

GUILT

A common emotional problem confronting Christians today is guilt. Even believers oftentimes feel beaten down or overwhelmed by it. Dwelling on their inadequacies and failures, they fret about their weaknesses. They would like to undo the past, but they know they can't. When they look around them, everyone else seems to be happy and carefree, while they themselves are burdened down by haunting feelings of wrongdoing.

As a result, such persons (often the most high- principled and sin-sensitive souls) are spiritually crippled. They are falling far short of their potential as servants of Christ. They brood, dwelling in dark valleys of self-incrimination, simply because they've never learned how to face and resolve the problem of guilt.

Because it affects so many Christians, I want to show you in this lesson how to handle and successfully overcome guilt. As I do, my prayer is that you will recognize how unresolved guilt can keep you from experiencing the Christian life at its best, that you will see the remedy God has provided for it, and that you will deal with your guilt in a direct, courageous, and biblical manner. I am convinced that this in turn will make you a more confident, effective, and joyful follower of Christ.

OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE GUILT

In treating the subject of guilt, it's very important to distinguish between *objective* and *subjective guilt*. The first (objective guilt) is real, while the other (subjective guilt) is not. It's only a misdirected feeling. The first is judicial; the second emotional. The first has a direct cause; the second involves a misunderstood effect. In the first, you are guilty of violating some law or code; in the second, you only feel guilty - whether you did anything wrong or not.

Yes, it is important to distinguish between objective guilt which is actual, and subjective guilt which is only imaginary. Objective guilt results from disobedience to laws that God Himself has established. You see, the Lord has laid down certain standards for mankind and has revealed them in the Bible. If we break those laws and violate His will (by murdering someone, for example, or being covetous), we bear actual, objective guilt. We did something wrong!

Such acts of disobedience produce feelings of guilt. We feel guilty because we are guilty. We have a disturbing sense of remorse, regret, and shame because we have in fact sinned against the Lord. We have lost self-esteem; we expect some kind of punishment. We may even feel that no one else wants us around because we're so bad.

It is never advisable to deny the reality of objective guilt. If we did actually violate the will of God through disobedience to Him, we must face up to the fact and deal with it before we can be at peace with Him, ourselves, and others.

Dealing with subjective guilt, however, is a different story. You see, subjective guilt is not real – it's only imagined. And because of its nature, understanding and overcoming it isn't quite so easy. Artificial factors may be at the root of our huge, overpowering guilt feelings. True, they may be there because of things we have done that were sinful, but it's also possible that we are plaguing ourselves unnecessarily because of other strong forces at work in our emotions.

Some people, for example, habitually establish unrealistic expectations for themselves. They set the standards so high that it is absolutely impossible to reach them. And when they fall short, they're disappointed and discouraged. They feel guilty because they've failed again. They're caught in a vicious circle. The guilt is not real, however, since they have simply failed to reach some arbitrary goal which has no moral base or relationship.

We should be careful, then, to distinguish between *objective* and *subjective* guilt. The first comes from an actual, outright violation of some moral commandment of God. The guilt in this case is real, and it must be dealt with forthrightly and biblically. The second, however, is only imagined. It's not real. Such an emotional illusion sometimes comes from setting unrealistic goals for ourselves, making unreasonable comparisons, or having a supersensitive conscience that has been improperly conditioned. Its distortions leave a person feeling guilty even though he has no good reason for it. The effect on individuals thus plagued can be devastating, and the problem must be resolved.

THE CURE FOR GUILT

In this lesson I would like to focus your attention upon the cure for objective or real guilt. You see, God did not intend for His children to be perpetually overwhelmed with feelings of shame and failure. Rather, He has provided a way for us to be happy believers - free from self-condemnation and the debilitating drain of ongoing feelings of guilt. Yes, you *can* escape those dark clouds of remorse. The way to freedom is to appreciate and appropriate the free forgiveness of our loving Heavenly Father.

Please remember that I am talking about those who have believed what the Bible says about Christ and His sacrifice on the cross, and who have placed their trust in Him for salvation. If you are born again, then consider with me some of the biblical truths relating to sin and forgiveness. Then, believing those things, experience for yourself a wonderful release from the burden of a troubled conscience. You can know both the joy of peace *with* God and the peace *of* God, because He stands ready and willing to forgive and forget every sin.

Sometimes people say; "I know God forgives sin, but He doesn't know how bad I've been." But when they talk that way, it's a sure indication that they have failed to comprehend the *scope* of God's forgiveness - that it extends to every possible sin we could commit, no matter how great or heinous. When Christ died on the cross, He paid for every transgression of all mankind. Therefore, we can believe and claim this promise:

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

Did you really hear what that verse says? It tells us as believers in Christ that there is cleansing from *all unrighteousness*. Those are John's very words as inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The forgiveness of God is therefore not limited to certain classifications of sins. Rather, it is broad enough to cover every sin of every believer - there are no exceptions!

Never does God become weary of honest and meaningful confessions, nor does He ever run out of patience and refuse to forgive those who sincerely acknowledge their transgressions and determine to live victoriously. The Lord stands ever ready to hear and to remove the guilt of the penitent soul.

How foolish, then, for a believer to go on feeling

guilty! How senseless to be obsessed by that which has been forgiven, and to be haunted by the specter of some past indiscretion which God Himself has determined to forget. Why go on carrying a heavy load of feeling guilty when, in response to your confession, the Lord of grace has forgiven you? He has removed the actual guilt of your transgression. David wrote,

He hath not dealt with us after our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward them that fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath He removed our transgressions from us (Psalm 103:10-12).

And Jeremiah records this word of the Lord pertaining to Israel:

I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more (Jeremiah 31 :34).

God will do the same for you. Remember, the Lord offers complete forgiveness. And when God forgives, He also forgets.

There are times when we would like to banish some dark, troubling memories from our minds. But try as we might, we just can't seem to forget them. Because of this, it's hard for us to realize that God can and does do just that. He completely puts out of His mind those sins we've committed and sincerely and honestly confessed.

The story is told of a man who, though genuinely converted, was having quite a struggle with a longstanding habit. He had resolved to give it up, and he was trying his best to overcome it. But time and again in weak moments he stumbled and fell. On each occasion he would confess his failure to the Lord. He succumbed to temptation so often, however, that he began to wonder how often the Lord would keep on granting him forgiveness. After losing another spiritual battle, he cried out to God with a broken heart, "O Lord, I've done it again. I've done it again!" Expecting a stern rebuke, the fearful soul was stunned and comforted by the Lord's reply. The Heavenly Father said, "You did what again?" This is not a true story; it is simply a parable. But it emphasizes the point that when God forgives a sin, truly and completely removing its guilt, He also forgets it.

Therefore, if you are having a struggle with something in your life that's displeasing to the Lord, don't let it get you down. Rather, confess it. Try with

God's help to forsake it. And claim the forgiveness and cleansing promised in 1 John 1:9. Having done that, you have no cause for self-condemnation. So, break free from your feelings of guilt by accepting the forgiveness God has already granted you.

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

I'd like to offer some practical suggestions that may help you overcome a nagging sense of guilt. They will help restore the joy and peace which can and should be yours.

1. **Revise your expectations.** If you've been setting standards too high for yourself and then feeling like a failure every time you fall short, it's time to become a little more realistic. No one is a super man - or super woman. Admit your own fallibility, your own humanity, and go on from there.

2. Establish a forgiving attitude. Perhaps your entire household has adopted a spirit of faultfinding and condemnation. If so, very likely the first false step any member makes, everyone is quick to point it out. This creates an atmosphere of judgment and guilt. In such a situation, the main purpose for living becomes escaping the accusing finger of others rather than obeying the Lord out of a heart of love and desire to please Him.

You yourself, however, can reverse that cycle in your home. Begin by being forgiving - as Christ forgave you. Do what you can to set a sunshiny climate of love and forgiveness. You'll be amazed to see how quickly the clouds of guilt and self-condemnation disappear. Everyone will be happier, more confident, and better able to handle the pressures of modern life.

3. Walk in obedience to the Lord. As you travel the pathway of righteousness, you are not only free from objective guilt, but you also experience the joy, satisfaction, and peace that comes from fellowship with the Heavenly Father. A sense of spiritual well-being is the most effective antidote for self-condemnation and false feelings of guilt. As you trust in God and do what's right, your whole outlook will be transformed.

If, in spite of all we've said, the problem persists, and you're still unable to sort out your feelings and pinpoint what is causing you to bear a heavy load of depressing guilt, I would make a further suggestion. Seek out a friend in whom you have confidence, a minister who truly believes and knows the Word of God, or a qualified Christian counselor. Share your concerns and burdens with him. Ask for help in evaluating your circumstances. Sometimes others can help you see the picture more clearly and from a different perspective. Doing that, they can assist you in ridding yourself of guilt - whether it be real or imaginary.

FORGIVENESS IN CHRIST

If you have never experienced God's forgiveness through receiving the Lord Jesus as your personal Savior, you have good cause for feeling guilty. This is simply because, "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

Yes, all have sinned. Every person is a sinner by birth and by choice. The guilt and charge against us is removed, however, when we place our faith in Christ. In Him is true forgiveness.

The Lord Jesus paid for our sins through His death on Calvary. He bore the penalty our sin demanded, and now because of what He accomplished on the cross, God is willing and waiting to grant full pardon and forgiveness to all who accept Him. When you do, instead of the verdict *guilty*, you will be declared *justified*. The Bible says,

Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1).

If you're not a Christian, acknowledge that you are a sinner and in need of the Savior. Admit that you could never earn your own salvation and ask the Lord Jesus to save you - and He will. In and through Him you'll find full forgiveness.