

FREEDOM FROM GUILT

INTRODUCTION:

- A. Prov. 13:15: "The way of the transgressor is hard."
- B. Unresolved Guilt will destroy our lives.
- C. We rarely measure up completely to our ideals.
- D. Along with guilt, we have another problem:
 - 1. Self-Acceptance.
 - a. Matt. 27:4 - Judas experienced unbearable guilt.
 - b. Gen. 3:8-10 - Adam and Eve felt guilty.
 - c. Gen. 38:1-30 - Judah felt guilt over Tamar.

I. HOW SOME PEOPLE REACT TO GUILT FEELINGS.

- A. I'm scared of what is ahead.
- B. My mind has a tendency to kick itself.
- C. Having a feeling of impending punishment.
- D. Fell like a raunchy person - a complete failure.
- E. I feel unworthy, unvaluable, somewhat inferior.
- F. I dislike myself - not accepted.
- G. Separated, like I don't want to show my face to people.

The Ancient Mariner in Coleridge's poem portrays the haunting fear of a guilty man. After cruelly killing the albatross that had brought him safety, he was plagued with fears of punishment and revenge. Coleridge wrote:

Like one, that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread
And having once turned around walks on,
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows, a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread.

Sometimes we transfer our fear of punishment to God. We feel, "Somehow, somewhere, God is going to get even."

H. The Bible is filled with illustrations of guilty reactions.

1. Adam - Gen. 3:12 - This woman you gave me.
2. Saul - I Sam. 20-21 - Blamed the people.
3. Israelites - Ex. 17:30 - Blamed Moses.

I. Our rebellious actions trigger a fear of lowered self-evaluation or a fear of rejection.

1. In response to this, we either:
 - a. Give in and suffer depression and feelings of worthlessness.
 - b. Rebel and fight back by committing more wrong.
 - c. Deny we did any wrong at all and put the blame on others.
 - d. Superficially acknowledge our faults to get rid of our pain, but feel no rightly-motivated desire to change.

II. SELF-ESTEEM IS DESTROYED BY GUILT:

- A. We have the conscious thought - I am bad - I could be better.
- B. Constant criticism causes self-esteem to take a beating.

Most of us are familiar with John Newton's song:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

Isaac Watts wrote:

Alas, and did my Saviour bleed
And did my sovereign die
Would He devote that sacred head
For such a worm as I.

The common thread running through these verses is a sense of self-abasement. We are either "nothing," "worms," or "wretches." When such graphic words are added to guilt-producing sermons and the usual failures of everyday life, you have a formula for real self-hate! This is especially true for people with poor self-images. Many people believe this negative view is the Bible's exclusive emphasis. This became crystal clear to me when I assigned some graduate students in a theology course to write a paper on, "The Nobility of Man According to the Bible."

C. Guilt feelings come when we miss the mark.

When the Bible mentions sin, it usually means "to miss the mark." The Old Testament book of Judges describes some Hebrew warriors with sling shots "who could sling a stone at a hair and not miss." The word for "miss" is the Hebrew word chatah - usually translated "to sin." Paul explains the concept further in Romans, where he says, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Here he connects sin with failing to attain God's moral glory and perfection. The Westminster Confession says, "Sin is any want of conformity, or transgression of, the law of God." In God's estimate, we are likened to a marksman who never hits the bull's eye, or the marathon runner who must go twenty-six miles but only makes ten. And the target or goal isn't the shifting mark set by our society, it's the perfect standard of a loving God.

D. Every sin has some harmful effect on our physical or emotional lives.

1. If people knew - they would not respect me.
2. If they knew - they might get angry.
3. I'm afraid I would lose their esteem.
 - a. Prov. 28:13: "He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy."
 - b. I 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."
 - c. James 5:16: "Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much."

- d. Rom. 5:1: "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Someone asks, "How can I get rid of my guilt? Tell me how to do it." Let me make five simple but significant suggestions.

1. Take God at His Word. He has promised to forgive us if we will forgive others. In Matt. 6:14-15, Jesus said, "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."
2. Admit to God that you have done wrong and that you are genuinely sorry. This is repentance and it also involves making right everything you can, relative to your sins.
3. Forgive everyone who has wronged you. Genuinely remove the hatred, resentment, and jealousy which you may feel toward anyone else by honestly forgiving them completely.
4. Sincerely, one time and one time only, ask God to forgive you. This prayer should be earnest and deep and genuine. But, then, do not follow the common practice of praying it over and over and over again through the years. Do not repeat this prayer forever.
5. Finally, accept the forgiveness which God has promised to give you. When the thought of your sin comes back to your mind, instead of praying, "Father, forgive me for my sin ...," pray instead "I thank thee, Father, for forgiving me." He has promised to forgive. We must believe that He has kept His promise. Instead of deepening our feeling of guilt through the years by repeating the request for forgiveness, we turn our attention time and again to God's goodness in forgiving us. One of these attitudes burdens and destroys, the other lifts and inspires. Rather than the negative, destructive attitude, let us have the positive, constructive, Christian attitude, believing that God has forgiven us.

THOUGHTS FOR DISCUSSION

The woman who runs through two or three marriages with abusive husbands is a classic example. You would think she would be careful after a bad experience or two, but instead she selects a carbon copy of her first spouse. She seems to have a desire to be mistreated and in fact she does. Since she does not believe she is deserving of a loving husband, she searches out men who make her suffer.

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Created in the image of God and living in the idyllic Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were in perfect harmony with themselves, one another, and God. Although they were naked, they were not ashamed. They knew no disunity or conflict; they were inwardly whole and peaceful. If Adam and Eve had taken time to reflect upon their self-esteem before the Fall, they probably would have thought things like "We are whole, happy, and fulfilled individuals because we know our identity in relation to our creator. We are what we were created to be and we feel comfortable in our position." They would have felt no burden to prove their worth, to avoid guilt, or to build their own identity because their emotional harmony was a gracious gift rather than something earned.

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As Barclay put it, "To have a good conscience is to be able to look at the knowledge which one shares with no one but oneself in the face, and not to be ashamed of anything in it."

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To be worthwhile, we must maintain a satisfactory standard of behavior. To do so, we must learn to correct ourselves when we do wrong and to credit ourselves when we do right.

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In a similar view, Mowrer writes:

It is surely unrepented and unredeemed actions that destroy our self-respect and moral credit, and one can hardly escape the conclusion that these cannot be recaptured by any means other than compensating good actions and deeds.

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Few clearer statements that the burden of man's self-acceptance and self-worth lies in his own actions can be found. According to this view, our identity, our worth, our acceptance, and our freedom from guilt come from our own efforts. If we measure up, we can feel accepted and worthwhile. If we do not, we cannot. The New Testament message suggests this is not true. In Ephesians, for example, Paul spends the first three chapters reciting the blessings God has bestowed upon us. He speaks of our election, our redemption, our acceptance through Christ, our inheritance, and our union with Christ. Only after stressing

all of these riches does he begin his challenge. "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called."

In 1 Timothy, Paul mentions the seared conscience:

"Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron."

In Titus, the defiled conscience is mentioned:

"To the pure all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled."

These verses show other extremes in the functioning of conscience. It can become seared or defiled. Searing apparently refers either to a callousness or insensitivity similar to the functioning of conscience in the classical psychopathic personality, or to a branding or burning of one's crimes into their consciousness that coexists with a "hypocritical show of sanctity." In either case, this conscience allows sinful attitudes or actions to go unchecked. In contrast to the weak conscience that inhibits unnecessarily, this conscience does not inhibit sufficiently

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Sometimes our inability to accept praise or compliments grows out of guilt. Because we feel undeserving, we pass off praise or squirm uncomfortably when a compliment comes our way. As Allison put it,

Many of us feel embarrassed when we are complimented, when people say nice things about us. We find ourselves strangely ill at ease when something wonderful happens to us, as though we did not deserve it. Guilt tends to rob the self of any sense of well being and does not allow us to enjoy fully our health, wealth, and well being while we have them.

Many parents experience guilt over their children. They condemn themselves for every real or imagined failure, read every book available, attend every seminar that comes through town, and try to be perfect parents. Some are so overwhelmed by their own guilt that they blame their children. "It's their fault," they say. "We did the best we could and they can't blame us for their hang-ups!" Since no parent is perfect, most of us have at least a few qualms of conscience about our relations with our children.

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The recent shift in male/female roles has caught some married women in a dilemma. Working outside the home, they feel guilty for "neglecting" their

families, breaking away from their traditional role, or "being selfish." But if these women stay home, they feel a sense of guilt for "failing to develop themselves" or being "just a housewife!"

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Adults are not the only sufferers of guilty, however. Children feel guilt, too. Parents and teachers have ingenious ways of saying things like, "You're not going out looking like that, are you?" "I've told you a thousand times!" or "After all I've done for you!" And our children return the favor with accusations like, "Everybody else gets to go!" "Everyone else gets to stay out that late!" and "You never let us do anything!" All such statements communicate, "You should feel badly (guilty) for not doing as I wish." Even after children grow up and begin their own families, guilt is frequent in family dialogue. Older parents write, "Why don't you call (or write)."

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The discouraged, defeated Christian, the perpetual altar-goer who never feels secure in his Christian life, the religious legalist who rigidly orders his own life and finds it easier to condemn others than to love them, and the rebellious adolescent from a highly religious home have all been touched by guilt. So, too, have many who have lost the vitality they once had in their Christian faith and who have seen that love replaced by religious ritual and orthodoxy devoid of personal meaning. In fact, I became convinced that the guilt feelings experienced by some Christians are actually compounded by a misunderstanding of the biblical role of guilt and conscience in the Christian life.

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Persons experiencing guilt feelings and persons experiencing inferiority feelings share the general tendency to depreciate themselves ... This kind of behavior is a function of a definition or concept of oneself as being of low worth or worthless if one behaves in a certain kind of negatively valued way (e.g., wrong or incompetently) or exhibits a certain kind of negatively valued characteristic (e.g., wrongness or incompetence).

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Self-esteem is the name given to the complex cognitive-affective response which accompanies behavior in accordance with the conscience.

When a person behaves in opposition to his conscience he experiences guilt ... When he behaves in conformity with his conscience, he experiences a heightening of the feelings of self-esteem ...

Repression is another common way of warding off uncomfortable emotions like guilt. An uncomfortable wish, desire, memory, or emotion is simply pushed from awareness. In combination with other defenses, we strive to keep these unacceptable desires or feelings from coming back. But why do we attempt to press these things from consciousness? Is it not because of either fear or guilt? If we acknowledged these hidden feelings or desires, we would fear condemnation from others or ourselves. Consequently, we expend great

amounts of energy keeping these things out of our awareness. This process starts early in life. We are taught, for example, "Tell him you're sorry" (even when we are not), "Give her a big hug" (even when we can't stand her), "Don't be a baby" (when we feel like crying). "We don't hate our brother, we love him" (though at the moment we do hate him). Because we know that these feelings will be condemned, we push them from awareness, "Good" children don't feel that way!"

In adult life, repression can show up as a void of emotion or in difficulty handling one's emotions. We may fail to laugh when others do, or to cry or show other normal affective expressions. Allison speaks of those whose guilt has "incarcerated them from access to their feelings, their bodies and their very vitality." This absence of emotions is a good indicator that something has been pushed from awareness and shut off from the remainder of our personality. Overreactions to apparently inconsequential situations can also reflect the operation of repression. Strong feelings that have been pushed from awareness break through at inappropriate times.

Religious rigidity and legalism may also indicate an earlier repression of thoughts or feelings. In fact, all forms of legalism are built on repression. Struggling to keep potentially guilt-producing thoughts from awareness, the legalistic person maintains a continued focus on external actions, works, and effort.

Guilt is a natural part of the response to the experience of death. It generates the need for self-punishment. But once again, enough is enough. It is proper and reasonable to engage in the guilt that comes when a loved one is gone. But it is important to know that a certain amount of suffering is appropriate to expiate a wrong. It is not a sign of weakness if you feel guilt at a loved one's death, as long as the suffering brought about by guilt can come to an end, and life can go on.

Do not expect the death of a loved one to pass by easily. There are bound to be unresolved problems, guilt that will lead to self-punishment. Be careful, though, once again to ask: What are your options? There is nothing wrong with wanting to experience hurt. It may be the best thing, as long as you don't want it too much.

Jews have a custom of giving charity in memory of the deceased. I often recommend to people that they give until it hurts. Strangely, by so doing, they help not only the poor but themselves as well.

The problem of punishment is, then, a problem that comes along with guilt. As with guilt, it has its purposes, purposes that are part of the intuitive way that morality works. But as with guilt, it has its problems, too. Punishment tends to be cruel. Whether used on others or used on oneself, it is more often cruel than not. The second need, then, as we have just seen, is to find ways to allow that need to be expressed while making certain that cruelty does not reign.

But still, punishment can be dangerous.

Punishment grows out of a sense of justice. What justice needs, for balance is love.

That was ultimately the purpose of the Day of Atonement: to appeal to God as a loving God, and to know that God's love can mitigate all wrongs. And that is the purpose of loving one another. Not to substitute feelings of love for the need to maintain a system of justice. But to be sure that justice will be pursued humanely and divinely; that justice will be meted out, safe from cruelty; that it will be accompanied by love.

Love and mercy therefore constitute the final means of protection against the dangers of punishment. We need to love others to be sure that we will not punish them too much. We need to love ourselves in order to make sure that we will not punish ourselves too much. We need to cultivate the emotion of love as much as we need to strive for justice and reach for morality.

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Do not deny the need for punishment. But try to reduce it to an absolute minimum, using certain forms of behavior that are not destructive, and developing the power of love that is expressed personally and toward others so that punishment, though an important theoretical reality, will be an unimportant practical one.

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The purpose of guilt, remember, is to make us feel good for the right reasons. It raises moral issues, and all the parameters of the moral equation, including the need for retribution, will be raised as well. Living with guilt requires the resolution of what seem like side issues such as punishment to make certain that we will still feel good in the end.

MORE CONSTRUCTIVE AFFLICTIONS

A similar experience in self-affliction is the lot of the bereaved. A person who has lost a loved one is oftentimes filled with a sense of grief that contains a large component of guilt. I refer not to some of the more profound sides of melancholy that are the province of the psychiatrist, but to the more common feeling most mourners have. The feeling, for example, that there is unfinished business that was not resolved.

As hard as it normally is to face a loved one's death, there are situations where mourners have had no opportunity to iron out the wrinkles in their relationships with the deceased. And when death comes, there is no more time.

But the extreme case hides a common experience which most of us have: that after a loved one has died, we will never again have the opportunity to do what we were waiting for a special circumstance to do. I remember driving to the

cemetery in a limousine once with a woman who kept repeating again and again, "Why didn't I have the painters come six months ago?" She could no longer invite the deceased to the dinner party she had put off. Another time, I remember a man standing at the graveside of his wife. He shed tears as he said to her, "I never told you this before, but I loved you so much." Why, I thought, have you waited until now?

In different ways, though, every one of us has unfinished business with the ones we love. Every one of us has missed opportunities to be good, to forgive, to laugh, to embrace those who are now gone.

When they are dead, so many people suddenly become alive - alive in the sense that their presence is finally appreciated. Scholars and authors finally achieve their deserved fame - posthumously. Business partners and husbands and wives finally are appreciated - posthumously.

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Take the case of an elderly woman who has just fallen and suffered a broken hip. She is beside herself - not only because she is now bedridden. Her elderly husband is completely dependent on her for cooking his meals and for taking care of the necessities of his life. Lying in her hospital bed, the woman doesn't pity herself. She weeps to her son who has come to visit her: "Look what I have done to your father. All because I forgot to take my cane when I went over to the cupboard, look what I have done to him!"

Now, it doesn't take long for her son to start generating his own guilt. He thinks: I should have hired someone to help my mother in the house by now. She really can't take care of herself, let alone my father. If I hadn't spent my money on the down payment for our country house, I could have at least paid for someone for a little while. And, who knows? That little while could have prevented her dreadful fall. Had she not fallen, both she and my father would be getting along quite well now. It is all my fault.

Can you see what is going on here? Guilt. Great gobs of guilt. Each person is so aware of his or her own responsibilities that no one has to remind them of Adam and Eve to say: Take responsibility! Don't hide! A failure to take responsibility is not the problem.

Someone has to remind them, though, that elderly women often have osteoporosis - a condition about which we have only recently acquired medical knowledge (and thus the elderly woman would not have known how to prevent it). As a result of osteoporosis, breaking a hip is commonly not the result of a fall, but the cause of the fall itself. It is very likely that this woman would have broken her hip had she had her cane in hand or not. And her son would not have been able to prevent the fall either, had there been a caretaker on the premises or not. What they all have to remember is that the fall was due to circumstances beyond their control, and when that is the case it is inappropriate to place any blame.

Who should feel guilty about the woman's fall? No one, no one at all. They should spend their energy trying to cope with the real problems of dealing with illness in old age, and they should save themselves the wear and tear caused by turning this unfortunate set of circumstances into a guilt trip.

Feeling guilty. A guilty conscience. What we have seen up until now is a reminder of the two-sided nature of human life, recognized since antiquity, but perpetually a problem in every age. Man is a combination of feeling and thought, of emotions and intellect. And when we begin to uncover the many layers of a concept as seemingly simple as guilt, we see that guilt itself is a product of these two separate but united sides of human life.

Feeling guilty is the beginning. Feeling guilty is the source of powerful behaviors and of the deepest levels motivating change. A guilty conscience is both the outward manifestation of feelings and the arbiter that involves the mind in controlling the emotions, and is therefore the central focus for moral activity in human life.

Guilt that is emotional and intellectual is therefore a desirable necessity of human existence, abandoned only at the peril of abandoning everything that is worthwhile in our lives.

But guilt doesn't have to be abandoned. Not when it makes sense and is appropriate. The real problem with guilt is not that it is inherently bad, but that we often feel guilty when we should not - that we are blamed for something we didn't do.

Let us take a look at those circumstances which we truly haven't created, those that are beyond our control.

Conscience forces us to confront intuitive realities without which we cannot live responsibly and without which we cannot expect to behave morally. For every measurement we make assumes the presence of some yardstick that stands behind it. Look at the way guilt works.

You feel guilty because you do not give as much charity as you should? Your conscience points you toward a higher principle: concern for others and the need to share one's material well-being. You feel guilty because you do not allow your wife to pursue her own interests and create her own role? Your conscience points you toward the powerful rights that every individual has and the need of all of us to support and relate to the personal autonomy of everyone who is near and dear to us. You assume that people should feel guilty if they cheat on their taxes or embezzle money from their employers or steal gold chains from women walking to work? Your conscience points you toward the need we have to respect other people's integrity, to respect their possessions as well as their rights. You assume that people should feel guilty if they gun down innocent passengers on airplanes in the name of one political cause or another?

Your conscience points you toward the truth that every human being is sacred and should not be used as a means toward an end.

Feelings engendered by guilt push ordinary people - not only philosophers, mind you, but ordinary, sensitive people - to become believers. Not necessarily believers in the rituals of one faith or another. But confronting situations that are pregnant with meaning forces us to posit, with whatever doubts necessary, that we cannot make a move and that we cannot organize a rational response to moral questions without using a yardstick, a law, that we try to ascertain to the best of our abilities. One of the interesting anomalies of the guilty conscience is that it places most of us in the position of acting as if there were a right and a wrong, as uncomfortable as such an idea may make us modern people feel.

Only the feelings count. And that is true about guilt, too. Feelings of guilt should lead to ideas about what is correct to do or not to do. But that connection never happens when only feelings count.

If guilt is only a feeling, then morals are entirely a private affair. If guilt is only a feeling, then it raises no issues that are likely to need public examination. If anything, guilt will raise highly private matters which will have to do only with how good you feel.

That is one of the reasons why it seems so preposterous to dwell on guilt. Why all we want is for someone to tell us only how to get rid of guilt because guilt is a bad feeling and we do not want to feel bad.

Even the Bible seldom regulates feelings. But when it does, it regulates them to make an important point. In the Ten Commandments, for example, only one commandment regulates feelings, and it is the most controversial of them all: "Thou shalt not covet."

The first two commandments regulates ideas: (1) the belief in God, and (2) that we shall have no other gods to which we bow down. From then on, actions are prohibited: (3) Do not take the Lord's name in vain; (4) Remember and observe the Sabbath; (5) Honor parents; (6) Thou shalt not murder; (7) Thou shalt not commit adultery; (8) Thou shalt not steal; (9) Thou shalt not bear false witness. But the tenth commandment, Thou shalt not covet, restricts a feeling. For that reason, many of the commentators see the tenth commandment as the source of the other nine - because religion takes this level of human experience as seriously as we do in our personal lives. Feelings are important because they lead to ideas and actions which may be good or which may be bad. But feelings do not exist all by themselves.

You are not allowed to covet because coveting your neighbor's wife could lead to adultery; coveting his ox could lead to theft. Both of these could lead to murder. Lusts of the heart of various kinds could lead to an attraction to other gods. You see the approach. Therefore, feelings are regulated.

But the pop preachers and the masses of people who are primed for their message don't want to think about where feelings could lead. They don't want to imagine that greed could lead to murder.

THE DEACTIVATION OF CONSCIENCE

The truly is that people have abandoned their consciences for a very long time. Corruption is nothing new. About what, after all, did the prophets of Israel speak? "The wind shall feed upon all thy shepherds," said Jeremiah, "and thy lovers shall go into captivity; surely then you shall be ashamed and confounded for all thy wickedness" (Jeremiah 22:22). What caused Amos such consternation? That the rich sold the poor for a pair of shoes. What drove Isaiah to distraction? That truth and justice were abandoned as yardsticks of life. The ship of conscience has sailed on many rough seas before; ours are not its first.

You would imagine that sooner or later people would learn; and yet experience shows us that they don't.

Why? Why do people act as if there were no higher truth, no standard to which they themselves ought adhere? Why do they act as if they can do anything they want - as long as they don't get caught? Why does the booming voice of conscience frequently sound like a barely audible whisper?

Because the built-in means for sensitizing us to moral problems can be deactivated. Guilt can be shut off and the conscience drugged so that it does not do its work. The result is that the guilty conscience is put to sleep and is then often hard to wake.

At its best, guilt is a means for restoring moral balance. You want to do wrong and hopefully guilt steps in and helps to provide a corrective before the damage is actually done. Or it is a red flag after the fact, thrown down on the field to initiate a new sequence of events, frequently involving a penalty, designed to redress some wrong. That red flag is important to the game; without it the game would degenerate into a free-for-all.

But if you can convince yourself that you could not be guilty, then you won't have to worry about your conscience. And convincing arguments are not hard to find.

Conscience is the dividing line between animals and people. We human beings are not only conscious of what happens all around us -after all cats and dogs, birds and even cockroaches (I think!) have awareness. In their own ways, they are conscious. But they are not self-conscious. They do not sit back and think about themselves. They do not measure themselves against yardsticks that enable them to judge whether they have stature in their own eyes. Only we human beings can do that.

So it is that a guilty conscience partakes in this most unique of human features: self-consciousness. Feelings are contemplated as thoughts. Pain becomes thoughts about pain. Guilt feelings become a guilty conscience, and are thereby transformed into a part of the rational mechanisms by which actions are weighed.

To be a person is, yes, to feel as a human being. But even more so, it is to think as a human being. Feeling must be transformed into thinking if we are truly to act as humans. Descartes said it on one level, I think, therefore I am. But Descartes' statement might be taken one step further: I have a guilty conscience, therefore I am.

Imagine the husband's guilt when his wife confronted their four-year-old daughter in anticipation of a visit from Grandma. "We're going to have a visitor," she said, "and it's someone you haven't seen in a long time. Can you guess who it is?" "Dad?" the little girl eagerly replied.

That dad knew well a parent's guilt.

When you have a guilty conscience, you have more than feelings; you are burdened by nagging thoughts. When you are plagued by a guilty conscience, you feel it not only in your gut; you feel it in your head. When the weight of conscience presses down upon you, it touches more than your nerves; it touches your imagination and your convictions. Because a guilty conscience is a pain in the mind.

Guilt is a feeling that poses questions: intellectual questions and moral questions. A woman may conceivably feel anger and even hatred toward her in-laws. When, as a result, she says that she has a guilty conscience, she is telling you more; that she subscribes to a view of how a person should relate to a parent, in-laws included, and that such a view does not square with the feelings she now has.

She may not have studied Scripture, but "Honor thy father and thy mother" rings loud and clear anyway - either because she has been taught that this is the way she should feel or because it is simply self-evident that parents deserve a special level of treatment. Her thoughts tell her she should be feeling differently. And, as a result, she has a guilty conscience.

Guilt is a feeling that hauls a person into court and places him before a judge, the conscience, who speaks out for right and wrong. A judge who never tires of reminding us that there is a tremendous gap between what we are and what we ought to be. A special judge who also is an officer of the court, a strong-armed monitor who tries to use his muscle to see that the judge's will is done.

Guilt feelings are, first of all, an indicator, a guide. Much like pain, they function within a human being as part of the complex message system that feeds information back to us on the state of our well-being. Pain is part of the message

system that indicates a problem with our physical well-being. Indeed, there are times when pain also is a manifestation of psychological illness. Guilt, however, points to problems of spiritual well-being.

Of course everyone wants to feel good. But the temptation is to take a simple pill to block out the bad feelings. If you have a serious disease, what would you do? Take an aspirin to be sure that the disease would go away? No doubt the aspirin might reduce the symptoms, but lowering the fever is surely not the same as curing the disease.

It is precisely the same for guilt. Guilt is a sign of something going on inside a human being, of something that is not right that has to be fixed up. Getting rid of the bad feelings that guilt induces may serve as a temporary treatment of symptoms. But it is not a cure. You have to look further inside for that.

The desire to change and to chart a new path is a desire that most of us have. It may be in the form of a diet, or a switch from gin and tonic to chardonnay. It may be a search to rediscover the enchantment and the attachment you once had toward your wife. Or it may be an effort to fix up your relations with your father, your boss, or even the IRS. But sooner or later the bug that tempts you to make your life better will surely bite. And you will look for the resources that make it possible for you to change.

Not very long ago that route was well marked and well known. It was called repentance, and people had access to their own inner resources through the spiritual traditions of their own religious faiths, so that they could repent and change. In this era, though, when religion no longer dominates, repentance - like guilt - exists for many in the realm somewhere between the quaint and the crazy. The cry, "Repent before it is too late," is the cry of an idiot, a sign displayed by a scruffy long-haired man in many a downtown that makes you want to cross the street.

Think, for example, how our terminology has changed. It wasn't so long ago that criminals served their time in a "penitentiary." (That is what we used to call the jail.) The word comes from the Latin root penitentiarius, a place to do penance. Maybe that fit the bill years ago, but today we are more matter-of-fact. We have "correctional institutions." No penitence, please, just correction - as if it were so easy to be correct, like adjusting the focus on a moving projector, and as if repentance, good old-fashioned repentance, did not have to play a crucial part.

But, even though the word has lost its luster, repentance - again, like guilt - is still around. This old-fashioned term deserves to be polished up. Even if not in so many words, people can - and do - repent. And, I hope you will agree, much can be learned by bringing this old classic back, unretouched, and not even colorized.

WHAT IS REPENTANCE?

How can we define repentance? The Hebrew term for it is teshuvah, which means "turning back" and carries with it the sense of returning to the point of departure after completing a full cycle. In the Bible, for example, you read of teshuvat hashanah, meaning the completion of the annual cycle of seasons. Or, in another context, Scripture speaks of Samuel returning to his home in Ramah following a full round of visits to various towns in Israel. Again, the same word, teshuvah. By extension, then, the Hebrew root is used to refer to a return to God. The resonance, then, that is heard with the word is one of movement back. It implies, of course, that there is some place to go back to - that there is a point of reference and an anchorage which can resist the winds and shoals of many great storms.

Such a return takes place on two levels, and the act of repentance often connects these two levels in human life. They are external and internal. A penitent sinner is one who examines his ways, finds them wanting, and changes his deeds.

Repentance is a turn in direction that leads to doing better.

But repentance is also a form of inner healing. It is a consequence of feeling debased and unworthy, of being less than a human being should be. It is a product of feeling self-contempt because of the state of one's life, a product of feeling polluted and impure. Repentance purifies and reroots a soul. Repentance reestablishes an inner harmony, a center of gravity, and a balance around which a human being can then freely move. Moreover, this inner experience is one that affirms the meaning of an individual's life and deeds. It is both a statement made and a commitment given to a cause, to a world of value which stands above every human being.

Repentance is an act, is the act of human freedom. It is the act that says "no" to the long chain of cause and effect that is behind each human act and that describes every person's past, and says: I am more than the sum of my past accomplishments. I am more than a total and complex picture of many stimuli and the history of responses to them. I am a unique human being and I assert my existence and its value by an act which is a free act, and one which, because it is so free, describes, more than any other description, just who I am.

As Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz has explained: "The recognition of the need to turn comes about in different ways. Sometimes one is overcome by a sense of sinfulness, of blemish, of defilement, which results in a powerful desire for escape and purification. But the desire to turn can also take more subtle forms, feelings of imperfection or unrealized potential, which spur a search for something better."

As a quest for purity, repentance is an effort to use serious reflection in the service of spiritual purification - all in order to do away with the metaphysical corruption of the divine image in man.

These two goals, to do better and to be better, lead to two related but different tasks: to repair broken relations with others, the others sometimes being other people, other things (like nature, from the animals to the ozone, or, most importantly, God), and to purify one's self. The guideposts that are part of this turning offer directions to make the act of repentance possible and effective. And it is the process of repentance, its several different steps and their impact on each individual, that provides the road map necessary for this turning to take place.

THE WAY TO REPENT

While there are many descriptions of the process of repentance, and many mixed brews that are said to work, they can all be distilled into five potent substrates that successfully bring about change: The five "R's" of repentance which make up five "Thou Shalts."

1. Remorse. Thou shalt ... feel bad and be remorseful about what you have done.
2. Recantation. Thou shalt ... turn feelings into words and confess your sins.
3. Renunciation. Thou shalt ... willfully renounce your wrongdoings, removing them from your feelings and thoughts and deciding not to commit them again.
4. Resolution. Thou shalt ... resolve to follow a better path in the future, to lift yourself up to where you want to be.
5. Reconciliation. Thou shalt ... ask for forgiveness.

Let us see how these five "R's" work.

Who knows what is hidden? Only you and God. And neither offers escape.

Paul Tillich, the great Protestant theologian, writes of the overwhelming existential loneliness that afflicts each of us, and how we are ultimately closed into a room with ourselves. "Who has not," he writes, "at some time, been lonely in the midst of a social event? The feeling of our separation from the rest of his life is most acute when we are surrounded by it in noise and talk. We realize then much more than in moments of solitude how strange we are to each other, how estranged life is from life. Each of us draws back into himself. We cannot penetrate the hidden centre of another individual: nor can that individual pass beyond the shroud that covers our own being. Even the greatest love cannot break through the walls of the self."

We are therefore alone and lonely, and there are limits to what we can expect from others. All the more reason, then, to remember that every self is created by God. Each is in His image. And that does not mean that only the selves that are good are so created, that only the saints are accepted as human beings and as children of the Most High. Every self can become good. Never perfect, never at the end of the becoming. But every moving, surging spirit in every sinful human being is a spirit that reflects God's concern.

And if we are good enough for God to be concerned, then shouldn't we feel good enough to deserve self-respect!

Imperfection may be troubling, but for God's children it is insufficient reason for despair.

There are those who have some standards that will impel you, even unconsciously, to ask yourself, "Is this an ethical idea?" All that from a repeated recitation of your failures. Feeling guilty about them is good.

And you will come to realize - slowly but surely it will work - that you can indeed change. You will find the strength to renounce what you have done in the past. And you will find the resources to resolve to change. It is simply not true that we never change. Yes, we need to sharpen our wills, but that being done, a change can, and often does, take place.

Sometimes it is a breakthrough that we could hardly have expected. We have been stingy in our charity for years and years. And finally we see a person in need who helps us break through. A young woman sleeping on the streets who could be your daughter or mine. A man with AIDS who is the son of someone you know. A destitute family traveling to the other side of the world to seek freedom in a new land. Someone's heartbreak becomes ours. Our mercy is stirred. Someone's need becomes a chance to do what we have never done before. Breakthroughs occur.

How often do I come back from the cemetery with people who declare, "My life is different today." When they gaze at the cold ground that now envelops their dear ones, they discover a newfound warmth. A newfound humanity. A newfound purpose. Yes, breakthroughs take place.

But they need to be nurtured every day. That is why Rabbi Levi Yitzhak was so right. Every night is not too often. And even if tonight is no different from last evening, then after tomorrow night, or three hundred or three thousand nights from now, a dawn will finally break.

I FORGIVE MYSELF

The last step is reconciliation. To love yourself, even though you are less than you should be, you must forgive yourself.

We usually think of forgiving someone else. But as hard as that is, it is easier than forgiving yourself. Who knows better than you do just how many faults you have and what they are?

"I SHALL NOT DO THIS AGAIN!"

In a sermon delivered on the Day of Atonement years ago, Rabbi Milton Steinberg asked the question: "What shall we do with our persistent and repeated failures?" There are answers he says, that people commonly give. The realist, for example, says that we regularly set our goals too high. Lower the goals, and we will not fail. But, says Rabbi Sternberg, with each failure and with each compromise of our ideals, there is less left for us to reach.

The cynic, on the other hand, counsels that ideals are delusions and, even worse, sources of discontent. Abandon them, and have peace at last. And that, of course, is peace achieved at the highest possible price.

Rabbi Sternberg finally concludes that the best response to failure is the view of Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, who was, you remember, so overcome when asked for shoes to mend. When Levi Yitzhak became old, he adopted the following practice. Each night, before he went to bed, he would review the events of the day that had passed. And he would say of whatever was evil in it, I shall not do this again." Having looked at his deeds, and having said this, he would say to himself, "But so you promised last night and the night before." "Ah, yes," he would answer himself, "but tonight I am in earnest."

How could it be? Wasn't the Rabbi just fooling himself? He was not.

He was committed to the path of repentance and took the only possible route. The first step he took was the step of recantation. He confessed his misdeeds. He kept a running tally and he looked at it every night. He put his moral life into perspective and he declared the legitimacy of giving it some thought.

That is the first and most important step that so many people never take. They know that it is hard to bring up children. They know that it is hard to be married to the same person for most of your life. They know that so many ethical decisions in business are gray rather than black and white. But, so often, recognizing the difficulties causes people to be instantly demoralized. They say simply: Because it is difficult to know what is right, it makes no difference at all. They abandon the ship the moment the water gets rough.

One of the most important reflective moments that each of us has is the moment when he says in all seriousness, "Hey, how am I doing?" It is a precious moment, one that should be multiplied every day of one's life. Keeping a daily log of your expenses is something that you may have learned to do in deference to the Internal Revenue Service. Why not keep a daily log of the obligations that you owe to a higher authority? Save part of your date book to keep this account - or find a place to enter it into your computer. And even if you fail day after

day after day, your tally will remind you of what is important so that you will not fail even more than you do -and so that you will continue to steer by the right star.

When a new morality is declared by the media, you will have some reference to an old morality. You will be able to check the points of your compass so that you will be able to know just where you are and you will be able to accurately plot where you are to go.

AN APOLOGY ASKS FOR LOVE

But what is the real purpose of an apology? To limit its use to its humbling deterrent value is to miss the true emotion that it is designed to elicit. It is principally a way of asking for love, and, by doing so from a position of weakness, it is precisely the kind of request that is most likely to elicit from someone else a powerful, loving response in return.

Reconciliation is a necessary part of the process of repentance. I suspect that even if one did not bring God or another person into the picture, it could be argued that reconciliation would still be necessary for a person to come to live with himself. But especially because of the fact that someone else is implicated, it would be insufficient to simply regret the wrongful action. It would be insufficient even to be remorseful because of what one has done. A confession of wrongdoing would be interesting, but even this would not be enough.

He who is forgiven is a happy person. As the Psalmist says, "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered."

We need to be forgiven by someone outside ourselves because the transgressions we commit, the wrongdoings that lead to our guilty feelings, are to a great extent committed upon others. Others are injured by us. The harmonious relationships that should exist between a man and his wife, between children and their parents, between friends and co-workers, between leaders and the citizens who are their followers - all of these relationships are hurt, sometimes even destroyed, by virtue of the injuries which are inflicted upon others. And, it goes without saying that most of our discussion about guilt is precisely about the guilty feelings and the guilty conscience that result from hurting others.

This is true, as we shall see, in several different relationships -most importantly in our relations with other people, and, not incidentally, in our relationship with God. In both cases, sin leads to unpleasant consequences, and, therefore, part of the process of repentance involves the re-establishment of love between the offended parties. It involves, it demands an effort to reach out to another, to a friend, to a loved one, to God, and to say, I am sorry. Please forgive me for what I have done.

The act of asking forgiveness is a statement that one is willing to cast aside one's arrogance, to debase one's self enough so that you come crawling if necessary. It is an experience that, in its extreme and unpleasant form, can be an experience of humiliation. From this standpoint, an apology derives its importance from the pain it produces.

An apology is public. As long as you are apologizing to someone else, you can't do it all by yourself. It is a humbling experience and there is a level of embarrassment that can smart. In fact, it is these characteristics that have led some to suggest that an apology is an effective way of punishing a crime and even of deterring future wrongdoing.

"What is repentance? That a sinner abandon his sin, remove it from his mind, and commit himself to not do it again."
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It is the commitment toward the future that marks this level of repentance. For there are two time frames in which the will can work. It can make decisions about the past. It can make judgments regarding what has been done. But the will works most potently when it makes a commitment for the time that is to come. It is this resolution that characterizes most people's sense of what repentance is all about. It is the New Year's resolution. The birthday resolution. The diet resolution. The family resolution. Now I will be the kind of person I have not been able to be until this point. But now, it will work!

Repentance must reach this stage. "To feel discomfort and explain it away with a shrug, or any number of verbal equivalents, may not lead to even the decision to change, let alone change itself. On the other hand, genuine regret for one's misdeeds and recognition of one's failings do not necessarily lead to the desired outcome either; instead, they can cause a deepening sense of despair and a fatalistic resignation Thus remorse alone, however decisive it may be initially, must be accompanied by something else: belief in the possibility of change. In this sense, the principle of teshuvah - that no matter what the starting point, no matter how far gone the sinner, penitence is possible - is itself an important source of reawakening and hope."

This is, frankly, the most difficult aspect of repentance, the place where most people fail. According to a recent study, "nearly half of more than 200 people studied failed to keep their New Year's resolutions for a month, and less than one in five followed their pledges for two years." These "failures" are not alone. Every one of us could surely join their ranks.

It is the test of our true intentions - and don't we know that it is a test that is hard to pass! Habit, which may have caused the problem in the first place, is very difficult to change.

RECONCILIATION

The fifth step toward repentance is reconciliation. Reconciliation with others is attained through seeking their forgiveness.

RESOLUTION

Remorse over past actions, confessions, and a renunciation of past deeds is a prelude to another willful act, a resolution and commitment regarding the future.

RENUNCIATION

Third comes renunciation. Repentance is, after all, an act of the will. Willpower is man's great gift. It is, at the same time, one of his weakest links with his higher self. As Rabbi Simhah of Przysucha (Poland, 1765-1827) put it: "Man's great guilt lies in the fact that he can turn away from evil at any moment, and yet he does not." Ergo, he lacks the will.

And what does guilt afford us more than the reminder that acts of will are possible? Ranging from the elemental willpower that fights against eating a piece of cake that may threaten an already endangered figure to the willpower necessary to fight the temptation to lust, from the will necessary to battle against the desire to accumulate material possessions regardless of whether they are ethically accumulated or not to the willpower that fights the temptation to procrastinate, all these are battles daily fought.

Renunciation involves using our will to abandon our sins. It is like a very sharp knife that cuts a rope that ties us down. All the desire in the world to change won't make any difference at all if the ropes of the past are not first cut.

"Whenever a man or woman commits any wrong toward a fellow man," says the Bible in the Book of Numbers (5:6-7), "thus breaking faith with the Lord, and that person realizes his guilt, he shall confess the wrong that he has done." Thus confession involves a level of self-contemplation in which feelings are verbalized.

At the same time, however, it is equally possible that we may sometimes repent by beginning with thoughts, by raising ideas in our own minds such as reciting a printed confessional: "Forgive us, our Father, for we have sinned. For the sin which we have committed by ..." Fill in the blanks, recite the sins, and begin the thought process that may lead to confession.

Confession gets the feeling out, lessening the burden and putting it in a place where it can be more easily examined. It is both catharsis and the beginning of an intellectual process that renders the feelings that are deep inside us accessible, assessable to the powerful control of our wills in the next two steps of

repentance; "renunciation" and "resolution." Before the will can touch them, though, the feelings need to be transformed into words.

The process of verbalizing guilt is a crucial process. It operates in sublime private moments of religious ecstasy but it can - and sometimes should - operate in public. Dennis Erickson, who is currently coach of the Washington State football team, has lamented over the way he left his former team, the Wyoming Cowboys. He got a fine offer for the job for which he had waited for a lifetime, and suddenly bolted. He had assured his team that he was staying with them, and then, without saying a word of goodbye, he was gone. "I still wake up at night in a cold sweat thinking about what I did," said Erickson. "I didn't leave the right way. If I had it to do over again, I would have returned to Laramie and told my players and the people what was going on. I was a young idiot. I didn't do it right."

What didn't he do? Verbalize his guilt in the presence of those whom he felt that he had wronged.

RECANTATION

Remember, guilt is more than a feeling. It is a feeling that invades the realm of consciousness. That is why we begin with remorse. But the remorse has to lead to a careful, objective reflection upon what has happened to our lives. The second step, then, is recantation, which requires a verbal confession. The psalmist pictures this so perfectly:

When I kept silent, my bones grew old
Through my groaning all the day long,
For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me;
My vitality was turned into the drought of summer.
I acknowledged my sin to You,
And my iniquity I have not hidden;
I said: "I will confess my transgressions
to the Lord." ---

---Psalms 32:3-5

Silence is so painful. Even if a person roars all day long, in business or at home, keeping a perpetual curtain of silence drawn in front of the conscience that is heavy with guilt leads that person into feeling as if he is in the midst of a terrible drought, so thirst is he for relief. What is the way out? Acknowledging sin and confession transgressions.

If a man hits his wife, he will, one hopes, feel remorse. If he has cheated on her, he will, one hopes, feel remorse. When a woman has beaten her child, she will, one hopes, feel remorse. When a person has embezzled money, one hopes he will feel remorse.

In all of these cases, a sick feeling is an appropriate feeling to have. For in all of these cases, we find ourselves being carried away with the emotions of the moment and then committing acts which are deeply embarrassing to us.

People sometimes feel so guilty at these times that they take out their guilt by persecuting the members of their families. Because a man feels guilty about what he has done to his wife, he will blame her for every possible sin under the sun. It appears as if he is trying to justify his wrong by making it seem as if she deserved what she got. What he is really doing is squirming with his guilt, unable to let down his guard long enough to take the blow of remorse to his body.

Strangely enough, though, it is only when that point comes, and when he feels cheapened, low, and horrible, that then, and only then, will he be able to transform the feelings that he has inside. Strangely enough, it is only when he has suffered sufficiently that he will be able to feel good once again. That good feeling may allow him to re-establish his relationship with his wife and to re-establish his self-respect. But until he arrives there, he will have a very difficult time.

Describing what is undoubtedly an extreme case, the Bible tells the story of Amnon's rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13). Amnon was King David's son. Tamar one of David's daughters, though each had a different mother. The Bible describes Amnon's infatuation with Tamar, a lust so great that it made him sick. He creates a ruse to be alone with Tamar. He overpowers her "and lay with her by force."

When the deed is done, however, Amnon "hated her with exceeding great hatred; for the hatred wherewith he hated her was greater than the love wherewith he had loved her." He is filled with disgust and the reader wonders: How can that be? Can passionate love turn so quickly into passionate hate?

The truth is that Amnon hates himself, not Tamar. He projects that hatred onto the victim of his lust. The object of his sinning now becomes the butt of his scorn.

Why? There is an instinctive feeling that operates within us that causes us to feel remorse. It is essentially an anti-aesthetic experience, a feeling of disgust. Disgust at ourselves. Disgust at our deeds, disgust at our lives. Not a nice feeling, nothing lofty. Simply disgust. Yet the amazing reality is that such feelings can serve to transform the way a person is.

Amnon loses his lust. A husband loses his desire for a woman other than his wife. A mother suddenly finds it possible to transform her relations to her child, somehow turning her anger into tenderness, a tenderness which she is sure was always there but which never could adequately express itself. From remorse, a person can lose the motivation to sin. Through feelings -- feelings of guilt that lead to remorse -- a person can be renewed.