

## GUILT

Psalms 32:3, Romans 3:23

By Raymond White

Being guilty and feeling guilty are two different things. We are all guilty and that's bad. And so we feel guilty and that's good. When we're guilty we need to feel guilty because that leads us to confession and repentance. Unless of course we feel guilty when there's nothing to feel guilty for, then that's bad.

### [1] FEELING GUILTY

*Job 9:20 If I justify myself, Mine own mouth shall condemn me: if I say, I am perfect, it shall also prove me perverse.*

When we are guilty we can't properly defend ourselves though we may try. If we claim to be innocent when we are in fact guilty, the claim itself makes us even more guilty because it's a lie and we feel even more guilty for saying we're innocent when we know better.

*Psalms 32:3 When I kept silence, by bones waxed old through all my roaring all the day long. :5 I acknowledge my sin unto thee, and my iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. Selah. :6 For this shall every one that is godly pray unto thee in a time when thou mayest be found...*

This psalm was authored by King David. He was feeling really guilty over the matter about Uriah and Bathsheba. Feeling guilt can consume you, and when you are guilty, as David was, it is that feeling of guilt that drives you crazy and finally to confession and submission to whatever penalty is appropriate.

Actually, David didn't confess his sins until he was caught by the prophet Nathan. But when he was caught, it was unburdening that at last he was found out.

*Psalms 38:3 There is no soundness in my flesh because of thine anger; neither is there any rest in my bones because of my sin. :4 For my iniquities are gone over mine head: as an heavy burden they are too heavy for me.*

This author considers that he is physically ill because of his iniquities and God's anger. While it is wrong to ascribe all disease to sin (as Job proves to us), it is certainly true that the stress of guilt can cause illnesses.

A guilty conscience is like drowning, "gone over my head," overwhelming. When someone does something truly evil, if they feel real guilt, then we can feel like there is that justice anyway. But if they feel no guilt, then we feel doubly angry at them, first because of the evil they did, and second because of their lack of conscience, lack of personal grief. I'm betting that God feels like that too and may exact a double penalty against those who feel no guilt and who in fact got away with it.

In that regard, Judas Iscariot felt enough guilt to hang himself, which doesn't absolve him of what he did, but at least we feel that some justice was done. Since no one else was willing to punish him, he punished himself. At least he didn't have to also suffer the guilt of having gotten away with it. Punishment, it seems, is merciful in a dark sort of way, and a guilty conscience sometimes longs for judgment.

*Psalm 40:12 For innumerable evils have compassed me about: mine iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to look up: they are more than the hairs of mine head: therefore my heart faileth me.*

Feelings of guilt can be so overpowering that one cannot even talk to God about it, "not able to look up." To ask forgiveness can seem inappropriate. This is all the more reason to see this consequence of sin ahead of time, resist it, and avoid all this grief.

Some people think that we should never feel guilty for anything. That's not true. Basically, we should feel guilty things we are guilty of, but not feel guilty about things that are not our fault. For an example, a child may feel guilt about her parents' divorce. That is a terrible unfairness, and it is the obligation of the divorcing parents to make sure that doesn't happen. But it is also the girl's obligation to herself to not blame herself for something she had no control over and could not have prevented.

## [2] CLAIMING INNOCENCE

*Proverbs 16:2 All the ways of a man are clean in his own eyes; but the LORD weigheth the spirits.*

However much sin an evil a man commits, he still sees his actions as justified. We tend to excuse ourselves, and we are horrified to have to face up to our own guilt and squirm every which way in our conscience to avoid the confrontation. But it is only when we accept our guilt that we are able to accept Christ's forgiveness.

*Proverbs 16:25 There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.*

Often that which is wrong seems right at the time, and only afterwards does the folly become obvious. But usually, wrong gives an early warning to our conscience which we really ought to take to heart.

*Proverbs 30:20 Such is the way of an adulterous woman; she eateth, and wipeth her mouth, and saith, I have done no wickedness.*

Many people have no shame, no feeling of guilt, just a constant assertion of innocence and self-justification. People have a strong need to feel innocent even when they are guilty (especially when they are guilty) and so they deny their guilt with excuses and justifications. That's the inescapable road to hell because there can be no repentance because there is no feeling of need to repent.

### [3] GENERAL GUILT

*Proverbs 20:9* Who can say, I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin?

This is a rhetorical question. The answer, of course, is no one. Even though we all want to be innocent, we all have the nagging suspicion that we are guilty of something.

*Romans 3:9* What then? Are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin :**10** As it is written, There is none righteous, no not one. :**19** Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them that are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. :**23** For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.

Paul, in order to offer us a general forgiveness in Christ, must first convict us of a general guilt. We are all of us guilty of something and therefore we all need forgiveness.

There is a problem here, and that is that we can become complacent with this feeling of general guilt. In other words, “Of course I’m guilty, we’re all guilty. So what?” The problem is that this guilt brushes with so broad a stroke that we are able to trivialize it away. We are confessing *so* much guilt that we are in effect confessing nothing. Thus we hide our real guilt, not with claims of innocence, but by confessing everything. So false guilt then becomes a cloak of concealment for true guilt. There’s this saying: “What’s harder than finding a needle in a haystack? Finding a needle in a pile of needles.”

An illustration: There is a popular radio talk show host, Bill Handel. His show is irreverent about almost everything. He is a centrists who offends conservatives and liberals alike and has found himself having to apologize to one group or another often. So, what he does now is, at the end of each show, he has one of his co-hosts, a lady whose name I don’t know, issue a blanket apology to everyone mentioned on the show. She will say something like, “This program apologies to but is not limited to gays, and Christians, and gun owners, and. . . and . . . and” and under a minute she will list everyone who could have possibly taken offense by anything said on the show. It’s very humorous, and at the same time very serious. But more than anything, it is poking fun at people who take offense so easily, The point is, that by apologizing to everybody Bill Handle is in fact apologizing to nobody, because it’s ludicrous.

Too much guilt is like that. If we fill guilty about everything, then we are in fact feeling guilty about nothing. And there are some real things we’ve done that really do warrant our feeling guilty about. Those are the things we need to find and bring to God, and not to hide them behind a mask of trivial guilt that amounts to nothing.

What Paul really means (in my opinion, and whether he knows is or not) is that we all have true guilt, things that we’ve done that are non-trivial that have caused real injury. What Paul is offering us is forgiveness from *those*, not this general and vague feeling of a sin nature, and a cheap confession with means little.

But, in case you still worry about hidden sins lurking in the shadowy caverns of your sin nature, sins that you don’t know about but you suspect are there, well, Jesus forgives those too. It really is a blanket forgiveness that atones for it all, big and small.