

WHAT TO DO ABOUT GUILT

Various Texts

Treasuring Christ Church – Pastor Boyd Johnson

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INTRODUCTION

With today being the last day of 2017, I thought it would be helpful to address from Scripture a topic that affects us all and may even be weighing you down right now. And that's the topic of guilt.

As you reflect back on the year, no doubt there were high points and low points. But no matter how well the year went for you, I think that truthfully we all look back on this year with some regret—things that didn't go as planned, resolutions we never accomplished, habits we didn't overcome, things we wish had turned out differently, sins we are sorry we committed, and so on. And, now, as you come into the new year, you might feel like you are carrying a load of guilt accumulated throughout the year.

If we could see inside your heart right now, maybe what we would find is a heart heavy with guilt. Worse, you might feel like you are carrying a load of guilt from many years or just unable to get past something that happened long ago.

The feeling of guilt can be one of the most heart-wrenching experiences. So what should you do about guilt? In this sermon, I want to show you from God's word why we feel guilty and what to do about it. My prayer has been for you that through God's word you could be freed from the burdensome weight of guilt.

I. WHY WE FEEL GUILTY

Let's begin by understanding why we feel guilty. There are two underlying reasons why we feel guilty.

A. We Feel Guilty Because We Are Guilty

First, the reason we feel guilty is that we are guilty. Guilt is a legal word. It's the fact of having done wrong and therefore deserving of punishment. In the eyes of God, we've all done wrong. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Because we have all sinned, we are all guilty and, therefore, deserving of punishment. Guilt is a universal condition of man.

I don't know if everyone *feels* guilty, but I do know that everyone *is* guilty. So the first reason why we feel guilty is that, in a multitude of ways, we are guilty.

B. We Feel Guilty Because of our Conscience

The second reason why we feel guilty is that God has implanted in each of us a warning system that makes us feel guilty so that we know something is wrong. The warning system that is innate in all people is called the conscience. God has given us the gift of the conscience to help us identify the presence of guilt. The conscience gives us the ability to sense right from wrong.

It is like the warning lights on your automobile's dashboard. It tells you when something is wrong. When you violate your conscience, you experience feelings of guilt, shame, anxiety, fear, and regret. When you act in concert with your conscience, you experience feelings of joy, peace, respectability, and hope.

The Old Testament doesn't really have a word for conscience. But the idea of the conscience is wrapped up in what the Old Testament says about a person's heart. So, for example, a person who has a tender heart (2 Chronicles 34:27) is a person with a tender conscience. A person like Pharaoh, who hardened his heart, is a person who has hardened his conscience against God's will (Exodus 8:15). A person with an upright heart is a person with a good and pure conscience (Psalm 32:11). When David cried out to God over his sin in Psalm 51:10, "Create in me a clean heart, O God," he was asking God to give him a conscience that was pure and no longer condemned him.

In the New Testament, the Greek word for conscience literally means "a knowing within." To say it another way, the Puritan Richard Sibbes said the conscience is the soul reflecting on itself. It is the soul evaluating its own thinking, emotions, motives, and actions based on a sense of right and wrong. The Bible teaches us that everyone has a conscience.

Romans 2:14-15: "When Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them."

In other words, even those who do not know God or his law instinctively know there is right and wrong. They value certain behaviors and find other behaviors repulsive. They have some innate knowledge of right and wrong written on their hearts and their consciences bear witness against them when they do wrong.

Scripture teaches us that we must take care to keep a clear conscience. Paul said in Acts 24:16: "I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man." Paul taught Timothy that if he was to fight the good fight of faith, Timothy needed to fight with two hands "holding faith and a good conscience" (1 Timothy 1:19). He said that some who have rejected this two-fisted fight for faith "have made shipwreck of their faith." Paul lived his life in such a way that even when he was unjustly accused before the Jewish counsel, he was able to say, "Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day" (Acts 23:1).

But it is important to understand that your conscience is a *human* faculty that judges your thoughts and actions. Your conscience only responds to the highest standard it believes. When you go against your belief system, it warns you. When you are acting within your belief system, it urges you on.

But whether your conscience operates the way God intends depends upon whether your conscience has been informed and trained biblically. If you have informed and trained your conscience on worldly wisdom, it will respond to worldly wisdom. Your conscience can actually tell you that you are doing right when you are doing wrong. So the conscience is not infallible. It can lead you to disobey God's standards. That's why telling someone to follow their heart is horrible advice.

The Scriptures teach us that the heart is deceitful above all things (Jeremiah 17:9). Just as your heart is not infallible and can lead you astray, so your conscience can lead you astray. That's why, even though Paul lived with a good conscience, he didn't rest in that ultimately. He said in 1 Corinthians 4:4: "I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me."

In other words, my conscience is clear about the matter you accuse me of, but the final verdict is with the Lord who decides and judges my thoughts and intentions. So our conscience is God's gift to us that warns us when we are doing wrong and makes us feel guilty. Nevertheless, because the conscience is a human faculty and capable of error, the conscience can be abused, under-developed, and misaligned.

Variations of Conscience

Scripture describes four variations in our conscience.¹ We each have only one conscience, but it may respond in different ways according to how it has been informed and trained.

1. A Seared Conscience.

The phrase "seared conscience" comes from 1 Timothy 4:2 where Paul says in the latter days, some professing Christians will abandon the faith because of the lies of false teachers "whose consciences are seared." The word "seared" is the word for the medical term cauterization. These false teachers have no qualms about their deceptive teaching because their consciences have been burned and turned to scar tissue through demonic deception so that they are desensitized to the wrong they are doing.

We often wonder why people can commit such heinous crimes. One reason is that they have so seared their conscience that they are desensitized to wrongdoing. Some people's consciences are so defiled that they no longer know right from wrong.

Titus 1:15: "To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled."

Those who continually violate God's standard eventually lose the feeling that they are doing wrong and become morally insensitive.

Ephesians 4:19: "They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity."

If you abuse your conscience by continuing to violate it and God's standard, you eventually will have a seared conscience.

2. An Uninformed Conscience.

If we don't bathe our conscience in biblical truth so that our conscience is informed and conformed to God's word, it won't respond according to God's standards (c.f., unintentional

¹ Categories adapted from John Street's PM 512 syllabus.

sins in Leviticus 4:22-24). When your conscience should be giving you a warning signal, it won't fire because in ignorance it doesn't know what is right. Paul said that before he came to Christ he was a "blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent" because he had acted "ignorantly in unbelief" (1 Timothy 1:13).

But your conscience can be trained. It must be trained. The writer of Hebrews says that those who are mature have "trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil" (Hebrews 5:14). You must not only bathe your conscience in Scripture, you must also form the habit of responding to your conscience.

3. A Misaligned Conscience.

This is a conscience that is aligned with some other standard than God's law. The result is that you feel guilty because you don't live up to that standard, even when you wouldn't otherwise be guilty under God's standard.

One example of this is in 1 Corinthians 8, where some Christians in Corinth couldn't bring themselves to eat meat that had been offered to idols and then sold for food. They felt that the meat was defiled and that they would be defiled in eating it. If they ate the meat, their consciences would be defiled and they would feel guilty of sin. But Paul said their consciences were weak. Idols are nothing and therefore food offered to idols is not defiled. It's ok for Christians to eat it. These Christians with weak consciences had aligned their consciences to a standard that wasn't biblical and because of that they were feeling guilty about something they didn't need to feel guilty about.

Paul didn't say that they should go ahead and violate their conscience. In fact, he said in a similar passage in Romans 14 that to do so *would* be sin (Romans 14:23). But since he called their consciences weak, the implication is that they should train their consciences to become strong by aligning their consciences with biblical truth.

Here would be a good place to recognize that the fact of guilt is not the same as the feeling of guilt. Feeling guilty and being guilty are not the same. You can be guilty and not feel guilty. You can feel guilty and not be guilty.

Many of you are no doubt feeling the weight of guilt for things you've done that the Bible doesn't condemn. You've trained your conscience to a standard outside the Bible and you feel guilt every time you violate it.

Moms can feel guilty about all kinds of things that they are doing or not doing. And the guilt they feel might not be because they've violated one of God's commands. Rather, it might be that they've trained their consciences on a standard of what they saw other moms doing in their playgroup or among their Facebook friends or on their Instagram feed or a Pinterest board.

If that's you, you learned a standard from those sources and now your conscience has been misaligned so that when your motherhood doesn't measure up to some *worldly* standard you feel guilty.

Others of you are constantly feeling guilty about food and eating. Certainly there are ways to

relate to food that are sinful. There are ways of eating or not eating that sinfully betray good stewardship of our bodies. But many have gone beyond that. Maybe you've watched this documentary and read that book and now you've got a set of rules in your head about what you should and should not eat and your conscience is trained on those rules. Perhaps you're on a diet and you've got diet rules. And while it would be ok for you to have a set of guidelines for making healthy eating choices and getting good nutrition and losing weight, perhaps you've elevated those rules so that you're good when you obey and bad when you don't. You might actually feel guilty when one of the rules is violated. And when you break the rules, you punish yourself in ways that only you know about. You go through a constant cycle of guilt-based dieting and eating. Perhaps throughout the holidays you've labored under guilt. You tell yourself, you'll get back on your diet once the holidays are over. Until then, you experience guilt every time you put on clothes or take another bite.

And we could talk about guilt because of medical remedies and parenting philosophies and school choices and not completing your to-do lists and what time you had your devotional time and on and on. There are many ways that we experience misaligned guilt because we have misaligned consciences. We experience guilt many times not because we have sinned but because we have not lived up to some other standard.

Be free from the guilt of a standard that God does not hold you to. If you break some arcane diet rule, who is there to condemn you except you? If you don't mommy like the mommy on the podcast, why feel guilty if you have done as *God* would have you?

4. A Biblically Aligned and Trained Conscience.

Thankfully, God has wired our consciences so that they can be trained. We must seek to have a conscience aligned to God's standards and sensitive to the righteousness that God requires.

How do you align and train you conscience? First, you align your conscience to God's standard by bathing it in Scripture so that you know what God requires. The conscience has been likened to a skylight. It has no light of its own. A skylight is only effective when it lets light in. Your conscience is your soul's skylight.

Your conscience is most effective when you keep it pure and expose it to the light of God's word rather than defiling it or keeping it in darkness. Our consciences should be oriented around the question: What does God's word require of me in this situation? What am I responsible for?

As it relates to parenting, what does God's word require of me as a parent? Am I doing that? If not, that's the reason why I feel guilty and I must do something about it.

As it relates to motherhood, what does God's word require of me? If you don't live up to the standard you see in others, that's ok. But if you don't live up to the standard in the Bible (rightly interpreted and applied), that's not ok.

As it relates to food choices, what does God's word require of me as I seek to take care of my body? I'm responsible for that. So my guilt or non-guilt ought to be aligned to that standard.

Second, you train your conscience through the constant practice of heeding it and not violating it.

II. WHAT TO DO ABOUT GUILT

So now we know why we feel guilty. But when we really are guilty, what should we do about it? Let me give you three nevers never to do, two questions to ask, and one solution to pursue.

A. Three Nevers Never To Do

1. We must never minimize the fact of guilt.

We cannot treat guilt as a matter to be ignored, buried, blamed, rationalized, medicated, indulged, manipulated, balanced, or fed. These are all worldly ways to get rid of guilt.

1. Ignore it. Put it out of your mind. If you don't focus on it, you won't feel guilty. Pretend it doesn't exist—it's only a fiction of your psyche.
2. Bury it. Busy yourself with other things to distract yourself from feeling guilty. Watch TV, go for a workout, eat, go out with friends. Do any number of things to bury guilt in activity so that you don't have to face it.
3. Blame it. Come to the idea that guilt is just other people's standards imposed upon you. Realize that you're a victim of people's expectations. The guilt you feel is your parents' fault for what they said and did to you. It's your religion's fault for imposing morality on you.
4. Rationalize it. Judge yourself not guilty. Excuse your behavior. Explain to yourself that you really haven't done anything wrong. Perhaps what you did was even right.
5. Medicate it. When you feel bad, take something that makes you feel good. Use substances—alcohol, drugs, prescriptions—to induce good feelings when you feel bad.
6. Indulge it. Overcome guilt with the idea that if you engage in more of the behavior, you'll eventually become desensitized to feeling bad about it. The psychologist B. F. Skinner taught that it was good to go against your conscience. It's like taking an allergy shot. Eventually you'll be free from guilt, if you indulge yourself in the behavior.
7. Manipulate it. If your morals are telling you that the things you like to do are wrong, change your morals. Adopt new standards so that you measure up and don't fall short.
8. Balance it. Compensate for the bad you've done by doing good in some other way. Outweigh the bad with good and you'll feel better.
9. Feed it. Go ahead and feel really bad now and get it over with. Have a good cry and get it all out. Tomorrow it will all be over.

These responses to guilt minimize the fact of guilt because they ignore the problem of sin. Guilt is a problem because we are guilty before God and in God's justice he must punish sin.

2. We must never minimize the feeling of guilt.

Feeling guilty is a warning sign. Something is wrong. There is always an underlying cause for feelings of guilt. Either we feel guilty because we have sinned or we feel guilty because we are holding ourselves to some other standard. Either way, guilty feelings must be addressed. If you don't, you will feel despair, hopelessness, sadness, overwhelm, even depression. But if we address feelings of guilt, there is hope for change.

3. We must never underestimate the effects of guilt.

Unaddressed guilt can unleash devastating emotional and physical effects on a person. Listen to how King David described the anguish he experienced because of his guilty conduct with Bathsheba (see 2 Samuel 11–12):

Psalm 32:3–4: "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer."

And again, David acknowledged in Psalm 38 that his sin had brought upon him pain:

Psalm 38:1–8: "O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath! For your arrows have sunk into me, and your hand has come down on me. There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me. My wounds stink and fester because of my foolishness, I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning. For my sides are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh. I am feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart."

This is the anguish of a man who has not addressed the guilt of his sin.

B. Two Questions to Ask

If you feel guilty, there are two questions you must answer.

1. What specifically do you feel guilty about?

Where are the feelings coming from? Crystallize what it is that you feel you've done wrong. This will bring clarity to what should be done about it. Perhaps you'll even discover that you haven't done anything wrong.

2. By what standard do you judge yourself guilty?

You may feel guilty because you are. Or you may feel guilty because you have the wrong standard. But those are two very different problems.

C. One Solution to Pursue

What is the solution to true guilt? The only solution to guilt is forgiveness through confession and repentance. Biblically, confession comes from the Greek word that literally means "to say the same thing." So confession means to agree with God about the nature of your sin.

Biblically, repentance comes from the Greek word that means to change your mind or purposes. So repentance is to turn from your sin and embrace God's ways. To bear the fruit of repentance would mean that you feel sorrow over your sin, that you seek to set things right, and that you seek to reconcile relationships that are broken.

The turning point in David's overwhelming guilt was his cry of confession and repentance. Listen to how he counsels us in the rest of Psalm 32:

Psalm 32:5–11: "I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found; surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him. You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance. I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you. Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD. Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!"

Those who confess and repent of their sin are those who are upright in heart—those whose consciences are cleared, not because they've never sinned, but because they've confessed and repented and their guilt has been forgiven.

The burdensome weight of guilt can be lifted. That doesn't necessarily mean that sorrow over past sin will instantly go away, even if it has been confessed and repented of. There is a godly sorrow over sin that is the consequence of sin and serves as a reminder of our weak flesh and our need to daily cling to Christ. But the everlasting guilt is taken away.

CONCLUSION

For Christians, we have the good news that we don't have to carry the load of guilt any longer. Our Savior said in Matthew 11:28–30: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.""

Whatever else Jesus meant by that familiar promise, we learn that Jesus is a burden-lifter not a burden-maker for those who come to him. He frees us from the crushing burden of our own spiritual bankruptcy and of trying to earn our salvation by our efforts.

Jesus took the burden of our sins upon his back as he hung upon the cross. Those who trust in him are freed from condemnation for their sins because he has paid for their sins by his sacrifice. By his blood, we are forgiven. And the way that his sacrifice can be ours is by trusting solely in him for God's forgiveness. Because Jesus was perfect, God can count us perfect, if we trust in Jesus. Because Jesus died as our sacrifice, we will no longer experience judgment, if we trust in Jesus.

So as we march forward into 2018, let's take up faith in one hand and a good conscience in the other, fighting sin with all that we have and when we fail (and we surely will), confessing and repenting and knowing that God has taken away our guilt.