



Is guilt ever healthy and does God use it to motivate us?



Addressed by
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the love and loathing of guilt

Mike and Becky have been married for 6-7 years. Becky grew up Roman Catholic, got saved in college and attended a pretty fundamentalist, "bible believing" church. Mike on the other hand was raised in a very socially liberal home. Guilt was seen as the result of repressive, outdated morals which were forced on society by narrow minded people. Mike was pretty hedonistic during college, although he "cleaned up his act" in order to woo Becky.

Becky started coming to NPC about 2 years ago, Mike has only come hit and miss. He likes the church and is surprised at how different it is compared to other churches they had attended which Becky picked out. Lately they've been having extended discussions about what "grace" really means and they've come to you for help in working through some issues.

Becky: "I've grown up and matured in social and church families where duty and commitment were very important. Failing to live up to clear standards was not acceptable, and feeling guilty about not doing so was just part of the package. In some ways, I think it helps me. It convicts me. It forces me to face the fact that I've not done what I should have. When I hear people talk about grace at NPC, I feel like they are saying 'Christians should never feel guilty for any reason, or about anything.' If that is the case, isn't that just going to lead to people doing whatever they want without regard to God. How am I supposed to know when I've done something wrong, or am missing the boat when I never have a sense of guilt or conviction."

Mike: "I understand Becky's problem, just look at how she was raised and what she's been taught. Frankly that was big reason why I quit going to church after we got married, I couldn't stand some guy always pointing his finger at me and telling me how bad I was and how wrong everything in my life was. I didn't need him trying to run my life or turn me into a repressed hypocrite. That's been the big surprise for me at NPC. I hear them talk about how God loves and accepts me. If that is really true, why should I feel guilty about anything. I work hard to provide for my family, I love my wife and I try to do right by my kids. I don't think I need to find a way to turn these into "bad things" just so that I can feel guilty. Becky says without that feeling of guilt forgiveness doesn't mean much to her. I think just the opposite, forgiveness means I shouldn't ever feel guilty."

Based on Scripture, what would you tell them?

there's guilty and then there's guilty

Historically in reformed theology there is tradition of precisely defining the issue which needs to be addressed in order to arrive at a correct biblical understanding. In this case, we need to address the definition of the word "guilt."

guilt¹

The bible uses the word "guilt" most often in a forensic, or legal sense: we are guilty of transgressing God's law. All sin therefore makes us automatically and objectively guilty before God, regardless of whether or not we know we are guilty or feel particularly guilty.

In this objective sense "guilt" isn't really healthy or unhealthy, but rather a description of how things actually are. Because God has provided a remedy for this guilt in Christ's work on the cross, we need to very clearly know that we are "guilty" before God if we are to avail ourselves of his remedy—salvation through the work of Christ.

guilt²

Our question, however, seems to refer to a more subjective use of the word: feeling conviction, blame, grief or shame as a result of what we have done or failed to do.

We need to keep this distinction in mind, since it is a distinction which scripture also makes and addresses in different ways. Our answer to the question, "Is guilt ever healthy and does God use it to motivate us?" will depend on rather or not we mean guilt¹ or guilt². For the remainder of the discussion we will be referring to the subjective use of guilt (guilt²).

the question answered: *sic et non*

The bible indicates that there are two types of guilt²:

- one that leads to sorrow and repentance ("godly sorrow")
- one that leads to shame and alienation ("worldly sorrow")

Obviously the "godly sorrow" is good, and God does use it and the "worldly sorrow" is bad and God does not use it. So the answer to the question, "Is guilt ever healthy and does God use it to motivate us?" is literally "yes and no."

An example of this comes from the book of Hosea. Hosea had been sent to the Northern Kingdom to tell them that without a severe repentance, they will come under God's judgment—indeed it may already be too late. In chapter six, we glimpse some of their response to this message:

"Come, let us return to the LORD; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him. Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD; his going out is sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth." (Hosea 6:1-3)

And then a little later, we find out how God, who knows their true heart, views these words and their real reaction to his correction:

What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away. ...they have rebelled against me! I would redeem them, but they speak lies against me. They do not cry to me from the heart, but they wail upon their beds; for grain and wine they gash themselves; they rebel against me. (Hosea 6:4; 7:13b-14)

Clearly here, we have seen in some sense “guilt” played out. And yet, despite protestations and resolve, God's assessment is that the Northern Kingdom has not cried out with their inner spiritual realities, but only with their outer words and emotions—with worldly sorrow.

Paul, later gives us a context for understanding the difference between godly and worldly sorrow, when he writes to his beloved, but often misguided Corinthian church:

For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn--fighting without and fear within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more. For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it- though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter. (II Corinthians 7:5-11)

The word “grieve/grief” here (λυπεω) means to be sorry, to regret; to cause pain or sorrow, all of which fit with our subjective understanding of guilt.

telling the difference

godly sorrow

Godly sorrow **is initiated by God**; in the first instance it can be the gateway to conversion (“...produces a repentance that leads to salvation...”)

Godly sorrow **is designed for correction and repentance**; it is not a permanent status (“...produces a repentance that leads to salvation.... ...see what earnestness godly grief has produced...”)

Godly sorrow **furtheres our relationship with God and others**; it **draws us to God** (“...grieved into repenting.... ...suffered no loss.... ...clear yourself....”)

worldly sorrow

Worldly sorrow **is initiated by our brokenness**; it may also be used **by Satan** (it leads to death, causes us to suffer loss and harms us—things contrary to God)

Worldly sorrow **is its own end**; there is **little or no movement of our soul** (by definition, does not lead to repentance and therefore does allow us to avail ourselves of the gospel)

Worldly sorrow **damages our relationship with God and others**; it **alienates and pushes us further away from God** (“...whereas worldly sorrow produces death.”)

helpful questions

Is my guilt/sorrow drawing me closer to God?

(by relying more on his goodness, forcing me to face my sinfulness to experience his mercy, allowing me to appreciate Christ’s work on the cross for me, increasing my tender affection for him)

or

Is it pushing me further away?

(hearing God speak through scripture is a lot harder or even unappealing, praying is difficult/forced/insincere, prone to ignore the cross)

Am I feeling guilt/sorrow or am I feeling shame?

Is there genuine repentance happening as a result of my guilt/sorrow or am I simply running away from pain or trying to “say the right thing” to get God off my back?

Is my sense of guilt/sorrow taking me new places in my relationship with God or leaving me broken or in a state of pity or self-loathing?

Is Christ's work on the cross helping me see the depth of God's love and mercy or is it a constant reminder that I have again screwed up?

(Do you sense that God sings over you with joy even when bearing the pain and consequences of your sin or that he is begrudgingly putting up with you because he has to?)

Is your repentance a true repentance ?

(one that causes you to run to God and rely on his strength, one that compels you to do things so that God can more readily work in your life, one that focuses on your heart attitudes and affections)

or

Is it a shallow repentance?

(one that causes you to "resolve to try harder," one that primarily is trying to stop the pain in your life, one that is mostly concerned with simply stopping your outwardly sinful actions)

dealing with the difference

Biblically responding to godly sorrow/guilt means I should. . .

Be regularly listening for God's voice and repenting of sins (attitudes, actions, affections) as he makes them known and makes me able. Repentance becomes a lifestyle, not a remedy.

See evidence of the Holy Spirit working in my life as I relate to God and others.

Be gaining a new depth of insight and appreciation for the gospel (depth of my sin, depth of God's love, security of my new identity).

Biblically responding to worldly sorrow/guilt means I should. . .

Force myself, with the help of my spiritual community, to listen to God's promises to me and his affection for me. We serve a God who pursues us with a relentless, ruthless passion; we are far more willing to let him go than he is willing to let us go.

Understand that Satan will try to greedily work in this area and I will need others to uphold me; Meditate on the fact that my Great Friend, Christ, makes never ending intercession on my behalf.

Be sure that I am not trying to assume roles which Christ has specifically reserved for himself (namely paying the price for my sins, trying to carry the burden of guilt, thinking that I can please God if I suffer etc.)

Biblically responding to godly sorrow/guilt means I should. . .

Be regularly assessing how my relationship with God is developing as a result of my sins, failures, weaknesses and brokenness. Am I running to God and trusting him to use a broken servant or running away from God and relying on my ability to cover up my brokenness so that I look good to others?

Biblically responding to worldly sorrow/guilt means I should. . .

Find spiritual traveling companions who will help me see how God would like to work in this situation, who can speak the truth of the gospel to me. Ask God to make me able to give in to him when I know that I don't want to.

a final word from jumpin' john

Those people who are more mature Christians know **how bad the punishments of shame, confusion, guilt, being angry with yourself, and these sorts of emotions really are.** Yet all of us must remember to exercise restraint, **lest guilt consume** us. For nothing more readily happens to people with fearful consciences than falling into **despair.** **Satan uses this** to his advantage. When he sees one of us **overwhelmed by guilt** and **fear** because of our sins he drags us **deeper**



and **deeper** into the **whirlpool of guilt** so that we may never rise again. Now don't get me wrong, when we feel sorry for having done wrong and it causes us **to run to God humbly** and **rely on his goodness**, nothing but **good** can happen as a result. But we need to be **careful** that we don't become **burdened by our guilt** in such a way that we worry and become so dissatisfied with ourselves that we are ready to give up because when we do this we are **actually running away from God**, instead of running to him in the way that he wants us to.

"I don't know where Knaak digs up these quotes of mine, but he makes me look "maarvalous!"

Paraphrase of Calvin, *Institutes*,3.3.15