

Freedom from



By Pastor
Doug Batchelor

An **Amazing Fact:** Amputees often experience a sensation called "phantom pain." For example, they might have lost their entire leg, but their toes hurt or their knee itches even though they no longer actually have them. They sense this phantom feeling coming from an absent member and their invisible toes will curl and their imaginary fingers will grasp. Even a nonexistent leg might feel sturdy enough to stand on. Doctors watch helplessly, unable to treat this part of the body that is screaming for attention even though it no longer exists. In the same way, there are many Christians, new and old, who have confessed and forsaken their sins and applied the blood of Jesus for cleansing, yet still feel the phantom pain of guilt.



A kind farmer offered a ride in his wagon to an old man carrying a large sack of potatoes to market. After the weathered man had struggled into the back of the cart, the farmer noticed his new passenger was still hoisting the sack of potatoes on his shoulder. "Friend," the farmer encouraged, "Set down your load and rest your back." But the weary fellow responded, "Mister, you were kind enough to give me a ride; I wouldn't dare ask you to also carry my sack of potatoes." Of course, we know the worn traveler was silly not to put down his load and rest, yet there are millions of Christians who accept Jesus' forgiving mercy yet feel they must continue to carry their burden of guilt and shame.

There are few things more important to a Christian's peace and assurance than the understanding of guilt and forgiveness. Sadly, these are some of the most misunderstood subjects, and I am constantly asked about what guilt and forgiveness should mean to Christians. Too many of God's children are dragging an unnecessary yoke through life.

Paul says in Hebrews 12:1, 2, "Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and

finisher of our faith" (NKJV). To successfully run this race, we are commanded to lay aside not only the sin, but also the weight of guilt that impedes us.

The Bible also says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). That cleansing includes the sin and the phantom pain of guilt.

What Is Guilt?

To appreciate the kind of forgiveness mentioned in 1 John, we need to understand guilt and overcome the many misconceptions causing confusion and heartache.

Have you ever instinctively taken your foot off the gas pedal when you see a highway patrolman? You might hit the brakes even when you are already going the speed limit. Why? Might it be because you often break the speed limit and automatically fear you might be doing something wrong?

Do you ever feel guilty? There are times when you should, because it's good for you. If you never feel guilt, something is probably wrong with your conscience. The Bible says, "For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not" (Ecclesiastes 7:20).

Of course, nobody enjoys guilt; yet everyone, if they have a normal conscience, will experience it. So it shouldn't surprise us that popular philosophy, and even some theology, tells us that all guilt is bad. Feel-good preachers say we should try to prevent guilt from worrying our minds no matter what we're doing or how evil it might be.

Yet no matter how stressful or uncomfortable guilt can be, it's not always bad.

The Sense of the Soul

Obviously, it would be nice to live without pain. But the very nerves that give you the sensations of pain also help you to experience pleasure. Even more, nerves keep us alive. Leprosy attacks your nervous system and eventually kills the feeling in your extremities. When those with this disease touch a hot stove and burn their fingers, they don't know it. Amazingly, leprosy even makes your eyes forget to blink! It's a very slight impression on our nerves that tells us to lubricate our eyes. Without nerves, you

wouldn't blink and you would be subject to dry eyes, becoming more susceptible to infections or blindness. Little sensations of pain are actually a blessing.

Likewise, while guilt doesn't feel good spiritually, it keeps your conscience alive. Jesus called the Holy Spirit a Comforter, but He also convicts the world of its sin (John 16:8). We can know the Holy Spirit is working in our lives when we feel the sensation of guilt that follows bad behavior. The sensation of remorse for sin is often literally a sign from God of new spiritual life!

How to Respond to Guilt

Have you ever been gossiping to another person when the very subject you're discussing walks into the room? You suddenly get very quiet and talk as if you were just commenting on the weather. Why that reaction? Guilt. Is that a good or bad reaction? Good. You should be ashamed if you're gossiping!

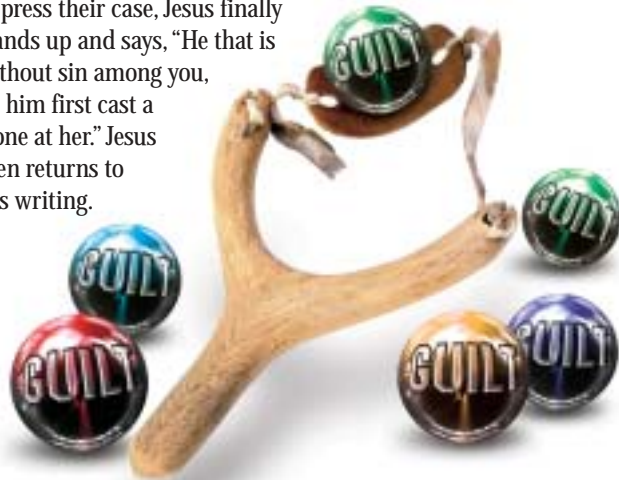
When Peter preached that spirit-filled sermon at Pentecost, one of the signs that it was effective is found in how his listeners responded. "They were pricked in their heart" (Acts 2:37). They were convicted, and they pleaded, "What shall we do?"

That was a good response. Peter could then talk to them about repentance and forgiveness, but only after they sensed their guilt. After Isaiah saw God, he cried out, "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips!" (Isaiah 6:5). When Isaiah saw God's holiness and goodness, he became aware of his badness, and then God cleansed him of sin.

The closer you draw to Christ, the more you will experience impulses of guilt. That might sound like a paradox, but it's true. The nearer you come to the Light, the more clearly you will see the wrong things in your lifestyle that you may never have noticed before—and you will probably feel guilt and shame. But when you ask for forgiveness, you will experience grace and peace. "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up" (James 4:10).

Who's Really Guilty

In John 8, we read the well-known story of a woman caught in adultery. Her accusers condemn her, saying to Jesus, "Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?" But Jesus ignores their accusations, and stoops down to write in the dust on the temple floor. As they continue to press their case, Jesus finally stands up and says, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." Jesus then returns to His writing.



The Bible next records, "And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last." They felt guilt, and they walked away.

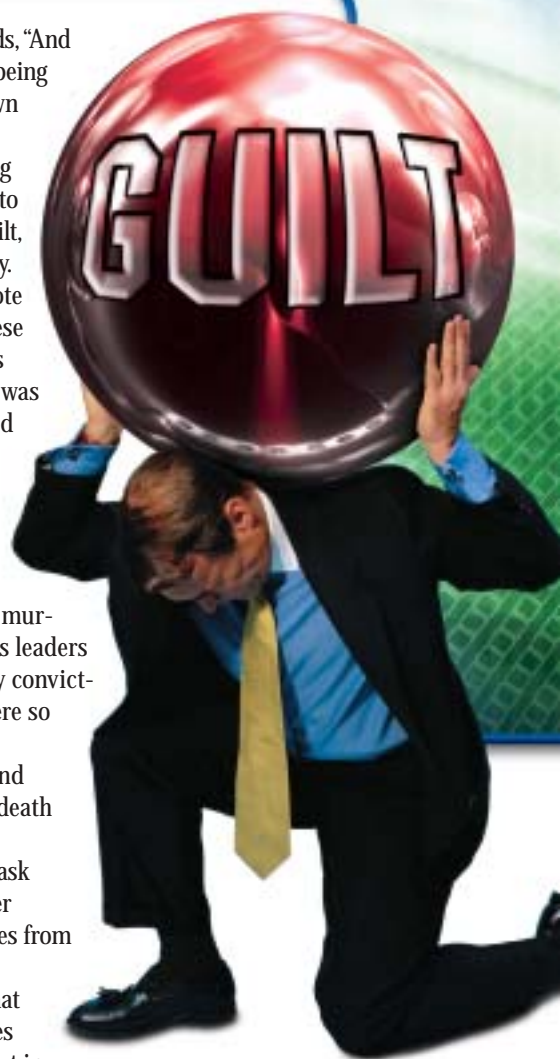
I believe Jesus wrote out the laws that these men had themselves broken, as each one was specifically convicted about their own guilt. By contrast, some of the guilty react in anger when they are convicted. Stephen was murdered when religious leaders heard his powerfully convicting sermon; they were so troubled that they plugged their ears and then stoned him to death (Acts 7:57, 58).

We might need to ask ourselves if our anger toward another comes from their wrongdoing or because we resent that their goodness makes our badness stand out in contrast. Are they simply reminding us of our guilt? In fact, some people stay away from church because they want to avoid places that will stir the unpleasant sensations of shame.

The Heart of Guilt

One of the best possible goals is to go through life feeling peace and innocence before God. Job declares, "My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go: my heart shall not reproach me so long as I live" (Job 27:6). The Bible says Job was a perfect and upright man who feared God and hated evil, but I don't think Job claimed to be sinless. But then why could he say that his heart was not condemning him? Because whenever Job became aware of any failure, he dealt with his sin, keeping his account right with God. He sacrificed for himself and his family every day, so his heart was always clear before the Lord.

Have you ever felt condemned by your own heart? Sometimes it hits you like a bolt of lightning. Other times it might build slowly, as if you know you are doing something wrong but are trying to ignore it—until it begins to boil over and, all of a sudden, you have an awful revelation. It's here we suddenly see ourselves through God's eyes. We feel guilty and condemned, and like



David, we cry, "I have sinned!" The weeds of sin must be pulled from the gardens of our hearts as soon as they sprout.

Yet what a wonderful thing when, like Job, our hearts don't condemn us. "Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then we have confidence toward God" (1 John 3:21).

False Guilt

Have you ever known somebody who felt guilty when they really shouldn't—maybe even yourself? The devil is probably urging you to feel shame about sins that have been forgiven. I once read a story in which the devil appeared to Martin Luther with a list of Luther's sins listed on a scroll. The devil said, "Do you really think that God can forgive all this? You're a doomed man." Luther saw the list and thought, "Oh, there's no hope for me." But then he noticed that the devil's hand was covering some words at the top of the scroll, so he asked, "What is your hand covering?" The devil answered, "Nothing. Just notice these sins here." Luther demands, "Remove your hand in the name of Jesus." And finally the devil took his hand away, revealing the words, "All under the blood."

Those sins were covered by Jesus' blood, but the devil still tried to make Luther feel guilty for his past. Likewise, most Christians are attacked by the devil at some point in their lives so they will feel this same false guilt.

Maybe you've asked God to forgive something you did years before—and you've asked a hundred times after.

But every time it comes to your mind, you say, "Oh, Lord, forgive me. I'm so sorry I did that." Yet each time, you still feel some guilt and continue to punish yourself.

But really think about this—is that feeling from God or the devil? You need to remember 1 John 3:21 and remind yourself that if God has forgiven you, you need to forgive yourself. Otherwise, aren't you somehow confessing that your judgment is better than God's?

Without faith, it's impossible to please God. That includes the faith that "He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins." We must embrace forgiveness, just as we should forgive others.

The Un-forgiven Are Unforgiving

The town gossip invited a friend over for tea. Glancing out her window, she watched her neighbor hang laundry on a clothesline. The gossip shook her head and said, "That lady's house must be filthy because her laundry always looks dirty." Her guest peered out the window and answered, "I don't think it's her laundry that's dirty but your windows."

I believe those who struggle with guilt are the most critical of others. People in the church who constantly criticize their fellow Christians are most likely the ones who haven't learned to embrace God's forgiveness. They still feel guilty, so they're trying to alleviate their shame by pointing to the deficiencies of everybody else. If you can't forgive yourself even after God has forgiven you, can you really forgive others?

The opposite is also true: The ones who have fully embraced God's grace, who are forgiven much, return that forgiveness to others more abundantly. They have experienced God's mercy, and they are more Christ-like. Proverbs 28:1 emphasizes this truth: "The wicked flee when no man pursueth: but the righteous are bold as a lion."

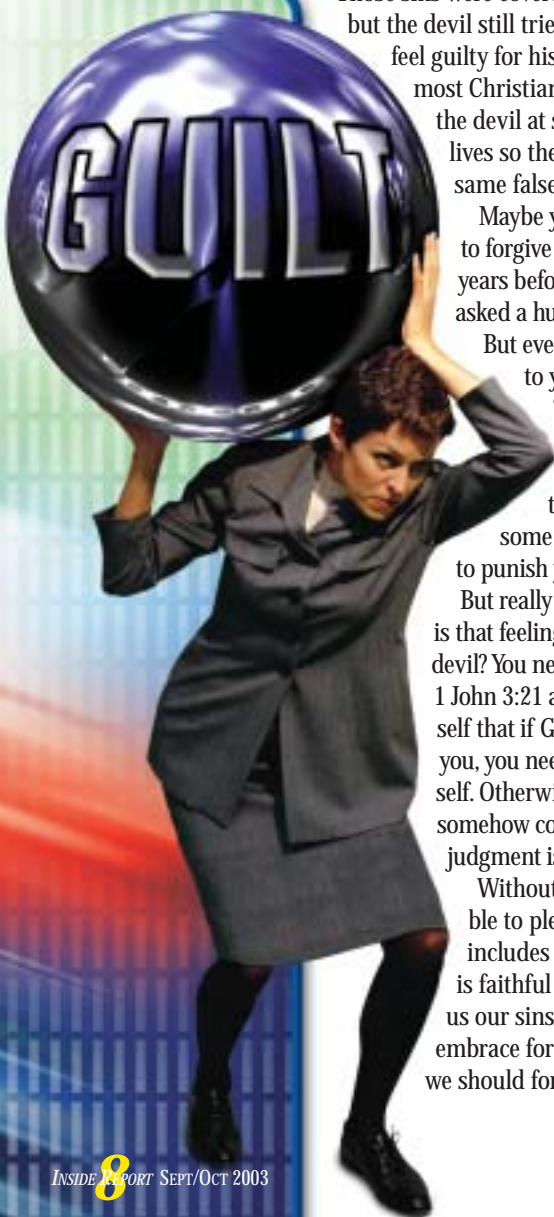
The guilty run from self-condemnation even though they aren't being chased—like a paroled thief who thinks the sheriff is still stalking him. They're plagued by a guilty conscience, while the righteous, those who like Job are clean by the blood of the Lamb, stand fast and offer grace to those in need.

Guilt From God or Man?

The first book of Peter counsels, "Having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed" (3:16 NKJV). Peter is writing to all those who are doing good and yet are suffering for their moral behavior. A day is coming when the whole world will try to make you feel bad about doing God's will, as if you are a traitor for not going along with their sinful ways. They will use guilt as a weapon against God's people—blaming them for the calamities that befall the earth in the final days.

Peter says that if you are being persecuted for doing right, don't be ashamed. Instead, let your false accusers be ashamed, because it's not your problem. We too often allow the world to heap undeserved shame on us because we are more concerned about what it thinks than what God knows. We would rather have acceptance before man than a clear conscience before God. But as someone said, "Guilt suggested by the judgment of men is a false guilt if it does not receive inner support by a judgment of God."

This dynamic can be seen during the church offering. As the collection plate goes by, some are not able to give, but they know people around them might be watching. So they reluctantly toss



A Clear Conscience—A Healthy Body

Jesus dedicated much of His ministry to healing people's bodies from sickness brought on by guilt. Indeed, His physical healing was often a symbol of forgiving their sin as much as it was a cure for their actual ailment. People often unconsciously make themselves ill because of their guilt. Science has clearly substantiated what the Bible has long taught about the connection between shame, guilt, and sickness. "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones" (Proverbs 17:22).

When Jesus healed somebody, He said, "Go and sin no more." He's saying there is a connection between their sin and sickness, so when He healed their disease, He also took away their guilt.

A good attitude is a natural remedy—those most positive about their lives tend to have an improved immune system and better odds of surviving a major sickness. "A merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance: but by sorrow of the heart the spirit is broken" (Proverbs 15:13). A good, healing attitude is composed of trusting divine power and mercy in your forgiveness, which positively influences your health.



something into the plate. The many empty envelopes treasurers find in the offering speaks to this. But don't confuse the guilt that the world wants to place on you with the guilt that comes from disobeying God. They are two different things, and only one leads to true redemption.

Steer Clear of Guilt

"But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

Of course, the ideal would be to never feel shame because you're not doing anything to feel guilty about. Philip Brooks writes, "Keep clear of the need of concealment. It's an awful hour when the first necessity of hiding anything comes. The whole life is different thenceforth. When there are questions to be feared and eyes to be avoided and subjects which must not be touched then the bloom of life is gone."

Christians ought to live lives that are crystal clear. It is possible to live without feeling fear or shame because our sins are forgiven and we are walking in the light with nothing to hide. No one can be caught in a place he does not visit. If you live in the light, you're not worried if somebody gets a hold of your computer

hard drive or file cabinet. Anytime you feel the need to hide something, you should ask, "Should I be doing this?"

One great way to avoid guilt is by surrounding yourself with spiritually honest people and activities. Reading the Bible with a sincere heart and fellowshiping with other good Christians is a proven way to practice living rightly and learning how to behave according to the Word. You probably tend to be more cautious about your actions at church than anywhere else because you're conscious of God's presence, so it's good practice to remain in that environment and attitude.

Often, my simply being a minister makes people feel guilty. A mechanic working on my car might not use "angelic language." They'll use profanity—until I mention that I'm a minister. Instantly the language changes! Their sense of guilt is a natural, healthy response. Likewise, when we walk conscious of the presence of God, it keeps us on the path of life.

Good News for the Guilty

Mary was the disciple from whom Jesus drove out seven evil spirits. Someone at a feast complains, "If Jesus was a prophet, He wouldn't let this woman touch Him because of who she is!" That's how dirty Mary's reputation was, yet who is the one who first saw Jesus after the resurrection? Not His mother or John or James or even Peter—it was Mary Magdalene.

Furthermore, He picked her to go share His message. Why?

Quite possibly, He was trying to say something about guilt and shame.

The Lord uses people who have these reputations.

Doesn't that speak to your heart something about feeling shame when the Lamb has forgiven you? Doesn't it show how you might treat others whom the Lord has forgiven?

When Jesus went to the cross, He endured our sins—but He also took our guilt and shame. Some Christians think that Jesus took our sins, but we still must feel the shame. Yet even though Jesus loves peace, He was stripped and felt our shame so that we might



have that peace. He felt what every transgression ever committed has brought the world, and it tortured His spirit so that He took our guilt on the cross.

"God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:19 NKJV). This is good news! God is not holding our sins over our heads. As we learned earlier, sin and guilt go together, so Jesus died for your shame as much as He died to cover your sins with His blood.

Jesus does not want you to feel guilty; rather, He has given you a new heart. It's why He calls His children "born again." Should a newborn baby feel guilty about the murders of Ted Bundy? Of course not, because they are two different people. It's the same way if you are born again—you're not the same person that you were before.

This is so important to me as a pastor, because the only way I can stand before my church and dare speak about Jesus and His gospel is if I believe I'm not the same Doug Batchelor who did despicable things in the past. That's why Jesus came to set us free. It's the new birth concept—how can a new person feel guilty about some-

thing a dead person did? When you're born again, you are made new. Hebrews 4:16 gives you and me wonderful hope: "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." We can now come before the throne of God with boldness, because Jesus took away our shame and guilt.

Grandpa took the whole family to the county fair where a pilot was offering short rides in his two-seat biplane for 50 cents. After much pleading and urging from the family, Grandma very reluctantly agreed to take a ride in the "flying contraption." For 15 thrilling minutes, the pilot gave grandma a beautiful and scenic ride. For the first time, she saw from the air the town and farms where she had spent most of her life. After she landed, the family detected a sparkle of excitement in grandma's eyes. "We knew you would love it!" the family chimed. Trying to save face, Grandma said, "I'll have you know, I never did put my full weight down!"

Friend, perhaps you are one of the millions who have accepted Jesus' forgiveness but still feel you must carry the shame and guilt. Why not put your full weight down now? 