

Questions You Can't Answer for Yourself, Pt. 2

What Do I Do with Guilt?

I Timothy 1: 12-17; Colossians 2: 13-15

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One of the most memorable lines from the hypnotic film *The Life of Pi* occurs as Pi narrates the history of his religious life. Pi was baptized Catholic as an infant. Later, his family became Hindu. So he recounted, “Now we get to feel guilty before hundreds of gods instead of just one!” *Religious* guilt affects many of us. I read an article comparing Catholic guilt to Jewish guilt. A heading asked the question, “Which is scarier: an all powerful deity or your mom?” I also know a good Presbyterian who says, “I just don’t feel like I’ve really been to church If I don’t feel guilty during the sermon.”

There’s *financial* guilt too. Everyone’s different, but most of us feel guilty about some kinds of purchases but not others. Why do I feel guilty for buying a tube of toothpaste for \$3.65 instead of \$2.85 because I just couldn’t face Walmart? And yet, I don’t hesitate to order a \$9 desert I don’t need. And *social* guilt. I feel so deceitful and wasteful if I just toss the plastic glass into the trash instead of rinsing and recycling it. But I never think about the dollar an hour a child got for stitching my shirt in a factory. Some of us sociopaths don’t think about any of those things.

There is *real* guilt and *false* guilt. I feel guilty and rightly so for hurtful words I said to someone. I did wrong. But I feel oddly guilty that when my car failed inspection, I got a Louisiana Certificate of Rejection. Burned out tail lights were not truly a moral failure, but it sure felt that way.

There is *short-term* guilt: I really should have gone to see that person in the hospital, but at least they're home now. And there is *long-term* guilt: I really should have spent more time paying attention to the family instead of always working and now it's too late. There's little stuff. And there's guilt for truly having blood on our hands, for having significant responsibility for another's well being and botching it, for ruining our own good health—whether physical, financial or emotional health-- with years of intentionally destructive habits.

There are so many types of guilt. So many things to feel guilty about. There's guilt that rises from within. There's guilt that other people put onto you: some more successfully than others. And often with a few toward manipulating you into what they want from you. And of course guilt over a particular action or thought brings the more overarching sense of shame: I'm just not a good person. I had a college roommate who studied all the time and felt guilty if he took off even an hour. "There's something *fundamentally* wrong with me!" he would complain. "Let's just go out then," I would reply. It didn't help. One thing that's true about guilt is that it is an intolerable feeling. You can't hold it for long. It's too uncomfortable. Something has to be done about it.

So what do we do with guilt? We've got to get rid of it. We have lots of strategies for guilt-removal. One of our elders answered immediately: *stuff* it! Just cram it way down deep and don't think about it. You might want to screw that lid on a bit tighter with some expensive whiskey or a pill that takes the edge off. Or, we might try to *reclassify* what makes us feel guilty as actually not wrong. I've got a colleague who says, "If you ever need anything rationalized away, just come to me. I'm an expert!" And of course, there's *projection*. Blame it on someone else. We've been doing that ever since Adam explained to God, "That woman you gave me..." The bigger the guilt, the more angry our projections sound. One way or another, we've got to get the sticky slime of the guilt off of us. And of course, any of those ways may keep guilt away for a while. But they are so life destroying! We have to go numb with denial. We have to exhaust ourselves dancing with self-justifying. Or ruin our joy with angry blaming. None of those strategies actually work to move us into life that is free, forgiven and flourishing. What to do with guilt is another question I can't answer by myself.

The only truly successful way to deal with guilt is found in Scripture. Confess all. Repent. Change your mind about your life. Look to Christ and his atonement. It's counter intuitive. Your earthly attorney might tell you never to admit anything. Deny, deny, deny. That might get you off a legal sentence, but it won't remove guilt. Scripture tells us to agree, agree, agree. That's literally what confession is. I agree with God that what I did, or failed to do, was wrong. Was sin. I have no defense. No one made me. I just wanted to. There really *is* something fundamentally wrong with me. I have sinned before God. I missed the mark. I failed to follow his rules and his will and chose my own. I come clean and say I'm sorry. I want to change and be different. That's the wonderful realism again of our Christian faith. We own the truth of us. Taking a risk that God truly forgives.

Paul wrote to his young protégé Timothy, "This saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (I Tim. 1: 15). Wonderful news: God wants to take away our guilt. Christ came into the world to save sinners. I don't have to hide the truth. There is no sin of which I am not potentially capable. It's all there in my heart, the very worst, and I admit it all, taking a flying leap of trust that God truly is merciful.

In our Colossians passage, Paul used a financial image. It's a legal transaction with powerful spiritual effects. Paul wrote, "And you, who were dead in your trespasses...God made alive together with [Christ], having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross."

The picture is of a certificate of debt. They had them 2000 years ago just like we do now. Written down on the paper is what you owe. It may be a promissory note. It was written in one's own handwriting so there can be no doubt. This is my obligation. This is what I bought and signed for. It's the written record of our transgressions against God's law. In that way it becomes the tally of how far we have fallen from what we should be. It is the list of what we owe God and could not pay. This is the list that condemns.

Paul nearly understates it when he says that this record of debt "stands

against us.” I’d say it does. It’s the source of our real guilt. Actual obligations that really were not met, not internally in our hearts, not externally in our actions. The record of debt blocks our hope for flourishing in this life and the next. It weighs on us all the time. And there is no working our way out of this kind of debt. It’s too great. That’s the honest truth of each of us knowing ourselves the foremost of sinner. As Matt Papa’s song says, “We stood neath a debt we could never afford.”



But the miracle of the cross is that God has cancelled our debt. Paul writes, “This he set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Col. 2: 14). By his own choice, Christ took over payment on the note of our life. Paul tells us here that God expunges our record. He blots it out. He writes over the debt so the amount no longer shows. The certificate of debt is entirely laid aside. It’s nailed to the cross. God takes the record of our debts, the source of our shame, and, writes, “Paid in full,” across it, then tacks it onto the cross. When someone goes looking for my debt, they find it nailed to the cross with Jesus. He has picked up the cost and absorbed all my obligation in his dying for me.

For centuries, people have drawn further thoughts about God’s forgiveness from this passage. Some have noted the parallel with the inscription that Pilate nailed to the cross, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” Pilate gave him his title. It was also his crime. Jesus was crucified as a rival of Rome, a pretender to be king when only Caesar could be king. The Son of God came to us, and we humans crucified him for being who he was. We made it a crime for Jesus to be the king for whom we had been longing. The Son of God, of course, had another plan. He took the punishment not only for the crime we accused him of, but also for the crimes we ourselves actually committed. God nailed our certificate of debt to the cross with Christ.



Take it just a bit further and recall what Jesus said as he died, “It is finished” (Jn. 19: 30). The work was accomplished. “It is finished” contains many layers of meaning. It includes, at least, the sense of saying Paid in Full. The debt has been cancelled because it has been paid completely. Our list of sins has been removed by Christ. He took it as his own. Our certificate of debt has been paid in his blood. Our signature at the bottom of the page, our names agreeing to obey and serve God, sealed in blood, all turned hostile against us. But Christ has taken them as his own and cancelled the obligation. We are free. The debtor’s prison of hell no longer has a cell for those who are in Christ. The death warrant signed against us has been commuted. The list, the wretched list, of our failings, has been blotted out, taken away and purchased by Christ. He bought our mortgage and left us with the house. He gives us the house of his eternal home.

The atoning death of Christ is the one authentic answer to the question of what to do about guilt. We put all our trust into the fact that our sin was included on the certificate of guilt nailed to Christ’s cross. He took our place. He paid it all. When we look to him, everything changes. We pass from death to life, from guilt to the freedom of forgiveness.

One of the most powerful expressions of this glorious news is Paul Hobbs’ prayer entitled “God on a Stick.” I’ve loved it for a decade now. Like a great song, I want to return to something so moving again and again:



I stand before the cross and wonder

He is not guilty of these things but takes our place

They spit on his face and then they crucify him

Jesus our Lord

He dies as a sinner

He dies as a blasphemer, as an idolater, as one who denies God

As one who betrays him

I stand before the cross and wonder

He is not guilty of these things but takes our place

He dies as one who boasts, who gossips

As one who dishonors his parents

As a cheat, as a liar, as a thief

He dies as a fraud and an embezzler

I stand before the cross and fear

He is not guilty of these things but takes our place

He dies as a sinner

He dies as one with evil thoughts

As a slave to lust, as a fornicator

As an adulterer, as an abuser of children

I kneel before the cross and weep
He is not guilty of these things but takes our place

He dies as one full of jealousy
As one who is selfish, unkind and rude
As one who destructively manipulates others

As one who envies and hates
He dies as a sadist
As one who destroys and murders

I pray before the cross and rejoice
He is not guilty of these things but takes our place
He is not to blame but dies to take the blame for us

He is dying to forgive us

Stand, stand...
And watch Jesus die
Alone and with nothing...
God on a stick.

What do we do with guilt? Deny nothing! Admit all. Confess. Be willing to change. Rely wholly on the good news: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. Rely with all your heart that Jesus already nailed your guilt to his cross. It is finished. Go to him there again and again and let the truth fill you with joy.