Guilt and Repentance

What is Guilt

- Although this English term in modern usage often refers to a subjective feeling (self-reproach, awareness of having done something wrong), in biblical contexts it indicates the legal and moral condition that results from sin, that is, from a violation of God's law.
- Guilt itself is culpability, meaning liability to punishment (Rom 3:23).
- Justification addresses both guilt and penalty through a two-fold exchange centered of imputation (2 Cor 5:21 cf. 1 Cor 1:30).

Sense of Guilt

- From the Beginning: That the shame here demonstrated by Adam and Eve was not simply a modest embarrassment for their nakedness is clear from the fact that before they had sinned, they were naked and not ashamed (Gen 2:25), and as soon as they sinned, they were ashamed. Furthermore, when they clothed themselves with fig leaves, they were, by Adam's own admission, still ashamed before God and were afraid of Him. (Gen 3:10).
- Fear – It was a cringing fear of what God may do in His displeasure to one who clings to his sin – the fear which drives man away from intimacy with God, unless there is contrition in his heart. It was the fear of God's judgment.

Sense of Guilt

- Proverbs 28:1 (cf. Deut 28:5) – Effects: Prov 28:1 reveals the effects that occur in man's heart when he chooses to order his life according to God's standards (that is, to do what he knows is right), or when he chooses not to order his life by God's standards (that is, to do what he believes to be wrong).
- Repentance is key – It was so in the garden, and now so in Proverbs 28:1 we see that unless man repents of his disobedience to God, he finds himself fleeing from the One who lovingly desires his intimate fellowship.

God's Standard for Man

- The Word of God (see Jn 17:17, Col 3:16, Jn 16:13, 1 Thess 2:13).
- The Work of the Law Written in the Heart (see Romans 2:14-15 cf. Rom 1:32).
- Human but God-ordained Authorities – e.g. Government
- Personally acquired Standards (Rom 14).
  "We may not tone down the condemnation to which the weak believer is subjected when he eats without clear conscience. It is not merely the condemnation of his own conscience; it is condemnation before God. This is proven by the last clause that 'whatever is not of faith is sin.' Just as the strong believer entertains his conviction of liberty before God (v. 22a) and is blessed before God (v. 22b), so the weak is condemned before God when he violates conviction (cf. vs. 14b, 15). The concluding clause is to be understood as applying to the subject in hand… a believer sins when he does what is not approved in his conviction and faith" – John Murray

A Basic Righteousness

- The great commandment – Love God and love others (Matt. 22:37-40).
- No fear in love – 1 John 4:18
- We love, because He first loved us (1 Jn 4:19).

Uncaused Fear / Uncaused Fleeing

- Therefore, when one experiences guilt, his problem is rooted in a lack of love for God and/or for others. When he experiences apparently uncaused fear (which, scripturally, is a fear of God's anticipated judgment even before He moves in judgment), the root of his problem is his chosen lack of love for God and/or for others. And when he is plagued with desires to flee when there is no apparent reason to do so, the foundational problem in his life is the same.

What about Faith?

- Faith is the avenue through which the unbeliever is forgiven (Acts 10:43), is imputed the righteousness of God (Rom 4:3), and is justified (declared righteous) in His sight (Rom 5:1). Faith is also the avenue through which the believer is filled with the Holy Spirit and is enabled to experience the fruit of the Spirit, the most comprehensive expression of which is agape love (Gal 5:22). Gal 5:6 in fact, even speaks of "faith working through love." So on the one hand, the believer is enabled to love by faith, and, on the other hand, he continues to believe God (to have faith in Him) because of his love for Him. It is a "blessed circle."
- Regrettably the circle is broken by the believer's choice to sin (to lack love for God and/or for others). But happily, the blessed circle returns when he confesses his sins and he is cleansed from all unrighteousness (1 Jn 1:9).

Moving from Unloving to Loving

- For the unbeliever: justification by faith in Christ (confession, forgiveness, Spirit-led life, reliance on Jesus) and now a new creation in Christ.
- For the believer – 1 Jn 1:9 (confession, forgiveness, Spirit-led life, reliance on Jesus), a return to intimacy with our Lord. See also Prov 28:14, Jas. 5:14-16.

Moving from Unloving to Loving

- As one grows in Christ, though he sins less and less, he is more and more sensitive to sin. He sees the sinfulness of sin more and more, i.e., sanctification, becoming more like Christ.
- We are to continue to press on (Phil 3:11-16) to grow in Christ whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light (Matt 11:30).
- Every man remains fully responsible for what he is, thinks, speaks, and does, for though it is true that he cannot change his own heart, it is also true that with the strength given to him by God he is able to flee to him who renews hearts and lives. The Lord is ever willing and eager to give whatever he demands of men. (Mt 15:19-20 cf. Mt 15:27-28).

Conscience

- “Conscience appears – to put it graphically – as a court of appeals which is not able to promulgate any statutes… but is able to deliver judgment on the cases before it.” – Colin Brown in NIDNTT
- Three passages in the book of Romans reveal that all people have a conscience by nature:
  - Romans 1:18-21
  - Rom 1:32
  - Rom 2:14-15

Conscience

- The conscience of man operates instinctively. Conscience is not only innate within the human heart, but it works instinctively therein, even when one wishes that it would not.
- “Conscience is an ineradicable witness to God in the heart of man. It is an independent inner conviction of man’s responsibility to God for his conduct, and it is planted in his very being by the Creator Himself” (William Hendriksen)
- Scripturally – One does not experience a sense of guilt or self-reproach unless he has a knowledge of his own guilt.

Conscience

- Conscience is therefore not, as has been claimed, the product of environment, training, or habit, race, impressions, or education, though it is influenced by all those factors, but conscience is an inherited faculty of the soul. It is innate, universal, and common to all men." – Alfred Rehwinkel – The Voice of Conscience

Contrast Teaching Concerning the Conscience		
	The Word of God	The Word of Man
Origin:	Innate	Developed
Operation:	Instinctive	Learned
Standards:	Innate and Learned	Learned only
Accountability:	To God the Creator	To Self

Conscience Functions in Three Ways (Walter Elwell)

- The redemptive purpose of depression lies in its potential to redirect us toward God's transformative work. God's ultimate goal is conformity to Christ, requiring us to do those things that please our heavenly Father (John 8:29).
- Trials—including depression—serve to test and strengthen faith, producing endurance that matures believers, requiring both a choice to find joy within difficulty and recognition that trials accomplish God-honoring purposes.
- When surrendered to Christ, the very circumstance pressing hard against us becomes the Father's best-shaped tool to shape us for eternity. Rather than remaining enslaved to distressing circumstances, believers can redirect their focus toward serving and worshiping God within those circumstances, finding purpose that transcends their emotional state.

The Connection Between Sinful Depression and Repentance

- Obligatory – It urges man to do that which he regards as right and restrains him from doing that which is wrong
- Judicial – Conscience passes judgment upon man's decisions and acts.
- Executive – Conscience executes its judgment in the heart of man. It condemns his actions when in conflict with his convictions by causing an inward disquietude, distress, shame, or remorse. It commends when man has acted in conformity with his convictions.

Is False Guilt Biblical

- Origin of false guilt – Sigmund Freud. The ideas that all guilt is false guilt and that guilt is a bad thing make sense for one who believes, as Freud did, that there are no absolute standards of right and wrong for man, that there is no God to whom he is responsible for his life.

1) According to the Word of God, there is no false guilt because when the believer violates even the personally acquired (but not biblically revealed) standards of his own weak conscience, he is sinning against God (Rom 14:22-23).

Is False Guilt Biblical

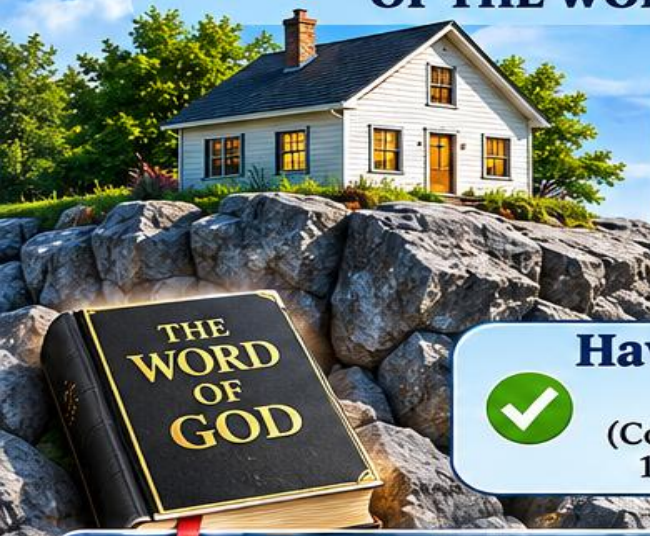
2. There is no false guilt because nowhere in Scripture is a sense of guilt experienced in the heart of one whose attitudes are at that moment righteous (loving) and who is resting in God's forgiveness for his personal sin. Instead, a sense of peace is present (Ps 119:165, Jn 14:27, Phil 4:6-7 Gal 5:22, Rom 8:6, 14:17)
3. There is no false guilt because the believer is morally responsible to God for having and maintaining a good, unguilty conscience, and consequently, when he does not have a good conscience but has a guilty one, he is responsible to God for having this as well (1 Pet 3:15-16, 1 Tim 1:19)

Is False Guilt Biblical

4. According to the Word of God, there is no false guilt because the believer must have a good, ungodly conscience in order to love God and others with *agapé* love, which is his moral responsibility before God. This confirms that a guilty conscience is also his moral responsibility to God, for if he does not have a good, unguilty conscience, it prevents him from loving as he is commanded to do (Matt 22:37-40, Eph 5:2, Col 3:14, Jn 14:15, Eph 5:18, Gal 5:22).
5. There is no false guilt because whenever the believer experiences a sense of guilt in his immaterial heart, it prevents him, at that moment, from obeying God's command to be continually controlled by the holy Spirit and thereby to possess the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace – the opposite of a sense of guilt (Gal 5:16-17, 22-23; 1 Tim 1:5; Rom 5:3-5; 8:28-29; Jn 14:27)

TRUE GUILT

LOVE BUILT SECURELY UPON THE ROCK OF THE WORD OF GOD



Agapé Love

(Commanded by God— 1 Tim 1:5, Gal 5:16, 22, Matt 22:37–40, 1 Jn 4:20–21, et al.)

Having Good, Unguilty Conscience

(Commanded by God – 1 Pet 3:16, 1 Tim 1:19, Ps 32:5, 1 Jn 3:21)

The Biblical Answer to True Family Guilt:



As the believer responds to the conviction of his conscience and confesses his sin, he receives God's family forgiveness through the Lord Jesus Christ and the control of the Holy Spirit.

(Promised by God – 1 Jn 1:9, Prov 28:13b, Ps 32:5, Isa 57:15, Eph 5:18)

True Guilt:



When the believer experiences a sense of guilt for violating any of the standards in his heart – including his own non-moral, personally acquired standards – his conscience is operating correctly, and it means he is truly guilty before God for personal sin in his heart.

FALSE GUILT

LOVE TEETERING INSECURELY UPON THE SANDS OF HUMAN WISDOM



Human Love

(Sourced in human wisdom)

Desensitizing One's Conscience

(Covering sin: fleeing from the sense of true guilt in one's heart and the fear of judgment – Prov 28:13a, Prov 21:2, Jer 17:9–10, Ps 32:3a)

Human Wisdom's Answer to False Guilt:



Human wisdom teaches principles designed to eliminate false guilt. Therefore, human wisdom, not God's Word hold the key to dealing with false guilt.

(Warned against in Scripture – Col 2:8, Ps 1:1, et al.)

Human Wisdom's False Guilt:



When the believer experiences a sense of guilt for violating his own non-moral, personally required standards, or when he experiences a sense of guilt said to be stimulated by a conscience that has wrongly learned to register punitive guilt.

Obedience

(According to the commands of God – Rom 14:22, 1 Cor 8:7–13)

Obedience (in the top two boxes) is **dependent fully upon a solid, biblical foundation.** (Read chart from top to bottom to explain.) **When false guilt is said to exist, one is dependent upon human wisdom** (Contrary to the teaching of Rom 14:22–23, 1 Cor 8:7–13, 1 Pet 3:16, not upon 1 Tim 1:5).

Repentance

- Repentance means changing one's mind, so that one's views, values, goals, and ways are changed, and one's whole life is lived differently. Mind and judgment, will and affections, behavior and lifestyle, motives and plans: all are involved. Repenting means starting to live a new life.
- David expresses true repentance in Ps. 51, having in his heart the serious purpose of sinning no more, and of living a righteous life (Luke 3:8; Acts 26:2).
- Confession logically precedes repentance because a humble response to sin goes beyond confession to include heartfelt repentance. Confession involves admitting guilt before God, while repentance means having godly sorrow for the sin itself and its effects (2 Cor 7:9–11).

Repentance

- Saying “I did something I shouldn’t have done” differs fundamentally from true repentance, which declares “I have given personal offense to God by breaking his holy law.” Without this deeper sorrow and commitment to change, confession remains incomplete. Feelings of remorse and sorrow generated by fear of punishment, without any wish or resolve to forsake sinning, should not be confused with repentance.
- Confession acknowledges the wrong; repentance transforms the person through genuine grief and a purposeful turning toward obedience. (1 Jn 1:9 cf. Matt 6:46).

Repentance in Relation to Sanctification

- Sanctification differs fundamentally from justification—while justification addresses guilt through a single decisive act, sanctification operates as a continuous process that confronts the corruption driving believers toward sin.
- Since the pursuit of holiness entails progress marked by victories and defeats, it necessarily demands repentance; as Martin Luther argued, the whole life of believers should be repentance, meaning sanctification will be characterized by penitence more than perfection.
- Repentance involves a change of direction and transformation of the will, constituting far more than a change of mind—it represents a determination to abandon disobedience and surrender one's will to Christ.

Repentance in Relation to Sanctification

- While repentance itself is not strictly defined as behavioral change, a changed life is the inevitable fruit that genuine repentance will bear (Matt 7:15-20).
- This dynamic prevents sanctification from becoming either works-righteousness or spiritual complacency; rather, genuine repentance means admitting specific wrongs, recognizing one's offensiveness to God, changing course, turning to Christ, and wishing with all one's heart never to repeat the despised mistake (Col 1:28, Heb 2:10; James 1:4).
- "If the pursuit of holiness entails progress—with fits and starts, with victories and defeats, with two steps forward and one step back—then it also demands repentance." – Kevin DeYoung

Repentance is Deeply Trinitarian

- Repentance emerges as fundamentally trinitarian because each person of the Godhead operates distinctly yet harmoniously in drawing sinners to transformation.
- Peter's Pentecost proclamation invites people to repent and be baptized in Jesus' name, with the Father offering the Holy Spirit to all who embrace the Son in faith. (Acts 2:38-39).
  - The Son is the object of our faith.
  - The Father initiates the gift.
  - The Spirit empowers the response.

Repentance is Deeply Trinitarian

- The Son's atoning work provides the ground for repentance's possibility. Before hearts can be filled with God's grace, repentance must occur; Scripture calls believers to faith that rests upon the living Christ, who fills them with himself through the Holy Spirit, transforming hearts by faith.
- Repentance thus involves simultaneous movements: the Father exposes our condition, the Son becomes our hope and substitute, and the Spirit empowers the turning away from idols and toward God.
- Repentance itself is "a grace of God's Spirit whereby the sinner is inwardly humbled and visibly reformed"—a work that cannot be reduced to human effort or emotion, but rather flows from the coordinated action of all three persons working toward the sinner's restoration.

Closing Thoughts

- Give praise to the Lord for it is His divine power that has given us the Standards by which we live. This includes the Word of God AND the Word of God written on our hearts (Conscience).
- A sense of guilt should lead you to the throne of grace. Be sensitive to “guilt” even when it is misinformed or weak. God’s Word will rightly transform your thinking.
- Repentance is for everyone. The unbeliever becomes a new creation in Christ. The believer is restored to the intimate relationship we were designed to enjoy with the Lord.
- Guidance through and understanding of guilt, the conscience, and repentance is essential to your counselee’s growth in Christ and properly dealing with the issues that they are facing.

Thank You

Questions?

Counseling Resources

- *The Heart of Man and the Mental Disorders, Part 1: How the Word of God is Sufficient, Third Expanded Edition, Rich Thomson.*
- *The Christian Counselor's Manual, Jay Edward Adams.*
- *A Theology of Biblical Counseling: The Doctrinal Foundations of Counseling Ministry, Heath Lambert.*
- *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling, Jay E. Adams*
- *Keep in Step with the Spirit: Finding Fullness in Our Walk with God, J. I. Packer.*
- *The Hole in Our Holiness: Filling the Gap between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Godliness, Kevin DeYoung.*
- *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth, John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue.*
- *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief, John M. Frame.*
- *How People Change, Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp.*
- *The Epistle to the Romans, vol. 1 of The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament, John Murray.*
- *The Voice of Conscience, Alfred M. Rehwinkel*
- *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans, William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker*
- *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Colin Brown*
- *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology: Second Edition. Elwell, Walter A.*