

## GUILT

### What is false guilt, and how can I avoid it?

#### Question: "What is false guilt, and how can I avoid it?"

**Answer:** Scripture is clear that all humanity is guilty before a holy God. [Romans 3](#) teaches us that there is no person who is righteous and that in the face of a perfect law, all mouths are shut and the whole world lies under judgment (verse 19). Furthermore, John tells us that if we try to say we aren't guilty of sin, not only do we ourselves lie, but we make God out to be a liar. Guilt in and of itself is not a bad thing; it's a fact of our fallen existence.

However, when it comes to *feeling* guilty, we must distinguish between false guilt and true guilt. It is normal to have feelings of guilt when we do something wrong—this is true guilt. But it is also possible to be innocent of something yet *feel* guilty about it—this is false guilt.

The major difference between false guilt and true guilt is their respective origins. False guilt has at least two possible points of origin: ourselves and the devil. One of the names of the devil in Scripture is "the accuser" ([Revelation 12:10](#)). It is a fitting name, as he can and does accuse us to our own minds and consciences. Satan will bring to mind our most horrible sins and cause us to focus on them rather than on God's forgiveness.

Another possible source of false guilt is our own conscience. The Bible speaks of a "weak conscience" and defines it as a mistaken belief that something innocent is actually sinful (see [1 Corinthians 8:7-13](#)). A weak conscience, then, is basically an uninformed conscience. A person who does not apprehend the freedom he has in Christ may consider things to be sinful which are not sinful at all, and his "weak" conscience can easily produce false guilt.

Then there are those who convince themselves that they're somehow on permanent "probation" before God. They think that if they're good enough—if they continually perform at a lofty standard—they'll earn God's grudging acceptance. It's an easy pit to fall into. It can happen when we are more aware of our sin than we are of God's grace.

True guilt, on the other hand, originates with the Holy Spirit. There are two places in Scripture where this is very clear. [Hebrews 12](#) discusses the “chastisement” or “discipline” of the Lord. The true guilt a believer feels over his sin might be the chastisement of God on a child He loves. His love will not allow us to sin habitually, so He brings conviction. Then, in 2 Corinthians chapter 7, Paul writes about a previous letter he’d sent that apparently caused great distress. In verse 8, he says, “Even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it.” Paul recognized his letter caused the church “grief,” but he identifies their feelings as true guilt. They *felt* guilty because they were, in fact, *guilty*.

The cure for true guilt is not just a commitment to “do better.” As C. J. Mahaney says in his excellent little book, *The Cross-Centered Life*, “It’s impossible to resolve issues of yesterday by doing better tomorrow.” No, getting rid of true guilt requires godly sorrow leading to repentance ([2 Corinthians 7:10](#)). Once the sin has been repented of, the result is a rejoicing in the grace of God.

False guilt can result in depression and spiritual paralysis. Someone suffering from false guilt may feel that God has given up on him and despair of ever being sanctified. False guilt tends to be very “me-centered,” rather than God-centered. The tendency is to think we’ll never be good enough and focus on our shortcomings.

The cure for false guilt is the gospel. If you’re a Christian, start by confessing any known sin. The promise of God in [1 John 1:9](#) is for believers: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” Remember that, once a sin has been forgiven, it’s forgiven for good. God separates our sin from us “as far as the east is from the west” ([Psalm 103:12](#)).

Also, focus on the grace of God. God’s grace is free, it’s based on Christ’s work on your behalf, and it’s greater than your sin ([Romans 5:20](#)). Meditate on [Romans 8:1](#), “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Preach the gospel to yourself every day, spending time in passages such as [Romans 3:19-26](#) (especially verse 24); [Psalm 103:8-13](#); [Romans 4:7-8](#); [Ephesians 1:3-11](#); and [Romans 5:6-11](#). Meditate on the cross and all it means to you; never think of your sin without also remembering the cross and the grace of God displayed in it.

Finally, in addition to Scripture, let these words from John Newton's poem "In Evil Long I Took Delight" sink into your soul:

*"Thus while His death my sin displays in all its blackest hue,  
Such is the mystery of grace, it seals my pardon, too!  
With pleasing grief and mournful joy my spirit now is filled,  
That I should such a life destroy yet live by Him I killed."*

## GUILT

**How should a Christian deal with feelings of guilt regarding past sins, whether pre- or post-salvation?**

**Question: "How should a Christian deal with feelings of guilt regarding past sins, whether pre- or post-salvation?"**

**Answer:** Everyone has sinned, and one of the results of sin is guilt. We can be thankful for guilty feelings because they drive us to seek forgiveness. The moment a person turns from sin to Jesus Christ in faith, his sin is forgiven. Repentance is part of the faith that leads to salvation ([Matthew 3:2](#); [4:17](#); [Acts 3:19](#)).

In Christ, even the most heinous sins are blotted out (see [1 Corinthians 6:9-11](#) for a list of some unrighteous acts that can be forgiven). Salvation is by grace, and grace forgives. After a person is saved, he will still sin, and when he does, God still promises forgiveness. "But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" ([1 John 2:1](#)).

Freedom from sin, however, does not always mean freedom from guilty feelings. Even when our sins are forgiven, we still remember them. Also, we have a spiritual enemy, called "the accuser of our brothers" ([Revelation 12:10](#)) who relentlessly reminds us of our failures, faults, and sins. When a Christian experiences feelings of guilt, he or she should do the following things:

1) Confess all known, previously unconfessed sin. In some cases, feelings of guilt are appropriate because confession is needed. Many times, we feel guilty because we are guilty! (See David's description of guilt and its solution in [Psalm 32:3-5](#).)

2) Ask the Lord to reveal any other sin that may need confessing. Have the courage to be completely open and honest before the Lord. "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any

offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” ([Psalm 139:23-24](#)).

3) Seek to make restitution, where possible, of the sins committed against others. [Zacchaeus](#), in repenting of his sin, promised the Lord, “If I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount” ([Luke 19:8](#)). This is part of the “fruit in keeping with repentance” that John preached ([Luke 3:9](#)).

4) Trust the promise of God that He will forgive sin and remove guilt, based on the blood of Christ ([1 John 1:9](#); [Psalm 85:2](#); [86:5](#); [Romans 8:1](#)).

5) On occasions when guilty feelings arise over sins already confessed and forsaken, reject such feelings as false guilt. The Lord has been true to His promise to forgive. Read and meditate on [Psalm 103:8-12](#).

6) Ask the Lord to rebuke Satan, your accuser, and ask the Lord to restore the joy that comes with freedom from guilt ([Psalm 51:12](#)).

[Psalm 32](#) is a very profitable study. Although David had sinned terribly, he found freedom from both sin and guilty feelings. He dealt with the cause of guilt and the reality of forgiveness. [Psalm 51](#) is another good passage to investigate. The emphasis here is confession of sin, as David pleads with God from a heart full of guilt and sorrow. Restoration and joy are the results.

Finally, if sin has been confessed, repented of, and forgiven, it is time to move on. Remember that we who have come to Christ have been made new creatures in Him. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” ([2 Corinthians 5:17](#)). Part of the “old” which has gone is the remembrance of past sins and the guilt they produced. Sadly, some Christians are prone to wallowing in memories of their former sinful lives, memories which should have been dead and buried long ago. This is pointless and runs counter to the victorious Christian life God wants for us. A wise saying is “If God has saved you out of a sewer, don’t dive back in and swim around.”





