moral education, according to C. S. Lewis, involves not only instructing the intellect in knowledge of objective standards, but also training the heart in the appropriate emotional responses. The next study guide in this series, "Permanent Things," explores the importance of learning objective standards. This study focuses on the importance of shaping the heart, and especially the role of imagination in shaping our sentiments, which Schakel defines as "complex combinations of feelings and opinions which provide a basis for action or judgment."

If members want to extend this study of moral imagination over two sessions, they might discuss the complex role of the teacher in the first session, and the role of stories in the second session.

The biblical passages look at moral education from the perspective of the teacher, and they encourage rigorous self-examination. Notice that Psalm 119:9-16 and Luke 6:39-45 (and in the second session, James 3:11-18) say the teacher must not only know God's precepts, but must have the proper "heart" (or "delight") in regard to them. The good teacher is a model, or exemplar, of the proper moral sentiments, and not merely one who speaks eloquently about moral precepts.

Study Questions

1. We have many moral instructors: parents, church leaders, school teachers, significant adult friends, and peers. Must *all* of these be good exemplars, or can our hearts be properly attuned if *some* of them are poor role models, or even the sort of hypocrites that Jesus derides? Encourage members to reflect on their experience of hypocritical teachers or poor role models who did not delight in the goodness they taught.
2. This is a stern warning to teachers that their students will become like them. Teaching is not merely imparting knowledge, but also sharing one's heart. Can we "survive" a hypocritical moral teacher? If so, how do we escape being like that person?
3. Sentiments are "those complex combinations of feelings and opinions which provide a basis for action or judgment" (p. 24). Schakel presents Lewis' view: "Crucial to such nurturing is the child's internalization of the standards and the appropriate response. Intellectual apprehension of abstract principles is not enough. When a child is tempted to steal a sweater that appeals to him or her greatly, the goal is not to have the child intellectually weigh the moral issues at stake; the child must 'feel' that stealing is not only wrong but repugnant, feel it through trained emotions: 'Without the aid of trained emotions the intellect is powerless against the animal organism' (15). A person possessing trained emotions – the equivalent of practical reason – relies not on the abstract reflections of the head, but on the properly nurtured judgments of the heart: 'The Chest – Magnanimity – Sentiment – these are the indispensable liaison officers between cerebral man and visceral man' (16)" (p. 23). Often we must react before thinking about what to do, and by itself our intellect is no match for our powerful desires for pleasure or self-gratification. Properly trained sentiments are quick and psychologically powerful responses to moral situations: when we "feel" repugnance at the wrongdoing, it's so much easier to diagnose and avoid; when we "experience" the beauty of a good action, we take delight in doing it.
4. If members are familiar with Lewis's fiction, they may mention their favorite passages. One person I know has wonderful memories of reading *Chronicles of Narnia* with her children. Encourage members to share and discuss other stories in literature, movies, or television programs that have shaped their moral imagination.
5. Peter Damian stresses the way that George handles the offer of wealth in the story: "Clearly what he did serves to teach us a valuable lesson: if we are afraid to strip ourselves of our worldly possessions, then we are unfit to make a strong defense of the faith." For Edmund Spenser, George's cruciform courage in defending the innocent is the primary lesson. Bunyan sees George as a model for confronting temptation in all its forms (p. 43). By focusing only on the dragon or princess, modern readers may miss these insights.
6. Many congregations pass along stories about the faithfulness of past leaders, or the inspiring and humble service of a servant in the church. Why is it important that some of our exemplars be "local" folks, who have lived in our community of faith?

Departing Hymn

"Imagination's Stream" is on pp. 52-53 of *Inklings of Glory*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.