

Dealing with Guilt



Guilt is the emotional response we all experience when we fall short of a standard of behaviour that we adopted for ourselves. When our actions or speech or even our thoughts conflict with our conscience, we can feel deeply disappointed in ourselves. We may also feel we have failed others – God, our parents, family, friends or our ecclesia.

Guilt can be a powerful, even valuable, force in our lives, stimulating our consciences, alerting us to the effects of our behaviour on others and ourselves. Guilt also assists us in aligning our actions/speech with our beliefs, helping us to achieve a position of personal integrity.

Because we are all (to varying extents) brought up with a sense of right and wrong, good and bad, guilt is our heritage because we are human and will inevitably “fall short” of our ideals.

However, it is God’s ultimate design to take guilt away from us, having offered us complete forgiveness through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 John 1:7).

The truth is that God wants us to live free and unburdened!

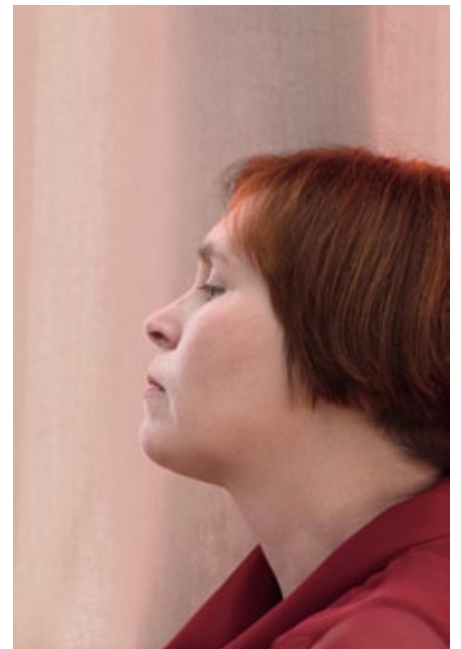
So where does guilt fit into God’s picture?

To explain this, Jesus told the parable of the lost son - a story of guilt, shame and restoration. The guilty son, having hurt his father and wasted his inheritance, having sinned and despaired of ever

finding a way out of his sad and sorry situation, at last recognises his wrong and returns home, hoping to find some acceptance there in spite of everything he has done. He places his trust in his father.

He says to him, “Father, I have sinned against Heaven and against you”, acknowledging his failure to live up to God’s expectations and his father’s. Then “I am no longer worthy to be called your son” expresses his deep sense of shame.

We can really identify with him when we experience feelings of worthlessness and remorse. It is such a relief to hear that this son found a welcome. The father’s response is more than a welcome. He offers not only acceptance, but wholehearted forgiveness and restores his son to his place in the family.



Our Father, too, is a healing, restorative God who wants His sons and daughters to live free from guilt in the warmth of His love for them.

What God wants when we have done wrong

God wants us to face our failures and deal constructively with them. He sets out the steps for healing ourselves and our relationship with Him in the parable.

Confession: We need to acknowledge our awareness of wrong-doing, specifically naming the behaviour and accepting responsibility for it.

Resolution: Repent, if the wrong is against God's laws. God has no time for crocodile tears - just saying "sorry" doesn't cut the mustard with Him. We need to resolutely turn away from the wrong and take a different path.

If someone has been injured by us, we may be able to make restitution, but sometimes this is not possible. However, an apology is always appropriate and can lead to restoration and healing. Sometimes we are not ready to take these steps. We may need to ask God to help us.

What is always possible is to ask for God's help to change the behaviour that caused us to feel guilty.

Conviction: Having repented and asked for forgiveness we then act in the belief that it has been granted. We are to live as people who have been washed clean and forgiven, whose sins are as far away from them as the East is from the West.

Belief in God's forgiveness can be the real test of our faith

David's experience in dealing with his guilt may help us. After his sin with Bathsheba, David denied it to himself until Nathan the prophet prodded his conscience. Once David recognised his guilt, though, he was filled with deep intense regret. He confessed his sin to God and found forgiveness. He describes this in Psalms 32 & 51.

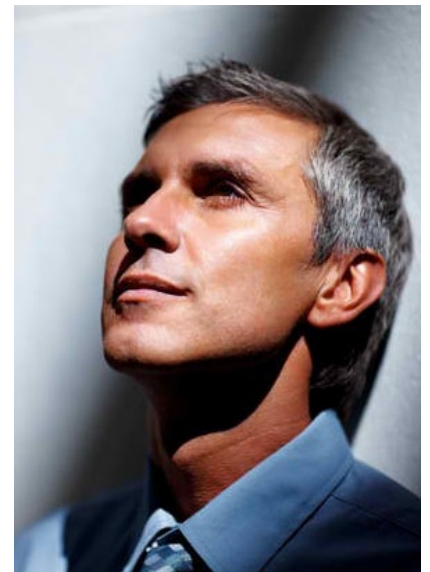
Psalm 103:9 says very plainly: *"He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us for our*

iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him."

God's grace is greater than our sin

In some instances we hold onto guilt because we find it hard to accept the extent of God's forgiveness. And some people are brought up with guilt as their moral guide. They can never seem to escape from guilt and shame.

This is not God's design. He wants us to know that He forgives and heals us. He declared at the beginning to Moses - and to us - that He is a *"compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin"*.



He forgives us because of who He is, not because of anything we have done or not done.

It is His nature to forgive us, just like the father in the story.

1 John 1: 9 tells us *"if we confess our sins he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*

God's "faithfulness" is to His own character.

We need to realise that He can forgive where men and women sometimes cannot.

We need to learn to trust God and appreciate the depth of His love for us.