

~Other Speakers S-Z: David Servant:

Guilt, that nagging feeling on the inside, is something with which everyone is quite familiar. It doesn't discriminate on the basis of race, gender or culture. It starts working in us from a very young age and never lets up our entire lives. We are wired with it, like animal instinct. Its universality actually betrays its divine origin. God has programmed every heart with His moral law. Paul wrote,

For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus (Rom. 2:14-16).

Most people aren't too keen on guilt, because it makes us feel bad about the person we love the most. But because guilt is so relentless, it isn't easy to ignore. It is the proverbial "monkey on our back." That monkey must be dealt with by some means, and we've invented many. Let me mention six of the most common. (I know these quite well because I've used most them at one time or another.)

1.) Find fault with guilt-purveyors: Guilt-purveyors aren't necessarily all preachers. The lifestyles of righteous people make other people feel guilty. Behind their backs they are often derided as "do-gooders," "self-righteous," "extremists" or "holier-than-thous."

Preachers who make people feel guilty are even bigger targets. When people can't find any real fault with the message, they search hard to find fault with the messengers. Those messengers are often accused of being unloving, intolerant, manipulative or legalistic.

In our culture, making people feel guilty has become socially unacceptable, which makes it easy for multitudes of people to sweep their guilt under the rug. When you hear someone say, "You are just trying to put a guilt-trip on me," you can be sure the discussion is over. Having stated his irrefutable objection, he struts away from his accuser with aplomb, fully convinced of his right to do so, because his opponent has disqualified himself from having the right to be heard. The lights are turned out and the door is locked.

2.) Self-justification: "Everyone else is doing it." "At least I'm not as bad as other people." "I had no choice in what I did." "I am just the product of my environment." "Nobody is perfect." "I made up for it by going to church." "My psychologist helped me to understand that some people are born with a propensity toward this behavior. She said I should just ignore my guilt, knowing how counter-productive it is in maintaining a healthy self-esteem." All of these justifications and many more like them are used to counteract the negative feelings associated with guilt.

Particularly remarkable are the unique justifications that professing Christians sometimes use to deal with guilt. Many are theological:

3.) There is therefore now no condemnation... Some resist anything they perceive as guilt-inducing with the defense, "The Bible says that 'there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ!'" It's as if that one Bible verse annuls the rest of the Bible. It is twisted to mean, "God doesn't ever want me to have negative feelings about myself, and I can shun guilt and guilt-inducing preaching because I'm in Christ." Such dreamers ignore that fact that in that very same passage, Paul defines those who are in Christ as those who "do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit" (Rom. 8:4). There is indeed condemnation for those who walk after the flesh (see Rom. 8:13-14).

4.) That old serpent... Similarly, some are convinced that Satan is the author of guilt, and thus all guilt is to be categorically rejected. How many times have you heard even preachers say, "When Satan attacks you with guilt, here is what you should do...blah, blah, blah?"

I would challenge anyone, however, to find a single scripture that states or implies that Satan is the one who makes people feel guilty. It's just not there. Yes, in one instance the Bible says that Satan accuses the brethren before God day and night (see Rev. 12:10), but nothing is said about his making the brethren themselves feel guilty, accusing them before themselves. Why would Satan ever heap guilt upon a believer who sins? He would run the risk of motivating that Christian to repent. Satan is not the author of guilt. Rather, he is the supplier of lies that we use to justify our sins and soothe our guilt. And if God is the one who has given every nonbeliever in the world a conscience that accuses him when he sins, making him feel guilty, are we to

think that once a person believes in Jesus, Satan then assumes that role? That seems rather unlikely.

Perhaps it is true that Satan may lie to those who have sinned, saying that God will never forgive them. But that is not the same as guilt. That is more like condemnation. Condemnation offers no hope; conviction does. The whole purpose of guilt is to motivate us to repent; thus the very concept of guilt implies that forgiveness is available. Praise God! But those who donâ€™t yield to guiltâ€™s conviction do not experience forgiveness. What many professing Christians reject as â€œcondemnation from the devilâ€ ought to be received as â€œconviction from God.â€

5.) Holy Robots: Another theological fallacy that professing believers sometimes use to manage guilt is the â€œholy robotsâ€ theory. It is often expressed with words something like, â€œWe canâ€™t be holy in our own efforts...only God can do it in us...so let us not fall into the trap of trying to play God.â€ Amazingly, â€œstriving against sinâ€ (a very biblical concept; see Heb. 12:4) has now become the sin of trying to play God.

Believing this fallacy may let us off the hook in our own minds, but it requires that we ignore the thousands of scriptures that balance such an lopsided view, scriptures that plainly emphasize the fact that holiness is not attained apart from the devoted decisions of free moral agents. Because God is at work within us, that is no reason to sit back and just let God change us. Rather, Paul said it is reason to â€œwork out our salvation with fear and tremblingâ€ (see Phil. 2:2). What God said in the first pages of Genesis to Cain is still true today: â€œSin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master itâ€ (Gen. 4:7). Obviously, free moral agents play a part in their holiness. If you donâ€™t believe me, try this little experiment: Put a plate of warm chocolate chip cookies on the table in front of you. Pray fervently and with all the faith you have that God will stop you from eating any. Then see if you can eat any. (My experience has shown me that ten out of ten times God doesnâ€™t stop me from eating at least three. Sometimes it is four.)

6.) Feeling Good About Feeling Guilty: One very subtle means that we sometimes use to deal with guilt is to fool ourselves into believing that feeling guilty is virtuous enough by itself. As we exit church we say to a fellow parishioner, â€œWow, that sermon really convicted me,â€ and off we go unchanged, mission accomplished.

The problem with all six of these is that none of them actually relieves any guilt at allâ€”they only suppress it by means of some self-deception.

So what should be our attitude toward guilt?

If we believe that guilt is from God, then we should realize that guilt can only be truly relieved by Godâ€™s forgiveness. And Godâ€™s forgiveness comes only through confession and repentance.

Scripture says, â€œMy son, do not reject the discipline of the Lord, or loathe His reproofâ€ (Prov. 3:11). What is guilt but Godâ€™s reproof? Think about this for a moment, as it is the most important point of this article. Because guilt is Godâ€™s reproof, we should not reject it, but welcome it, embrace it, and allow it to work His goal in us, which is our repentance and obedience. The truth is that we donâ€™t change unless weâ€™re motivated to change. Guilt is the catalyst of spiritual progress because repentance is always preceded by guilt. There will be no spiritual growth apart from guilt. â€œBlessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.â€

Proverbs 9:8 tells us, â€œReprove a wise man, and he will love you.â€ If we are wise, we will love God all the more for the reproof of guilt. The reason God reproves us is because He loves us (see Rev. 3:19) and He wants us to â€œshare His holinessâ€ (Heb. 12:10) so that He can reward us in the end.

On the other hand, Scripture declares that fools spurn Godâ€™s reproof (see Prov. 1:22-30). Foolish indeed are those who are adverse to guilt or any teaching that makes people feel guilty. If one is adverse toward guilt, he is adverse toward God. Amazingly, many such people claim to be Christians who supposedly believe that the Bible, the most guilt-inducing book in the history of the world, is inspired by God!

If we are lovers of God, we will continually evaluate ourselves in the light of Christâ€™s commandments and even ask God to search us and reveal to us what is displeasing to Him (see Ps. 139:23-24). We will study His Word along with self-examination (see 2 Cor. 13:5). We will be attracted to read what will challenge us spiritually and expose our sins. We will want to spend time with people who are deeply consecrated to God, that we might be challenged by their example. When we are attracted to churches where there are always â€œfeel goodâ€ messages, we reveal the real nature of our spirituality. When we shun anything that might make us feel guilty, that is a good sign were just phony Christians, on the broad way to hell.

But what about “false guilt,” when people feel guilty for what they shouldn’t?

That problem, in my experience, is extremely rare. Many people who should indeed feel guilty are misdiagnosed with this “problem” by their “caring” counselors who unwittingly rob them of the repentance God wants them to enjoy. In the very rare instances when people actually feel guilty for things that should not make them feel guilty, the cure is found in renewing their minds on God’s Word. It is that simple.

Some of us still feel guilty even after we’ve confessed our sin, and although this could be an indication of our lack of faith in God’s promise of forgiveness, it could also be an indication that we have not made a sincere decision to turn from our sin or its root cause. Naturally, in such cases we should continue to feel guilty, and our continued guilt is a good thing.

The only people whom God doesn’t want to feel guilty are those who aren’t guilty. And the only people who aren’t guilty in God’s eyes are those who are not sinning, or those who have sinned, repented, and been forgiven by Him.

We should be very glad for guilt! Personally, I’m so glad you read this entire article! (How many didn’t because they didn’t want to be made to feel guilty?)

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted (Matt. 5:4).

For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation (2 Cor. 7:10).

A broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise (Ps. 51:17).