

Guilt—Friend or Foe?

Are you in an emotional battle over guilt? Is your guilt the loving prod of God used to convict, correct, and conform your character—especially when you’ve gone astray? Or do you battle feelings of shame, disgrace, and disgust—especially when guilt strikes your heart?

True guilt is your friend—a godly companion in your conscience who whispers truth and motivates you to change.

False guilt is a relentless foe—an inner enemy that produces sorrow . . . worldly sorrow . . . superficial sorrow that ends in death!

“Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.”
(2 Corinthians 7:10)

True Guilt—A Gift?

True Guilt . . .

- Is a gift from God, motivating you to change
- Reveals that we all are guilty of sin
- Is concerned about developing your inner character
- Communicates God’s care and concern for you
- Does not make excuses for itself
- Encourages your real feelings to surface
- Lovingly shows you the hurt feelings of others
- Is accompanied by a desire for you to change

“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”
(Psalm 51:17)

Where Does False Guilt Come From?

False guilt is based on self-condemning *feelings*: when you blame yourself, even though you’ve committed no wrong, or when you continue to blame yourself even though you’ve confessed and turned from your sin.

False guilt often begins in childhood.² If you heard repeated messages saying “You’re naughty. . . . You’re bad. . . . Shame on you!” your guilt moved from knowing that you did something bad to feeling that *you are bad*. Shame leads you to focus not on *what* you’ve done but on being ashamed of *who* you are. These feelings lead you to believe:

- “Love is based on my performance.”
- “My performance does not live up to the expectations of others.”
- “I will be rejected and abandoned.”

False guilt is that inner voice saying, “Shame on you!” This guilt causes negative attitudes about ourselves and makes us feel basically defective. It produces a deep sense of unworthiness, leaving us with a constant fear of rejection.

False guilt causes unhealthy patterns of relating to others that can last throughout adulthood. As these patterns develop, true guilt over an action that hurts another (real sorrow over our sin) is immediately accompanied by false guilt (fear of rejection from others).

“If I am guilty—woe to me! Even if I am innocent, I cannot lift my head, for I am full of shame and drowned in my affliction.”
(Job 10:15)

Questions and Answers

“How should I respond to true guilt?”

You experience true guilt when you recognize the fact that you have sinned.¹

- Note David’s honesty in Psalm 32:5: “*I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. . . . And you forgave the guilt of my sin.*”
- How did God respond? With forgiveness. His response is the same for you. He says, “*I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sin no more*” (Jeremiah 31:34).

God is faithful. . . . He will always do what He says He will do. When you totally humble your heart before the Lord, not only does God forgive you, He also removes the sin from you.

“As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.”
(Psalm 103:12)

“How should I respond to false guilt?”

The next time the viewing screen of your mind begins to replay your repented sins, realize that this taunting comes from the enemy, the accuser, to discourage you. Ask yourself:

- “What am I hearing?” (Accusation.)
- “What am I feeling?” (Guilt.)
- “What are the facts?” (I am fully forgiven.) Use Scripture as your standard to determine true and false guilt.

If you have received Jesus Christ as your personal Savior and since the Savior died to take away your sins, choose to focus on God’s truth. Turn Romans 8:1 into a prayer: “Thank You, Father, that You don’t condemn me and don’t want me to condemn myself. These feelings of false guilt are not valid because I have accepted Christ’s sacrifice and have turned from my sins.”

*“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”
(Romans 8:1)*

How to Be Forgiven

Find the source of your guilt.

“Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.” (Psalm 51:6)

Own responsibility for your sin.

“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)

Realize that God means what He says.

“Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.” (Romans 4:7–8)

Give up dwelling on the past.

“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!” (Isaiah 43:18–19)

Invest time in renewing your mind.

“You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds.” (Ephesians 4:22–23)

Verify truth when Satan accuses.

“No weapon forged against you will prevail, and you will refute every tongue that accuses you. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD.” (Isaiah 54:17)

Exchange your life for the life of Christ.

“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20)

Notice that God brings your feelings in line with the facts when you obey Him.

“You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.” (Hebrews 10:36)

My Personal Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,

“You know the heaviness I’ve carried in my heart because of my guilt. I admit that many times I’ve had wrong attitudes and wrong actions. I know I’ve been self-willed and haven’t lived according to Your will.

Please forgive me for all of my sins.

Lord Jesus, thank You for loving me. . . . Thank You for Your mercy toward me. . . . Thank You for dying on the cross for me. I realize that You paid the penalty I should have paid for the guilt of my sins. Now I ask You to come into my life to be my Lord and Savior. I give You control over every part of my life.

Thank You for using “good guilt” so powerfully in my life to let me know that I was going the wrong way and to convince me that I needed to go the right way.

May I see my sin as You see it—may I hate my sin as You hate it. Help me lay aside all of my feelings of self-condemnation. Please give me the discernment to know when I’m feeling false guilt instead of true guilt.

I ask that Your spirit convict me when I’m on the wrong road so that I will get on the right road. I also pray that I will always be sensitive to the convicting touch of the Holy Spirit’s hand.

Thank You that I’m forgiven and set free.

In Your holy name I pray. Amen.”

God’s Personal Guarantee

When you have handled your guilt God’s way, He says . . .

*“Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”
(Isaiah 1:18)*

You Can Live Guilt Free

Many Christians who know that God has forgiven them still feel weighted down with guilt and self-condemnation.

- God has forgiven me.
“He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.” (Proverbs 28:13)
- God has purified me.
“If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.” (1 John 1:7)
- God will not remember my sin.
“I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” (Hebrews 8:12)
- God will not bring a charge against me.
“Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.” (Romans 8:33–34)

- I am free of my past.
“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.” (Isaiah 43:18–19)
- I am not condemned by God.
“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” (John 3:18)
- I have peace with God.
“Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:1)

Related to Guilt . . .

- Assurance of Salvation: *Safe, Sealed, and Secure*
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Although the editors have sought to eliminate errors, some may have been overlooked. The considerate reader would render us a great service by calling our attention to such inaccuracies.

1. See Erwin W. Lutzer, *How to Say No to a Stubborn Habit, Even When You Feel Like Saying Yes* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1979), 37–41.

2. For this section, see Bruce Narramore and Bill Counts, *Freedom from Guilt* (Irvine, CA: Harvest House, 1974), 19–26.