

How To Get Rid Of Guilt

When I was twenty years old I spent a summer working for the Forest Service in Idaho.

I became good friends with a guy named Gary Butler.

We were "drinking buddies" and spent a lot of time together.

On one occasion he lent me \$20.

A few weeks later he asked me if I could pay him back and I jokingly said, "*What's \$20 between friends, Gary?*"

He gave me a serious look and said, "*It can be a canyon, man.*"

I paid him back the money as soon as I could get it.

At the end of summer I was planning to hitch-hike home to Missouri and Gary offered to take me as far as Boise where he lived.

I said sure, I'd like that, so we drove down to Boise in his station wagon.

I'll never forget that day: I think we put away a case of beer and a full box of Hav-a-Tampa cigars while we sang along with the radio for 400 miles on the way down to Boise.

When I took off from Boise I borrowed another \$20 to last me on the trip home.

About a month went by and I didn't have the money to repay him so I wrote and asked him if I could take more time to pay him back.

He wrote back and said "Fine, no problem."

When I did get around to sending him a check the envelope was returned and a mutual friend told me that Gary had moved to Australia.

So I kind of let things slide and never made a serious attempt to locate him.

He lent me the money and I never paid it back.

And I still feel guilty.

Now I've done worse things than that and felt guiltier than that, but my point is that even a small thing like twenty bucks has kept me feeling guilty for over 50 years.

A guilty conscience is a powerful thing and can be one of the worst things a person can suffer.

Yet guilt is a natural, even a Godly feeling.

The Scriptures make it clear that we are all born with a conscience that enables us to distinguish between right and wrong, and when we do wrong, we feel guilty.

As Paul puts it: *"...when Gentiles, who do not have the written law, do by nature things required by the law...they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them."*

This innate knowledge of what is morally right and wrong is evident in the fact that all human societies, Christian or pagan, primitive or civilized, have the same basic ethical system.

There is no human society that honors stealing or murder or adultery or lying or the dishonoring of one's parents.

So when we break God's moral laws it is both natural and desirable that we should feel guilt.

Our consciences are the central nervous systems of our moral character. They tell us when we go morally astray in the same way as our nerves tell us that we are injuring part of our body.

When we do something morally wrong, we feel guilt in the same way that we feel pain if we put our hand into a flame.

The question is: how do we deal with guilt?

More to the point, how can we get rid of it?

As usual, the human ways we come up with don't work—in fact they usually make the problem worse.

One way people try to get rid of guilt is by trying to ignore their consciences.

They grow tired of struggling with some ongoing sin and decide that they'll just stop struggling and learn to enjoy it.

After all, other people do the same thing and they seem to get along without feeling guilty.

This is called the "What, me worry?" solution.

As they follow this path their conscience weakens and pretty soon they don't feel guilty anymore—at least not about **that** particular sin..

The Bible says of people like that that they end up with their consciences, "*seared as with a hot iron.*"

Having become hardened, their consciences no longer function—the same as if you burned your hand so many times there was nothing left but scar tissue.

You might not feel much pain, but you wouldn't have a hand that functioned very well either.

Then there's those who blame God for their sins.

"God made me this way and I can't help it."

It's theological lunacy but it makes them feel better.

Then there are people who develop a martyr's complex about a perennial sin and think of it as their personal cross to bear.

"It makes me miserable but I just can't help it."

While this does keep them in touch with moral reality it also keeps them from experiencing God's grace, which is to say, from being saved from their sins.

We don't get to heaven by cultivating a deeper sense of guilt, we get to heaven by receiving God's forgiveness of our sins through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ.

There is only one way to get rid of guilt and that is God's way.

But like many of God's solutions, it is counter-intuitive.

Our human instinct prompts us to try to work our way out of our sins and guilt by pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps, either by striving to stop sinning or by doing good deeds to offset our sins.

That doesn't work either.

Mother Theresa's diaries reveal that she suffered from guilt because she couldn't discern godliness deep down inside.

As long as we are saddled with this sinful flesh—this “bag of worms” as Luther called it—which is to say, as long as we are in this world—we are not going to be able to stop sinning.

This doesn't mean that we shouldn't take our sins seriously—let alone abandon ourselves to them like the “What, me worry?” person.

It just means that we have to face the reality that we have a sin nature that we are not going to get rid until we are dead and buried.

In our souls we are new creations, washed clean and white as snow, but in our sin nature we are addicted to sinning.

And as long as we keep sinning, we are going to feel guilt.

As Paul wrote, the power of guilt is sin and the power of sin is the law.

In other words, although the law is good and perfect, its effect upon fallen man is to arouse sin, and the effect of sin is to produce guilt.

So to get rid of guilt, we have to get rid of sin, and to get rid of sin, we have to be set free from the power of the law.

And the good news I have for you today is that *you already have been set free the power of the law.*

Christ has set us free from the power of the law and replaced it with the power of grace.

As Paul said: “*You are not under law, but under grace.*”

And if I am not under the law, sin has nothing to do with me, for as Paul also wrote: “*Apart from the law, sin is dead.*”

No law, no sin, no guilt.

You are under the governance of God's love and grace, not of law and guilt.

Now admittedly, this is hard for us to understand—let alone believe.

How can I be both sin-laden and at the same time completely free of my sins?

And that question brings us to the heart and soul of Christianity—the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

God has transferred all of your sins—past, present and future—to His Son, Jesus Christ, Who took them to the cross, died with them and was buried with them.

Then He rose from the dead and left them behind and they have nothing more to do with all who place their faith in Him.

This is the Gospel, the Good News of the salvation God prepared for us before He created the world.

It is, you might say, a beautiful mystery: we don't deserve it and we can't explain it: we can only rejoice that we have it.

Do we keep on sinning?

You bet we do.

Does God forgive our sins for Jesus' sake?

You bet He does.

Why?

Because he loves us.

And why does He love us?

Not because we are loveable.

God knows we are not loveable

He loves us because God **is** love.

As long as we trust that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross atoned for all our sins, we cannot out-sin God's willingness to forgive those sins.

You might say that we are imprisoned by God's love.

To invoke my favorite analogy—a baseball analogy that I've subjected you to more than once—it's like you are trying to slide into second base and the second baseman tags your foot with the ball before it reaches the bag.

You know that you're out.

But then the second base umpire yells "Safe!"

You should be out, but you're safe.

Why? ***Because the man with the power to call you safe has called you safe.***

And the proof is—you're standing on the bag and you're headed for home.

Human logic says "NO!" but God's divine wisdom says "YES!"

This is what led Luther to say to Christians in one of his more provocative statements, "Sin boldly!"

(That didn't go down well with the Church, by the way!)

What he meant was not that we should become profligates and sin as much as we liked.

His point was that even in the midst of our sinning, we may rest assured that God no longer looks upon our sins.

As far as He is concerned they no longer exist, because they were paid for by His Son and He has covered you with His grace.

None of this is because of anything we have done or failed to do—or even *could* do—but because God loves each one of us as if there were

only one of us to be loved, and He has adopted us as his children—making us brothers and sisters of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Have you ever heard of a phenomenon called “the phantom limb?”

Sometimes people who have had an arm or leg amputated continue to feel sensations where the arm or leg used to be.

Flashes of pain—itching—soreness—feelings that didn't go away when the limb was removed.

Guilt for the Christian is like the phantom sensations that haunt a phantom limb.

Any feelings of guilt you feel now is phantom guilt about sins that no longer exist..

Your sins have nothing to do with the redeemed you, the real—the eternal—you.

And where there is no sin there can be no guilt.

Your guilt was buried along with your sins in a tomb outside Jerusalem about two thousand years ago.

So rejoice and be glad: Jesus is yours, and along with Him, a guilt-free life!

Amen.