



RESPONDING TO GUILT... AND CHANGING ACCORDINGLY

Do you struggle with the guilt of past sins even though you've confessed them to God and to the people you have wronged?

Perhaps you said unkind words to a friend. You asked your friend for forgiveness and it was granted; but you still cringe when you remember what you said.

Maybe you committed terribly devastating sins that created long-term difficulties for many people. To the best of your knowledge and ability, you asked forgiveness from the many who were affected by your sin. Yet even now, everyday conversations and routine events sometime create an unforeseen and unwanted bridge of remembrance to the pain and shame of your past.

One of life's realities is that unforeseen consequences can last for decades as a result of self-centered choices made long ago. For example, murder, adultery, drug involvement, sexual promiscuity, abortion, suicide, robbery, drunkenness, child molestation, slander, rape, rebellion against parents, pornographic involvement, family abandonment, divorce, embezzlement, or habitual lying can "cast a long shadow" over people's lives impacted by these actions.

When you, as a believer, realize that your past behavior indicated your disregard for the Lord and His Word, crippled your spiritual development, and created problems for others, how should you respond to current guilt feelings? Also, how is it possible for you and others to know that "who you once were" is not "who you are now"? Both of these questions will be examined separately, even though both answers are rooted in God's gracious forgiveness realized through Jesus Christ.

AS A BELIEVER, HOW DO YOU BIBLICALLY RESPOND TO GUILT FEELINGS ASSOCIATED WITH YOUR SINFUL BEHAVIOR?

The personal intensity or outward expression of any emotion can vary from person to person and from situation to situation. Believers in Christ will eventually experience some level of guilt feelings as a result of committing sin. They know that willful sin indicates a lack of love for Jesus Christ, a disregard for God's Word, and a desire to live for self, often at the expense of others. Believers who respond biblically to guilt feelings recognize that the focus is neither the intensity of emotion nor any associated physical response.

Believers who respond to the truth of God's Word will experience "guilt feelings" associated with specific sin(s). Their response is actually "godly grief or sorrow." Godly grief leads to repentance (a change of mind), a necessity to return to a Christ-honoring life.

2 Corinthians 7:10, For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

Godly sorrow alerts believers to cease living according to fleshly desires and, instead, return to Christ-centered obedience to God's Word. A believer's initial response to godly sorrow is to humbly and prayerfully confess personal sin(s) to the Lord.

Basically, to *confess* means to *agree with God* about one's shortcomings. Those who biblically confess do not rationalize, justify, or minimize personal sin(s) and do not blame others or circumstances for shortcomings. Instead, they take responsibility for personal waywardness. Believers who deal biblically with guilt feelings know that this is not simply a reaction to the self-centered concept of "I am caught!" or "What will happen to me now?" God-honoring confession of sin(s) gives expression to repentance and allows one to receive the Lord's merciful forgiveness and cleansing.

1 John 1:9, If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Proverbs 28:13, Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.

Confession of sin(s) reminds a believer of his failure to wholeheartedly follow the Lord. Biblical confession fosters

humility and increases a believer's dependency on the Lord.

James 4:6-10, *But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.*

Matthew 23:12, *"Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."*

Please note that "forgiving yourself" is an illusory, ineffective, and unbiblical response to guilt feelings. Refer to [**The Futility of Forgiving Yourself**](#) for a more complete study on this subject.

What if a professing believer continues, for a time, to purposefully sin with no acknowledgment of guilt, either intellectually or emotionally? There are only two answers to that question: 1) The professing believer *is* an authentic believer but is spiritually deluded (deceived) as a result of not dealing biblically with sins that have been committed (James 1:22-24); or 2) The professing believer *is not* an authentic believer, demonstrated by unceasing efforts to fulfill fleshly desires instead of obeying Scripture (1 John 2:3-5, 15-17).

James 1:22-24, *But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.*

1 John 2:3-5, *And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him:*

1 John 2:15-17, *Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.*

Sadly, some believers live with inappropriate guilt feelings due to a belief that God's acceptance of them is dependent on their obedience to God's Word. These believers are very aware of their shortcomings and readily confess them to the Lord and, often, to others. They remain spiritually crippled, however, due to a lack of understanding and acceptance of God's grace and forgiveness demonstrated through the finished work of Jesus Christ.

Romans 8:1, *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*

Ephesians 2:8-9, *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

Other believers are stymied by persistent guilt feelings because they do not take biblical steps of change. This situation can be overcome through an on-going study of God's Word that leads to godly living.

Psalms 119:11, *I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.*

There are numerous passages in Scripture that list specific examples of "putting off" sinful behavior and "putting on" Christ-honoring alternatives. For example, see Colossians Chapter 3, Romans Chapter 12, and Ephesians Chapters 4 and 5.

HOW IS IT POSSIBLE FOR YOU AND OTHERS TO KNOW THAT "WHO YOU ONCE WERE" IS NOT "WHO YOU ARE NOW"?

Confession of sin(s) to the Lord is part of the process of "dying to self" in order to live for Christ in accordance with God's Word. Growing in Christ (biblical change) involves an on-going renewal of the mind that is accomplished by studying Scripture and applying God's truth for every aspect of life and relationships.

2 Timothy 3:16-17, *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.*

2 Timothy 2:15, *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.*

Romans 12:1-2, *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

Another aspect of “dying to self” and living for Christ is to confess your sins to those against whom you have sinned. This is especially appropriate among believers (James 5:16) and helps to foster relationships both inside and outside the Body of Christ (Romans 12:18). Confessing sins to those sinned against provides opportunity for others to see the difference Jesus has made in your life, which can bring glory to God (Matthew 5:15-16).

James 5:16, *Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*

Romans 12:18, *If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*

Matthew 5:15-16, *Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

Similar to one’s confession to God for personal sins, a confession to others involves taking responsibility for wrongdoing and not making excuses or blaming others for your own sinful behavior. While difficult circumstances or another’s actions are sometimes blamed as the reason behind your personal sins, your “heart” (the “real you”) is the actual source of all your actions or reactions (Luke 6:43-45).

Luke 6:43-45, *For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.*

Ideally, in confessing your sins to another, you can also ask for forgiveness. Asking for forgiveness means you are asking another not to hold your wrongdoing against you. In asking for forgiveness, you are not asking to be relieved of any consequences resulting from your sinfulness, which might include making restitution. Even though forgiveness may not be granted to you in the manner you might hope or expect, you are not responsible for another’s choices or actions. You are only responsible to the Lord (Jeremiah 17:10; Colossians 3:23-25).

Jeremiah 17:10, *I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.*

Colossians 3:23-25, *Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.*

Even when you confess to others, your words do not sufficiently prove to others that you have changed. Undeniable proof of change is demonstrated by a new manner of life, marked by your growth in Christ (Romans 8:29). Spiritual growth lasts throughout your lifetime (1 Corinthians 3:18) and will be sovereignly completed (Philippians 1:6).

Romans 8:29, *For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*

2 Corinthians 3:18, *And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.*

Philippians 1:6, *And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*

As you mature in Christ, biblical love (1 Corinthians 13:4-8a) should be more and more evident in your life. Other Christ-like traits should also characterize your daily life and relationships (Galatians 5:22-24). Words alone do not prove you have changed. The development of Christ-like characteristics that become evidenced in every area of life provide proof that “who you once were” is not “who you are now” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

1 Corinthians 13:4-8a, *Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.*

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

Galatians 5:22-24, *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*

2 Corinthians 5:17, *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.*

After confessing your sin(s), leaving your path of self-centeredness, and keeping your focus on Jesus, you once again can live as one who is forgiven and eager to follow God's will. Sometimes, your Christ-oriented way of life may be perceived by others to seem you no longer remember your previous sinfulness. While you are not to dwell on past sins, some sins cannot be completely forgotten (blotted out of memory). Refer to [**Forgetting Your Sins . . . What Does the Bible Say?**](#) for further study on this subject.

What do you do when you are overcome with remorse and regrets and tempted to dwell on past sin that has already been forgiven by our Lord? As in every situation, fix your eyes on Jesus (Hebrews 12:1-2), and go to His Word!

Hebrews 12:1-2, *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*

The following verses remind every believer that it is not because of personal "goodness" that He saved any of us, nor is there a qualification or quantification of sin that He forgives.

1 John 1:9, *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

(Notice the *amount*—*all unrighteousness*.)

Romans 5:6-8, *For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

(Notice the *timing* – *while we were still weak, at the right time, while we were still sinners* – not after we had somehow been good enough or "proved" ourselves, neither of which is possible.)

Ponder His greatness and the miracle of His love toward us. His grace and mercy are indescribable gifts that our minds cannot fully grasp. When we focus on Jesus and what His love provides, we cannot help but long to honor Him by the way we live our daily lives. In Philippians 4:8-9, the Apostle Paul tells us where to keep our thoughts.

Philippians 4:8-9, *Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.*

The Apostle Paul could remember his previous sins, but these were overshadowed by the matchless mercy and grace of God (see 1 Timothy 1:12-17). Paul focused on the majesty of "The Forgiver" instead of the former mire of "the forgiven." For Paul, his prior sins were the backdrop for his ceaseless praise and thankfulness to Jesus, as stated in 1 Timothy 1:15-17.

1 Timothy 1:15-17, *The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

Our lives are blips on earth's timeline, infinitesimally less than that of immeasurable eternity; but He has chosen to redeem us and make us His own, forgiving and cleansing us, making us new creatures. To live our lives in defeat over what God no longer counts against us seems to diminish – although it never could diminish!—the perfect work Jesus accomplished on our behalf. He did this throughout His life that culminated with His death on the cross and resurrection from the grave. Thank Him for the priceless gift of forgiveness!

Romans 4:7-8, *Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.*

Not only does God forgive us, but when we mourn (which includes godly sorrow as a result of committing sin), He promises to comfort us (Matthew 5:4).

Matthew 5:4, *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”*

People around the world abuse their bodies to try to pay for their sins (often on Good Friday) instead of rejoicing in the completed work of Jesus on the Cross. Trying to atone for one’s own sins in any measure is hopeless. In fact, to focus on personal sin that has been forgiven by God causes one to try to carry a load Christ has already carried. It is futile to try to somehow pay a debt when we were (and are) so hopelessly in debt to God that we never can repay it. Jesus paid it all. He did the work. IT IS FINISHED.

Ramifications of past sin can still roll in. Consequences of self-centered choices can last a lifetime. Often, others can still be affected deeply by our past sinfulness. Satan, the accuser, is always ready to remind us of the horror of our sin and try to tempt us to dwell on it. But in Colossians Chapter 2, we are told the following:

Colossians 2:13-14, *And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.*

In *Man, The Dwelling Place of God*, A.W. Tozer wrote:

“The victorious Christian neither exalts nor downgrades himself. His interests have shifted from self to Christ. What he is or is not no longer concerns him. He believes that he has been crucified with Christ and he is not willing either to praise or deprecate such a man.

“Yet the knowledge that he has been crucified is only half the victory. ‘Nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.’ Christ is now where the man’s ego was formerly. The man is now Christ-centered instead of self-centered, and he forgets himself in his delighted preoccupation with Christ.”¹

Now that we have been forgiven, we should live like the forgiven! Each day we are to be full of gratitude and humility to our Lord. We are to live in such a way that pleases Him, and in doing so, people will see His work in us and praise Him. Only God can change a heart! Since He has changed ours, our very lives should be testimonies of His grace, pointing others to Him.

Psalm 40:2-3, *He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD.*

2 Corinthians 5:14-15, *For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.*

Philippians 2:12-13, *Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

1 John 1:7, *But 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 cleanses us from all sin.*

Darlene Zschech has written “Worthy is the Lamb,” a beautiful song that expresses deep gratitude for Christ’s work on the cross on our behalf:

“Thank you for the cross, Lord; Thank you for the price you paid. Bearing all my sin and shame, in love you came, and gave amazing grace.”

But the song does not stop with what Jesus did for us. She goes on to proclaim in the chorus:

“Worthy is the Lamb, seated on your throne. Crown you now with many crowns, you reign victorious. High and lifted up, Jesus on your throne. The Darling of Heaven crucified. Worthy is the Lamb!”²

The guilt is real, but the punishment was taken on the cross by Jesus, the spotless Lamb, the Darling of Heaven. The record of debt against us was canceled, thanks to His work. And, it was not “just” so we can be forgiven, but it was for His Name’s sake. Recognizing that, we exalt His worth, not ours! We live so that others will see His work in us and put their trust in Him! Living now, we join with the saints of all ages proclaiming His matchless grace!

Because of His grace, mercy, and love that led Him to the Cross to be the perfect sacrifice, we can sing the hymn, “It Is Well with My Soul,” with passionate enthusiasm . . . particularly the verse that says,

“My sin, oh the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin not in part but the whole, was nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more! Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, oh my soul!”³

If any of our sins come to mind, we can use the thought to give praise to the Lord for His loving forgiveness and the changes He has made in our lives. Relying solely on the work of Christ, we can echo the words of former slave-trader John Newton (author of the well-known hymn, “Amazing Grace”) who said, “I am a great sinner, and Christ is a great Savior.”

When we see even a small portion of the magnitude of our sin, it should not cause us to dwell on it in defeat. Instead, we should remind ourselves of His great work and “forget ourselves” in our “delighted preoccupation with Christ.”

***Colossians 3:2-4**, Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*

¹ *Man, The Dwelling Place of God*, A. W. Tozer, Wingspread Publishers

² “Worthy is the Lamb,” copyright Darlene Zschech/Hillsong

³ “It is Well with My Soul,” Public Domain