

YAMs

Summer Midweek 2009



Week Seven:

Is guilt after sinning a good thing or a bad thing?



covenant chapel

Question: Is guilt after sinning a good thing or a bad thing?

Short Answer:

The feeling of guilt is really a reminder of a verdict. We feel guilty when we feel we have violated some set of standards. Christians believe God's standard is the most important one to follow. And so the feeling of guilt reminds us that, left to ourselves, we are "guilty" according to God's standard.

Therefore, in general, guilt after sinning is a good thing for all people. Without it, we would not recognize the depth of our sin and consequent need for a savior. Guilt reveals an essential truth - that something is wrong and has to be fixed.

However, in specific instances, guilt can be good or bad. It depends on the standard and the result. First, good guilt comes from violating God's standard – not a different set of standards. Second, good guilt results in repentance and ultimately in salvation and joy.

Long Answer:

Before we decide if guilt is good or bad, we need to understand what guilt is and how it works.

Guilt is a Verdict

Guilt, in its most literal sense, is a verdict. It is the standing of a person in a court of law who has disobeyed a standard and is held accountable to pay the penalty.

Most of us, when we think of guilt, think of it as a feeling. We *feel* guilty when we do something wrong. We sometimes say we are "racked with guilt" when the feeling of guilt becomes too overwhelming and burdensome.

But the feeling of guilt – which we have all experienced – is really a reminder of our standing. When we feel guilty, it is because we feel that we have disobeyed some standard or set of rules. We feel that we deserve a verdict of "guilty" in a court of some kind.

And the type of court is important because the court sets the standard or rules. The court we are subject to determines the standards we are judged by, and therefore determines the verdict of either "guilty" or "not guilty." So, the court we are subject to will have a lot of influence over what we do and do not feel guilty about.

For example, let's say you are 16 years old. You may have several "courts" you feel subject to. One "court" would be your parents. Another would be your friends. Each of them has a set of standards or rules they expect you to operate by.

Some of the standards are the same. Your parents and your friends both expect you to take regular showers. So when you come home from a week at camp smelling like a wet sock, you will probably be too embarrassed to spend time with them before taking a shower. Although minor, that embarrassment (also known as the feeling of shame or guilt) is a result of you being declared “guilty” of violating the hygiene standard set by the courts of your parents and friends.

But what happens when the set of standards don’t agree? Your parents expect you home by 10:00. Your friends expect you to stay out until midnight. Inevitably, you are going to break one of the sets of standards. You will be innocent in one court and guilty in the other. But what will cause you to *feel* guilty?

It depends on which set of standards you know you should follow. Let’s say you stay out until midnight. You are now guilty in the court of your parents. But you will only feel guilty if you recognize that you are supposed to value the standard of your parents higher than the standard of your friends. (Which, by the way, is true)

But let’s say you obey your parents and come home by 10:00. You are now guilty in the court of your friends. But, if you are thinking clearly, you do not *feel* guilty because you followed the rules of the more important standard – the one set by your parents.

So, the feeling of guilt is inseparable from our perceived importance of the court.

This is essential for us to understand as we seek to answer this question because not all people feel guilt about the same things. People only feel guilt when they violate the standards of the court they place the highest importance on.

Guilt and God’s Standards

As Christians, we believe that God’s standards are of highest importance. And we believe that God’s standards apply to *all* people – regardless of whether an individual values those standards or not. Jesus has authority over *all* people (John 17:2) and one day *all* people will bow to his authority (Romans 14:11; Philippians 2:10).

Because Christians believe God’s standards are the most important, Christians feel guilty when they sin – or miss the mark of God’s standards. And this feeling of guilt makes sense because in sinning, they have earned a verdict of “guilty” in God’s court.

The Bible makes it clear that all people have sinned (Romans 3:23). Therefore, left to themselves, all people earn a guilty verdict in God’s court. And although God is loving and gracious, he does not simply excuse a guilty verdict:

Nahum 1:3 - *The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty. His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet.*

At the same time that God does not simply clear the guilty, he does make promises to his people that he will ultimately remove guilt:

Jeremiah 33:8 - *I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me.*

How does that work? How does God remove the guilt without simply excusing it? Similar to a court of law, he demands payment and punishment. We can clearly see this from the example of the Israelites throughout the Old Testament.

In the Bible, there are more than 150 references to the word "guilt." A large number of these references appear in the Old Testament in reference to something called a guilt offering.

The guilt offering, explained in Leviticus 5, was a penalty for sinning in the form of payment by animal sacrifice. When a person sinned and stood guilty before God, God required him or her to sacrifice a valuable animal. The animal would stand as a substitute for the sinner, and be killed to bear God's wrath so the sinner didn't have to. In this way, God would forgive the guilty verdict without simply excusing it.

But these sacrifices had to be offered each and every time someone sinned. Because people sin often, these sacrifices had to be offered endlessly. And what the Bible teaches is that these sacrifices were only able to temporarily forgive the punishment resulting from a guilty verdict. They were not sufficient to actually remove the guilty verdict itself (Hebrews 10:1-4).

It would be similar to when a rapist gets out of prison after serving his sentence. He may have paid the court-appointed penalty for his crime, but he is still guilty of rape. The verdict has not changed.

Guilt and Jesus

However, these guilt offering sacrifices foreshadowed Jesus – the perfect sacrifice. Jesus actually becomes our sin (2 Corinthians 5:21) and pays the penalty once for all (Hebrews 7:27). In so doing, he actually changes the verdict for all who trust in him from "guilty" to "not guilty." Because of Jesus, God not only forgives sin, he removes it as far as the East is from the West (Psalm 103:12).

This is a remarkable truth, and should not be taken lightly. Because of his love God sends Jesus so we can be declared "not guilty."

This is why Paul says in Romans 8 that, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." For those who believe in him, Jesus changes our standing before God. Guilt is removed.

So why do we still feel guilty at times – especially if we know and believe that truth? Is that guilt good or bad?

Guilt: Good or Bad?

First, we still feel guilty because we still sin. We still miss the mark of God's standards. And apart from Jesus, that sin *would* result in a guilty verdict. The feeling of guilt is reminder of how things would be (and, in all reality, *should* be) apart from the love God demonstrates in Jesus (Romans 5:8).

So overall, guilt after sinning is a good thing for all people. Without it, we would not recognize the depth of our sin and consequent need for a savior. Without guilt we would never realize how wrong and evil we actually are. Guilt reveals an essential truth - that something is wrong and has to be fixed.

As you might imagine, Paul has something to say on the subject of guilt. He had ongoing struggles with sin (Romans 7:15-17), and he regularly dealt with new believers and new churches who were in the midst of ongoing sin. One such group was the church in Corinth.

We know of four letters from Paul to the church in Corinth. Chronologically, they are as follows:

1. An initial letter dealing with the ongoing problem of sexual immorality (this letter is now lost, but see Paul's reference to it in 1 Corinthians 5:9)
2. A letter answering multiple questions posed by the Corinthian church (we know this letter as 1 Corinthians)
3. A tearful and severe letter warning the Corinthian church of God's judgment if they did not repent of ongoing sin (this letter is now lost, but see the reference to this letter in 2 Corinthians 2:3-4)
4. A letter defending Paul's ministry against false teachers and expressing joy at the repentance of the Corinthians (we know this letter as 2 Corinthians)

And in this last known letter, 2 Corinthians, Paul distinguishes between two types of grief (or guilt) and answers the question about whether or not guilt after sinning is a good thing...

2 Corinthians 7:8-13a – *For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you,*

but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter. So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God. Therefore we are comforted.

In this passage, Paul uses the word “grief” (or “sorrow” depending on your translation) to refer to the feeling of burden or shame or sadness produced when falling short of a specific standard. For this reason, I believe it is extremely similar, if not identical, to what we refer to as the feeling of “guilt.”

Notice that there are two distinct types of grief mentioned: godly and worldly. One is good and one is bad. Guilt can be good or bad. It depends on the standard and the result.

What’s the Standard?

The main difference hinges on which standard we perceive as more important. If we value the worldly standard above the godly standard, we will feel guilty when we fall short of the worldly standard. Our guilt will create a desire to regain the approval of the world and thereby turn from God and the godly standard. We will be like the 16-year-old who disobeys his parents to gain the approval of his friends.

But instead, if we value the godly standard above the worldly standard, our guilt will come when we fall short of God’s standard. Now our guilt will create a desire to regain God’s approval. Guilt is good so long as it results from falling short the proper standard.

What’s the Result?

The other key thing that differentiates between good guilt and bad guilt is the result. We must ask what the guilt leads to.

For the Christian, if a guilty feeling only leads to more and more shame and burden, it is not good guilt. Remember, there is no condemnation for those who are in Jesus. With his sacrifice, Jesus changed our verdict to “not guilty.” Perpetual guilt has no place with genuine believers, because Jesus is faithful and will preserve the “not guilty” verdict:

1 Corinthians 1:6-9 - *even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

This passage makes it clear that because God is faithful, Jesus will sustain us and keep us guiltless in our standing before God.

We must remember this when we struggle with sin. Guilt is something Satan loves to use to lie to believers. Satan will use guilt to cause Christians to doubt their salvation, to doubt that they will ever be free of sin, and even to doubt that Jesus' sacrifice was sufficient to change our "not guilty" verdict.

The one thing we can agree with Satan on is that apart from Jesus we are guilty. But that is the whole point of Jesus' death and resurrection. When Satan tempts with guilt, remember that Jesus sacrificed himself for that exact reason – to remove the guilt for those who believe in him.

So guilt that merely results in more guilt and shame has no place in the life of a believer.

On the other hand, if guilt results in the desire to repent and that desire becomes reality, guilt is a good thing. As Paul says, godly grief produces repentance. Repentance leads to salvation. So any guilt that ultimately leads to salvation has to be good guilt.

For this reason, guilt experienced by a non-Christian is a good thing – so long as that guilt is caused by a godly standard. Guilt experienced by a non-Christian demonstrates that he or she is at least aware of God's standard and is beginning to recognize that he or she falls short of that standard.

And because non-Christians have not trusted in Jesus, their verdict is still "guilty." So, for a non-Christian, guilt that leads to more shame and guilt is not bad; it's accurate. There is no such thing as bad guilt for a non-Christian – the guilt is intended to lead him or her to salvation in Jesus.

Guilt that results in repentance is also good for Christians. Christians are to continually repent of sin in their lives; turning from their sin and returning to God's standard. The feeling of guilt can remind us of the way we are supposed to live. It can point us back to God's standards. Just as God's grace is not a license to sin, a "not-guilty" verdict is not a license to ignore the feeling of guilt after sinning.

This is why, in his tearful letter to the Corinthian church, Paul sternly rebukes the ongoing sin among believers in Corinth. Rebuke, though harsh and painful, will create the kind of guilt that causes genuine believers to repent.

Furthermore, this guilt will reassure Christians that they belong to Christ. Because good guilt leads to repentance, it eventually produces joy because it assures us and others of our salvation.

Notice how this is the exact opposite result of bad guilt, which Satan uses to make believers doubt their salvation. The result of the guilt distinguishes good guilt from bad guilt. Good guilt produces assurance; bad guilt produces doubt.

The Corinthian church experiences good guilt because it results in repentance. Therefore, Paul has great pride and overflowing joy about the Corinthian church (2 Cor. 7:4) and concludes this passage by saying, “We are comforted” (v. 13).

Addressing Guilt Practically

Practically, guilt is a powerful emotion that paralyzes many people – Christian and non-Christian alike.

Therefore, we must always address guilt with love and a desire to see the guilt result in repentance that leads to salvation. Salvation is God’s ultimate purpose in guilt; it should be our ultimate desire as well.

Part of addressing guilt with love means we have to correctly recognize the person we’re counseling. This requires discernment. Our approach will be different for genuine believers than it will be for non-Christians.

A genuine believer wrestling with guilt needs to be assured that Jesus has already purchased the “not guilty” verdict. He or she needs to know that Satan is using guilt as a lie to distract and paralyze them.

At the same time, a genuine believer will actively desire to repent and be rid of the sin that is causing the guilt. If that desire to repent and change is not there, then out of love we can’t just take their word for it that they’re a Christian.

A non-Christian may or may not be wrestling with guilt. If they do not value God’s standard, then falling short of that standard probably won’t cause them to *feel* guilty. But the standard applies nonetheless and, just like everyone else apart from Jesus, they are guilty. In this situation, point people to God’s standard – not self-righteously, but in love, remembering that you too were once alienated from God (Colossians 1:21).

But for a non-Christian who is experiencing guilt, point them to Jesus – the only solution to remove that guilt. You may be tempted to help them not feel guilty. Don’t. God speaks to so many people through their conscience and guilt can play a huge role in that. We have to recognize our guilt so we will recognize our need for a savior. Don’t distract them from the guilt; give them an answer to be rid of it.

Learn More

From Books:

***Battling Unbelief* – John Piper (especially Chapter 3 on shame)**