

One of the great sources of anxiety in life is guilt, the feeling of “dis-ease” because of moral and ethical failures, or the sense that one has failed to live up to a standard, one’s own or someone else’s.

Guilt can be experienced when there is no reason for it. This is false guilt. Very often, however, guilt accompanies wrong actions or harm done. This is justified guilt. It can be the source of great psychological illness.

But guilt is not always pathological. It can be healthy when it helps shape a person’s behavior and character in positive ways. Sometimes the lack of guilt, or remorse, can be very dangerous. Nonetheless it is a source of anxiety and today’s question is the biblical answer to the problem of guilt?

I realize that the question of condemnation and guilt is not the only source of anxiety in life and the bible speaks to us of redemption in other ways. But Lent is the appropriate time to speak of sin and also the right time to speak of the biblical understanding of it and solution to it.

Modern Psychology is a recent discipline, it really begins a little more than 100 years ago. I do not mean to set Psychology against Faith as a matter of essence. But they both offer solutions to the problem of guilt and sometimes there are disagreements.

It is common to derive the source of guilt from biology or societal norms. This effort is really a way of saying that all guilt is false guilt, and the solution involves convincing the guilty person that there is no actual guilt, thereby setting them free.

Or at least one way to alleviate guilt is to distinguish between false and justified guilt. The idea is that if we eliminate that for which we are not responsible we can pare things down to a manageable size and apply redemption only where it needs to be applied. Both of these amount to an attempt at vindication.

The caveat is that the medical profession, Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, can be helpful in various ways, and should be generally trusted and consulted when needed. But when the professionals are finished and have produced a reasonably healthy person, the guilt associated with the human condition remains.

Biblical Faith

The bible speaks to us as reasonably healthy persons. In biblical faith, sin is universal; even when false guilt is removed, guilt remains. The anxiety it causes is inescapable. While it is true that religious authorities have sometimes been willing to manipulate with guilt and try and control with it, a more authentic understanding of the biblical approach to sin is to proclaim the fact of it, like the diagnosis of a medical illness, and then offer a solution that leads to health.

According to the biblical view. Sin is inescapable and universal, and it causes us to be unduly selfish, which in turn causes us to do harm. We are all guilty, because we all sin.

I hope that I can speak of this not as a manipulator trying to coerce and control, but as a pastor trying to help, assuming only that in one way or another, at one time or another, all of us have experienced guilt because in a non-pathological way it is a part of the human experience.

Psalm 32

In comparison to psychology, the Psalms come to us from the less recent past, around 2,500 years ago or more, yet a closer look reveals that reflections in the

Psalms address the same concerns and offer insights that have stood the test of time. In the 32nd Psalm we are able to imagine a person experiencing symptoms commonly associated with the depression that comes along with guilt; the feeling of bones wasting away, groaning all day long, heaviness, weakness.

This psalm, and the Bible as a whole, offers us a consideration that compels our attention. It tells us that we *do*, in fact, experience guilt generally, and that it is not always possible to distinguish between the guilt we *should* feel, and that which we should let go (it is actually possible to add to a person's guilt by making them feel guilty because they feel guilty).

The deliverance we need is the freedom from the burden of daily having to have the right beliefs, the right attitudes, the right actions, all the time. Even if one *could* be successful for one day, the burden would only follow us to the next day, the next place. Sooner or later we would stumble upon a mistaken belief that is uninformed, or fails to comprehend the mystery of life; or some action that disregards the well-being of others and has harmful consequences.

The psalm offers repentance and confession, "I confessed my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgression to the Lord.'" The acknowledgment we call confession

extends to our pride, our deepest fears, our anger and resentment, our tendency to excessive selfishness. It is a way of shaking off the heavy demand of perfection which we are not able to shoulder.

My Own Experience

I myself have felt guilt over several things. Mostly I feel guilty over a failed marriage. I do not speak of it often but today it seems to fit. When I came to terms with my wife's infidelity, *I felt guilty*. I have come to understand this feeling of guilt is common among people in similar circumstances. This would seem to be false guilt and may not seem rational. I had to be told that I was not responsible for what she had done. But even after that there was the guilt of my failures of love.

The weight of the situation was like a Mt. Everest in the background of everything. It cast a large shadow, too big to rationalize away.

In addition to repentance and confession, the bible offers the promise of forgiveness, which is summed up in words straight out of the psalm, "And you forgave the guilt of my sin."

My experience is judged by the ideas in these verses. If I acknowledge my guilt rather than rationalize it away or run from it, and if I acknowledge it *every day*, not

every day for 40 days or until I feel better about things, but every day throughout life indefinitely, as a part of spiritual discipline, then when I look up I see that Mt. Everest has gotten smaller, the heaviness has gotten lighter, and the burden of the moral demand no longer seems like a burden, and I am free to live, free enough to live another day.

It really is better to be forgiven than to be vindicated. It really is true, "blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the LORD does not count against him, and in whose spirit is no deceit."

And that is the way we should go. It is the way of dependence upon God's grace. We find protection there. It is the way that lightens the load and makes it possible to love better, to refrain from judgement and to be compassionate and kind and forgiving. We should not reject it because the Lord's unfailing love surrounds those who trust.

And as the weight is lifted, then comes joy and gladness, and the song of abundant life.

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