

“God’s Answer to Guilt”

1 John 1:8–2.2

One of the experiences we hold in common as human beings is the experience of making mistakes, of saying and doing things that hurt others, that hurt ourselves, that bring pain, brokenness, and conflict into our lives. More often than not, those mistakes produce deep within us feelings of regret, remorse, and guilt. One of the things that impressed me as I prepared this message is the almost universal acceptance of guilt and of its destructive impact in our lives. There’s little disagreement that in guilt, we blame ourselves, we punish ourselves, we spend valuable time and energy feeling bad about who we are, what we’ve done or didn’t do in our past. Left unresolved, guilt can define and even dominate our lives. I think we can all identify with David in Psalm 38 when he cries, “My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear...There is no health in my body, I am feeble and utterly crushed, I groan in anguish of heart.” As students of God’s Word, we know that guilt is really just a symptom, an indicator of something else. That something else is sin. When we think of sin’s punishment, we typically think of death, (“the wages of sin is death,” Romans 6:23 tells us) which is a punishment “out there” in the future. But that’s not sin’s only punishment. Guilt, that sense that deep inside we deserve blame and punishment for having done or said something wrong, is a punishment we carry in our present. Before we get to God’s answer to guilt and sin, I want to survey some very human responses to it.

The first is what I call the “self-help” or “power of positive thinking” response. The remedy to feelings of guilt and regret is to change your thinking: “Don’t be so hard on yourself.” “Overcome negative thoughts and feelings by flooding your mind with positive thoughts and feelings.” Not only do non-Christian teachers and speakers promote this “change your thinking” remedy, I fear there are many in American Christianity promoting “self-help” under the guise of “the power of positive thinking.” They simply add that God has given you the ability to change your thinking. A second human response to the problem of sin and guilt came to me in an e-mail this week, as a member of our church notified me about a new book entitled, Conversations with God, written by Neil D. Walsch. By the title you’d think this is a biblically-based book, but unfortunately, that’s not the case, in that God’s Word is replaced by the author’s in response to people’s questions. A young woman asks, “I am living with my boyfriend. My parents say that I should marry him because I am living in sin. Should I marry him?” God’s reply (in the form of Walsch’s words) is, “Who are you sinning against? Not me, because you have done nothing wrong.” This response denies that sin is real. It doesn’t exist, so it’s not reasonable to feel guilty. These very human responses frame the problem of sin and guilt as ultimately a mental exercise. You simply change your thinking and you solve the problem. What’s assumed in these responses is that you have the ability and power within you, particularly in your mind, to overcome sin and guilt. If we’re honest, I think we’ll admit that these solutions can work for a while. But eventually those guilty thoughts and feelings come back. Why? This is a problem that cannot be solved intellectually. It’s a problem that affects your mind, yes, but your heart and your soul, too. And so both of these responses to guilt and sin are inadequate, because they don’t get to the heart of the matter. The good news is that God’s solved the problem. I want to speak to His solution in two points.

First, God’s solution to sin and guilt is forgiveness. In saying it’s God’s solution I want to underscore that forgiveness comes from God and through God. Coming from and through God it’s spiritual and supernatural. As His solution is spiritual, it touches and transforms the whole of your inner being: your heart, your soul, and your mind. As His solution is supernatural, it’s more than adequate in solving this problem that plagues our finite human nature. Verse two of First John chapter two calls Jesus the “atoning sacrifice for our sins.” This describes what the sinless, perfect Jesus did for you on the cross. By taking the punishment for your sin on Himself when He shed His blood and gave up His life, when He died on the cross, He made forgiveness possible. In the simplest sense, forgiveness means you’ve been released, let go from an obligation or debt. In the forgiveness that is yours in Jesus Christ, your sins have been removed from God’s record of your life, wiped clean. It’s as if they never happened. You’ve been released from the debt, the obligation you owe God for your sin. Please

understand how costly forgiveness is: It is not God's faithfulness or justice or grace or love that forgives. A loving, holy, and perfect God requires that sin must be punished. Forgiveness is never a case of saying: "It's all right; it doesn't matter." Forgiveness is costly; it comes through death. As Hebrews 9:22 makes clear: "Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness." Jesus Christ is the One Who took your place, Who shed His blood, Who died for you so that you can be forgiven; you can be freed from the power and punishment of sin and guilt. Please note that this is not the end of Christ's work in forgiving you. Verse nine of chapter one says, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins." But don't stop there! The verse continues, "and purify us from all unrighteousness." God not only forgives you, but also "purifies" (that is, cleanses you) "from all unrighteousness." Now what does that mean? It means in part that the inner effects, the spiritual and mental and emotional consequences of your sin are also removed. When you claim God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ, you claim, in the power of the Holy Spirit, freedom from guilt and regret and remorse, and all the "bad stuff" sin produces in here. Your inner being is liberated to experience and revel in the grace, love, peace, and joy that are yours in Jesus Christ!

Up to this point, forgiveness is all about God and what He's done. The second point speaks directly to you and me. Notice the conditional nature of verse nine. You will find that God is faithful and just, that He will forgive you, that He will purify you IF you will confess your sins to Him. God has done all this for you in Jesus Christ, but you must act on it, act on it in a specific way. To confess means, "to say the same thing." To confess your sin means to say the same thing about it that God says about it. It means honestly facing it and judging it and rejecting it for what it is: awful, evil, abhorrent to God and to you. As you come before God and bare your soul to Him in confession, you know you're coming to a God who will forgive your sin and will purify your heart, mind, and soul of sin's destructive impact.

I have two applications today. First, have you received the forgiveness that comes only from Jesus Christ? If you have not received Jesus as your personal Savior and Lord, you have been carrying a burden, a heartache that you were never created to carry through this life. You can be freed from the misery, sadness, and despair of sin and guilt only if you receive Jesus Christ and the forgiveness that only He can offer you. If you have not confessed your sin and your need for the Savior, won't you consider that God the Holy Spirit may be calling you to do that very thing today? The second application is for those of you who are believers in Jesus Christ. You know that as a Christian, you need to come regularly to God for forgiveness because you continue to sin even as you're saved and growing in Jesus Christ. But I want to take my application in a different direction. As your pastor, I have to say that with too much regularity I've had conversations with Christians who have an incomplete or inadequate understanding of what forgiveness means for their lives. Where they come up short is not in the initial area of being forgiven. They can affirm that by the shed blood of Jesus, they're forgiven of their sins. The problem is that this forgiveness seems to have no present impact on their lives. It's as if forgiveness is only for the future; that when you appear before the Lord at the final judgment, His forgiving work for you will save you and gains for you eternal life. In the meantime, you're stuck with guilt, shame, and remorse. For others it seems as if they've decided that the appropriate, God-honoring response to being forgiven by Jesus Christ is to feel bad about the sin that nailed the Lord to Calvary's tree. In both cases, there's no sense of being purified from all unrighteousness, as they've been forgiven. Could I be speaking to you? To close, let me refer you to the parallel passage to 1 John 1:9 in the Old Testament. Psalm 51 is David's great song of acknowledging his sin, confessing it, and receiving forgiveness. This is what verse seven says: "Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean, wash me, and I will be whiter than snow." Here's a poetic way to describe forgiveness. But it doesn't stop there: "Let me hear joy and gladness...Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me...Restore to me the joy of your salvation!" My friends, of all people, Christians should not be people walking around with pained expressions on our faces. We should be people of joy! Like everyone else, we're sinners, but we're forgiven sinners, and in that forgiveness is the salvation, the gladness, the joy that come from the Lord, the Savior, who gave His life that we might have life, life lived in His love, His goodness, His peace, His joy!