

## What Do I Do With This Guilt?

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Psalm 19:7-11

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### I. Introduction.

- A. Is there anyone here who has never felt guilty for something they've done? Who has never thought, "Oh, I shouldn't have said that. I shouldn't have done that?"
  - 1. Would you please raise your hand. Please hold it high.
  - 2. I'm having a hard time seeing any hands. My hand certainly isn't up.
  - 3. It appears to me that there's no one here who has never felt guilty.
- B. Now I have a second, more sobering question, for which I don't want a show of hands. Is there anyone here who is presently struggling with guilt that they don't know what to do with? For which they can't find relief?
  - 1. This is a very different question.
  - 2. Although all of us acknowledged we have, at times, felt guilty for things we have done, most of us have resolved that guilt—it no longer haunts us.
  - 3. But this question asks "Is there unresolved guilt in your life?" Is there guilt for which you are unable to find relief?
- C. I've included the topic of guilt in my "We Smile on Sunday, But Come Monday.." series because I've discovered that there are many more Christians than one would imagine struggling with various degrees of unresolved guilt.
  - 1. They're present with us on Sundays, smiling and appearing calm and at peace on the outside.
  - 2. But inside they carry a burden for something that happened days, weeks, months or years ago for which they have been unable to find relief.
  - 3. And we want to look at that today.

### II. Now the first thing we need to do is to define what guilt is.

- A. The definition I want to use is this, "Guilt is a feeling of regret and shame as the result of a gap between a certain standard of behavior we feel we are to achieve and the behavior in which we have engaged which has fallen short of standard."
  - 1. Now all of us have standards of behavior—rules defining what our behavior should be.
    - a. That standard might tell us, "Do not kill people." or "Stop at stop signs." or "Turn off a light when you leave the room."
    - b. There are all kinds of standards of behavior in our lives.
  - 2. But sometimes our behavior falls short of these standards.
    - a. We may reach for a standard but not achieve it—My standard is 30 minutes of devotions every day, but I missed two days this week.
    - b. And sometimes, if the truth be known, we just ignore the standard and do what we want—Mom said two cookies, but I had five.
  - 3. Guilt resides in the gap between the standard of behavior that we regard as authoritative in our lives and the behavior in which we have engaged.
- B. There are two chief ways we have of resolving guilt.
  - 1. The first way is excusing the failure to meet the standard because of

extenuating circumstances.

a. I couldn't do it because I was sick.

b. I was just following directions.

2. The second way we have of resolving guilt is forgiveness.

a. In many cases this involves the forgiveness of a person or God.

b. And in all cases it involves our forgiving ourselves.

C. Now what I want to do today is to identify five kinds of guilt and then look at how we go about resolving each kind.

III. I'm going to begin with the weirdest kind of guilt which I'm calling irrational guilt.

A. That's when we feel guilty about something that's way outside our control.

B. It's amazing how many people feel guilty about things had nothing to do with.

C. I'm thinking of:

1. Children who feel guilty for Mom and Dad's divorce.

2. People who feel guilty for 9-11, the Columbia disaster, the Iraq War.

D. I don't know about you, but I frequently feel irrational guilt.

1. I can feel guilty for the dumbest things I had nothing to do with.

2. It's irrational, but yet it's real. I feel real guilt.

3. I suspect many of you know what I'm talking about.

E. Now the strategy for handling irrational guilt is to be rational and to logically evaluate your degree of responsibility for the problem.

1. "This is silly. I didn't have anything to do with that. It's not my fault."

2. Irrationality doesn't always surrender easily to rationality, but that is our only hope of addressing this kind of guilt.

F. We can cancel a lot of guilt in our lives by getting rid of guilt for things we didn't do. That leaves dealing with guilt for things we did do—rational guilt we deserve.

IV. The first kind of rational guilt is guilt about failing to meet standards we've created for our selves.

A. Now before we can get into this too much, we need to talk about how the standards in our lives got to be the standards we feel we need to observe.

1. And the truth is that the standards are written by authorities to whom we grant the power to define how we should behave.

2. These authorities include God, other people, and ourselves.

B. And what we're talking about here in this point is the standards we ourselves have written for how we will live our lives.

C. You see we create many of the standards in our lives. They may not be fair standards or logical standards. But we create them nonetheless.

1. I will brush my teeth three times a day. Turn off light when leave room.

2. My brother-in-law's father who was starved as a prisoner of war in WW2 wrote standard of never less than three month supply of food in house.

D. Most of the time these standards are appropriate and lead us to be disciplined and to achieve significant goals—I will drink no alcohol. I will exercise three times/wk.

E. But at other times they can be unrealistic as we reach for some impossible goal we wish we could meet, and lead us to live in constant guilt—I will have 30 inch waist.

F. In this situation, where we're dealing with a standard we've created for ourselves, we can deal with guilt in three different ways.

1. First, we can change our behavior to fit the standard—if this is a standard we believe in, we can redouble our efforts and meet it.
  2. Second, we can change the standard to fit our behavior.
    - a. I don't want to say this lightly, but sometimes we create standards that just simply are too drastic—they may be very praiseworthy, but entirely impractical and unattainable.
    - b. Well, since we established the standard, we can change it.
      - (1) Maybe it just simply is too high and unrealistic.
      - (2) Maybe changes in our situation mean that we no longer can meet the standard.
      - (3) So we can change standard. We can loosen up on ourselves.
  3. And third, we may need to just simply forgive ourselves.
    - a. We may conclude that the standard was appropriate and we failed.
    - b. In that case we can offer ourselves grace and forgiveness and we can renew our attempts to live according to the standard.
- G. We can control a lot of our personal guilt by balancing our standard with realistic expectations of our behavior.
- V. Second, there's guilt we feel about failing to meet the standards created by other people.
- A. There are all kinds of standards created by other people.
    1. Some are laws. Some are regulations.
    2. Some are social expectations, family expectations, friendship expectations.
  - B. Most of these have been shaped by centuries of human experience and are wise.
    1. Out of centuries of experience, accountants have developed what are known as Generally Accepted Accounting Principles.
    2. A century of driving has produced traffic laws.
    3. Centuries of living have produced the common courtesies of family life, social life and friendship.
      - a. Use a napkin rather than your sleeve.
      - b. Send a thank you note.
  - C. So how do we deal with guilt we feel in these areas?
    1. Well, first of all, rewriting the standard isn't an option as it was in regard to the standards you've created yourself.
    2. So the critical thing to do is to change your behavior to meet the standard.
    3. In cases where you have failed to live up to certain standards, you might need to apologize/ or pay a fine,/ or spend time in jail.
    4. You may need to ask for forgiveness from the one you have offended.
    5. And then you need to forgive yourself.
  - D. Now although rewriting the standard isn't an option here as it is for standards we create ourselves, there are some cases in which one might need to question and attempt to revise the standard, or to operate according to a different standard.
    1. Sometimes adult children may need to evaluate if a standard they learned from their parents is one they want to accept for themselves.
      - a. I've rejected some of my parents' standards.
      - b. And I see our daughters rejecting some of ours.
      - c. That's different from rejecting traffic laws or GAAP.

2. There are times when one needs to stand in opposition to some standards that fall short of other standards that you think are of greater importance.
    - a. I think of Jim Crow or apartheid laws.
    - b. And I can think of some newly-created politically correct standards that I question.
  3. There are times when we need to resist human-created standards.
- E. But for the most part human-created standards are wise ones.
1. We need to strive to meet them.
  2. We need to ask for forgiveness and to forgive ourselves when we fail.
  3. We need to think long and hard before challenging them.
- VI. Third, there's guilt we feel about failing to meet the standard created by God.
- A. Now here we come to the ultimate standard.
1. There is a standard God has established by which He expects us to live.
    - a. To fail to live according to this standard is sin.
    - b. And there's no modifying this one.
  2. The Psalmist declares this at a number of places.
    - a. Both *Psalm 19* and *119* sing the praises of God's law and precepts.
    - b. In *Psalm 119:4* the psalmist says, *You have laid down precepts that are to be fully obeyed.*
  3. We find these precepts in the Ten Commandments, the OT holiness code, the teachings of Jesus and the letters of the Apostles.
  4. God's standard is a standard of justice, of peace, of love for one's fellow man, caring, respect for life, righteousness, holiness, and purity.
- B. And we are called to live up to this standard.
- C. There is one and only one way to deal with guilt in this area—by acknowledging our failure to meet God's standard, repenting of that failure and asking God to cleanse us of our guilt.
1. It is in his forgiveness of us that we find freedom to forgive ourselves and cancel our guilt.
  2. And fortunately our God is a very forgiving God. *John says, If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)*
  3. Knowing full well that God forgives us, we can then forgive ourselves.
- VII. Now there is a fourth kind of rational guilt.
- A. It's a guilt based on failing to meet the standards humans create in an attempt to interpret and reinforce the standards of God.
- B. For many of the standards God has created, very well-intentioned people create a secondary standard saying "This is what God means," and they ascribe to it all the authority of God's standard.

- C. Guilt for failing to meet these secondary standards is a guilt particularly found among religious groups who put an emphasis on purity of life or social action.
    - 1. They say, “God calls us to modesty, and this is what modesty means.”
    - 2. “God calls us to purity of life, and this is what purity of life means.”
    - 3. “God calls all Christians to vote this way, and support these social issues.”
    - 4. So people add all this secondary stuff on to God’s original standard to make sure everyone understands what God means.
  - D. It is exactly this practice that got the Pharisees in trouble with Jesus.
    - 1. They had taken the precepts of God and developed an incredible legalistic structure of what they meant.
    - 2. And Jesus was saying, “No, no, no! You’re getting it all wrong.”
    - 3. And I suspect he would have the exact same response to modern groups with their secondary standards of what God means.
    - 4. Many of our attempts to define what being faithful Christians will look like end up creating legalisms that fall short of what God intends.
  - E. We need to carefully consider what is a legitimate expression of God’s standards and what is a legalistic human addition.
    - 1. If we have broken the standard of God, need to confess and be forgiven.
    - 2. But there’s a possibility that we have merely broken legalistic human reinforcements of God’s standard and need feel no guilt.
- VIII. Now what we’ve learned from our review of guilt is that we sometimes do and sometimes don’t deserve to feel the guilt we feel.
- A. Some guilt is irrational.
    - 1. And you can dismiss it because you realize it is irrational.
    - 2. I had nothing to do with Columbia disaster. I’m going to cancel that guilt.
  - B. Some guilt is because we’ve created standards for ourselves we can’t meet. We can handle that by changing the standard to make it more realistic.
  - C. Some guilt is because we’ve confused God’s standards with a secondary standard that may have missed God’s original intention.
  - D. But some guilt is genuine because we have failed to live up to fair and authoritative standards that we have no power or right to change.
    - 1. In that case you need to accept the validity of the standard and acknowledge you have failed to meet it.
    - 2. And here the only answer is repentance and forgiveness.
    - 3. And the forgiveness of God comes full and free.
    - 4. And in that forgiveness of God comes the opportunity to forgive ourselves.
  - E. There’s no reason for us to live with unresolved guilt.
    - 1. No matter what we have done, God stands ready to forgive us.
    - 2. And with his forgiveness come the power and the permission to forgive ourselves and lay our guilt down.
    - 3. Probably the best example of that is the story of the Prodigal Son.
      - a. He blew all kinds of standards of behavior.
      - b. But he also repented and asked for forgiveness which the father gladly gave.
    - 4. Hymn 139 tells that story. Let’s join in singing it together.