

The Guilt Trip Trap

It's an amazing thought that one of Satan's greatest weapons lies within the human soul. He simply needs to prod, blow on the embers, stoke it up a bit – and he has a human right where he wants him. We're talking about guilt. Guilt is shame over sin. A sense of deep regret, humiliation, failure; a sense of self-contempt and pain over one's sins and choices.

Guilt is something God built into a human being. It serves as a warning system. In **Romans 2**, Paul explains why even an un-evangelised person is without excuse before God – and it has to do with guilt:

For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another...

Romans 2:14-15

In other words, humans feel guilt over sin. We either *accuse* ourselves or *excuse* ourselves, but either way – we are trying to deal with guilt. We feel the blame of sin, the condemning force of God's law upon us. God has placed a conscience inside each of us as a built-in alarm system – even without direct exposure to God's Word, people have an innate sense of right and wrong, and they feel guilt over wrong.

Now guilt is one of those things that comes in two forms – good guilt and bad guilt. Good guilt drives a person towards God, and bad guilt drives a person away from God. God wants us to feel guilt so that we will turn towards Him. He gets no glory from a person who writhes in agony over their guilt, but never turns to Him. Paul explains these two forms when speaking about the guilt and consequent repentance of the Corinthians:

Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing. For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death.

2 Corinthians 7:9-10

Paul isn't sadistically happy over their guilt; he is happy their guilt drove them to God. Godly sorrow or good guilt works repentance – bad guilt works death. The difference is not in the quality of the guilt, as it is in the response. All men feel guilty over sin. How they react is what makes the guilt good or bad – profitable or destructive. Guilt is destructive when humans respond in three ways to it: when they excuse, ignore or internalise it.

1. Humans excuse guilt

This is perhaps the way the majority of people deal with guilt. They basically seek an excuse why they should not feel guilty. One way is to downplay or minimise it. They say, "It's not so bad, really." They attempt to tell themselves that they are silly for feeling guilty over sin. They reckon their sin is not so big after all. They compare it to the sins of others. They say, "It's not like I'm killing someone." They figure if they are sinning less than others, then they are effectively sinless.

If they're not trying to make the sin seem smaller, they're trying to make the sin seem reasonable. So they absorb the secular humanism of the world which says: if it feels good, do it. They believe the lie of the world which says, "If you aren't hurting anyone else – it's okay." They excuse it but saying it's a small sin, a white lie, a justifiable offence, a crime of passion.

If they're not minimising it or glamourising it, they may be blaming it on others. They accept the teachings of secular psychology which say: guilt is wrong. 'You don't have to ever feel guilty. It's your parent's fault; it's your upbringing. It's your subconscious that is controlling you. It's your ego. It's your temperament. It's the animalistic urges in you. It's never your fault.' Guilt is totally negative in secular psychology. According to it, you should never feel guilty, because you are never really responsible for your own actions.

One strange way which humans are prone to try and excuse their sin is by sinning more. A person who feels defiled reasons that if they sin some more, it won't seem so bad. Then at least sin becomes normal for them. By smearing mud over all of our garments, we reason it will be better than having just one dark blotch on an otherwise white robe.

That is why a formerly virtuous young person can become very promiscuous after losing their purity – they seek to make the sin seem less by sinning more. And so you have people ironically sinning more and more, in order to try and feel less and less guilty. What a satanic trap! The very thing which causes more guilt, we bury ourselves deeper into, in hopes of not feeling the guilt as acutely.

Excusing it is the first way people deal with guilt. Making it seem less, or justifiable, or someone else's fault, or surrounding ourselves with more sin till it seems normal – are all ways of excusing the sin. In biblical terminology, this is the man who hides his transgression. He covers it up. It may not be that he is concealing the act, but he is covering his sin by making it into something it is not.

Such people cover their sin with a coat of paint that makes it into something it isn't – a righteous act, a justifiable act, an offence worth dismissing, a normal act. However, **Proverbs 28:13** tells us that "*he that covereth his sins shall not prosper.*"

2. Humans ignore guilt

The second way people deal with guilt in a self-destructive way is by trying to ignore it – but no one can ever ignore it completely. This kind of person feels the pangs of conscience and essentially runs away. They increase the intensity of their busyness, they party harder, they go for more extreme entertainment and pleasure, in the hopes of forgetting and escaping the conscience.

Did you ever consider that this is the rationale behind much of the world's sinful pleasures? Taking drugs, getting drunk and being sexually immoral are often attempts to drown out the conscience. Turn up the volume of the music – if it's so loud, I can't even hear my conscience anymore, and the guilt subsides for a time. Such actions discourage clear, sober, rational thinking. 'If I get high, I forget; I feel free and not guilty. If I surround myself with others doing the same, it consoles me – we're all trying to forget, we're all trying to have some fun.'

People like this are essentially escapist. Whereas the first group are dishonest in that they lie to themselves, this group is dishonest in that they refuse to even talk about it with themselves. They don't want to sit still long enough to deal with their guilt. They'd rather hurry along, party harder, turn the volume up – as long as they can keep running. The reason for this behaviour is described in John:

And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.

John 3:19-21

Basically, people hate light because it exposes how dirty they are. Everyone hates that guilty feeling, so they avoid what will expose them. People like this are difficult to get into church or to engage in a discussion about Christ or eternity, because they are perpetual escape artists – forever running from the realities of eternity, God, heaven and hell. They hope that having fun will drive away the darkness of guilt and despair inside them.

People like this are perpetually ignoring their conscience – to their own peril. An illustration of this is that in 1984, a Spanish jet crashed into a mountain, leaving no survivors. As investigators began to study the accident, they made an eerie discovery when playing back the black box cockpit recorder. It revealed that several minutes before the plane ran right into the side of a mountain, there was a shrill computer synthesized voice saying in English, “Pull up, pull up, pull up, pull up, pull up!”

The flight recorder captured that the pilot had inexplicably shouted back at the warning system, “Shut up Gringo, shut up Gringo!” and flipped off the warning voice. Minutes later, the plane smashed into the mountain, and everybody was dead. That is a picture of how such people treat their conscience. They tell it to keep quiet, while they run, run, run – ignoring it while they try to keep busy, work longer hours, party harder, make more money, achieve greater success or status – but always running, always ignoring. The conscience is like that warning system – there to help us pull up to God, but we instead ignore it.

3. Humans internalise guilt

The third kind of self-destructive reaction to guilt is internalising it. These are perhaps the most honest of all people. They do not try to excuse their guilt by reasoning that their sin is small, minimising it, comparing it to others, blaming it on others, or sinning more to make it seem less. Nor do they run from their guilt with endless activities. No, they face their guilt. However, they mistakenly try to deal with it internally. They meditate over it, brood over it, feel shame over it, and basically writhe in agony over their guilt.

The results soon become manifest – withdrawal from society, deep-seated depression, self-disgust, pessimism, reluctance to participate in life. A plethora of emotional and mental problems can probably be traced back to unresolved guilt. A London psychologist once told evangelist Billy Graham that seventy percent of the people in mental hospitals in England could be released if they could find forgiveness.

People wallow in guilt, and it produces insecure, unhappy, and troubled individuals – unable to love others properly while they live in perpetual self-disgust. Now these people are at least honest – they face up to their sin, but they do the wrong thing about it – they try to find answers within. The weight of their sin tears them apart, and they fall to pieces emotionally.

It’s ironic that they are often looked down upon as society’s dropouts, when they are the ones being honest about their guilt. In the meantime, those excusing or ignoring their guilt carry on, and consider themselves ‘normal.’ What a strange world we live in!

Now you can see why guilt is such an effective weapon of Satan. He uses it to encourage people that their sin is no sin by excusing it, or to sin more to make their original sin seem less, or to miss out on life’s blessings by retreating instead of pressing forward into the light. Satan simply has to take the alarm beeping in our souls, and convince us of an incorrect response to the alarm, and most of his work is done. All we need do is believe we ought to ignore that alarm, or consider it faulty, or try to fix it in our own strength, and we will go the way of the majority of the human race – on the broad way that leads to destruction.

So what is the Biblical method for dealing with guilt?

The Biblical method for dealing with guilt is the kind we saw Paul describing – godly sorrow that leads to repentance. The first thing is we need to do is:

1. Agree with God about our sin

We need to claim ownership for what is ours. That does not mean we must claim ownership for the sins of others, or make our sin larger or smaller than it is. It means we must recognise what God says about us and our sin as true. We must believe His statements about our behaviour in the Bible are correct. We must not blame it on others, excuse ourselves for doing it, make it seem less by comparison, sin more to make it seem less, or any other thing.

If God calls it sin, it is sin. If the Holy Spirit through our conscience declares us guilty of violating God's Word, we are to agree with God. We must not feel guilty over self-imposed standards or over the standards of others. We must feel guilty if we have violated God's standards. In Psalm 51, King David captures this idea:

For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.

Psalm 51:3-4

The word 'confess' in the New Testament literally means 'to say the same thing.' Confession to God is when I say the same thing about myself and my sin that He does. I call it sin. I call myself guilty. I call myself a sinner. We need to confess as much before God.

2. Accept that Christ took the blame and the shame on the cross

The message of the Gospel is that Christ was our substitute. He suffered in the place of the sinner. He bore the punishment for our sins. But what a lot of Christians miss is this: Christ not only bore sin's punishment; He bore its shame as well:

Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:2

Christ bore our shame. The very guilt we feel for sin is what He took upon Himself. He did not become guilty of our sins, but He bore the guilt and shame of them, as a sinless offering. A person who comes to Christ must by faith ask God for forgiveness through Christ's death and resurrection, and believe by faith that God forgives them. We must believe that God sees us in Christ and forgives us for His sake. By faith we must believe that our sin with its guilt has been taken by Christ, and His righteousness and its blessedness is ours.

2 Corinthians 5:21 tells us: *"For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."* It is because of this that **Romans 8:1** is true of the believer: *"There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus..."*

Now, if God is not condemning us, then who are we to condemn ourselves? As **Romans 8:34** adds: *"Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us."*

See, we may think it is a noble thing to feel continually dirty and unworthy about our sin, but it is not. It can actually be a sign of pride. Perpetual guilt in spite of knowing the truth of God's forgiveness is proud because we're essentially saying, 'I refuse to accept God's forgiveness of me. God might have cleared my name, but I certainly haven't!'

In fact, this is a refusal to accept God's acceptance of you! The reason? We want to be accepted on merit. We want to be acceptable to God on the basis of our perfect record, our clean sheet, our moral life. We cannot accept the fact that we have failed, and our pride refuses to accept God's forgiveness. We instead sit and accuse ourselves, from our proud place of self-righteousness. We ignore the standard of God, which was met perfectly by Christ, and instead focus on our own standard, which we have failed to keep.

This is sinful pride. To condemn yourself when Christ was condemned for you is to consider His death ineffective. To bear shame which was borne for you is to make grace void in your life. We need to humbly accept the fact that we did soil our garments. We were hopelessly lost. But no matter how big or small the sin, Christ paid for it. If you have confessed and repented of the sin, the blood of Christ cleanses:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 1:8-9

He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.

Proverbs 28:13

By faith we need to surrender our own hope of being pleasing to God or ourselves, and accept Christ's righteousness as our own. We need to believe our sin is cleansed in His blood, and our lives are now seen as being in Him. Isaiah describes how believers ought to see themselves:

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels.

Isaiah 61:10

When God looks at me – He perpetually sees me in Christ, clothed in righteousness, His blood continually cleansing me of the sins I pick up along the way and continually keeping my garments spotless as I confess them before Him.

3. Forget what is behind and press forward

Paul could have wallowed in guilt. Here he was, the most prominent Christian of his day, but he had a past. He was also formerly the most prominent persecutor of Christians! He had stood by, overseeing the death of the first martyr. Was Paul continually tinged with shame, misery and anguish? Was His service of God a frenetic activity to try and escape thinking about his past? No, he describes the contentment he had come to in Philippians:

Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:13-14

Paul had regrets. We all do. Sin brings regret. There is no way we can erase the regret any more than we can erase our history. But the difference between regret and shame is this: regret feels pain from time to time when looking back, but uses it to press forward. Godly sorrow works repentance. Shame, however, paralyses you in a state of self-disgust that makes you unwilling to press forward. The sorrow of the world brings death.

Though Paul had regrets, he saw himself through the eyes of Christ. Christ had borne his shame, and Paul humbly accepted that grace. While he regretted his past, he did not sit and mourn over it – he sought to forget about it and press forward. Perhaps one of the most useless things we do with our time is that we spend huge amounts of time thinking about the past and the future, and far less so the present.

There is a time to simply forget the past and press forward. It does not mean you will totally forget. But if you have confessed and forsaken the sin, and learnt from it, you need to make the habit of not calling up your sins to your remembrance. That is how God treats your sin, so why should you do any differently?

Refuse to remember. If you do remember, let it be a provocation unto good works – the thing which drives you to holiness, to prayer, to rejoicing in forgiveness – not to despair, depression or self-disgust.

‘Go and sin no more’

These words were spoken by Jesus to someone who had been caught in the act of adultery. As Jesus challenged her accusers to throw the first stone if they were without sin, they went away, one by one. *“When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, ‘Woman, where are those thine accusers? Hath no man condemned thee?’ She said, ‘No man, Lord.’ And Jesus said unto her, ‘Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more,’” (John 8:10-11).*

These are Christ’s words to us. If we find forgiveness in Him, He says: *“Neither do I condemn you – go and sin no more.”* Returning to the sin we have been forgiven of is likened to a dog returning to its vomit, a pig returning to the mud. God tells us if we return to our sin, it will make us feel condemned again and cause us to be sickened. A clear conscience comes from seeking to do the will of God by the grace of God. This clean conscience comes from obedience.

Remember, when you fall, there is forgiveness. A clear conscience does not come from perfection, it comes from earnest effort to obey God by the grace of God. Nothing is as useful as the blessedness of walking guilt-free with God. **Psalm 119:1** says, *“Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD.”* But this means applying ourselves wholeheartedly to the grace of God – to be so filled with Him, that we might obey and imitate him.

Many Christians struggle with guilt because they refuse to accept God’s forgiveness of them – they want their own performance to be good enough. They often refuse to let the past be the past, and morbidly go through their painful past as if God is impressed with their openness. Sometimes they inflame their guilt by returning to past sins, instead of putting off the old, being renewed in their minds, and putting on the new.

We need to see guilt is an alarm to drive us *to* God, not *from* God. When the guilt is from God – the Holy Spirit working through His Word – we need to confess our sins, believe in His forgiveness, press forward, and make diligent efforts not to repeat that sin. When the guilt is self-imposed, we need to repent of the pride that wants to condemn what God has pardoned, and remember what God has forgotten, so to speak.

Let us never excuse, ignore or internalise our guilt – it brings death. Let us embrace the godly sorrow that brings repentance, and rejoice in the garment of righteousness which God has given to us.

