

GUILT

Accepting forgiveness and gaining true inner peace.

Guilt comes from a troubled conscience. It is a self-judgment based on perceived personal misconduct. It may or may not deepen into sorrow or remorse. Some people, in fact, suppress their guilt. The Bible tells us (1st Timothy 4:2) their conscience is seared, and they seldom show regret for what they do.

Sin Is a Major Cause of Guilt

All sin initially produces guilt in the soul of the sinner. When guilt weighs heavy on the sinful soul, it drives us to God for forgiveness. If, however, we fail to obtain that forgiveness, or if we persist in our sin, we may deaden (sear) our consciences and become no longer sensitive to guilt. Nevertheless, we are still guilty before God. A murderer may feel no remorse for his crime but pay the penalty just the same. Whether we sin ignorantly or willfully, we stand condemned before the law (Romans 2:12).

The Psychological Effects of Guilt

Guilt is a major factor in psychological problems. No one is a stranger to guilt. Often we respond to it with defense mechanisms – denial, blame shifting, suppression, sublimation, self-justification, and so forth. All these, in fact, are means that the personality uses instinctively to deal with guilt on a psychological level. Guilt feelings stimulate self-condemnation in the form of anxiety, inferiority, fear, worry, and pessimism. When these are not resolved, they lead to diversionary behaviors such as drug abuse or sexual acting out, and eventually to depression.

So-called “False Guilt”

All guilt is real guilt. A person is guilty, by biblical definition, when he has broken God’s moral law (Romans 3:19). Also by biblical definition, a person’s sins (and his real guilt) are washed away when confession occurs (1 John 1:9). However, guilt feelings are another matter. A person may be guilty of sin and yet not feel guilty. Another person may feel guilty over something that is not sinful, due to his false standard of righteousness. Guilt feelings based on a personal sense of chronic inferiority before God are referred to as “false guilt.” These guilt feelings are real enough, but it is the standard by which we judge ourselves as inferior that is false. The standard may indeed not be legitimate (dreams of unattainable perfection, for instance), but our willful violation of that standard will still produce a real sense of guilt. The solution to false guilt is to acknowledge and correct our false standards, not merely explain away our guilty feelings.

For example, a person may grow up being told that it is sinful to wear red socks. Because he believes that standard to be true, but chooses to violate it, he will experience guilt. The solution is not to deny the reality of that guilt, but to force the individual to re-examine his standard. Once he or she is convinced the standard is invalid, the guilt will disappear.

The Moral Conflict

It is precisely in the area of dealing with guilt that Christian theology and secular psychology have their greatest conflict. If there is no God, and therefore no divine standard of behavior, there is no true guilt. All guilt would then be false guilt arising from a faulty value system. Guilt would merely be the result of violating generally accepted cultural norms, rather than universal principles. In a culture where murder, cannibalism, rape, adultery, incest, or stealing was acceptable behavior, there would be no real guilt for those acts.

Christianity will have none of this! We believe that real guilt arises from sinful actions that can only be truly forgiven by God.

Objective Guilt

Objective guilt is personal guilt resulting from the violation of an objective standard: legal, social, personal, or divine. Violating civil law, social law, or our own personal standards results in real guilt, as does the violation of God's laws. In order to face the issue of objective guilt, we must acknowledge the legitimacy of the standard that condemns us. Correction and restoration are possible because we recognize an objective standard of behavior.

Subjective Guilt

Subjective guilt is the sense of regret, shame, or condemnation we experience when we believe we have done wrong. Such feelings are not always bad, as they may be the result of sinful behavior. These guilty feelings may cause us to face our sin and deal with it. However, some may feel guilty out of proportion to their act of sin. Subjective guilt is a fallible and sometimes irrational judgment we pass on ourselves. It is self-condemnation generating feelings of worthlessness. Subjective guilt varies with our feelings about ourselves and the way we act. It is based on a fallible measure, rather than an objective standard.

Resolving Guilt by Repentance and Confession

Two principles stand clear in Scripture for resolving guilt: repentance and confession. Repentance (Greek, *metanoia*) is a mental decision that produces an act of the will. When we change our mind about our sin, we do something about that sin. No one ever truly repented and then went on sinning. Confession (Greek, *homologeō*) means to "say the same thing" or to agree. When we confess, we do not simply declare, "I have sinned." We acknowledge that God's judgment – on that sin is just. The Bible promises: "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).

The means, of dealing with guilt is repentance, and the method is confession. The goal is the freedom of one's conscience. True repentance and confession lead to a clear conscience, which heals the guilty soul. Without a clear conscience, guilt cannot be resolved. Those who refuse to repent of sin will persist in that sin. Those who refuse to confess their sin will pretend things are resolved when they are not. You will never be free from guilt until you face your sin and do something about it.

1. **Acknowledge any hidden personal sin that is the root of your guilt.** Pinpoint wrong attitudes and actions that are eating you up with guilt. Be totally honest with God. He

already knows what you have done: “...for the Lord searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts...” (1 Chronicles 28:9). Prayerfully ask the Holy Spirit of God to illuminate those areas of your life that are not pleasing to God.

2. **Honestly face the sin that is feeding your guilt.** Choose a point at which to clean the slate with God and start over. Do not just admit you have failed. Establish a turning point in your life. Face your sin, confess it, correct it, and forget it. Discard any inferior, irrational, or unbiblical standard you have been comparing yourself to and beating yourself down with, these may be breeding painful false guilt feelings.
3. **Make a complete confession of your sin.** Come to terms with God about the seriousness of your sin. Stop making excuses, and take full responsibility for what you have done. Two marks of genuine confession are sorrow according to the will of God and repentance without remorse (Psalms 101:3; 119; 145).
4. **Plan to avoid future failure.** See your sin as unwise and self-defeating. Proverbs 8:36 reminds us: “He who sins against me injures himself...” (NAS). Realize that tomorrow will be a better day if you conquer sin today. Live to glorify God, not to satisfy yourself. Correcting your problem will bring glory to Him and be an encouragement to others. Totally dedicate yourself to victory.

Accepting Forgiveness

Some sins we simply cannot forgive ourselves for. Yet the Bible assures us only one sin is really unpardonable – blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. All others may be forgiven! We must learn to take God’s offer of forgiveness seriously. Jesus constantly emphasized that He came to save sinners, not condemn them (John 3:17). By condemning ourselves, we reject God’s offer of grace and cleansing. We refuse the only true solution to our problem of guilt.

Salvation is instantaneous, but it initiates a lifelong process. Conversion happens in a split second, but spiritual growth takes a lifetime. Learning to face our failures and the guilt they produce is part of that process. No one is perfect; no human being is error free. We are **ALL** guilty before God, yet He who knows us best is willing to forgive and forget.