

Words of Forgiveness
When Love Speaks: Seven Words from the Cross (Part 1)
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Does anyone here like to travel? Has anyone taken a trip far away? Anyone take a trip to Europe? Anyone take a trip to the Caribbean? Anyone take a trip to Florida? Anyone gone to Arizona? Anyone been on a trip to Alaska? Did you have a good time? Did you enjoy your trip?

How many of you have ever taken a guilt trip? How many have taken a guilt trip more than once? Did you like it? NO! Absolutely not. God did not create you to live with guilt. In fact, there's a myth that says feeling guilty makes me more spiritual. Absolutely false! Wrong! Absolutely wrong. Guilt is not required for holiness. In fact, God did not design your body to handle guilt. In fact he designed it and intends for you to live guilt free.

Guilt really messes up your body. It messes up your mind. It messes up your relationships. **Guilt is a problem in that it creates all kinds of fears.** There's the **fear of being found out.** "If somebody knew what I have done then I'd really be in trouble..." A lot of people carry the fear of being found out. A lot of people carry the **fear of being rejected** by others. "If people knew about my past they wouldn't want anything to do with me." "If people knew what I was thinking, they wouldn't want to be around me." The fear of rejection keeps us from getting close to people.

There's the **fear of retaliation.** If other people knew what I've done, they'd get even with me. If other people knew what I've done, I'd get in trouble... So you're always looking over your shoulder wondering who I told this story to, and who I told that story to. There is the **fear of judgment.** That God's going to judge me guilty for the wrong things I've done and he is going to punish me.

The truth is God wants you to live guilt free. If you've wanted to get rid of the guilt in your life you've picked a good Sunday to come to church. Because there's no reason for you to leave here today carrying any load of guilt. God says you've got to let it go. You've got to set it down. You've got to stop the guilt trips.

Today is the first Sunday in the Season of Lent. During the Lenten Season we will be focusing on the seven last words Jesus spoke from the cross. The first word is the word of forgiveness. We pick up the story in Luke 23. Jesus has been arrested. He's been up all night because they took him through six sham trials – three of them Roman trials and three of them religious trials. None of them were legal because you couldn't have trials at night. He has been beaten. He has been battered. He has been scourged. They put a crown of thorns on his head. They spit on him, they made fun of him.

Now we start the story where Jesus is carrying the cross up the hill to Golgotha. The place where Jesus was crucified and other people were crucified was just outside the city wall and it was called the place of the skull or Golgotha. It's called the skull because it looks like a skull when you're standing back looking at this hill.

In Luke 23:32 we read, *"Two others, both criminals, were led out to be executed with him [with Jesus]. Finally, they came to a place called the Skull [or Golgotha]. All three were crucified there — Jesus on the center cross, and the two criminals on either side. Then Jesus said, 'Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'" And the soldiers gambled for his clothes by throwing dice. As the crowd stood watching, the leaders laughed and scoffed at Jesus. 'He saved others,' they said, 'let him save himself if he really is God's*

Chosen One, the Messiah.’ The soldiers mocked him, too, and offered him a drink of sour wine. They called out to him, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’” (Luke 23:32-37)

Jesus had no intention of saving himself because that’s not what he came to do. He came to save you and me. He had proved himself as God many times with miracles and he was going to do it again by coming back to life. He had no intention of coming down from that cross because he wasn’t on the cross to save himself. He was on the cross to save us. The very first words uttered by Jesus on the cross were words of forgiveness, **“Father forgive them. They don’t know what they’re doing.”** Jesus went to the cross so you and I could be forgiven. He went to the cross to pay the penalty for our sins so we could live guilt free lives.

That’s how Jesus handles our guilt. He enables us to be forgiven. Without Jesus we are left to try and handle our guilt on our own. How do we try to do that?

First, we try to bury it. We try to bury our guilt but it keeps resurfacing. It keeps resurrecting itself. It keeps coming back to life. It won’t stay buried. Your guilt is like one of those old horror movies – The Night of the Living Dead! It just keeps coming back to remind you at the most inappropriate and inopportune time. Either you will remember it or somebody else will remember it and remind you.

King David says it like this in Psalm 32 **“When I refused to confess my sins, I was weak and miserable,** [In other words, the emotional toll on my body was great because I was carrying this guilt.] **and I groaned all day long... My strength evaporated like water in the summer heat.”** If you’re tired all the time it just may be because you’re carrying a load of guilt unnecessarily. David continues, **“Finally, I confessed all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide them. I said to myself, ‘I will confess my rebellion to the Lord.’ And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone.”** (Psalm 32:3-5)

When we finally come to God and say, “God, I need you to forgive me,” he takes our guilt away. It’s such a relief that we wonder, what was I thinking? Why was I holding on to my guilt in the first place? It’s not like God didn’t already know my sins. It’s not like he didn’t already know everything about me. Someday I’m going to write a book on phrases you’ll never hear God say. One of the phrases God will never say is “Oh really? I never knew that about you. I didn’t see that one coming.” God already knows everything about you. So it’s not like you’re going to surprise God when you ask for forgiveness. When you confess to God it’s not for his benefit; it’s for your benefit—to get it off your chest.

We all have our **favorite ways of trying to bury our guilt.** Some of us are **minimizers;** we minimize our sin in an attempt to bury our guilt. The minimizer says, “It was no big deal. It wasn’t that important. It happened a long time ago. It didn’t hurt anyone.” Then why do you still remember it if it was not big deal? It was a big deal. That’s why it keeps coming up in your mind. You can’t get it out of your mind. Why did I do that? I wish I had never done that. I regret it and I feel ashamed that I’ve done that. It was a big deal. Minimizing doesn’t work.

Some of us are **rationalizers;** we rationalize our sin in an attempt to bury our guilt. We say, “Everybody else is doing it.” That has nothing to do with you and it certainly doesn’t relieve your guilt. Just because somebody else did it doesn’t make it right. Rationalizing does not remove your guilt. What others do is irrelevant.

Some of us are **compromisers.** The compromiser keeps doing what is wrong until it feels right. The compromiser lives by the Chinese proverb that says, **“Commit a sin twice and it won’t seem like a sin to you anymore.”** That’s true. Once you cross a line, it will be easier to cross it the next time. I’m sure the fifteenth time you murder somebody it’s not as hard as the

first time. But that doesn't make it any more right. Compromising with sin causes a condition called hardening of the heart and dulling of the conscience. Certainly the first time I violate my conscience and I do something wrong my conscience says "Tilt! Tilt! Tilt! That was the wrong thing to do!" But if I keep doing the same wrong thing, pretty soon "Tilt" feels normal. But let me warn you, just because it feels normal, that doesn't make it right. If I tell a lie once or I tell it fifty times, it's still a lie.

Minimizing, compromising and rationalizing can't take away our guilt. Proverbs 28:13 says this: "***You'll never succeed in life if you try to hide your sins.***" Why is that true? There are a couple reasons.

One reason is this: every seed you plant eventually sprouts. You can't keep it from sprouting. The Bible says "***Be sure, your sins will find you out.***" (Numbers 32:23b) The Bible also says "***What you sow, you will reap.***" (Galatians 6:7) If I plant seeds of selfishness, they're going to come back on me. If I plant seeds of envy and jealousy, they're going to come back on me. If I plant seeds of anger, I'm going to reap a harvest of anger at some point. It's all going to come back to me. Being from Pittsburgh we say, "What goes around comes around."

That has never been truer than today. The internet has changed our lives forever. The internet has become the permanent repository of all of our mistakes, all of our sins, all of our goof ups. It used to be you might be able to hide some of your stuff from most people in the world. But today everything you do can be caught on an iPhone and posted on Facebook or UTube. And it's now permanent, global, and searchable. And there's no way you're ever going to remove it. There are kids out there right now writing things on blogs and taking pictures of themselves doing all kinds of things they're going to regret the rest of their lives because it's never going to go away. It's never going to be taken off the internet. It's permanent, it's global. Anybody in the world can type in your name now and find out all kinds of dumb stuff about you.

Another reason why you will not succeed in life if you're trying to hide your sin is this: It takes an enormous amount of energy to try to hide your sin. That's energy you could be using to succeed in life. Psychologists will tell you that chronic fatigue is often caused by trying to suppress guilt and hide sin. It takes enormous amounts of energy to bury your past, energy you could be using to live your life to the fullest. Trying to bury your guilt will not work.

The second way we try to deal with our guilt is to blame. We blame others. This tactic is as old as Adam and Eve, the first couple. When Adam sinned he took it like a man, he blamed his wife. And husbands have been blaming wives ever since and wives have been blaming husbands ever since and on and on. Parents blame their kids and kids blame their parents. In Genesis, chapter 3, we read how God came to Adam and said, "Did you do what I told you not to do?" "*Yes,* Adam admitted. *But it was the woman you gave me who brought me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.*" (Genesis 3:12) Who's he blaming here really? He's blaming God. "The woman you gave me..." "God, when it was just you and me in paradise it was really copasetic but then you brought in this little temptress. Ever since then it's been downhill. God, if you hadn't given me this woman I would be a godly man." Sound familiar?

Question: Who are you blaming for your unhappiness? Who are you blaming for your problems? If only I had different parents. If only I had a different boss. If only my husband would just get his spiritual act together. If only my wife would stop doing this or that. If only my kids, my brother, my sister, my boyfriend... Who are you blaming for your problems? Who are you blaming for your sins? Who are you blaming for your guilt?

The fact is we're all pros at this. You're a pro at it; I'm a pro at it. We're pros at accusing and excusing. Accusing and excusing, accusing and excusing. We accuse everybody

else and we excuse ourselves. Or as Adam did – hiding and hurling. He hid from God and he hurled accusations at somebody else. She did it!

We do this all the time. In fact, America is becoming a nation of victims. Everybody blames everybody else for every problem and nobody wants to accept responsibility any more. Even in high profile court cases, you'll get somebody like a serial killer. His justification is: when I was a little boy my mother held my head under the bathtub water for three seconds too long and I had all this pent-up rage and now I've gone postal! We want to blame everybody else. It's the government's fault. It's Al Qaeda's fault. On and on and on. The more guilty we feel, the more we blame other people. Sometimes we even try to blame God for our mess like Adam did. The Bible says in Proverbs 19:3 ***“Some people ruin themselves by their own stupid actions and then blame the Lord.”*** God, why did you let me go bankrupt! And God says, “Wait a minute! I didn't put all that stuff on your credit card. I didn't tell you to buy a house you couldn't afford. I didn't tell you to take a risky gamble with that investment. You did that. Why are you blaming me?”

The third way we try to deal with guilt is we beat ourselves up. Sometimes we try to bury our guilt. Sometimes we try to blame others for our guilt. Sometimes we are really good at beating ourselves up. Sometimes we try to punish ourselves for the things we've done. Burying, blaming, beating ourselves up do not work.

What does Jesus want us to do with our guilt? He says ***“Father, forgive them for they don't know what they're doing.”*** He wants us to be forgiven. What do we have to do to be forgiven?

Step One is to ADMIT you have sinned. That's the starting point. 1st John 1:8-9 says, ***“If we claim to be without sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”*** Admitting that we have sinned takes place on three levels: 1) admit to yourself – own up to it; 2) admit to God – confess it; and 3) admit to another person – share it. James 5:16 ***“Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.”*** We need flesh and blood to hear our confession. Everybody needs a listening ear. It's all part of the healing process to confess our sins to self, God and another person.

Step two is to ASK God for forgiveness. There are some dos and don'ts to asking for forgiveness. **First, don't beg God to forgive you.** He wants to forgive you more than you want to be forgiven. **Second, don't try to bargain with God.** It's not in your power to keep your end of the bargain. **Third, don't try to bribe God into forgiving you.** Just believe. The Bible says, ***“All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” “Yet God declares us ‘not guilty’ if we trust in Jesus Christ, who in his mercy freely takes away our sin.”*** You don't need to ask God over and over and over to forgive the same sin. You only have to ask God once. **He forgives instantly the moment we sincerely ask.** In Isaiah 55:7 ***“God is merciful and quick to forgive.”*** Please know— **He forgives completely. He forgives repeatedly. And one more: He forgives freely.**

Step three is to THANK God for His forgiveness. Though it is free to us it was not free for Jesus who gave His life for our sins.