

## How Should We Deal with Feeling Guilty?

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Silent Killers

1 Timothy 1:15-16

How many of you have watched a cut animal video online? A cat video? A funny guinea pig video? I want you to watch this dog video:

Dog video

How do you think Maggie was feeling? At the other end of the cultural spectrum from dog videos, there is the classic scene of Lady Macbeth. She is sleepwalking and compulsively rubbing her hands after participating in the murder of King Duncan. Here is Dame Judi Dench's portrayal of Lady Macbeth:

*Macbeth* video

She can't wash the spot off her hands because the spot is not on her hands, it's on her conscience. Guilt is destroying her.

Finally, here's a scene from the TV show *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven*.

*7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* video

Guilt is a universal phenomenon. You find it across cultures. How would you define guilt?

Guilt defined

Technically speaking there are two types of guilt in the Bible. There is objective guilt which refers to acts or behaviors that violate God's law or community values or your own internal standard. I do something that's in violation of a law, whether it's God's law or my own standards, and I am objectively guilty.

Subjectively, guilty feelings are emotions that sometimes accompany the self-judgment that we have violated a standard – God's law, family standard, our community standards or our own standards.

What we're going to focus on today is the subjective side of guilt. Guilty feelings – guilt that causes inner psychic pain. Put simply, guilt feels bad. It feels like you have a finger pointed at you, accusing you.

Guilty feelings make you literally feel heavier and more weighed down. Studies show that feeling guilty makes people assess their weight as being much higher than it is. If you feel guilty, you feel heavier than you are. Studies show that people that feel guilty feel like every physical activity requires more effort. Feeling guilty feels like walking with a heavy pack on your back.

Guilty feelings cause us to be distracted. It's hard to think straight when you are plagued by guilt. Guilty feelings compete for attention and make it hard to concentrate on school and work and other people. Guilty feelings make us less productive, less creative, less effective in life.

The great evangelical pastor, John Stott, said that:

“No one is free who is unforgiven.”

No one is free who is guilty. I've been doing a series over the last several weeks called “Silent Killers”. Doctors will often say that things like high blood pressure, coronary artery disease, diabetes, those things if left untreated can kill us. This summer I want to talk about silent killers of our souls. Things that if we don't deal with them, will kill us emotionally, crush our souls, and, indeed, wreck our relationship with God and other people.

Today I want to talk about guilt in a message that I've titled, “How Should we deal with feeling Guilty?”

Let's pray.

How do we become aware that what we're feeling inside is in fact guilt?

Guilt detected

The Bible speaks about the conscience nearly three dozen times.

Indeed, the Bible speaks about three types of consciences. There is the:

Hypersensitive conscience

The Bible calls the hypersensitive conscience the weak conscience.

1 Corinthians 8:10-12

<sup>10</sup> For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, won't that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? <sup>11</sup> So

this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.

<sup>12</sup> When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.

What does the Bible mean by the hypersensitive weak conscience? It's talking about someone with an overactive guilt meter. There are lots of technical terms for people with an overactive guilt meter, I'll just use the layman's term. People who have overactive guilt meters are called "Moms".

Seriously, there are people who feel guilty about everything, even things that the vast majority of folks would not regard as being close to being wrong. These hypersensitive, guilt-prone people remind me of a defective smoke alarm. It goes off when you light a candle, when you cook something on a stove, when you breathe. Several times a day there is this shrill high-pitched alarm that keeps everyone on edge, makes everyone in the house agitated and irritable.

I read a survey that said that 4 in 10 Americans feel guilty about relaxing on vacation. How many of you would say "that's me"? I should be working. I should be producing something. I should be doing something. A third of Americans say that the mere thought of relaxing. Many people will not give themselves permission to relax. As your pastor, let me speak in the name of Jesus to you and tell you that you have permission this summer to rest, to relax, to not work. It was God who provided the Sabbath. And it was God who gave the people of Israel various times through the year for rest and celebration. Hypersensitive conscience feels guilty about what is not objectively wrong.

The Bible also speaks about a second kind of conscience:

#### Hardened conscience

I think in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, guilt-prone hypersensitive folks are becoming rarer and rarer. It seems more and more people go through life not with a defective smoke alarm that goes off all the time, but most people go through life these days with a disabled smoke alarm. It seems, these days, that many of us have taken the batteries out of our smoke alarm so the alarm doesn't sound even when the house is on fire.

That is a really vivid picture of the disabled smoke alarm in 1 Timothy 1:18-19:

#### 1 Timothy 1:18-19

<sup>18</sup> Timothy, my son, I am giving you this command in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by recalling them you may fight the battle well, <sup>19</sup> holding on to faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and so have suffered shipwreck with regard to the faith.

It talks about neglecting conscience. We have so many alarms going off and we've grown so used to the alarm that it's just background noise or I can't hear it anymore. The picture that Paul uses is that the conscience is like a boat. It's carrying our faith and if we neglect our consciences, it's like punching a hole in the boat so that our faith is drowned.

Have you ever known someone, a friend, a family member, a son or daughter, a boyfriend or girlfriend, a wife or husband, a friend at church, maybe a former member of your small group who used to be excited about the Lord? They used to pray. They used to read the Bible. Now they say that they can't believe anymore. They are struggling with their faith. They have all kinds of questions about the truth of Christianity. They used to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead. They say that they struggle with that now. They used to believe that God is good, but they no longer believe.

The Apostle Paul says that often the issue with a person who has walked away from the faith is not intellectual. Some people do have real intellectual questions, but Paul says often the issue is not intellectual. It's moral. The person has punched a moral hole in the boat carrying their faith and the reason their faith is sinking is because they have violated their consciences over and over again. They've had an affair. They've hurt someone deeply. They've pursued a divorce. They've hurt one of their children. They've betrayed a business partner. They have a secret addiction. It's incredibly dangerous to neglect your conscience because if you do – if you pull the batteries out of the smoke alarm – you can destroy your faith. Your house may just burn down.

We've talked about the hypersensitive weak conscience, the hardened shipwrecked conscience, and finally there is the:

### Healthy Conscience

Paul speaks about himself in the book of Acts saying:

Acts 24:16

<sup>16</sup> So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.

You know, the problem with contemporary culture and much contemporary therapy is that our culture largely dismisses guilty feelings as something signaling to us really important information. The reason smoke detectors go off is because your house may be on fire.

### Guilt dismissed

But these days, many people reject feeling guilty even if they are objectively guilty. Christian Smith, who is one of the great contemporary Sociologists of Religion, wrote a wonderful book several years ago describing the religious life of young adults who are twenty-something. It's called *Souls in Transition*.

Here's what Christian Smith says:

"Despite often smarting from hard lessons learned, most of the emerging adults who were interviewed explicitly denied feeling any regrets about any of their past decisions, behaviors, or problems.... In fact, many emerging adults also appear, we think, to harbor regrets about the past even when they deny that they do. They clearly do not want to see themselves as having regrets, even though they get angry with themselves about mistakes and continue sometimes to be haunted by problems from the past. One young adult was asked whether quitting drugs had an impact on his life and he said, "Yeah, absolutely, I'm so much more clear-minded. Now that I am where I am, it kinda makes me see it was bringing me down even though I don't regret it. I don't regret it at all. I think everything you do makes you who you are so I don't really regret it."

Contemporary culture has trained several generations now that feeling regret is bad, feeling guilty is always bad. Is that the case? Should we never have any regrets about anything? The abortion, the lies we've told, the drugs we've taken, the hurt we've caused to people we should have loved, the things that we failed to do because we were too selfish or lazy or stupid. Is that really the best way for people to live? To dismiss reality? To say I feel ok when I really don't feel ok? A common way to dismiss and deny guilt is to blame other people.

We are masters at making excuses. We blame our upbringing. We blame our circumstances. We blame how we've been treated by others. These days, we blame our genes. "God made me this way." There's a singer with a sense of humor who had a little song that went this way:

I went to my psychiatrist to be psychoanalyzed

To find out why I killed the cat and blacked my husband's eyes.

He laid me on a downy couch to see what he could find,

And here is what he dredged up from my subconscious mind:

When I was one, my mommy hid my dolly in a trunk,

And so it follows naturally that I am always drunk.

When I was two, I saw my father kiss the maid one day,  
And that is why I suffer now from kleptomania.

At three, I had the feeling of ambivalence toward my brothers,  
And so it follows naturally I poison all my lovers.

But I am happy; now I've learned the lesson this has taught;  
That everything I do that's wrong is someone else's fault.

Of course, this doesn't mean that we're not sinned against, sometimes horribly. It does mean that none of us can be let off the hook for our sin.

John Stott, the great Christian theologian and author, said:

"The Bible take *sin* seriously because it takes *man* (male and female) seriously. Christians do not deny the fact in some circumstances – of diminished responsibility. Rather we affirm that diminished responsibility always entails diminished humanity. To say that somebody is "not responsible for his actions" is to demean him or her as a human being. It is part of the glory of being human that we are held responsible for our actions."

The problem with guilt is that however much we try to excuse ourselves or deny that we feel guilty or claim there are no regrets or blame someone else or claim to be victim, we can't entirely rid ourselves of guilt. Guilt persists inside of our hearts, often in disguised forms.

### Guilt disguised

Freud argued that guilt is hard to understand because it frequently can dwell in our unconscious minds and can easily be mistaken for something else. One writer said,

"Guilt is crafty, a trickster and chameleon. Capable of disguising itself, hiding out, changing its size and appearance, even its location, all the while managing to persist and deepen."

Guilt shows up in our lives in lots of disguised forms. It can show up in obsessive compulsive disorders. Psychiatrists say that frequently at the root of a lot of OCD

behavior is intense guilt or the fear of feeling guilty. Guilt shows up in lots of depression. We feel this heaviness, this malaise. At the root of depression is often guilt. Guilt shows up in explosive anger when we lash out at people. Often, anger is accompanied by a fear of feeling guilty. I can't allow the finger to be pointed at me so I attack you.

The Bible takes guilt very seriously because it takes people seriously. You can't just dismiss guilt. You can't just deny it. Claim you have no regrets. You can't just excuse guilt away. Or disguise it, dress it up and imagine that it's not a silent killer. You have to deal with guilt. How do you deal with guilty feelings?

### Guilt dealt with

So what do we say, then, to a person who is struggling under a huge boulder of guilt? What do we say to a person who says, "I am a Christian. I do believe that Christ died for my sins, but I just can't get past what I've done – something I've said; something I did – I just can't take it back and move on."

Sometimes the thing that we most struggle with is what we failed to do. Maybe you had an opportunity to tell your dad or your mom that you loved them, but you didn't take that opportunity. You were too busy. And now they are dead and it is too late. Or maybe you rejected the opportunity to go to counseling and reconcile with your spouse, but you were too stubborn or too full of pride and now it is too late. You say, "I want to go back and reconcile with my spouse, but he or she is no longer interested. They've shut their heart to me." I've had people tell me, "I should have seen the signs of their possible suicide and I didn't. I minimized how depressed and off-balanced they were. I kept thinking they would snap out of it, but they didn't and they ended up taking their own life. Maybe I could have done something to prevent this, but I didn't do it."

Many people these days say the key to getting free from guilt is forgiving yourself, but forgiving yourself however popular it is these days is a concept that is absolutely foreign to the Bible and absolutely foreign to Christianity. It has nothing to do with Christianity. There is not one verse, there is not one command, there is not one story or proverb or example from the Bible of someone forgiving themselves. I've read through the Bible dozens of times. There is nothing, not a word or a phrase, about forgiving ourselves.

There are lots of verses about God forgiving you. For example, we read this:

1 John 1:9

<sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

And there are lots of verses about our need to forgive each other. We read in:

Ephesians 4:32

<sup>32</sup> Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

But there's nothing about self-forgiveness. You see vertical forgiveness in which God forgives us. There's horizontal forgiveness in which one person forgives another. But internal forgiveness in which we forgive ourselves, not one solitary word in the Bible because forgiveness is a transaction between two persons. Between God and us, between us and another person. It's not something that you do inside yourself. You don't give yourself forgiveness.

So, what do we do when we feel guilty? If the answer is not that we forgive ourselves, let me suggest three things you can do to deal with your guilt. I would ask you, guilty one, whenever you feel guilty have you tried these three things?

First of all,

Have you tried confession?

1 John 1:9 says:

1 John 1:9

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

You know, honest confession is the one thing that we human beings avoid at all cost. If you watch any trial on TV or you read about it in the newspaper, or you attend a trial in the courtroom – it doesn't matter what a person is being tried for – breach of contract, tax evasion, medical malpractice, drunk driving – it doesn't matter what a person is on trial for, if you follow any trial at the end no matter what the jury found and what the evidence showed, every person who loses denies that they are at fault. The other attorney had a personal relationship with the judge. It was obvious from the beginning that the judge was biased. The other side lied through their teeth. What they said happened, never happened. My attorney was an idiot.

Wouldn't it be refreshing, wouldn't it be shocking, in fact, if someone who lost a trial walked out of court, stood before reporters, and said, "Well, you heard the jury verdict. I'm guilty. The evidence is overwhelmingly against me. The judge was right. It was a just and correct decision. I am liable."

I read a recent study by two psychologists who found that confession doesn't relieve guilty feelings in confession is only partial. The article was titled, "I cheated, but only a



little". If we confess to God or we confess to another person that we've done wrong, but we minimize what we've done. We only tell them what we've been caught in, but not all the rest. We only confess to God the part of the iceberg that's out of the water, but not everything that's below the surface. The conclusion they drew is that partial confessions don't work. They may just get a person off your case for a while, you may be able to mislead someone by a partial confession, but you won't relieve your guilt. It will sit in your soul like a silent killer. It may be expressed in disguised ways in your life.

You say, "I still feel guilty". The Spirit of God asks through the Bible, have you tried confession? Here's the second thing:

Have you tried repentance?

Let me say this with all affection. If you still feel guilty and you can't get past your guilt, perhaps you've not gotten to the root of the problem. Maybe you've misdiagnosed the problem and you thought the remedy was beating yourself up, or trying to feel sorrier, or crawling over broken glass. Try repentance. And like a laser that burns out a tumor, make sure that you aim your repentance right at the cancer. The cancer may not be the past sin that you have confessed and turned away from.

Let me suggest where the cancer might be in your soul. You might have a tumor that need to be lasered out with repentance. Very often when a person says "I can't forgive myself," the root issue is sinful pride. The person might really be saying, "I can't believe that I did that. Someone like me, with my high standards, with who I am and what I know – I can't believe that I did that. I can believe someone else would do that." Often "I can't forgive myself" translates to "I don't believe in the depths of my own depravity. I am shocked by my own sin."

Friends, if you are shocked or surprised by anything that you have ever done, then you are – and I say this with all affection – deceived about who you are. Sin runs down to the very core of our beings according to the scriptures. The Bible says in Jeremiah 17:9 these words:

Jeremiah 17:9

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

Your heart, my heart...when we say "I can't believe I did this," we are saying we don't have a realistic understanding of how deceitful our own hearts are.

Have you tried repentance? Have you tried to repent of your pride that someone like you couldn't have done something like what you've done?

You say, "I still feel guilty". Try confession. Try repentance. And, finally:

Have you tried believing in God's forgiveness?

The angel of the Lord told Joseph why Jesus was being born. We read in Matt. 1:21 these words:

Matthew 1:21

She [Mary] will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

It doesn't say in this text that Jesus came into the world to save people from certain sins and not from others – from respectable sins, but not from unrespectable sins; from non-violent sins, but not from violent sins; from inward sins, but not from outward sins; from non-sexual but not from sexual sins or from private but not well-publicized sins. Jesus saves his people from their sins without qualifications and without limits. Listen to what the apostle Peter said in 1 Peter 2:24,

1 Peter 2:24

"He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed."

Again, there is no qualification or limitation on the promise that our sins were borne by Jesus on the cross – sins of omission, sins of commission, what we should have done, could have done, would have done if we were smarter.

You say that you struggle with guilt over something you've done, or something you failed to do, and your problem is that you haven't forgiven yourself. Let me say this with all affection, your greatest sin and my greatest sin is not the horrible thing we said and that we can't take back. It is not your past adultery or drug use, or your alcoholism, or the child you had out of wedlock, or the fact that you missed God's call on your life and that you've wasted the last 20 years. That is not your greatest failure or mine. Your greatest sin and my greatest sin is the failure to believe the Word of God. God has said in his Word that "if we confess our sins he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

1 John 1:9

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

And the great sin that we regularly commit against God is to say, "I don't believe you." I believe my particular sin, the form that it took, is too great for even you to forgive. I don't believe that Christ's death is enough for this sin. Friend, if you want to ask God's forgiveness for something, stop repeating over and over to God the same confession

that you've made a hundred times before about what you did or what you failed to do. Instead, if you want to ask God's forgiveness about something, how about asking God's forgiveness for doubting the scope of his mercy? Ask God to forgive you for believing that his heart was too small and his grace too limited to forgive you. If you want to ask God's forgiveness for something, ask God's forgiveness for your unbelief regarding his Word. That you believe that God keeps a record of your sins when God says, "The record has been blotted out."

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- I. Guilt defined
- II. Guilt detected
  - A. The hypersensitive conscience
  - B. The hardened conscience
  - C. The healthy conscience
- III. Guilt dismissed
- IV. Guilt disguised
- V. Guilt dealt with
  - A. Have you tried confession?
  - B. Have you tried repentance?
  - C. Have you tried believing in God's forgiveness?