

How Life Feels Part 3: Guilt and Shame

Unable to Pay

Monday 4/20/2020

“A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?” (Luke 7:41–42).

The question, “What do we do with our guilt before God’s law?” assumes that we all have, broken the Lord’s commandments. As Christians who are faithful to the Word of God, we understand that this assumption is taught throughout the Bible, and it is particularly evident in Romans 3. In this chapter, Paul argues that the Creator indicts all men, Jew and Gentile, for breaking His law, reminding us that “none is righteous, no, not one”

However, Scripture is not the only testimony to our universal guilt. All of the major world religions, recognize that humanity has not done what is right, though they differ with the Bible on where sin comes from and what to do with it. Our awareness of guilt also shows up in our everyday language. How often do you hear the phrase “nobody’s perfect” to justify a mistake or explain away moral failings? very few would ever claim that they have never done wrong, and they would be wrong for saying so.

Unfortunately, this universal recognition of our fallenness does not necessarily translate into an accurate understanding of the Lord’s character. Our tendency as fallen creatures is to look around us and, seeing other imperfect people, believe that God is going to forgive us simply because we are all in the same imperfect boat. How many people think that the holy Judge of all creation will rule in their favor simply because they are not as wicked as someone like Pol Pot, Adolph Hitler, or Joseph Stalin?

However, God’s law is an expression of His character, and, since His character does not change (Mal. 3:6), His standards cannot be lowered. Our Father in heaven is infinitely holy; therefore, any transgression of His will incurs an infinite debt. We are debtors who cannot pay, an image Jesus uses to depict guilt and forgiveness in today’s passage.

When other people confront us with our misdeeds, we often try to justify our sins. But on the coming day of judgment, God’s glory and perfection will be so evident that our mouths will be shut (Rom. 3:19). Before the Lord of all, no excuse will stand.

1. Thoughts?

Guilt and Guilt Feelings

Tuesday 4/21/2020

“Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God”

- Romans 3:9-19

The Word of God declares that all people are guilty of violating God’s law and stand in need of His forgiveness. Oddly, most people struggle with feelings of guilt to one degree or another, but few seek the real forgiveness they need to have relief from those feelings. Why is this?

What is guilt? A very basic definition is “that which is incurred when we violate a standard.” We live in a world of laws, rules, and regulations imposed by parents, teachers, employers, and governments. And then, above all of these human laws stand the commandments of the supreme lawgiver, God. All people, being creatures of God, are responsible to conform to His mandates. Thus, we have abundant opportunity to incur guilt, and we all do so. We violate both human rules and God’s law with amazing regularity, and so incur actual guilt. Such guilt must be dealt with in some way. With human rules and regulations, we must make restitution or pay our “debt to society” by some other means, like paying a fine or spending time in prison. But when we violate the law of God, we incur a debt we cannot repay. We need forgiveness.

However, we may or may not *feel* our need for forgiveness. Our subjective feelings of guilt may or may not correspond to the objective guilt we incur by violating some standard. Yes, feelings of guilt are common, but there are those people who seem to feel no guilt at all. These include everyone from people who violate minor laws repeatedly with no apparent remorse, to psychopaths, who can commit serious crimes repeatedly with no evidence of guilt feelings. On the other hand, we sometimes experience feelings of guilt when we have incurred no guilt at all. Most commonly, however, we simply feel far less guilt than we should, given our numerous legal violations. Clearly there can be a great disjunction between objective guilt and our subjective guilt feelings.

1. Is there something you feel guilty about? Can you trace these feelings to an actual violation of some rule, regulation, law, or divine commandment?

If so, seek forgiveness from the proper authority. If not, your guilt feelings may be out of place. Seek out one of the pastors, or a trusted brother or sister for advice on dealing with these feelings.

Dealing with Guilt

Wednesday 4/22/2020

“For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse”

- Romans 1:18-22

We have seen that guilt is a reality for every person, for all human beings are in violation of God’s commands, and all know it to one degree or another. Left untreated, this guilt will bring everyone under the wrath of God; as it is, people continue to live now only because of His grace. We should all seriously wrestle with the question: “What do we do with our guilt?”

In our sinfulness, human beings answer this question in numerous ways. For example, some deny there is a God at all. If they can convince themselves there is no God to set standards of conduct, they have no reason to worry about violations of such standards. The law of God as it exists in written form becomes nothing more than the words of men, for no God exists to exact a penalty. However, disbelief in God does not cause Him to cease to exist.

Others seek to rationalize their behavior, by making excuses for it. They may claim that since others were engaging in the same behavior, they assumed it was acceptable. However, the law of God serves to silence every excuse (Rom. 3:19). At the Judgment, all will be silent before God, for they will realize the inadequacy of every excuse before the eyes of Him who looks at the heart.

Many people say they don’t worry about their guilt because everyone is imperfect, so God will surely grade on a curve. They assume that God will be forced to adjust His standards lower if anyone is to be saved. But God actually went to great lengths to satisfy His own justice without lowering His standards in the least (Read Romans). To assume that He will adjust the law that reflects His holy character to accommodate those who rebel against Him is just silly.

It is clear that these methods, while they may provide some relief from the pain of a troubled conscience, are not real solutions to the problem of guilt. Just as physical pain signals us that something is wrong with our bodies, guilt is meant to tell us that there is a problem with our souls. The above approaches are just Band-Aids—the only adequate answer to the question of what to do with our guilt is forgiveness. We will look more at the forgiveness of sins tomorrow.

1. Thoughts?

The Remission of Sins

Thursday 4/23/2020

“Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool”

- Isaiah 1:18

On occasion, a lot of us live with the feelings of guilt long enough that they become feelings of shame. Meaning, the guilt has moved from the idea that I did something bad into the realm of, I am bad.

John Calvin once said that the remission of sins was the heart of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. The word “remission” is made up of the word mission and the prefix re-. Mission is taken from the Latin word missio which means “to send.” The prefix re- means “away” or “again.” So, when we speak of the remission of sins we speak of the sending away of our sins.

In short, the doctrine of justification deals with the reality of our shame. In justification, God declares us righteous based on the righteousness of Christ that has been given to us. However, He also declares us not guilty of our sins because in justification, our sins are given to Jesus upon whom was poured the wrath of God. In Christ, our sins are sent away from us. Consequently, our guilt is removed, and we are made clean in the eyes of God.

This was the hope of every old-covenant believer. As today’s passage notes, the Lord promised that though the sins of His people be as scarlet, He would make them as white as snow. The use of the color scarlet shows us that even the foulest sins would be forgiven, for just as God can make the darkest stain white, so too can He make the foulest sinner clean.

Two thousand years ago, the hope of Israel was fulfilled when Jesus bore the sins of His people on the cross. On that day, the wrath of God was poured out upon Him so that those who are in Christ might be cleansed. If you are in Christ you are no longer guilty of any transgression, and you have been forgiven of even the most heinous of sins. Let shame melt away.

1. Thoughts?

Receiving God's Forgiveness

Friday 4/24/2020

"I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, 'Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down'"

- Revelation 12:7-12

Today we are concluding our brief study of what Scripture has to say about guilt and forgiveness. We talked a lot about the objective reality of guilt before God and that the only solution to it is real forgiveness from Him. When we approach Him in the name of Christ, repent, and ask for forgiveness, the Bible promises that He will always forgive our sins. Our Creator never makes promises that He will not keep, in fact, He must keep this promise because His own Son has satisfied His wrath against His people. If the Father were not to forgive us when we repent and trust in Jesus, He would be dishonoring the Son, essentially telling Him that the atonement He offered was not good enough. The Father will never do that, He seeks to glorify His only Son, and He will do nothing to detract from that glory.

so, when we repent and turn to Jesus, we are objectively forgiven. Our sin is covered with His perfect righteousness, and we do not stand condemned any longer. This objective reality, however, does not always mean that we feel forgiven subjectively. Often our shame feelings do not go away even though we know (at least in our minds) that the problem of our objective guilt before the Lord has been solved in Christ. What, then, do we do if we have repented and yet do not feel forgiven by our Father in heaven?

The only solution is to keep turning back to what the Word of God teaches about the reality of our forgiveness in Christ. If the Lord says that we have been forgiven in Jesus our Savior, then He has.

Going back to the Word in order to receive God's forgiveness and feel it subjectively also means understanding what Scripture says about Satan. The Bible tells us that the devil and his servants assault believers primarily through accusing us of our sins. They ever seek to convince us that God could not possibly forgive us. We need not let their words get through to our souls, for we have been forgiven in Christ, the same Christ who has cast down Satan in defeat and made His accusations groundless.

1. Thoughts?