

Forgiveness and Guilt



Sabbath Afternoon

MEMORY TEXT: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

IN SHAKESPEARE’S PLAY *MACBETH*, Lady Macbeth—involved in murder—wanders around the castle at night, murmuring to herself, going through the motion of washing her hands. “It is an accustomed action with her,” said a gentleman of the castle, “. . . [to] continue in this a quarter of an hour.” In the same scene, Lady Macbeth then cries out, “Here’s the smell of blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.”

Though portrayed in the play as a cold-hearted woman willing to do anything to achieve her goals, Lady Macbeth apparently had something inside her that she didn’t realize, and that was a conscience. And that conscience began eating away at her because of the terrible crimes she had committed. In short, even someone so hard, wicked, and callous as Lady Macbeth was suffering from guilt.

Of course, she’s not alone. Who cannot relate? After all, are we not all guilty? Have we not all sinned? Have we not all done things we are ashamed of? This week’s lesson will help us look at the answer to this perennial human problem.

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: Who’s guilty? How bad are we? Why do we suffer from guilt? How high of a moral standard are we expected to follow? What is the only remedy for guilt? In what ways are guilt and forgiveness linked?

*Please study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 3.

THE GUILT FACTOR (Rom. 3:9).

On May 29, 1919, Arthur Stanley Eddington pointed a telescope toward an eclipse and proved that gravity did, as Einstein theorized, bend light. Unfortunately, nothing has been pointed toward the heavens, in the earth, or in any direction that has proved, with such “provable” objectivity, that Christ is the Son of God, who, at the Cross, shed His blood as an atonement for sin. People need faith to believe that “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible” (1 Cor. 15:52), but they do not need faith to believe that “for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction” or that gravity bends light. In other words, our religion requires faith, belief in something that cannot be “proved” in the same sense that one can prove simple math equations.

However, if there is one aspect of our religion that doesn’t require a whole lot of “faith,” it is the sinful nature of humanity. It is as obvious as the morning paper, or perhaps even the lusts of our own hearts. Jean Paul Sartre once wrote: “Hell is—other people!” He does have a point.

Read Romans 3:9-18. Write out in your own words the essence of what Paul is saying there.

In one sense, someone could argue that Paul’s words are too strong. *There is none that does good? There is none that seeks after God?* Is that not a bit overstated? After all, are there not some people who do good things, who are earnestly seeking to know the Lord and know truth?

On the other hand, perhaps Paul is simply portraying the general state of humanity were it not for the power and presence of God on the earth. Those who do good do it only because of the action of God upon their hearts; those who seek Him do so only because the Spirit is moving upon them. But left to ourselves, without divine intervention, we are all just like those whom Paul wrote about here in Romans.

How do you respond to those who argue against the Christian notion of humanity being essentially evil? Perhaps the best way to help them understand is to help them understand the definition of *evil*. How would you as a Christian define that term?

Key Text: John 8:11.

Teachers Aim:

1. To explore the causes and effects of guilt.
2. To focus on Jesus’ death on the cross as the remedy for guilt.
3. To understand how forgiving ourselves helps us to forgive others.

Lesson Outline:

I. Guilt (Phil. 4:19).

- A. Experience teaches that guilt is real.
- B. In most humans, doing wrong triggers guilt.
- C. Understanding our sinful nature causes guilt.
- D. Falling short of God’s standard causes guilt.

II. At the Cross (Phil. 4:13).

- A. Jesus reconciled us with God by His death on the cross.
- B. God does not hold our confessed sins against us.
- C. Our humanity does not excuse us from reaching God’s high standard.
- D. Jesus reached His Father’s standard of perfection and offers His success to each of us.

III. Kept in Perfect Peace (Isa. 26:3).

- A. Total surrender to Christ brings peace.
- B. The mystery of God’s forgiveness of our sins cannot be fathomed.
- C. Accepting God’s forgiveness dissolves guilt.

Summary: Thank God for Jesus! Because of Him, there is no need to be burdened with the guilt of sin. All we have to do is repent, ask in faith, and receive God’s forgiveness, which is always flowing from a heart of infinite love. The result is perfect peace, which passes all understanding.

Commentary.

Forgiveness and Guilt.

The Bible establishes beyond doubt that all people are sinners (Rom. 3:9; 3:23; 5:12; 1 John 1:8). All people, therefore, have cause to feel guilt. Guilt itself can be beneficial as long as it leads us to

GUILT TRIP.

Yesterday's study said that every human being was, basically, sinful and evil. This is scriptural. Is it any wonder, then, that human beings suffer from guilt? Or that the whole world is, to some degree, on a guilt trip? Paul continues in Romans: "Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, *and all the world may become guilty before God*" (Rom. 3:19, emphasis supplied).

If nothing else, guilt reveals to us our fallen humanity. After all, when we look at history and see some of the worst crimes committed by people who showed no remorse, no sadness, no guilt over their deeds, we often call them "monsters" or some epithet, giving the idea they are devoid of humanity. Guilt is part of who we are, especially if we are creatures who, by nature, do wrong.

Take a look at the past week of your life. What things have you done that make you feel guilty? Make a mental note (or write it out if you want) of what element these acts, thoughts, or words have in common? In other words, look for a common denominator (such as, "It violated the law of God" or "It would have made me ashamed if someone found out" or "It could have hurt someone I love."). What can you learn from this exercise?

There is no question that guilt is a part of our existence. For Christians, the possibility of guilt rises even more so because of the high standards we have. After all, if you are comparing yourself to others, then you might not feel so bad about things, because most of us can find people who do "worse" than we do. On the other hand, as followers of Jesus, we, of course, have only one Example.

Look up Philippians 2:5 and 1 John 2:6. What do they tell us to do?

The Bible gives us a very high standard to follow: Love our enemies, do not lust in our heart, give freely of ourselves, take up our cross daily, minister to others, keep our thoughts in captivity to Christ. We know we are to do these things; we know we have been promised the power to do them—and yet sometimes we don't do them. No wonder we feel guilty.

Though guilt is a reality, how can we as Christians allow God to use that guilt for something good in our lives?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

recognize our sins and to desire to turn away from them. Once we truly repent and turn away from sin, there is no further need to feel guilty.

Paul's argument in Romans 3:9, 10 relies on the Jewish Christians' knowledge of, and faith in, the Old Testament. With that background, "They could hardly evade Paul's conclusion that they should rightfully be regarded as sharing with the Gentiles in the universal guilt of man."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 499. God had given His law to the Jews so they might have a knowledge of their guilt (Rom. 3:20). This knowledge brought with it a greater share of responsibility: the responsibility of sharing the plan of salvation with the Gentiles. Paul's argument startled many self-righteous Jews into realizing their own imperfections and sin.

Knowledge of sin brings guilt. Knowing they have missed God's standard and knowing the effects of their sin, people experience fear and unrest in their conscience. Until they accept Christ's atonement, sinners will continue to experience guilt. Christians' experience with guilt differs from that of non-Christians. Since they are aware of the price of sin, Christians who walk with God will be aware of their sinfulness. Fortunately, a close walk with God brings the peace of realizing that there is no need to remain paralyzed by guilt, because Christ has paid the penalty for sin.

When people are bound by guilt, their effectiveness is limited. Ellen White explains that continual worry wears "out the life forces. . . ."

"Many who profess to be His followers have an anxious, troubled heart, because they are afraid to trust themselves with God. They do not make a complete surrender to Him. . . . Unless they do make this surrender, they cannot find peace."—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 330. When we focus on self rather than on God, it is impossible to surrender to Him completely. Thus, sinners are left to suffer the consequences of a guilty conscience.

The remedy for guilt is to shift our focus from self to Christ. We need to thoroughly acquaint ourselves with His sinless life in order to copy it and apply its principles to our own lives. "True religion is the imitation of Christ. Those who follow Christ will deny self, take up the cross, and walk in His footsteps."—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 949. Focusing on Christ's life will help us to realize how immense God's love is. "When we learn that God is love, fear is replaced by trust, and we confidently place ourselves in the hands of our heavenly Father, knowing that He careth for us (1 Peter 5:7)."—Page 664.

Christians have the advantage of knowing that with His death, Christ assumed the burden of our sins. Therefore, when we accept His sacrifice and His forgiveness, we receive a sense of peace. Christ's death changes the status of those who believe in Him. "Divine mercy and justice have found a way to deal with the offenders as though they were not guilty. Sin is a debt (Matt. 6:12) for which the sinner must someday render an

THE CROSS FACTOR (2 Cor. 5:19).

Look at this text for today. Whom did God reconcile to Himself? Not just Asia, not just South America, not just the Solomon Islands—but the world. In other words, all those whom in Romans Paul described in the most unflattering terms he now says can be reconciled to God.

What’s the one key phrase in the text that expresses the basis of this reconciliation? What does it say, what does it mean, and how does it bring about this reconciliation?

We feel guilty because of our sins, because of our trespasses. Yet, according to this text, God through Christ no longer imputes or holds those sins and trespasses against us. In other words, no matter how universal the guilt, God’s forgiveness is just as universal. We all are sinners, we all are guilty, but through Christ and His sacrifice on the cross, we all are offered forgiveness.

It is crucial to remember that Christ died for us, not despite our sins but *because of our sins*. Because “there is none that doeth good, no, not one” (Rom. 3:12), Christ died for us. Because “their throat is an open sepulchre” (vs. 13), Christ died for us. Because “destruction and misery are in their ways” (vs. 16), Christ died for us. Because “their feet are swift to shed blood” (vs. 15), Christ died for us.

Not despite these things but *because* of them Jesus became our Sin Bearer, taking upon Himself the shame, the penalty, and the *guilt* of our sins.

Look at the following statement from Ellen White: “When Satan seeks to cover the people of God with blackness, and ruin them, Christ interposes. Although they have sinned, Christ has taken the guilt of their sins upon His own soul. He has snatched the race as a brand from the fire. By His human nature He is linked with man, while through His divine nature He is one with the infinite God. Help is brought within the reach of perishing souls. The adversary is rebuked.”—*Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 169. How does the truth that Christ bore our guilt help us deal with guilt in our own lives? How should it help us?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

account. . . . But God will not impute sin to those who have been reconciled to Him through Christ (Ps. 32:2).”—Volume 6, p. 869. “We need to keep ever before us the efficacy of the blood of Jesus. That life-cleansing, life-sustaining blood, appropriated by living faith, is our hope. We need to grow in appreciation of its inestimable value, for it speaks for us only as we by faith claim its virtue, keeping the conscience clean and at peace with God.”—Ellen G. White, *Our High Calling*, p. 47.

God’s great love for us led Him to establish a plan whereby we can have relief from the devastating burden of guilt. “Recognizing that even those who fellowship with God will continue to need cleansing from sin, John [in 1 John 1:7] assures the Christian that God has

INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY

Texts for Discovery: Romans 3:9-20; 2 Corinthians 5:11-21; 1 John 4:7-12.

aspects of this ministry. Why has God chosen us—frail and prone to failure—to be His ministers of reconciliation? (See Luke 7:40-47.)

1. In Romans 1:18-32 Paul catalogues all the unrighteous and rebellious behavior that stirs up God’s wrath. In chapters 2 and 3 Paul says that all of us—believers and nonbelievers—are in the same boat; we all deserve God’s wrath. What does this have to do with the gospel? More specifically, what does this have to do with forgiveness?
2. One of the things taught in Romans 3 is that sin and guilt are not just problems of what we do; they speak to the essence of who we are. How is admitting our true condition a prerequisite for being forgiven?
3. According to the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:11-21, Christ has given us a “ministry of reconciliation.” List some tangible
4. Because we’re sinners by nature, love is not a natural affection. Yet, even secular people know the feelings of tenderness and affection parents feel for their children and spouses feel for each other. How do Christians demonstrate a love that is, in fact, supernatural? What is its source? How can we practice it more completely?
5. A song of a few decades ago had these words in its chorus: “And they’ll know we are Christians by our love.” If a documentary film crew asked to do a film about your weekly activities, what demonstrations of love would indicate that you have been captivated and motivated by God’s forgiveness and unconditional love?

THE LOVE FACTOR.

“Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

Some people, plagued by guilt, are like boilers waiting to explode. Years of repressing their guilt have turned it into rage and rebellion. According to psychologists, our parents, by demanding too much, criticizing too much, affirming and praising too little, can produce harmful guilt in us. This process becomes even more acute in the context of religion.

The story of Cain illustrates this point. Notice that Cain (1) becomes angry and commits the murder of his brother, (2) experiences guilt as a result, and (3) deals with his guilt by rebelling against God’s authority that condemned him. (See Gen. 4:16.) How often are repeated these principles behind this scenario, in one form or another, throughout history.

Of course, as Christians we are called to a high standard, the highest possible standard (Matt. 5:48). Yet, before seeking to reach that standard, we must be sure we understand that the foundation of our salvation rests not in how close we come to that standard (because we can never get close enough to earn salvation) but only in Jesus. He not only reached that standard for us; He offers His achievement in place of our failures. Without understanding this foundation, many people, fueled with rage and guilt over their failures, have left the church in an attempt to gain some peace of mind.

High standards are essential, as long as the gospel is their center. But without the balance of love for Christ as the basis of high standards, church members can experience frustration that leads to rebellion.

Read 1 John 4:7-10. What principle is operating here that can help us deal with those who, perhaps rightly so, are suffering from guilt? What is John saying? What did God show toward us that we need to show toward others? Yet, how can we do this without, at the same time, excusing the sin and deeds that brought the guilt to begin with? In what ways does the Cross reveal to us just how fundamental forgiveness is to love? Can we truly love and yet not forgive?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

already anticipated this need and provided for it.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 631. When erring Christians acknowledge their guilt and turn with confidence to the Lord, “Christ interposes. Although they have sinned, Christ has taken the guilt of their sins upon His own soul. He has snatched the race as a brand from the fire.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 169.

As a result of Christ’s action, Christians are changed in God’s eyes. Christ “removes the filthy garments, He places upon the repenting, believing ones His own robe of righteousness, and writes pardon against their names on the records of heaven.”—*Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 169, 170. That is why we can turn with confidence to God, knowing that, no matter what our sin, He will accept our genuine repentance and cover us with His blood. We can enjoy the blessings of peace, knowing He has paid the price for our sins.

WITNESSING

Once in a while, I get a sweet tooth. So, I begin to think about things such as cookies, pie, ice cream, and without hesitation, I go to the store and purchase the treat I’ve been longing for. After the first bite comes the sweet sensation of satisfaction. But when I’m finished, then comes guilt. So I say to myself, “I shouldn’t have eaten all that pie,” and I determine not to do it again. However, the guilt lingers on. So it is with sin. Whatever the sin may be (lying, adultery, covetousness, envy), afterward comes guilt. Not only *are* we guilty, but we know it. We feel it. But, why is it that even when we pray and ask God to forgive us, we sometimes still feel guilty?

The Bible tells us, “There is therefore now no condemnation

to them which are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). If we were to replace the word *condemnation*, the verse might read, there is therefore now **no conviction** or **no punishment** or **no disapproval**. And, therefore, there is now **no guilt**. We no longer have to *feel* guilty, because God has forgiven us. Now we can also forgive ourselves and let go of the guilt, as well as the sin.

Let us tell others that when Christ died for us, He took our sin, the penalty of our sin, and the guilt of our sin upon Himself. “Therefore being justified (just-as-if-I’d-never-sinned) by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). And He says to us, “Neither do I condemn thee, go, and sin no more” (John 8:11).

PEACE WITH GOD.

“Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1).

Unless we are willing to surrender ourselves completely to Christ, to give Him our wills, our desires, our fears, and our sins—we will fight a losing battle with guilt. We will never be able to forgive ourselves for our sins and, wallowing in our own guilt and anger, we will be less likely to forgive others.

Here is the moment when the Cross becomes so crucial. Only as we understand that we have been forgiven, that our guilt has already gone beforehand to judgment, can we begin to forgive ourselves and others. Only as we look at the Cross and realize that not only did God know beforehand of our sins but He made a way to forgive us those sins can we truly have the peace that we desire.

Look at Romans 5:1. What has happened that gives us peace with God? Using the context of this week’s lesson, write in your own words what Paul is saying here. How do guilt and forgiveness fit in the equation? See also Romans 5:8; 1 John 1:7.

That God forgives our sins, even the worst of our sins, is a mystery too deep for us to fathom. There is no question, though, that because He does forgive our sins, because He has borne the guilt of them at the Cross, we can forgive ourselves and live without the crushing burden of guilt.

Yet, this does come with some hard questions. What do you say to someone whose child had been murdered by a person who, though sitting in jail, has just accepted Jesus and who proclaims joy, peace, freedom, not to mention true sorrow of the terrible crime he has committed? As a result of confession, repentance, sorrow, the murderer now claims to have “peace with God.” Is it right that this person should now be guilt-free? Could you go to the parents, who weren’t Christians (or even if they were), and tell them *with rejoicing* that the individual who murdered their baby now stands perfect in the sight of a loving God and who, though sorry for that sin, has confessed it to the Lord, who not only bore the guilt of that sin but has now given the murderer peace of mind and freedom from guilt? How could you explain this in a way that could make any sense to anyone?

Or can you?

LIFE-A PPLICATION A PPROACH

Icebreaker: Philippians 2:5 provides the key to relief from guilt, yet it seems that even Christians are sometimes slow to grasp the promise. How can we let the mind of Christ be in us? Are sacrifice, faith, and love required? If so, why are sacrifice, faith, and love required?

Application Questions:

1. “Boy at the chalkboard to his teacher: ‘I’m not an under-achiever; you’re an over-expecter.’”—Charles R. Swindoll, *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart and 1,501 Other Stories* (Nashville, Tenn.: Word Publishing, 1998), p. 11. When we allow ourselves to be mired in guilt, are we making the same kind of accusation about God?

Thought Questions:

1. Remember a time when you were driven by “good” guilt, guilt that led you to a closer walk with God. Rehearse how you would share your story with someone depressed by a load of guilt.
2. Can one focus too much on God’s forgiveness? How can you strike a balance between rejoicing in forgiveness and being reproved by guilt?
3. How can you tell when you have removed Christ from the center of your standards? Why is it so easy to set up our own standards and yet think that they are God’s? What lessons in this area can you learn from the scribes and Pharisees, Peter, and David? What safeguards can you put in place?

2. Have you ever been publicly ambushed by someone to whom you confessed your sin and been verbally forgiven? What did you learn about forgiveness and guilt from that experience? What insight does Philippians 2:5 provide about how to recover from such an experience?
3. You thought you had “gotten over” the betrayal by your spouse, friend, sibling, or neighbor. Then the hurt and anger boiled over and burned both of you. What did you learn about forgiveness and guilt from that experience? What can you apply from Philippians 2:5 to help you prevent a similar experience from happening again?

FURTHER STUDY:

A council was held in heaven, the result of which was that God's dear Son undertook to redeem man from the curse and the disgrace of Adam's failure, and to conquer Satan. Oh, wonderful condescension! The Majesty of heaven, through love and pity for fallen man, proposed to become his substitute and surety. He would bear man's guilt. He would take the wrath of His Father upon Himself, which otherwise would have fallen upon man because of his disobedience."—Ellen G. White, *Confrontation*, pp. 16, 17.

"As one with us, He must bear the burden of our guilt and woe. The Sinless One must feel the shame of sin. The peace lover must dwell with strife, the truth must abide with falsehood, purity with vileness. Every sin, every discord, every defiling lust that transgression had brought, was torture to His spirit."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 111.

"God is waiting to bestow the blessing of forgiveness, of pardon for iniquity, of the gifts of righteousness, upon all who will believe in His love and accept the salvation He offers. Christ is ready to say to the repenting sinner, 'Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment.' The blood of Jesus Christ is the eloquent plea that speaks in behalf of sinners. This blood 'cleanseth us from all sin.' "—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 517.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1. What do you say to someone who says "The cross makes me feel even more guilty, because I see God's love for me there and yet I sin anyway, despite that love"?**
- 2. What does it mean that Jesus suffered the guilt of our sins? Is that fair? Is it supposed to be fair?**
- 3. No guilty man "is ever acquitted at the bar of his own conscience," wrote the Roman poet Juvenal. How does the Cross help undo the truth of that statement?**
- 4. Is it right for a Christian no longer to feel guilty about bad deeds, even after those deeds have been forgiven? Explain your answer.**