

Guilt and Grace
Series on Grace - Part 2
James 2:10
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An article appeared in the San Diego Union newspaper describing a scene that took place in the San Diego superior court. Two men were on trial for armed robbery. An eye witness took the stand and the prosecutor got up to begin his questioning him. The prosecutor asked the eyewitness, "You were at the scene of the robbery?" "Yes," answered the witness. "You saw a vehicle leave at a high rate of speed?" "Yes," answered the witness. Then in a loud booming prosecutor's voice the prosecutor asked, "And are those two men in this courtroom today?" At that point the two men on trial sealed their fate. Before the defense attorney could stop them, they both raised their hands.

What is guilt like? **First, guilt is universal.** There isn't a person in this room or anywhere else who isn't guilty of something. The Bible tells us, "*Whoever keeps the whole law and stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.*" (James 2:10) In the eyes of God you're either completely innocent or you're completely guilty, and even if it's just one little law you've broken, you're guilty of being a law breaker. As such we have this thing called GUILT to deal with.

Second, guilt is heavy. In Psalm 38, verse 4, David talks about what guilt feels like. He says, "*My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear.*" Everyone knows what that's like. Our wrong doings weigh heavy on our hearts and we live in fear that others will find out and see us for who we really are. But is that all there is to guilt? Is that what God means it to be? Is it just meant to be some kind of punishment God sends into our lives when we mess up to make us miserable so we hang our heads and feel like failures for the rest of our lives? Is that what guilt is all about?

God has a far greater purpose than just to make you feel bad. **Guilt is actually a gift from God** to get your attention before you destroy yourself and the relationships you have with others. Guilt is meant to be like a warning light that goes off like on the dash board of your car, warning you that something is wrong. Something needs fixed before it's too late to do anything about it. When a warning light goes on it's not a good thing to ignore it. Suppose your oil light goes on. If you ignore it you could end up with a burned up engine. Or suppose your transmission light goes on. If you ignore it, you could end up destroying your transmission. Suppose your brake light goes on. If you ignore it you could end up with no brakes and have a deadly collision.

Guilt is God's gift to tell us there is something wrong in our lives. Maybe we're involved in something that's going to hurt us or someone we love. That kind of guilt is **true guilt**. It warns us to stop doing what we're doing wrong and start seeing things from God's perspective.

Sometimes the warning light comes on in a car and there's nothing wrong - it's just a defective warning light. That's like false guilt. **False guilt** is when we feel overwhelmed and weighed down by unrealistic expectations we have for ourselves or that others have for us. Like when we say "no" to others when they ask us to do something and we feel guilty. Saying "no" might be the right thing to do in God's eyes, but we still feel guilty. Sometimes we say "yes" to something and we feel guilty, like we're not supposed to enjoy ourselves or do anything for ourselves. That's false guilt. Sometimes we get it into our heads that something is wrong, when in God's eyes it's not. God has given us great freedom in our union with Jesus Christ. It's not a sin to have limitations. Sometimes people lay unrealistic expectations on you. Sometimes you lay unrealistic expectations on yourself. You cannot be all things to all people. You cannot please all people all the time. Not even God can do that.

False guilt can be just as overwhelming as true guilt, like when you can't let go of something in your past, something that wasn't your fault. False guilt is very prevalent among church goers. It produces a belief system that has more walls than doors. There's no way out. It closes you in. It weighs you down and makes you feel overwhelmed with anxiety. This was a problem for a particular group of people in the New Testament called the Galatians. The apostle Paul wrote to the believers in Galatia about their false guilt. He said, *"You began your life in Christ by the Spirit. Now are you trying to make it complete by your own power? That is foolish!"* (Galatians 3:3) That's what happens when we get weighed down by false guilt. You can't get rid of it because it's not real. It's just in your head. There's nothing real for God to forgive.

How do we know the difference between true guilt and false guilt? There are **three tests** that will help you discern true guilt from false guilt.

First, is your focus on people or on God? Dr. Paul Tournier says, *"False guilt is that which comes as the result of judgments and the suggestions of men."* But true guilt is that which comes as a result of divine judgments, what God has to say on a particular matter. In other words, are you seeking the approval of other people or are you seeking the approval of God? If you're overwhelmed by false guilt it means you're seeking the approval of other people more than God.

The second test in discerning real guilt or false guilt is whether the source of your guilt is vague or specific? Often when we're experiencing a nagging feeling of guilt that has no certain source, it's not a warning light from God but a distraction from Satan who goes by another name, which is "the Accuser." When God wants to tell us something is wrong, he lets us know in no uncertain terms. He doesn't just beat around the bush. He makes it very clear to us. But Satan just beats us up and we have no idea what we did wrong. When God speaks to us He sheds light on the problem. When Satan speaks to us, he just confuses the issue because he doesn't want us to move beyond our guilt. He only wants to wound us and

put us out of commission. A vague feeling of guilt that you can't tell where it's coming from is not true guilt. God convicts us of our sin so we can do something about it. Satan muddies the waters so we can't see what we did wrong and seek forgiveness for it.

The third test of guilt is whether your focus is on rules or relationships? Are you more concerned with having broken a rule or having broken someone's heart? God's rules are given to establish and maintain our relationship with Him and with all He has created. His rules are designed to enable us to live in peace and harmony in all our relationships. The rules are a means to an end and that end is relationships. Our highest concern is to be the impact our behavior has on the heart of God and the hearts of others. It's the nurturing and maintaining of relationships that is most important. False guilt elevates the letter of the law above the spirit of the law which is love - love for God and love for our neighbor.

How do we handle guilt? What is our response? It's amazing how universal our response to guilt is. The origins of our response to guilt can be traced as far back as Adam and Eve. In the very first book of the Bible, Genesis, chapter 3, we're told that Adam and Eve felt shame because of their guilt. They hid from God after they broke the rules he had given them. They hid because they were afraid. The shame of what they had done overwhelmed them. They sowed fig leaves together to cover themselves from God and from one another. Their shame broke their relationship with God and with each other. Shame and guilt are universal responses to breaking God's commands. We are hard wired to be subordinate to a higher authority and when we defy that higher authority we are overcome with guilt.

Adam and Eve's **first response** to disobeying God was feeling shame. Their **second response** was to hide from God and try and avoid God. That's like trying to run from your own shadow on a bright sunny day. It doesn't work. Adam and Eve's **third response** to their guilt was to blame someone else rather than taking personal responsibility. Adam blamed Eve. "She gave me the apple," he said. "It was her fault." Eve blamed the Serpent. "He told me God didn't really mean what he said." Adam blamed Eve. Eve blamed the serpent and the serpent didn't have a leg to stand on.

Feeling shame, trying to hide and blaming others are all ways we try to deal with our guilt. But God has a better way. God's way of dealing with our guilt is called GRACE. The universal remedy for guilt is CONFESSION.

One of the first Bible verses I ever memorized is from First John, chapter 1, verse 9. It reads, "*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*" Wow. What a great offer of grace. Our part in receiving God's grace is to confess our sins. His part is to be faithful and just. You see, unlike those poor guys in the story I began with who confessed their guilt and got thrown into jail by the judge, our defense attorney is Jesus. When we confess our sins, he stands

before the judge who is God, and reminds God that he, Jesus, has already served the sentence for our sins. He has already paid the penalty for our sins. He reminds God that the penalty has already been paid in FULL. Our part is to say we are sorry. God's part is to forgive us because of Christ, and then he proceeds to clean us up. He doesn't leave us weighed down and overwhelmed by guilt and shame. God knows we can't be all that he created us to be if we're weighed down by shame and guilt. But he can't forgive us if we're still trying to hide who we are from Him. He can't forgive us if we're still trying to blame others for our sins. He can't forgive us if we don't admit our guilt, ask his forgiveness and receive his grace through faith.

I cannot stress to you enough the importance of confession. Confession opens the door to God's grace and forgiveness. Confession is simply telling God you've messed up - telling God you are sorry for disobeying him. When you sincerely confess your sins, He is bound by His word to forgive you. Even more than that, He brings healing to your soul.

Confession isn't just telling God you're sorry. It also involves seeing things from God's perspective. It's telling God what you did or failed to do, but it's also bringing your thoughts in line with his thoughts.

Once we ask God to forgive us, then we also need to confess our sin to a trusted brother or sister in Christ, someone who can speak on behalf of God and tell us we are forgiven. In the letter written by the apostle James, chapter five, verse 16, we read, **"Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so God can heal you."** Confessing our sins to one another is part of the healing process.

When we confess our sin to God, he isn't shocked or angry with us. It's not like he didn't already know because God knows everything. Why not be honest with Him when he already knows what you've done. The writer of Psalm 69 declares, **"God, you know what I have done. I cannot hide my guilt from You."**(verse 5) Since God already knows, what do we have to lose by confessing our sin?

Confession is only opening the door to God's grace. In order to enter into God's grace you have to walk through that door. How do you do that? What do you have to do to enter into God's grace?

In addition to confessing your sins, you have to become serious about getting to know God. You have to draw near to him. You have to trust in who he is and you can't do that if you don't really know him. In the book of Hebrews in the Bible, chapter ten, verse 22 it says, **"Let us come near to God with a sincere heart and a sure faith, because we have been made free from a guilty conscience."**

Jesus has set us free. If you are still struggling with guilt, then you haven't truly accepted what Christ has accomplished for you on the cross. You haven't fully trusted in what he has done for you. The Bible tells us, "**...there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering.**" (Romans 8:1-3) It's a done deal. It's already taken place. You are forgiven! All those images of standing before Saint Peter, pleading your case for why you should be let into heaven are all wrong. The decision as to whether or not you are going to be let in to heaven happens here, in this world, not there in that world. The writer of Psalm 32 understood this when he said, "**I finally admitted all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide them. I said to myself, 'I will confess them to the Lord.' And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone.**" (32:5) Thanks be to God who forgives us all our sins.