

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Not guilty

Presented by Chris Witts

You might know the feeling. Driving along in the 100k zone only to discover your speedo has crept up to 110k. And then the police radar camera records your car breaking the speed limit. I own up to the experience, only to feel annoyed at myself for not being more careful. At that moment, I broke the law and felt guilty at having done so.

There are many books available today that try to explain what guilt is. And it's an enormous topic that affects each of us in some way. My guess is that we all have experienced guilt in one form or another, going back to childhood. Perhaps there's a sense of anxiety and inner turmoil which relates to feeling guilty. Maybe you know someone who has said to you "I have an overwhelming feeling of guilt - and I don't know what to do about it."

It's a comfort to know God knows how we feel, and He has some answers to help. We don't have to struggle through life burdened down with a sense of guilt. Many people do not know how to handle feelings of guilt. They become confused, frustrated, and allow life to sour. But God's Word has a solution which may help you to get back on track

Max Lucado in his book "In the Eye of the Storm" tells of a young lady named Sarah who in the late 1880s inherited \$20 million. A lot of money at any time, but it was an immense fortune back in those days. She also got \$1,000 a day and everyone in Connecticut was amazed at her success. Her name and money would open almost any door in America, and politicians clamoured for her support. She was rich, well known, powerful, but also very sad. Her daughter had died at five weeks of age and her husband had also died. All she had were her memories, and her guilt. In California, she bought a farmhouse and for the next 38 years, employed labourers who worked every day, 24 hours a day, to build her a mansion. She was making a house on six acres that had 13 bathrooms and 10,000 windows, and 160 rooms. Sarah believed the house was haunted with the spirits of those Indians and soldiers killed on the US frontier. They had all been killed by bullets of the most popular rifle in America. The Winchester. She had married into the Winchester family, and spent her remaining years in a castle of regret and guilt. Today, you can still visit this unusual house.

This is an example of the powerful effect guilt can have on a person's life.

But what is guilt? James Dobson says "Guilt is a message of disapproval from the conscience which says, in effect, 'you should be ashamed of yourself'". Other writers say "guilt is anger toward yourself" or "guilt is a bothered conscience". In Richard the Third, William Shakespeare wrote "My conscience hath a thousand several tongues. And every tongue brings in a several tale. And every tale condemns me for a villain". A guilty person feels a sense of shame and unworthiness because he or she is guilty. If you're a Christian, you would probably say "I have sinned against a holy God" - and I want to come back this shortly.

But I wonder if you've ever thought through this issue? I've heard people say "I can never get rid of my guilt". It's an emotion so slippery, so controlling, that it can wreck our lives. It's a voice that tells us we've

failed, fallen short of expectations, or that we have failed our family and friends. It's also a reminder of past mistakes and regrets.

Is your life controlled by guilt? Do you carry the baggage of guilt with you as you go about your day, at work, at home, or at church? If so, that's not what God wants for your life. He wants to permanently free you from your guilt, no matter what kind of guilt is holding you down. He wants to see you released from its crushing control and made into a new person.

Not everyone suffers from a guilty conscience. Some of the most shocking crimes that have ever been committed were carried out by men who felt no remorse for their evil. Adolf Hitler's final solution to the so called "Jewish problem" was the indiscriminate killing of men, women and children. Yet there is no evidence he ever felt any remorse for his crime. It's been alleged Joseph Stalin was responsible for the death of 20 to 30 million people during his reign as Russia's premier. But there is no evidence he had any regret or feeling he had done wrong. But, thankfully, these people are an exception.

On the other hand, there are some people whose conscience works overtime. It's not unusual for someone to say "I owe you an apology". Maybe you've had a friend come and say that to you, and you think to yourself "I don't remember what happened here. I wasn't upset or offended". Probably, your friend suffers from what's called a "pained conscience". They feel guilty over the smallest matter. So conscience doesn't function in the same way for everybody. We sometimes equate guilt with shame, which is different. Suppose a teenage boy wears a pair of jeans with holes in the knees to church on Sunday night. His mother may feel ashamed. She thinks the holes in the jeans are a reflection on her competence as a mother. In her mind, people are forming value judgement, saying she's a bad mother. That's why she feels shame.

But there's no doubt that guilt destroys happiness. The mental health experts agree that guilt is a major cause of depression. But if we keep thinking about it, God's Word can give some advice and clear up misconceptions about guilt and shame.

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I'm talking today about a subject not everyone is comfortable about. Guilt.

The Guinness Book of Records has an entry for Ffyona Campbell, from the United Kingdom, the first woman to walk around the world. She was walking 40 kilometres a day. Problem is, she sometimes cheated by riding on the back-up truck and walked into towns where people could see her. In the end, she couldn't live with her feelings of guilt and went to her sponsor to confess. At her own request, the entry in the record book was removed. She said "I should not be remembered as the first woman to walk around the around the world when I cheated". Her feelings of guilt were too much to bear.

Is there an answer to this kind of guilt? Yes – it may take time. But owning up to our wrong-doing is the first step. Jesus said "You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). Living each day with faith in God and Jesus as Saviour help to keep you free from guilt. We have a built- in system called the 'conscience' which tells us when we are doing something wrong. Sometimes we feel the urge to punish ourselves or escape the punishment we feel we deserve.

God made a world that he wanted to be perfect. But people chose to go their own way and run their lives the way they wanted. The Bible tells us the world ignored its Creator and we were born into sin. But only a loving God could make a way around this problem by coming into this world with a human face that we

could recognise. His name was Jesus, God made man, who never sinned. A prophet named Isaiah who, hundreds of years before Jesus was born, said “All of us like sheep have gone the wrong way. Each of us has turned to his own way. And the Lord has put on Him the sin of us all” (Isaiah 53).

And that’s the good news. Our guilt and shame have been paid for by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. The apostle Paul said “Everyone has sinned and is far away from God’s saving presence. But by the free gift of God’s grace, all are put right with him through Christ Jesus, who sets them free” (Romans 3:23-24). In New Testament times, when a person was sent to prison, guards posted a ledger outside the cell door declaring his guilt. When his sentence was completed, a certificate was then written and signed “Paid in full”. This was the proof that the debt had been paid.

It’s a bit like the man who bought a car from a garage. Things began to go wrong, like strange noises, gearbox trouble, and leaking oil. He couldn’t afford to put them right, so he struggled on for months. Then someone told him the garage had given him a total guarantee, and that all the problems with the car would be fixed free of charge. His problem was not the car, or the garage, but knowing what had already been done for him. We can be free from guilt and shame if we do it God’s way. It’s like coming out of the shadow into the sunlight.

Some notable people from the Bible, like David, knew what it was like to have a guilty conscience. He was Israel’s greatest king who conquered enemies, and established Jerusalem as the capital. He was a great person, and yet a series of shameful acts nearly ruined his life. He had sexual relations with Bathsheba, a married woman, and she fell pregnant. He tried to cover up his sin and shift the responsibility to someone else, and arranged for the woman’s husband to be killed in battle as a way of covering up his immorality. He desperately wanted to hide his sin, and then married Bathsheba himself without telling the truth of what had happened. But he forgot that God knew the whole story. God sent Nathan to expose his wrongdoing and we read David eventually said to Nathan “I have sinned against the Lord” (2 Samuel 12:13a). He was courageous and bold enough to own up and confess to what he had done. God showed grace and mercy and David showed genuine repentance. He blamed nobody else except himself.

In Psalm 51 he wrote “God, please have pity on me. Please wipe away my sins. Wash me clean from all my sin and guilt. I know about my sins, and I can’t forget my terrible guilt. You are really the one I have sinned against”.

I have a feeling that we sometimes have a distorted view of guilt, especially as guilt is a key player in Satan’s plan of deception. He brings a sense of distortion into our thinking and we can end up doubting the sincerity of God’s forgiveness and grace. When that happens, we don’t know how to handle feelings of guilt.

But let me say there are two forms of guilt – genuine guilt and false guilt. There’s no doubt that God uses genuine guilt to stir up our conscience when we act irresponsibly. If you’re a Christian, you might call that conviction, which alerts us to specific things that we feel deeply about. It’s the Holy Spirit who brings conviction and helps us see where we’ve gone wrong. It’s His task to convict us of our sin. Have you had that sense of God speaking to you like that? It’s not something to be alarmed about because He can help us unravel what is true guilt and what is false guilt. Maybe you’ve asked yourself, “What can I do to make up for all the wrong I’ve done? How can I fix it?” Make sure it’s not false guilt you’re carrying around

Counsellors say they meet many people whose lives are bound down by negative emotions. They say “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I just have an overwhelming feeling of guilt”. There may be no definable reason for this – it’s just a pressing sense of guilt that slowly destroys them on the inside. They feel sad and

depressed and sense they are to blame for everything's that wrong. But this is totally unrealistic, and is Satan's way of holding them back from becoming a complete person. In their head they hear phrases like "You're a failure. You've disappointed your family and friends". For example, I know people who carry guilt around because their parents are divorced, and they feel somehow responsible. This is false guilt. Maybe you had a strict childhood and were punished for very small things. As an adult, you could still have feelings of guilt or shame. Some people, who survive a bad accident or disaster in which others were injured or killed, often feel guilt that they have survived. Others feel they can never measure up, always on the alert, working hard and striving, but never arriving. This sense of shame feels like a coat of dirt around them. Life becomes hard work without much satisfaction.

Is that how you feel? If you struggle with the guilt of some past failure in your life, I can only say that you cannot go back and re-live that moment. The mistake was made, the sin was committed. But the guilt God gave you is not intended to destroy you. It is a spiritual and psychological reaction that He uses to draw us to Himself. It is not a consequence with which you must live for the rest of your life. The same Saviour who died for your sins also died for your guilt and wants to set you free from it. All of us have failed in one way or another and we stand guilty before God. While our conscience may condemn us, the Bible reminds us God is greater than our hurts and He will defend us on the merits of the blood of Jesus Christ

There's no point trying to block or suppress guilt, or by excusing it by blaming somebody else. I have heard people blame things on God, the devil, and the church; but they never came to grips with their own problems. The key to getting rid of guilt is to recognise that only God can take it away and cleanse our conscience. I sense that David fully recognised his sin. He didn't try to blame Bathsheba, or his circumstances, or on the fact that he was caught out by Nathan the prophet. He accepted full responsibility for his sin and confessed it to God. Then, he found God's solution. 1 John 1:7 says "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, then we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, makes us clean from every sin".

If you've been struggling with the weight of guilt upon your soul to the point that you can hardly sleep at night or you find it difficult to make it through the day, rest assured that God's forgiveness is available to you. God's grace is so great, and His forgiveness so full, that He offers you complete pardon through Jesus Christ.

An Army chaplain tells the story of reaching a young man just before he died on the battlefield of Vietnam. As he held the boy's hand, it was evident that he had been mortally wounded, and these were the last moments of his life. So the chaplain tried to console him the best way he knew how. "Is there anything I can do for you?" he asked. "No" said the young soldier as the memories of his life passed before his eyes. "What I need now is someone who can undo some things for me". That's what Jesus Christ is all about. He can undo the errors of our past, for Romans 8:1 says "There is no condemnation now for those who live in union with Christ Jesus".

Psalm 103:12 says "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us". We don't have to be a prisoner to the past.

Heavenly Father, today we thank you for your love and acceptance which enables us to lay aside our feelings of guilt and self condemnation, and choose by faith to receive the forgiveness of my Saviour Jesus Christ. May you continue to help us to live as children of God with a clear conscience and clean heart, AMEN.