

What Must We Do When We Recognize Our Guilt?

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Forerunner, "Bible Study," May-June 2014

Scripture makes little distinction between guilt, sin, and punishment. Although guilt has its emotional component, it is not primarily a feeling but a state that arises because of a violation of divine law—that is, sin (either of commission or omission) against God or one's neighbor. Individuals may also bring guilt upon entire groups, as, for instance, Leviticus 4:3 says that the priest's sins "bring guilt on the people."

Nevertheless, we must understand sin and guilt as personal responsibilities, emphasizing the motives of the inner heart and mind. Jesus teaches that sin begins in the heart (Matthew 5:21-22). He emphasizes the inner motive and aim of the guilty party, and degrees of guilt are seen in light of individual motive and knowledge. Guilt is connected to forgiveness of sin as a debt owed to God (Matthew 18:21-35). Guilt has serious consequences and so is deserving of punishment (I Corinthians 11:27-29).

It is only in the life of Jesus Christ that we can measure the extent of humanity's guilt in the sight of God. He sees man's guilt as the result of sin that killed His Son. The apostle Paul reinforces the fact that everyone is guilty before God until he is justified and sanctified by God (Romans 1:18—3:20).

1. What are the remedies for guilt? Leviticus 5:17-18; I John 1:7.

Comment: Sin requires some sort of punishment (for example, Deuteronomy 19:11-13, 21; 25:1-3). To avoid punishment—receiving the penalty of the law—action must be taken to remove the guilt. In the Old Testament, offerings were performed to cover the penalty (see Leviticus 4-6), along with restitution in relevant cases. Those who sinned defiantly and neglected the required atoning sacrifice were "cut off," remaining in their guilt.

Under the New Covenant, guilt is addressed by having sin washed away by the blood of Jesus Christ. Calling for humility, James commands believers to "cleanse your hands" and "purify your hearts" as requirements for entering God's presence (James 4:8-10). "Hands" represents action (i.e., stop doing wrong things), while "heart" signifies thinking (i.e., stop thinking bad thoughts). This cleansing is required for salvation (John 13:8; Titus 3:5). Water baptism symbolizes our redemption, in which our guilt is washed away, and we arise to newness of life (Acts 22:16; Romans 6:1-6).

Blood corresponds with the stain of guilt, but it is also the means of atonement for sin. Sprinkling with blood can both cleanse and consecrate (Leviticus 16:18-19; I Peter 1:2). Faith in the blood of Christ is the ultimate remedy for human guilt, bringing full and final atonement to those who believe (Romans 3:23-25).

2. How should we respond once we recognize our guilt? Leviticus 26:40-42; Acts 2:37-38.

Comment: We must turn our guilt into responsibility, first by acknowledging and admitting we have committed sin, and then by repenting, changing, and overcoming our

wrong ways. The initial step to overcoming sin is to humble our hearts and accept our guilt. Overcoming, that is, our struggle after righteousness, is evidence of our admission of personal guilt; by striving to rid ourselves of sin and living in accordance with God's standards, we admit to God that we are guilty of sin. The apostle James writes:

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted [found guilty] by the law as transgressors. For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. (James 2:8-10)

Vine's Expository Dictionary defines the Greek word *enochos*, "guilty" in James 2:10, as "lit., 'held in, bound by, liable to a charge or action by law.'" When guilty of sin, we have bound ourselves by it, relinquishing our liberty.

3. What is "the whole law"? James 2:10.

Comment: The whole law encompasses the entire will of God. To break any part of it is to infringe on that will and therefore become guilty of sin, to become a sinner in principle against each individual law and the intent of the whole law. Even under human justice systems, a person becomes a criminal by breaking just one law.

God's law goes beyond physical infractions of rules. For instance, when He directs us to love our neighbors, He does not ask us to like the way they are. He expects us to give them tolerance, patience, and help when needed. Passing by a beaten man lying in a ditch on the road to Jericho may not be legally wrong, but it is unloving (Luke 10:25-37). Thus, a person doing so is guilty of far greater spiritual sin. He does not love his neighbor as himself.

In Matthew 22:37-39, Christ tells us how we can fulfill His royal law—by keeping the two great commandments:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.

If we want to be part of God's glorious Kingdom, we must face our guilt and overcome our sins.