

Why Do I Feel So Guilty?

Many of us are plagued with a nagging sense of guilt--sometimes repeatedly throughout the day. Where do these feelings come from?

Our Unrealistic Expectations. We can crawl into bed exhausted from a long day of work and frenzied attempts to accomplish everything on our "to do" list. However, our minds think more about all the work we didn't do rather than what we did accomplish. We say things like, Whatever we do, somehow it never seems quite enough. When we put too many expectations of what we want to achieve or think we need to do to be a successful person we need to remember Jesus' words to the multitude who asked Him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" He replied, "***The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent***" (John 6). To believe Jesus sacrifice is sufficient is the real work to which He calls us, not the many works we busy ourselves with to gain His or other's approval. We need to live in ways that make good use of our time but not live as slaves to what we cannot do.

When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, your lives will produce these evil results: sexual immorality, impure thoughts, eagerness for lustful pleasure, idolatry, participation in demonic activities, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, divisions, the feeling that everyone is wrong except those in your own little group, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other kinds of sin. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God. But when the Holy Spirit controls our lives, he will produce this kind of fruit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Here there is no conflict with the law. (Galatians 5)

The Accuser. When we read passages such as Galatians 5, we are sometimes overwhelmed with feelings of defeat. Sometimes our life seems more described by the "deeds of the flesh" than the "fruit of the Spirit." Condemning thoughts flood our mind such as, "You will never really be free from those sins. You will never really be what God wants you to be. God is deeply disappointed in you. How long can you expect Him to put up with you?" These assaults are a vicious accusation from the devil who seeks to devour us.

Christ stands in front of us and says, "This one is my child! I shed my innocent blood for him, for her." Though inadequate in ourselves, He is our adequacy. When Satan tries to defeat us by pointing out how far we have to go toward maturity in Christ, we must boldly state it is God's work to complete what He has begun in us and to make us strong, firm and steadfast.

And I am sure that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on that day when Christ Jesus comes back again. In his kindness God called you to his eternal glory by means of Jesus Christ. After you have suffered a little while, he will restore, support, and strengthen you, and he will place you on a firm foundation. (Philippians 1 & 1 Peter 5)

Conviction of the Spirit. Does that mean we should never listen to guilty feelings? No. There is a third source of guilt--the only valid one--which we are wise to stop and consider: the conviction of the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit convicts us about sin in our lives, we will experience remorse at the gravity of our sin, yet the Spirit's conviction always comes with the hope of restoration. Satan would have us wallow in our guilt, believing we have pushed God's grace beyond its limit. The Spirit shows us how He wants to free us, restore us, and lead us back on the path of grace and obedience. While we need to be quick to recognize and resist condemnation and false guilt from the accuser, we must also be quick to surrender to conviction from the Spirit. The more quickly we confess, repent, and make amends with those involved, the more quickly we can be back on the way of healing and life.

Walking in Freedom. If you are struggling with guilt and uncertain of the source, ask yourself some of the following questions:

1. Does this guilt drive me into God's arms for mercy and restoration, or drive me away from Him, believing He condemns and banishes me?
2. When I tell myself I "should" be doing something, am I secretly hoping that by doing it, God will love me more than He already does?
3. Is there a scriptural command about the act for which I am feeling guilty?
4. What is the Spirit convicting me of today? Am I making any excuses for my actions in attempts to evade His conviction? Do I need to make amends with someone?
5. What words of condemnation am I listening to today that contradict God's teaching of grace?

Adapted from *Why Do I Feel So Guilty?* Stacy S. Padrick, Discipleship Journal, Issue 92 © 1996