

I. WHAT IS GUILT?

We typically talk about guilt in two different ways. The first, and most predominant, is what we can term guilt "feelings." This is the subjective sense of pain or sorrow. This is a remorseful awareness of having done something wrong. In much unbiblical counseling, this is all that is dealt with. The main concern is that those feeling get relieved, and instead of feeling bad a person wants to feel good. Many counselors will accommodate this, and give reassuring words without digging deeper.

Scriptures speaks of guilt primarily in a different way than guilt feelings. Guilt used by God as a legal and judicial term that implies criminal responsibility in the eyes of a court of law. That court of law may be human or divine. It assumes the violation of a standard outside of ourselves. It is the fact of being responsible for committing an offense. It is liability or culpability to punishment for wrongdoing. There can be feelings that will follow, but fundamentally guilt is seen as a violation of God's law. As we will see, there can be a violation of that law and someone not "feel" guilty, yet be guilty.

So guilt is primarily a fact, not a feeling, of having done wrong.

II. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF GUILT?

While guilt is primarily a fact, it certainly has consequences in the feelings. Let's look together at a Scriptural example of what can happen with unresolved guilt before God. For this, let's look together at Psalm 38. The setting of this Psalm is a sense of God's chastisement due to unresolved guilt (the fact) and may be in particular relation to David's sin with Bathsheba and Uriah after 1-1 ½ years.

Notice that his symptoms include: internal pain (2a), spiritual pressure (2b), physical illness (3), heaven burden (4), worsening circumstances (5), daily sadness (6), weakness (7), loss of caring (8a), inward agitation (8b), heart palpitations (10a), sad eyes (10b), isolation (11), threatened (12), sorrow (17b), anxiety (18).

How would these things be diagnosed in our day? What would a modern secular (and some "Christian) counselor do with someone in this situation? Once the word "depression" is used, they would typically turn to what is known as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (or DSM IV) and would look for the following:

At least one of the following three abnormal moods which significantly interfered with the person's life:

- 1.) *Abnormal depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day, for at least 2 weeks.*
- 2.) *Abnormal loss of all interest and pleasure most of the day, nearly every day, for at least 2 weeks.*
- 3.) *If 18 or younger, abnormal irritable mood most of the day, nearly every day, for at least 2 weeks.*

At least five of the following symptoms have been present during the same 2 week depressed period.

- 1.) *Abnormal depressed mood (or irritable mood if a child or adolescent) [as defined in criterion A].*
- 2.) *Abnormal loss of all interest and pleasure [as defined in criterion A2].*
- 3.) *Appetite or weight disturbance, either:*
- 4.) *Abnormal weight loss (when not dieting) or decrease in appetite. Abnormal weight gain or increase in appetite.*
- 5.) *Sleep disturbance, either abnormal insomnia or abnormal hypersomnia.*
- 6.) *Activity disturbance, either abnormal agitation or abnormal slowing (observable by others).*
- 7.) *Abnormal fatigue or loss of energy.*
- 8.) *Abnormal self-reproach or inappropriate guilt.*
- 9.) *Abnormal poor concentration or indecisiveness.*
- 10.) *Abnormal morbid thoughts of death (not just fear of dying) or suicide.*

At this point, if there has not been found through a routine checkup any evident medical problems, it is assumed to be a "mental illness", and medication is prescribed. At this point I won't address the issue of mental illness and whether there are some legitimate things to consider. The point I am making is that what the Scriptures clearly define as consequences of guilt, the modern man doesn't even think about. The possibility that this is a real issue of guilt and sin against God that is producing these feelings is not even considered. This is because of the secular view of man as essentially a machine.

One of the important things to remember is that these symptoms are often God's gracious punishment for sin in the believer. These things happened to David so that he would not go on in unrepentance, and ultimately be cast away from God. To use an illustration, consider a light on your dashboard that, as an engine problem grew worse, the light grew brighter, started blinking, started making an annoying noise, and started shutting down other systems. If the light is working right, it is a good thing that is happening to warn of the problem that could eventually destroy the engine and make the car unusable. It may really annoy someone, and they get frustrated, but it is intended for good.

III. WHAT IS GOD'S REMEDY FOR GUILT?

Thinking still of the dashboard warning system, without an understanding of the soul and its relationship to God, the problem is identified in the light itself. One remedy for this guilt is either a training in how to ignore the light (there is no problem, there is no real guilt, only the traditions of your parents/church/culture). Another remedy is to mask the problem, like putting black tape over the light and disconnecting the wires to the noisemaker. This is done primarily through drugs, and in one sense we can say that "it works." The problem seems diminished or at least controlled. This is one of the

primarily arguments for the use of psychotropic drugs, and in a sense it is true. But if there is a deeper issue, then (like the bad engine) it is only going to get worse.

What then, assuming it is the deeper issue of guilt and the reality of God's working to resist one's sin, is the biblical remedy. How do we not only mask the symptoms, but actually get under the hood and deal with the problem?

A. Acknowledge it to yourself

As we have seen in past studies, we live in an entire culture that, mostly because of its denial in the reality of God, denies the reality of sin. This cultivates three things when confronted with wrong: (1.) self-justification (I am right in doing so because...), (2.) blame shifting (it is the other person's fault), and (3.) victimization (I couldn't help it). As long as we play these games of ungodliness, we will never truly be able to deal with guilt. It is still there (the fact), and God will continue to resist and bring about consequences. Proverbs 28:13a reminds us that "he who covers his sin will not prosper." As long as we use these coverings, or even the covering of ignoring them, we will not prosper.

Let me make something clear here, and that is that we should acknowledge what is not ours. For instance, if there was truly a victimization (i.e. different kinds of child or spousal abuse), one should not try to own that. We should seek to deal with it biblically (which we will address later under the subject of handling difficulty), but saying that those things are our sins that we are responsible for is not correct and will not help (those in this area are particularly prone to this).

B. Confess your sin to God

It is only as we recognize how we have sinned against a holy God who is resisting our sin, that we can move toward the removal of those consequences. This is where a verse like 1John 1:9 is so crucial. It is as we acknowledge to God where we have sinned, that He in faithfulness and righteousness will forgive us (remove the guilt) and cleanse us (renewing our heart that has been defiled). We see that in Proverbs 28:13b that whoever confesses and forsakes their sin will find mercy. We see a full example of how David did this in Psalms 51.

C. Confess it to the appropriate people

We need to identify those against whom we have sinned. Jesus sees this as so important, He actually makes it an issue of priority in relation to worship Matthew 5:23-24. When realizing that someone has a legitimate issue against us, to immediately go and seek reconciliation, even in interruption with our worship of God. We will deal with this more in the next lesson on forgiveness, but for now let me summarize in saying that the focus in such an instance is what "I" have done.

Bad example: "Honey, I'm really sorry that I responded in anger. But you have to realize I have had a busy day, and when I come in and you start immediately asking me questions about the bills, and don't let me just chill out with the news, then I get very aggravated. I was also struggling because the house was such a mess and the children were screaming. I think you really need to be more firm with them. So, I'm sorry about losing my temper.

Good examples "Honey, I sinned against you and the children this evening when I got angry and yelled. There is no excuse for my sin. I have confessed it before God, and now I ask that you would please forgive me. Would you please? (Then later) Perhaps we could work together in some ways that would help me..."

D. Make restitution

What is meant by this is to repay for loss experienced as a result of sin. We see in passages like Luke 19:8, Exodus 22:1-15, Proverbs 6:30-31. This could be time (cheating on time card), money (theft), fulfilling of promises (vacation).

E. Repent

Repentance is essentially change. It is first and foremost a change of thinking. Then, flowing out of that thinking, is new behavior. While there is not perfect and complete change immediately, the process is on, and the person demonstrates that they are sincere about those changes.

Paul deals at length with this in 2 Corinthians 7:9-11. There are two kinds of sorry, worldly and godly. Even the world can have sorrow. But godly sorrow leads to repentance, a change of mind, resulting in change of behavior. This includes diligence, clearing, indignation, fear, vehement desire, zeal, and vindication. We don't see and indifferent response to sin, but a godly zealotness to overcome it. We should not be lethargic and indifferent, but to set our hearts against it. Out of that comes "fruit worthy of repentance" (Matthew 3:8).

There is, however, a counterfeit of repentance. It includes simple regret or remorse (Matthew 27:3). This can include tears, convulsions, deep regret. But the focus is often on the self, and the consequences of sin to them. There is not the sense of having offended such a good and gracious God (I more frequently ask in marriage counseling "where was God in all this?")

IV. TWO QUESTIONS ABOUT GUILT

A. Why do some people feel guilt but have not violated Scriptures?

There are some who deal frequently with guilt feelings when there is in fact no guilt. They may feel horrible, and those feelings are real, but they are not founded on God's Word. It may be that they have a falsely informed conscience. It may be that they have been taught that something is God's expectation that isn't rooted in God's word. The remedy for this is the instruction of their conscience, not the violation of it.

Sometimes people deal with guilt because they themselves have created standards that aren't God's. This can be related to everything from our families and children, to the physical care of our bodies, to spiritual disciplines. In many cases guilt over these things actually eclipse real issues of guilt that they don't deal with. This can lead to a spiral effect of constantly feeling guilty and not living in the joy and freedom of the Gospel.

The remedy for this is to identify what are God's standards, and what are their preferences and desires. It is legitimate to have goals, but those goals should never be raised to an equal or greater standard to God's expectations.

B. Why do some people feel no guilt when they have violated Scriptures?

In some cases, particularly in new Christians, there may be things that they simply aren't aware of that God calls sin. They, having been steeped in the world, don't change overnight. God doesn't zap them with His Spirit, and they suddenly know all that God requires. Rather, through the caring and patient instruction of the community of the church, the believer is led in the paths of righteousness.

Another reason is that someone may have their conscience seared (1Timothy 4:1-2). They give themselves over to sin, and the conscience is so continually ignored it is like burning calluses on the fingers until they don't feel anymore. But just because one doesn't have guilt feelings (to which people will appeal), doesn't mean there isn't the fact of guilt.