

Guilt and the Next Right Thing

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Do you know the feeling of being absolutely crushed by guilt—when you’ve done something wrong, committed some sin, and you just hate yourself for it?

In Jesus, we have forgiveness of sins and so, also, Jesus relieves us of the guilt associated with those sins. That’s easy to say, but what does being unburdened of guilt actually look like? And when we do feel self-loathing because of our wrongs, how should we confront that?

I’m going to speak firstly about guilt handled in the wrong way, guilt that seems to cast a shadow over our lives. Then, I’ll reflect on the spiritual truth that Jesus has truly lifted our guilt away. Finally, I’ll look at a practical approach for what we can do when we feel weighed down by guilt.

Casting shadows

Everyone is acquainted with guilt. We have all sinned and still do sin, and we know we can bring nothing to God but a guilty conscience and heartfelt repentance. I’m sure it’s not a revelation to say that feeling guilty about a sin feels bad. Guilt is the pricking of your conscience, the niggling knowledge that you’ve done something wrong. Guilt is tied up with shame and regret. In poetic language, it’s often described as a great weight that sits upon your shoulders and bends your back.

Notably, that weight can only get there in the first place if you have a conscience, beliefs about right and wrong. And when somebody loves God and wants to follow Jesus, they will necessarily develop a sharp and refined conscience. People who don’t follow Jesus also have moral standards, of course, but I want to think specifically about believers, people who try to set their moral compass according to God’s direction.

As we do so, we come to understand that God’s standards of righteousness are really high. We discover that sin is ubiquitous and falling prey to it is easy. As we go about trying to live our

lives to best please God, we quickly encounter a dreadful problem: sin seems inevitable. Good intentions and hard work often aren't enough. Paul wrote these famous words:

I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out... Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. (Rom 7:18,21)

This is the human condition: we sin a lot, even when we don't want to, even when we're trying to fight it. We all know what it's like to be told, 'Don't push the big red button,' and then all we can think about is how much we really want to push the big red button. When people who want to meet God's towering standards of holiness realise the extent of their sin and the hopelessness of their condition, their conscience burns and berates them. These words of David describe the feeling:

My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear. My wounds fester and are loathsome because of my sinful folly. I am bowed down and brought very low; all day long I go about mourning. (Ps 38:4-6)

This psalm describes guilt at its most awful. This is how a person of good conscience can feel when they recognise their sinfulness before God, made all the worse by its apparent inevitability.

To ask a personal question, what sin keeps coming back to you, to crush you with guilt? Everyone will have a different answer.

What is it that makes you think you're just the worst? Is there something you keep asking forgiveness for, a sin you dwell on too much or fall back into even as you hate yourself for doing it? Do you then slink to the meeting on Sunday and take the bread and wine in a self-abasing way, reflecting on what an absolutely useless loser you are?

If that describes you, if anything I've said so far speaks to you, please: you are not a loser. You are not hopeless. Remember how Paul develops his thoughts in Romans. In chapter 7, he does lament our failures as sinners, and he does get frustrated at how our efforts to avoid sin fall short. But moving into chapter 8, he wrote:

Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Rom 7:24-25, 8:1)

Our sin no longer condemns us in the sight of God. The gospel message is very good news indeed. It says that by the grace of God, Jesus Christ redeemed us from sin and made us new. As new creations, we are not bound to sin anymore. Our failure is not inevitable, but if we do sin then we have no fear of being rejected by God but only joy at being forgiven. God is faithful to his promise. He forgives our sins and he purifies us from unrighteousness.

Surely we believe that God forgives our sins when we ask him. So what about the guilt associated with those sins? Perhaps you believe wholeheartedly that God can and does take your sin away, but you're still struggling with feelings of guilt.

It's tempting to think that feeling guilty about a sin, even after it's forgiven, is a sort of divine punishment. After all, even once a sin is forgiven its consequences remain, so perhaps it can be argued that feeling bad about ourselves because we've done wrong is a necessary and maybe even proper consequence of sin.

Consider a hypothetical example that sadly is reality for a lot of people. Imagine a person who gets drunk and, in that debilitated state, drives their car and kills someone on the road. As an outside observer, maybe reading about it in the news, what would you want to see happen to that driver? The natural human response is that we want to see them punished. For the sake of the person who died, we would want to see that drunk driver prosecuted to the full extent of the law. We want them to pay somehow, an eye for an eye. Wouldn't that be justice?

Now imagine that the driver is remorseful, and the family of the deceased offer their forgiveness and goodwill. Charges against the driver are dropped, and they move on with their life. They're even back on the road, despite the ongoing grief they have caused that cannot be undone. At this, we might feel anger. Where's the justice in that? It does sort of sound right that someone who has committed a grievous sin should suffer for it in penance, that this sin in their past should overshadow their life forever. It would only be fair.

But the grace of God is anything but fair. If God dealt with us fairly as our sins deserved, we would be without hope. Being stuck in the past is not what Jesus is about. Jesus does precisely the opposite: he puts our past behind us so completely that it's like we are truly reborn and begin life anew. I love this verse:

If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation: the old has gone, the new has come!
(2Cor 5:17)

Lifting our Guilt

This is our reality: for any sin, we have the immense relief of a do-over. No matter what a terrible mess we've made of things, we can bring it to Christ, and he'll say, 'That's over. Nail it to the cross; you have a new life now.' In that new life, we will still fall into sin sometimes, and we will still encounter feelings of guilt. But now guilt has its proper place and is no longer permitted to condemn us over and over.

Guilt is not actually a bad thing. It has a role to play in the story of our redemption. It's a warning to tell us something is wrong. It's an alarm that goes off to draw our attention to a problem, and like any alarm, once the problem is dealt with, it's supposed to stop ringing. Guilt is not meant to last forever.

That's really the difference between guilt that's healthy and according to God's design and guilt that haunts you for a lifetime. Guilt is your conscience telling you you've done something wrong, saying, 'This is sin! Stop.' Listening to it prompts us to repent, and with repentance, guilt should be relieved. It's not God's will that we stay in a place of pain forever, but only that the pain urges us to turn to him.

When God forgives a sin, his forgiveness is so absolute that it removes the sin like it never happened, and the guilt is meant to vanish with it. We know that consequences remain. The grief of irreversible consequences continues to hurt, such is the terrible impact of sin. But our guilt and self-condemnation must, by faith, be released.

God designed guilt to be a trigger that prompts us to confess and seek restoration. When God grants that restoration—and he always does—the role of guilt is over, because God has declared us not guilty of that sin in the name of Jesus Christ. Being cruel to ourselves in a never-ending guilt spiral achieves nothing but pain and is not God's will. Faith declares confidently that God really has restored us, he is on our side and he will help us face the remaining consequences of our wrongs.

Think of King David's infamous sins in the matter of Bathsheba and Uriah, dreadful sins of adultery and murder. If ever anyone had something to feel guilty about, it was David. He was entirely at fault for those sins and their painful consequences. But he didn't feel guilty at first. His guilt alarm didn't go off. God had to intervene by sending Nathan the prophet to make David aware.

Once David realised his sin he repented immediately. It's the first thing he did. Nathan replied, 'The Lord has taken away your sin.' God's forgiveness in response to a truly repentant heart is instant and complete. After that, David tried to deal with the only consequence of his sin that he may still have had some control over by fasting and pleading with God to spare the life of the baby. But after the baby died, he rather suddenly went back to normal, cleaned himself up and asked for food.

His servants were confused and asked, 'Why are you acting this way? While the child was alive, you fasted and wept, but now that the child is dead, you get up and eat!' In other words, 'Why have you stopped suffering? You should be suffering.' How can a guilty person just resume living? We expect them to be a mess. We're almost offended when they're not a mess.

I don't believe that David was happy about the death of the child or about any of that horrible episode. But when it was clear there was nothing more he could do to fix any of it, he stopped mourning and resumed his duties.

Like David's servants, this restoration can make us feel uncomfortable. We may accept that God forgave David's sin but find it irks our sense of justice that David could resume his life again so quickly. But it was God who forgave the sin and lifted the guilt. When we are tempted to think that another person should suffer for a wrong, remember what God says about them and about all of us:

Since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus...let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience... (Heb 10:19,22)

God offers us cleansing from a guilty conscience. He doesn't want us to go around mourning in continuous guilt; he purposed guilt only to provoke us to repentance. How could we condemn to a lifetime of guilt ourselves or anyone else who has committed a sin when God has forgiven the sin and graciously lifted the guilt? The precious blood of Jesus has cleansed us from a guilty conscience. We cannot withhold that cleansing from anyone else, nor can we think it doesn't apply to ourselves, without diminishing the power of Christ's sacrifice.

The Next Right Thing

I'd like to put to you a practical idea for how to deal with guilt that hangs around after it has stopped being useful. Take a scenario where you're feeling guilty about a sin of any sort. You've already confessed it to God and asked for forgiveness, and you fully believe that God has forgiven you, but you're struggling to shake the feeling of guilt. You feel angry at yourself, or embarrassed by what you did, or even fearful that you'll do it again. You feel that even if God forgave you, you can't forgive yourself, so you continue to dish out daily punishment from your own hand.

How do you break that cycle? Here's one suggestion that I've found helpful: 'do the next right thing'. This adage is both straightforward and powerful. If you know you've done the wrong thing and you've repented and believe you have received God's forgiveness, the next thing to do is not to stand still and wait to feel forgiven; the next thing to do is act in faith like someone who is forgiven.

How do we show that we believe God has forgiven us? We act like it. Faith is not just believing that God exists; it's believing that what he says is true. If God has said that he will sprinkle our hearts to cleanse us of a guilty conscience, then by faith and with his help we must push guilt away and forge ahead.

The idea of doing the next right thing is just that. Whatever you did wrong has been forgiven, so pick up your good deeds where you left off and do whatever the next right thing is. Often, this will mean trying to fix, or make up for, the consequences of the forgiven sin. Sometimes the only action possible might look pretty inadequate, but if it's all you can do, then doing it is living out your faith that you are forgiven and your conscience is cleansed.

Consider Zacchaeus the tax collector, who was wealthy presumably through dishonesty and greed. His actions in the record in Luke 19 suggest a timid man, ashamed of his history and heavy with guilt, who tried just to glimpse Jesus from afar as if that's all he deserved. When Jesus surprised everyone by calling on Zacchaeus, he eagerly welcomed the Lord. But there was grumbling from the crowd, because everyone knew that Zacchaeus was a crook. In response, Zacchaeus gave a textbook example of doing the next right thing. He said:

'Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.' (Luke 19:8)

Four times the amount was really over the top, more than required, but Jesus was pleased with these words, so I think Zacchaeus really meant to follow through on this promise. He showed that he was dedicated to his own restoration by doing the next right thing, which in his case was making generous financial reparations.

Recall John the Baptist's advice to 'produce fruit in keeping with repentance'. Repentance is more than just asking God for forgiveness; repentance shows in our actions as we go back to doing what's right, and we can only go back to doing what's right if we let go of the handicap of guilt.

When we ask for forgiveness for wrongs, no matter how big or small, part of our faith in receiving that forgiveness is that we release the burden of guilt. To wallow in guilt is to re-open a wound over and over again, to refuse healing. It is not right to refuse healing and thus declare our failure; it is right to accept God's healing and thus declare his magnificent salvation.

Ask yourself: what is the next right thing for you? How can you produce fruit in keeping with repentance? If you can remedy the consequences of a sin, great; that's clearly the next right thing. If you can't, then just do what you can, even if all you can do is learn the lesson and be prepared next time you find yourself that facing that situation.

Consider these beautiful verses written by David:

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me. (Ps 51:10,12)

Restore 'the joy' of salvation. Salvation is joyful! The state of being forgiven is not heavy but full of joy. God doesn't ask us to remain in the dark place of guilt but calls us to be restored so that we feel the joy of being saved all over again. That's what Jesus did for us. Jesus took our guilt away. It is an act of faith to deliberately allow him to take that guilt. Stop asking for it back! Instead, trade ashes for beauty, and in that joyful state step forward and serve God by doing whatever is the next right thing.