



Guilt/
Shame

DEALING WITH GUILT

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(Ezra 9:5-8)

A letter addressed to “Uncle Sam” said, “My conscience has been working on me, so to quiet it, I’m sending you this money order for \$200.” It was signed, “One of your conscience-stricken nephews.” A postscript was added, saying, “P. S. If I still feel guilty, I’ll send in the other \$200.”

It all began in the 1800’s when someone sent a few cents to the United States Treasury Department. The enclosed note read: “This is payment for a reused postage stamp. It wasn’t canceled so I peeled it off and used it again. The money is to ease my conscience.” The government, not knowing what to do with those few pennies, created the Conscience Fund. To date, that fund has received over five million dollars.

Everyone experiences guilt now and then. And nearly everyone reacts to guilt in a predictable manner. If people fall short of a goal (such as raising the “perfect” child), they are filled with shame. “If only I had been a better parent, my child wouldn’t have turned out this way.” If students don’t make a desired grade, they berate themselves: “No wonder I didn’t pass. I’m so dumb.” The merciless mental tape player replays its destructive messages, creating waves of guilt and shame. How should a person cope with these guilt-ridden feelings?

FEELING GUILTY VS. BEING GUILTY

There is a difference between *feeling* guilty and actually *being* guilty. For example, if someone were to steal a loaf of bread from the local grocer, that person would be guilty of the crime. The laws of society and the words of the Bible make this clear: Stealing is against the law and is morally

wrong. This type of guilt is the result of a violation of a moral law. The person *is* guilty regardless of whether or not the person actually *feels* guilty.

On the other hand, just *feeling* guilty doesn’t mean that someone has violated a moral law. Many times, failing to meet a person’s expectations imposes guilt feelings that are not associated with a moral wrong. Because of the strength of their emotions, many people carry guilt they have neither earned nor deserve. They feel guilty and they don’t know why.

It is possible to be guilty of an offense without necessarily feeling the emotion of guilt. For example, a person may hurt a friend’s feelings without even realizing it. Unfortunately, many people also become desensitized to a sense of conviction by repeated offenses.

On the other hand, the fact that the believer is unconditionally loved by God seems to indicate that guilt feelings which are not based on the fact of guilt have absolutely no place in the sanctified life. The Bible says: “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

Satan, not the Holy Spirit, is “the accuser” (Rev. 12:10). Satan’s work is to create feelings of condemnation for the believer, resulting in overwhelming hopelessness or unnecessary guilt. The work of the Holy Spirit, however, results in conviction, forgiveness, and restoration.

DEALING WITH GUILTY FEELINGS

Most people do not have trouble knowing when they are guilty. The following tips will help those who struggle with nagging feelings of guilt:

1. Pay attention to uncomfortable feelings. Guilt, like physical pain, is a signal that something is wrong.
2. Determine whether the guilt feelings are realistic or the result of unreasonable expectations. Ask: "Why do I feel guilty?" and "Should I feel guilty?" Once a person has determined the nature and cause of feelings, it is easier to be more objective in handling them.
3. **Remember** that everyone is human. Punishing oneself for human errors is useless. If you forget a friend's birthday, for example, you can make it up to that person as soon as possible. However, don't follow the tendency to "replay" the mistake over and over again. Correct mistakes and move on.
4. If guilt feelings are a result of sin, ask God for forgiveness, accept His cleansing love, correct the misdeed if appropriate, and forget it. This is not a way of getting God off your back. It serves as a springboard to help jump over a guilty past into the present love of God.
5. Recognize that "telling all" can be a way of inflicting more punishment on oneself. This only eases the sense of guilt for the moment and may put unfair stress on those who are listening. Permanent relief from moral guilt comes from God's forgiveness, not public confession. In most cases, the scope of our confession should not exceed the scope of our sin.
6. If guilt feelings are unrealistic, turn off the mental tape player. Ask God for strength to do this. Ask a minister or other professional for help if necessary.

CHRIST SETS US FREE

We can deal with guilt and be sorry without self-condemnation. The apostle Paul says, "For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (2 Cor. 7:10).

Christ did not come to condemn us and make us feel guilty. While donations to the government's Conscience Fund may ease our minds temporarily, Christ offers to remove the guilt entirely and for eternity. He came to set us free from sin and the uncomfortable emotion of guilt.

FURTHER MEDITATION:

Other passages to study about the issue of guilt/shame include:

- > 2 Chronicles 30:9
- > Psalms 19; 32; 38; 51; 89
- > Isaiah 43:25; 54:4, 9; 55:7
- > Jeremiah 33:8
- > Romans 3:23
- > Hebrews 10:2, 22
- > 1 John 1:7-9

To Learn More: Turn to the key passage note on guilt/shame at Romans 8:1 on page 1474. See also the personality profile of Adam on page 10.

drachmas, and two vessels of fine polished bronze, precious as gold. ²⁸And I said to them, "You *are* holy to the LORD; the articles *are* holy also; and the silver and the gold *are* a freewill offering to the LORD God of your fathers. ²⁹Watch and keep *them* until you weigh *them* before the leaders of the priests and the Levites and heads of the fathers' houses of Israel in Jerusalem, *in* the chambers of the house of the LORD." ³⁰So the priests and the Levites received the silver and the gold and the articles by weight, to bring *them* to Jerusalem to the house of our God.

THE RETURN TO JERUSALEM

³¹Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth *day* of the first month, to go to Jerusalem. And the hand of our God was upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambush along the road. ³²So we came to Jerusalem, and stayed there three days.

³³Now on the fourth day the silver and the gold and the articles were weighed in the house of our God by the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest, and with him *was* Eleazar the son of Phinehas; with them *were* the Levites, Jozabad the son of Jeshua and Noadiah the son of Binnui, ³⁴with the number *and* weight of everything. All the weight was written down at that time.

³⁵The children of those who had been carried away captive, who had come from the captivity, offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel: twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs, and twelve male goats *as* a sin offering. All *this was* a burnt offering to the LORD.

³⁶And they delivered the king's orders to the king's satraps and the governors *in* the region beyond the River. So they gave support to the people and the house of God.

INTERMARRIAGE WITH PAGANS

9 When these things were done, the leaders came to me, saying, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, with respect to the abominations of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. ²For they have taken some of their daughters *as* wives for themselves and their sons, so that the holy seed is mixed with the peoples of *those* lands. Indeed, the hand of the leaders and rulers has been foremost in this trespass." ³So when I heard this thing, I tore my garment and my robe, and plucked out some of the hair of my head and beard, and sat down astonished. ⁴Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel assembled to me, because of the transgression of those who had been carried away captive, and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice.

⁵At the evening sacrifice I arose from my fasting; and having torn my garment and my robe, I fell on my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God. ⁶And I said: "O my God, I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, my God; for our iniquities have risen higher than *our* heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens. ⁷Since the days of our fathers to this day we *have* been very guilty, and for our iniquities we, our kings, *and* our priests have been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plunder, and to humiliation, as *it is* this day. ⁸And now for a little while grace has been *shown* from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and give us a measure of revival in our bondage. ⁹For we *were* slaves. Yet our God did not forsake us in our bondage;

SOUL NOTE



Owning Up (9:2-8) Ezra's prayer confessed the sins of the nation of Israel. He was so upset over their defiance of God's law that he fell on his face before the Lord, acknowledging the people's sin as well as God's grace toward them.

Despite our mistakes and failures, God is always willing to meet us at our point of need. Sometimes we can make amends by specific actions; at other times we must suffer the consequences of our sin. But through repentance, we can experience God's grace and love.

Topic: Guilt/Shame

in that it was weak through the flesh, God *did* by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those *who live* according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. ⁶For to be carnally minded *is* death, but to be spiritually minded *is* life and peace. ⁷Because the carnal mind *is* enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. ⁸So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of

Christ, he is not His. ¹⁰And if Christ *is* in you, the body *is* dead because of sin, but the Spirit *is* life because of righteousness. ¹¹But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.

SONSHIP THROUGH THE SPIRIT

¹²Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, “Abba,

KEY PASSAGE



**Guilt/
Shame**

FREE!

(8:1)

No truth is more glorious to imprisoned people than to be told that they are no longer condemned but are set free! Christ brings that good news. When people accept Christ's sacrifice on their behalf, they are freed from the tyranny of sin.

“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.” Condemnation means an eternity apart from God. No condemnation means living *with* Him, now and forever.

Often, however, believers who have been set free still keep themselves behind bars. They feel guilty about their past, or guilty that they cannot be perfect in this life. Guilt can be good when it helps us to know when we have done something wrong. But guilt can also keep people from being able to rejoice in their new life or to bring others to Christ. That kind of guilt is a prison. We needn't stay locked up if Christ has set us free.

To Learn More: Turn to the article about guilt/shame on pages 600, 601. See also the personality profile of Adam on page 10.

SOUL NOTE



No Longer Condemned (8:1) Not keeping the law perfectly leads to condemnation. Since no one can keep God's law perfectly, all people are condemned. The law brings guilt because people realize they are powerless to keep it. Christ's death on the sinner's behalf, however, sets them free. “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” because they have been forgiven and are promised eternal life. If Christ no longer condemns us, then neither should we condemn ourselves. Beating ourselves up over sins that we have brought to God only keeps us imprisoned in our guilt. Christ has set us free. **Topic: Guilt/Shame**

¹⁶To the woman He said:

“I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; In pain you shall bring forth children; Your desire *shall be* for your husband, And he shall rule over you.”

¹⁷Then to Adam He said, “Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat of it’:

“Cursed is the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat of it All the days of your life.

¹⁸ Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you,

And you shall eat the herb of the field.

¹⁹ In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread

Till you return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; For dust you *are*, And to dust you shall return.”

²⁰And Adam called his wife’s name Eve, because she was the mother of all living.

²¹Also for Adam and his wife the LORD God made tunics of skin, and clothed them.

²²Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”— ²³therefore the LORD God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the

PERSONALITY PROFILE



ADAM’S GUILT; ADAM’S SHAME

(GENESIS 3)

Guilt/Shame

While He had Adam’s undivided attention, God gave him some very specific instructions: “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:16, 17). God offered to Adam an opportunity to experience the full freedom that grows out of obedience.

Shortly after that, God introduced Eve to Adam. The two of them received God’s blessing and began their perfect life together. At this point there was no sin or suffering in the idyllic garden God gave them as a home.

One of Adam’s duties was to help Eve understand God’s instructions. He apparently gave Eve the condensed version: “See that tree over there, honey? God told us not to even touch it. Got that?” Eve was an easy prey for Satan because perhaps Adam didn’t tell her the whole story. That’s why God held Adam ultimately responsible for the sin that infected the human race when the couple ate of the forbidden fruit.

Even before God’s confrontation, however, Adam already knew he had sinned. He felt that inner awareness of wrongdoing called *guilt*. He also realized that fear of exposure called *shame*. This powerful combination was given by God as an internal corrective. It could have brought Adam to repentance and confession. Instead, Adam tried to cope with guilt and shame by avoidance and denial. Adam found himself suddenly terrified of God’s approach. He hid in shame. Gently questioned, Adam excused his behavior. Eve followed Adam’s lead. The rest of us have done the same thing.

As long as we blame others and refuse to take responsibility for our wrong actions, we remain mired in sin. Guilt and shame rule our lives and cut us off from God’s redemptive healing. But God invites us to own our sin and confess it to Him. When we do so, God is “faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

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