

Feeling It—and Not Guilty!

(Part One)



And I will forgive their wrongdoings, and I will never again remember their sins.

(Heb. 8:12)

REVIEW

In the previous chapter, we looked at how guilty feelings can sometimes be evidence of true guilt. How have you been able to apply some of the principles from that chapter to your own circumstances?

The memory verse was 1 John 1:9. See how well you can remember it by writing it out here.

Destructive Emotions

Have you ever visited one of those purse and jewelry stores that are stocked with fake designer goods? To the untrained eye, it's almost impossible to distinguish the fakes from the real thing! After all, they look like the real thing, they feel like the real thing, but they're not the real thing. Guilt can be a bit like that, too. It might look real, and it certainly feels real, but it's often not real—in fact, it can be totally false.

In the last chapter, we began to look at guilt as a feeling, with particular emphasis on the experience of true guilt. In this chapter and the next, we're going to continue looking at guilt as a feeling, but this time, we'll turn our attention to two types of false guilt. We'll look at one type in this chapter and the other in the next.

Experiencing false guilt # 1

We experience false guilt when we have done wrong, but have admitted it to God and have turned from it. The guilt is false because, by confession and repentance, we have received God's forgiveness for that particular sin. We are, in fact, no longer guilty, even if our feelings would try and tell us otherwise!

Susan, in Scenario #4 (see Chapter Five), is an example of this type of false guilt. Since her abortion, she has come into a living relationship with Jesus Christ and all her sins—including the abortion—have been forgiven. However, the painful memory of that decision all these years ago arouses feelings of guilt within her. Notice that she talks about not being able to forgive herself.

Have you ever talked like that? Whatever our sin might have been, we can feel so repelled by it that we withhold forgiveness from ourselves. But wait a minute...what does the Bible say about forgiving ourselves? You might be surprised to discover it says nothing at all about it! That's right! Nowhere in the Bible are we encouraged to forgive ourselves. You see, only God can forgive sins—only he can truly cleanse the guilty heart and conscience. Oh, yes, we need to extend forgiveness to others who have wronged us (Matthew 6:14; Colossians 3:13) but, ultimately, cleansing from sin is between them and God. When we forgive others, we release them from any right we might have to pay them back for hurting us. But we can't make them clean—only God can do that.

The idea of not being able to forgive ourselves is quite a common one, but it's not in line with biblical teaching on guilt and forgiveness. You see, God's forgiveness is perfectly complete, and we don't need any other kind, not even our own! When we think we need to forgive ourselves, we give the impression that God's forgiveness isn't enough and that we have to add self-forgiveness to Christ's atoning work on the cross. Perhaps you've never thought of it like that before. If you're looking for freedom from the false guilt that stems from the mistaken belief that you need to forgive yourself, look no further. God's forgiveness is sufficient!

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Pause for reflection

Have you ever struggled with the idea that, in order to be free of guilt, you need to forgive yourself?

How has this chapter helped you appreciate the sufficiency of Christ's atoning sacrifice in bringing you forgiveness?

GRACE NOTES

Only God can forgive and forget. We may forgive but never forget. We may forget but never forgive. Only God can do both. This is amazing. When we get to stand before him and the book of our life is opened, God is going to say, "The page is blank—no sin recorded here" and we will say "But what about..." and God will say, "I don't remember that." Now that's forgiveness!

Romans 8:1 says: "So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus." Satan, the enemy of every Christian, loves to try to condemn us by accusing us of wrongdoing. In fact, he is even called the accuser (Revelation 12:10) who brings to our minds past sins that have been confessed and forsaken and are, therefore, forgiven. Notice what it says in Romans 8:33 and 34:

"Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? Will God? No! He is the one who has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? Will Christ Jesus? No, for he is the one who died for us and was raised to life for us and is sitting at the place of highest honor next to God, pleading for us."

Whenever we feel condemned, we need to recognize the voice of Satan who is trying to rob us of the peace that is ours through Christ.

Destructive Emotions

Pause for reflection

Are there any areas of false guilt in your life at the present time? Do you still feel guilty over something wrong that you did, even though you've confessed it and turned from it? You might find it helpful to consider your thinking about this as faulty thinking is often linked to the experience of false guilt. Write your thoughts in the space below.

Guilt-busters

If this describes you, take time now to:

- Thank God for the fact that he has already forgiven you of this particular sin (1 John 1:9).
- Praise him that he chooses not to remember the sin that he has forgiven (Hebrews 8:12).
- Believe that, as a Christian, you are no longer condemned (Romans 8:1).

Although as Christians we are no longer condemned for sin, we are often convicted of sin by the Holy Spirit. He does this by making us feel uncomfortable about specific sins that we fail to confess to the Lord. We need to be honest with ourselves and with God by confessing the sins he brings to mind. As children of God, our relationship with him is secure, but unconfessed sin damages our fellowship with God and our enjoyment of him. While Satan would condemn us by heaping false guilt on us, the Spirit convicts us of actual wrongdoing—John 16:8 and Jude 1:15. So, whenever we feel guilty, we need to discern between the accusations of Satan and the promptings of the Spirit. As a rule of thumb, condemnation tends to be general or vague and holds out no hope of forgiveness.

On the other hand, conviction is more likely to be specific about a particular sin and encourages us to go to Christ for forgiveness. If you're not sure whether you're dealing with false guilt or true guilt, ask God to show you which one applies in your present situation. Refuse to bear the burden of false guilt by acknowledging it as such, but respond to true guilt by confession from a penitent heart. Remember to be specific, naming your sin out loud to God. Ask him to help you put Romans 6:11 into practice whenever you're faced with temptation. This verse teaches us to think of ourselves as being dead to sin (and dead people don't respond) but living for God's glory. Then, remind yourself of 1 John 1:9 and accept forgiveness as a fact, even if you don't feel forgiven. Feelings of guilt may come and go,

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so you need to remind yourself that you have been forgiven. It's a done deal. Don't allow yourself to feel guilty over an issue that Jesus Christ has already dealt with.

SUGGESTED PRAYER

Thank you, Lord, for showing me how false guilt often masquerades as true guilt. If I've been living with false guilt because I've listened to the voice of condemnation that tells me my sin has been too horrible for you to forgive, help me now to clearly see that your forgiveness alone is sufficient to free me from my guilt. Don't let me spend any more time lamenting a sin that you have dealt with completely. In Jesus' name. Amen.

MEMORY VERSE

And I will forgive their wrongdoings, and I will never again remember their sins. (Heb. 8:12)