

# What Missionaries Ought to Know about Guilt

Lately you have been feeling guilty, but are not sure why. People are suffering. They are dying without Christ. Your work seems to make little difference. You are having difficulty maintaining a consistent devotional life. You just feel guilty about so many things that it is interfering with your work. You begin to wonder if you are guilty. Why do you feel so guilty? Isn't guilt bad? What can you do about feeling so guilty? What if the feelings don't go away? Let us consider some of these questions.

## Am I guilty?

This is the crucial question. All possible combinations of guilt and guilt feelings are possible. You may be guilty and not feel guilty, you may feel guilty and not be guilty, or you may be guilty and feel guilty. Any one of these is likely to interfere with your work as a missionary. You want to reach the place where you are not guilty and do not feel guilty.

The Bible says much about being guilty. A look in a concordance at "guilt" and "guilty" will reveal dozens of verses about being guilty of sin. When you break one of God's commands, you are guilty—whether you feel guilty or not. If you are guilty, something needs to be done about the guilt, and we will discuss that later.

## Why do I feel so guilty?

Of course, you may feel guilty because you are guilty, and that is good.

Although the Bible says much about *being* guilty, it says little about *feeling* guilty. If you feel guilty because you are guilty, you just need to do something about the sin. However, many people feel guilty without being guilty. In fact, the guilt feelings may even be *stronger* when there is no guilt. Here are a few examples of things other than sin that may produce guilt feelings:

- Falling short of your own expectations. This often happens during the first term, especially for perfectionists.
- Falling short of other's expectations. Your church, your family, headquarters, and field director may expect more of you than you can possibly do.
- Not forgiving yourself. After God has forgiven your sin, you may not be able to forgive yourself even though your guilt is gone.
- Guilt trips by other people. Martha tried to "lay a guilt trip" on Mary for not working hard enough in Luke 10, and she even tried to get Jesus to join her.
- Oversensitive conscience. A good conscience will produce guilt when you sin; however, part of your conscience is learned in your culture, and you may feel guilty for many things that have nothing to do with sin.
- Survivor guilt. You may have gone through a traumatic situation and may feel guilty that you survived when others did not, or feel guilty about what you had to do to survive.
- Satan himself. Remember that Satan is the "accuser of the brothers" in 1 Peter 5 and Revelation 12. His accusations can make you feel guilty.
- Temptation. Although we are never promised that we will be beyond temptation, missionaries may feel guilty

for being tempted to lie, cheat, or be sexually unfaithful.

Shame, rather than guilt, often brings on these guilt feelings. Guilt means that you have broken God's command, fallen short of his expectations. Shame means that you have fallen short of the expectations of someone other than God. It may have begun when you walked through a mud puddle, soiling your new shoes. Your parents said, "Shame on you, you should have known better." Perhaps there was no way for you to have known, and the Bible does not forbid walking in puddles, but you felt guilty.

## Isn't guilt bad?

Of course it is. That's a major goal of missions, to tell people in other cultures that God has solved the sin problem.

Aren't guilt feelings bad too? They may or may not be. If they are caused by things other than sin, such as some of the examples given in the previous section, they are also bad. They will interfere with the missionary's goal of telling others the good news.

Guilt feelings as a result of sin are good. These guilt feelings provide motivation for doing something about the sin in your life. Without them people seldom come to Christ, and often have great difficulty in society, perhaps becoming antisocial personalities (psychopaths) and getting into serious legal trouble. Such guilt feelings tend to be strongest immediately after sin is committed, then to decrease as rationalizations are generated. You then no longer feel the guilt, at least not nearly as much, and your "heart is hardened," making you much less likely to do something about the sin.

## Are guilt feelings worse for missionaries?

Guilt feelings may be worse for missionaries because of some special situations.

- Living standards. Some missionaries live quite affluently compared to the people they minister to, and may feel guilty about their wealth. This is becoming less so as missionaries go to large cities.
- Suffering. Many of the people missionaries work with are suffering compared to Western standards, and all their needs simply cannot be met.
- Children's education. Although MKs do better academically than non-MKs "back home," missionaries may feel like they are not providing an adequate education.
- Aging parents. Since missionaries are out of their home country and do not have large financial resources, they may feel guilty about not caring for aging parents.
- Civil authorities. How can a missionary get anything done in a society where the local value system may conflict with that of the missionary? For example, what is the difference between a gratuity and a bribe?

People in their own cultures often have problems dealing with their affluence, the suffering of others, their children's education, their aging parents, and their government, so the difference is one of degree, not of kind.

## What can I do about guilt?

The natural response to realizing you are guilty is to try to hide or rationalize, such as Adam and Eve did. However, that will not solve the problem. Missionaries are familiar

with what to do about sin, but here is a review of the steps.

- Confession. Certainly confess your sins to God. You may also want to confess to people you have harmed as well. Confession usually should be only to those actually affected by the sin rather than to the general public.
- Repentance. Repentance is more than being sorry for your sins; it is a change of purpose or a change of mind. We are to turn from our sinful ways to God. After forgiving her, Jesus told the woman taken in adultery to sin no more.
- Faith. Christ paid the penalty for our sins, and we must trust him for this.
- Restitution. As far as possible, try to make right the wrong you have done. If you have stolen something, you can usually return it. Of course, if you have destroyed another's reputation, you may not be able to rebuild it.

### What can I do about guilt feelings?

That depends on the cause. If the guilt feelings are because of sin, follow the steps reviewed above. If the guilt feelings are because of other factors, you need to deal with each one individually. Let's consider a couple of examples.

First-term missionaries often have very high expectations about what they will accomplish and feel guilty that they do not achieve their personal goals. In this case, they need to talk with an experienced missionary and set more realistic goals. Of course, they may still not lower their expectations, thinking that they are different, that their ministry will be more effective.

If the goals set for you by others are too high, ask to have them lowered. One

teacher felt guilty for not spending the required number of minutes on each subject until she realized that the required number of minutes each day was an hour and twenty minutes longer than she had the children in class. The principal lowered the number of required minutes.

### What if the guilt feelings don't go away?

Guilt feelings that you have had for a long time as a result of sin may become conditioned responses and remain even after the sin is forgiven. Just as Pavlov's dogs salivated to the sound of a bell, so you may feel guilty when some event triggers the guilt feelings, even after the sin is forgiven and the guilt itself is gone. These responses gradually decrease and stop over time.

If they do not go away, you may need to talk with your pastor or a counselor about why they are still there. You may have hidden things under layer after layer of rationalization and may need someone else to help you sort it all out.

A related question is how to lead a consistent Christian life to keep from becoming guilty again. Two things are very important. First, maintain a consistent daily devotional life. Missionaries report that this is their most difficult "spiritual" activity. Second, get into an accountability relationship with others to check on each other weekly, or at some other regular interval. Agree with the others, as to what you will hold each other accountable for, and give this meeting a high priority in your life. Include daily devotions in any accountability plan.

Christ died for our sins and there is no condemnation in Christ. There is no need to be hindered by guilt or guilt feelings.

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