

# GUILT AND CONSCIENCE

Guilt is one of the most misunderstood concepts related to human behavior. Guilt is the state of a moral agent after the intentional or unintentional violation of a law, principle, or value established by an authority under which the moral agent is the subject. The law refers to the legal system or establishment instituted by God or man to protect mankind. In the Scripture, when limited to its biblical distinction, guilt is that state of a moral agent after the intentional or unintentional violation of a law or a principle established by God (Lev. 4:2, 13, 22, 27; 5:2, 3)

The Bible shows a progressive development in the concept of guilt. In the Mosaic laws personal responsibility was not necessary for one to have been considered guilty. The priest's sins made "the people also become guilty" (Lev. 4:3). Even the common citizen's sin could bring guilt upon the whole land (Deut. 24:4). A man's family, even if totally unaware of his sin, bore his guilt, and they and even his animals were subject to equal punishment with him (Joshua 7:1-10).

By the time of the prophets, however, we see a notable advance in the concept of sin and its consequent guilt in that they have become more clearly ethical and personal. The emphasis is less on ritual correctness and more on the individual motive, inner spirit, and personal attitude (Isaiah 1; 57:15; 58:1-12; Micah 6:8). The idea of personal responsibility has arrived, God holds every person accountable for his own sins. Man has to suffer a natural consequence of his actions, and he would have to pay additionally by being punished (Ezekiel 18:29-32; 2 Kings 14:6).

The Lord Jesus recognized the broader and deeper implications of guilt. He was concerned not only with the act and the inner attitude (Matt. 5: 21-22), but He saw degrees of guilt dependent on knowledge and motives (Luke 11:29-32; 12:47-48).

Human legitimate happiness is based on compliance with the standards of one's conscience according to Bible doctrine. The conscience containing Bible doctrine is the basis for enduring all injustice and maltreatment without defending the OSN (1 Peter 2:19, 3:16). A soul empty of doctrinal and grace orientation will resolve to frantic search for happiness without fulfillment and satisfaction.

He made it clear that the law had been made for man's benefit (Mark 2:27) and that which made him guilty not only brought suffering to the offender but possibly others around him, it also brought pain to the heart of God. The Lord Jesus Christ, God incarnate, was already paying a price for the guilty people's sins even as He grieved over the city of Jerusalem (Matt. 23:37-39) for lack of guilt.

The guilt of God's people and others' guilt was not only in the violation of rules, but in the violation of persons, whether the injury was to themselves or to others. The weight or seriousness of guiltiness is in its cost expressed in terms of human injury. Jesus Christ paid the ultimate price upon the cross. Since God loves all men, any injury to man is an affront to God. The word "guilt" carries with it the concept of deserved punishment or payment due, or even payment by punishment.

This was established in the first judgments upon man's behavior and attitude that declared him guilty (Gen. 4:11-15) and was already incorporated into the written law (Lev. 4). The concept of payment for our wrongdoings by punishment runs throughout the Scripture. The concept of payment was significant in the atoning death of Christ upon the cross for the individual and the collective sins of mankind.

The concept of payment for guilt is taught and practiced by some religious sects in the form of penances, sacrifices, or even flagellation as payment for their own sins. Current theological and psychological literature shows abundant evidence of the inner need of man to punish even himself, atoning for the violations of his own accepted ethical code.

But inner psychodynamic forces make it possible for another to pay in his behalf. Though it is not widely discussed in secular literature, modern clinical studies help us understand the psychological mechanism that makes it possible for a person to accept a vicarious atoning payment for his sin.

Clouding the modern understanding of guilt is the common but erroneous use of the words "guilt" and "guilt feeling" as though they were interchangeable. Guilt is an after-the-fact reality or state that may or may not be accompanied by any guilt feeling. Indeed, some remnants of humanity have enacted the most heinous crimes with no testable trace of any feelings of guilt. Guilt feeling is not spiritual and has no value before God. Only the Holy Spirit can convict the soul to admit guilt.

Guilt feeling is a painful integration of emotions that usually includes the following:

- Anxiety in anticipation of divine punishment or by established authorities,
- Shame, with its sense of false humiliation, the feeling of dirtiness, and the need to hide from others,
- Grief, or depression, for the diminished sense of worth, dignity, and the collapse of human self-esteem,
- Anger and hatred as a defense mechanism to hide the presence or the absence of guilt feelings,
- Pseudo-peace behind pious arrogance and self-righteousness conceal the reality of guilt.

Though a source of intense emotional pain, the feelings of guilt do have value. They serve as an internal alarm system that alerts human beings to a keener awareness that they have violated their own value system. It goads us, correcting us toward more constructive behavior or attitude, (but only if we are spiritual and advancing). But since it is such an intense source of pain, man commonly draws away from about three dozen methods of escaping, evading, or killing the pain of the guilty conscience, most of which bring further injury to the human personality.

The most constructive, healthy response of mankind to the pain of guilt is rebound or repentance (for believers) and acceptance of the grace of forgiveness (for unbelievers) offered by God through the person of Jesus Christ.

We can do nothing to gain salvation, and we can do nothing to lose it. Those who do not believe this are being misled. The idea that Christ did His part on the cross and now we must do our part by maintaining a certain level of morality or goodness in order to get to heaven is not the truth of the Bible but a lie from cosmic morality or religious self-righteous arrogance that cannot save! Christ made a wasted trip to the cross if we can get to heaven by being moral. In fact, hell will be full of good, moral people who have depended on themselves rather than Christ for salvation.

A guilty individual may not have guilt feelings and will confidently claim that he has a good conscience. The most hardened or serial criminal is justified by his evil conscience and though guilty before God and man, he is totally without guilt feeling. Conscience is an awareness restricted to the moral sphere. It is a moral awareness. The conscience of the self-righteous Pharisees did not condemn them because the very laws that should provide them the awareness of their sins justified their wicked deeds (Matt. 23).

The Greek equivalent in the NT is syneidesis, which appears thirty times in the New Testament pointing to the mental attitude of the soul toward God, toward the Word of God and toward people. A person with evil or calloused conscience may have or may never have guilt feeling because his norms and standards justify his sins or crimes. A cultic preacher may have led millions to hell without any guilt feeling because of an evil conscience. The word "conscience" does not appear in the OT. However, the idea is well known and is expressed by the term "heart" referring to the soul. It appears at the very dawn of human history as a sense of guilt with Adam and Eve after the fall.

We read of David that his heart smote him (2 Sam. 24:10). Jobs say: "My heart shall not reproach me" (Job 27:6). And Psalm 32:1-5 and 51:1-9 are the cries of anguish coming from an aroused conscience.

The conscience is located in the kardia or right lobe of the mentality of the soul (Rom. 2:15, Titus 1:15). The conscience establishes norms and standards for both human and divine relationship (Acts 24:16). It convicts evil or wrong doing (John 8:9). It establishes norms and standards for morality and laws of the divine establishments (Romans 2:15). God created man with a perfect conscience, but after the fall of man, false norms and standards replaced the perfect standards of God, resulting in the first act of arrogance and legalism.

The conscience can be distorted or destroyed by negative volition toward Bible doctrine which results to formation of a hardened, calloused and rebellious soul. The Bible doctrine stored and resident in the soul is the authority, the judge, the point of reference not the conscience. The conscience without Bible doctrine is maladjusted to the will, purpose and plan of God; it is treacherous, false in its approbation and unreliable in its evaluation.

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