

Should We Ignore Our Feelings Of Guilt?

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Forerunner, "Bible Study," March-April 2014

After Jacob's ten sons sold their brother, Joseph, into slavery in Egypt, they spent two decades haunted by an ever-present feeling of guilt. Whenever Egypt was mentioned, they experienced a pang of culpability for what they had done. The English Romantic poet, William Wordsworth, poignantly expresses the mood of this menacing memory: "From the body of one guilty deed a thousand ghostly fears and haunting thoughts proceed."

Most people believe sin occurs only between themselves and some impersonal, arbitrary law made up in former times to keep people from enjoying themselves. The only reason today's youth seem to have been given for moral integrity is "because the church says the Bible tells us so." For this reason, many waste their time trying to undermine the credibility of Scripture and the authority of the church. If they can overturn them, they reason, they will be free to have all the fun non-Christians supposedly have.

In this progressive culture, people believe that morality changes from age to age and culture to culture. Society decides what is right and wrong. Under this reasoning, sin depends on the circumstances of the moment. Through the media and entertainment, the world promotes quite a different level of moral acceptability than God's standards, illustrating Proverbs 14:12: "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death."

1. What is guilt? How does it relate to sin?

Comment: Numbers 15:31 defines guilt as breaking God's commandments: "Because he has despised the word of the Lord, and has broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; his guilt shall be upon him." Guilt is a condition, a state, or a relationship. It is the result of two forces drawing different ways. At one point stands righteousness, and at the other, sin. In the Old Testament, the ideas of sin, guilt, and punishment are so interwoven that it is impossible to describe one without mentioning the other two. Sometimes one word is used interchangeably for the others.

The apostle John writes, "Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness" (I John 3:4). The Greek word for "sin" is *hamartia*, an archery term for "missing the mark." We could say that sin is not just making an error in judgment in a particular case, but missing the whole point of human life; not just the violation of a law, but an insult to a relationship with the One to whom we owe everything; not just a servant's failure to carry out a master's orders, but the ingratitude of a child to its parent.

The state of sin is a surrender of freedom; it is like being enslaved to a drug. Like a chemical addiction, sin can become an unshakable habit, so that every next time makes it easier to absolve ourselves of guilt. Even petty sins, if numerous enough, can immobilize us until they completely harden our hearts.

2. What happens to our sense of sin when God's standards seem no longer to be valid?

Comment: For an answer, all we need to do is take a look at our global society—its violence, sexual immorality, greed, stealing, and lying resulting in mass deaths, horrible diseases, rampant fraud, massive distrust, and misery. Why is it like this? “Where there is no revelation [divine vision], the people cast off restraint; but happy is he who keeps the law” (Proverbs 29:18). This is why the standard of right and wrong can only come from one who is perfect—our Creator, the Almighty God.

The apostle Paul writes in Romans 7:14 that God’s law is spiritual. The average person, however, considers laws as strictly physical guidelines that were invented to restrict him. But in the widest sense of the word, man’s relationship to God, affected by sin, is what constitutes guilt. Sin separates us from God (Isaiah 59:2), and guilt is the result of that separation.

3. What are the effects of ignoring guilt?

Comment: A couple of examples of guilt will help clarify its effects. One is Cain’s despondent complaint to God after he had slain Abel. “Cain said to the Lord, ‘My punishment is greater than I can bear!’” (Genesis 4:13). The word “punishment” includes both the sin committed and the guilt attached to it. Guilt assures us of eventual misery.

Another example is that of Joseph’s brothers, who were late to recognize their guilt in selling Joseph into slavery. They probably felt their guilt in varying degrees all along, but it was not until they felt threatened by receiving the consequences that they admitted it. “Then they said to one another, ‘We are truly guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear; therefore this distress has come upon us’” (Genesis 42:21). Their guilt had separated them from God, their brother Joseph, and even from their father, Jacob.

In the Psalms, it is apparent that willful and persistent sin can never be separated from guilt or from consequent punishment. Notice Psalm 69:27-28: “Add iniquity to their iniquity, and let them not come into Your righteousness. Let them be blotted out of the book of the living, and not be written with the righteous.” David writes of the wicked in Psalm 109:7, “When he is judged, let him be found guilty.”

Ignoring guilt does not make it go away. A penalty of sin must be paid. Unless we submit to God and accept Christ’s sacrifice for our sins, we will pay the ultimate price—our lives!