

Battling Guilt

One of our greatest soul battles lies within the past; its regrets, sins, failures, and lingering guilt. Oh, the darkness of living life with deep, dark secrets or publicly known failures. Feelings of guilt can suffocate affect human happiness and steal the joy and peace of Christ. Trace the scent of unrelenting guilt, and along the way you may discover the insidious work of the Evil One who roams the earth seeking to kill, steal and destroy the human personality. (John 10:10)

What is the nature of this debilitating guilt? There is illegitimate guilt. We feel guilty when we are not guilty. There is legitimate guilt. We are guilty because we have sinned against a Holy God.

Illegitimate guilt is a very destructive dynamic in our lives. Sadly, it is not only an emotion we feel but inflict on others. Parents, siblings, teachers, coaches, pastors can leave a hurtful legacy of illegitimate guilt. “You could have done better?” “You don’t measure up.” When a parent or other leaders in our lives have expectations without affirmation it produces illegitimate guilt.

Spiritually, one of the most effective strategies of the evil prince of lies and darkness is to manipulate guilt in our lives. Oh that we would spend as much energy preaching the gospel to ourselves, rejoicing in God’s grace and forgiveness lavished in Christ, as we do beating ourselves up for sins already forgiven. The big difference between legitimate and illegitimate guilt is one is real and the other is counterfeit. When we feel guilty when we are not, we play right into the slimy hands of the great Deceiver, the Devil.

All of us experience legitimate guilt. “*All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*” (Rom. 3:23) If you never feel guilty, you have a more serious problem than is addressed in this article. Some of us have committed very grievous and destructive sins. Those transgressions leave a lingering scent of consequence and memory. But the Bible would remind us that the sinfulness of our sin, whether big or small, is in direct relationship the One whom we have offended. We all must say when we confess our sins to God, “*Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight*” (Ps. 51:4). Legitimate guilt comes when we have sinned against a Holy God. I do not know who might be the most righteous person reading this article. Whoever it is, I know something about you. You have a sense of the Holiness of God, the sinfulness of yourself, and the ongoing miracle of the amazing, matchless, marvelous, grace of God that forgives sinners like you. “*In Christ we have redemption through his blood; the forgiveness of sins in accordance with the glorious riches of God’s grace that He has lavished on us...*” (Eph. 1:7-8). This is the good news of the gospel.

Have you ever considered how people cope with guilt without the grace and forgiveness of God? Some of you may have lived such guilt. Some of you may be living amidst the suffocating affects of guilt right now. How do people cope with guilt without the grace of Christ?

Some people internalize the pain and guilt. “Let’s just keep it a secret.” This is where a shallow, superficial Christian fellowship characterized by pretense is not only deceptive, but plays right into the strategy of the Evil One. The Devil desires that you keep painful realities in the dark. As long as your secret remains in darkness, it still has power over you. When sin is brought out into the light, light begins to dispel the darkness. David, following his grave sins, decided no longer to live in the darkness of silence and secrecy. “*When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me, my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer*” (Ps. 32:3-4). Internalize guilt and eventually it produces emotional distress, spiritual despair, and sometimes physical illness. Amidst the darkness of guilt, David confessed his sin and brought it out into the light, “Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, “*I will confess my transgressions to the Lord*” — *and you forgave the guilt of my sin*” (Ps. 32:5).

Some people live in denial. They live as if there is no such sin, guilt or consequences. “*The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?*” (Jer. 17:9) Sometimes people begin to believe their own view of reality; developing a sort of spiritual psychosis.

Some people anesthetize their pain. If the pain of guilt won’t go away, some choose the option of trying to make it feel better for a short time. Alcohol use, substance abuse, overeating, overspending, overworking, pornography... deadens the pain of a frustrated, guilt-ridden, empty heart. Actually, it works in the moment, all the while creating a larger soul cavity which needs more anesthetic to relieve the pain. Tragically, such a coping pattern is not only idolatry, but can soon become a life-destroying addiction.

Some people choose busyness. From work, to sports, to the pursuit of pleasures and recreation; there seems no end to the diversions offered in our culture, afforded by the Visa. If Jesus Christ is not the all-surpassing, all-satisfying treasure of your life, there are lots of people, pursuits, and possessions that will line up to capture your attention and affections. Behind some busy lives are busy people; often too busy for God. Lurking behind the busyness, lives remain broken. Hurting people can be found running as fast as they can in order to cope with the pain of guilt.

The list goes on and on, each with its personal, relational and social consequences. The Bible is clear. There is no relief from guilt nor spiritual rest until the weary, guilt-ridden, empty heart finds rest in Jesus. Jesus says to the unbeliever, “*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest*” (Matt. 11:28). He says to His wayward children, “*Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls*” (11:29).