

Self Guilt

By: Gloria Domino

If you are wrapped in some kind of guilt, it might be God speaking to you through your conscience, which is a healthy, constructive guilt. Or it might be guilt of your own making, in which case it's probably keeping you up at night for all the wrong reasons. Guilt can be God's caution, God's sorrow in you for your sin, an understanding of your sin that leads you to great grace – or it can be a misunderstood, distorted, and misapplied emotion that leads you down the path of pride. Whatever guilt is, it is not just an unruly psychological response to something you've done wrong, to failure, to blowing a test, or to an inability to realize your life's dream.

Guilt and Your Soul

Now I realize that when I mention the word *soul*, a lot of people start to tune out. The soul seems vague to us; we know we have one, but we really don't know how to talk about it. Most people can more easily discuss cholesterol levels or the stock market than the condition of their souls.

What does this have to do with guilt? Well, if you want to get at your guilt, you've got to understand how your soul operates. And if you want to know how your soul operates, then you've got to know what your soul is. That is why I want to digress for a moment and discuss the "anatomy" of your soul.

You've probably heard that you were created in the image and likeness of God. But that's a difficult thing to imagine, especially when we consider that in the Old Testament God is described as a fire, a cloud, a voice, and a wind. Obviously, God *looks* different from us – so how are we made in His image and likeness?

This might seem complicated, but it's easier than it sounds. All you have to do is picture a circle, which represents your soul, divided into three parts. A pie cut into only three pieces. The three parts make the whole, and each part – or faculty – corresponds to a Person of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

- You have a memory with an imagination, which resembles the Father. In this faculty you possess the capacity for mercy and compassion.
- You have an intellect, which resembles the Son. In this faculty you possess the capacity for faith and humility.
- You have a will, which resembles the Holy Spirit. In this faculty you possess the capacity to love.

Guilt originates in the memory and the imagination. We commit a sin, remember it, and feel guilty about it. If we are experiencing proper guilt, repentance brings us back to the Lord and gives us peace. We have guilt because we remember a sinful action, but our intellect tells us that if we repent and ask for God's mercy, we will be forgiven. Guilt thus serves a purpose, because it leads us back to God and to His forgiveness. The problem occurs when you leave your intellect out of the equation, and your memory and imagination run wild. Your guilt takes on unreal proportions, and you begin to blame yourself for things that aren't even your fault. Unfortunately, this happens more often than it should, because we don't trust that God's mercy is greater than our sin. Bear with me, and you will grasp a very important point. *Feelings are not evil*. But they are not reliable either.

Once a sin has been committed, your memory is going to work overtime. You blew it. You lied to your spouse. You snubbed an old friend. You were impatient with your father. If you don't let your intellect inform you that God is ready and able to forgive, you're going to be in big trouble. Your memory will never let you forget your sin, and your imagination will probably exaggerate it. At this point, you don't have much chance of healing or forgiveness.

Wallowing in guilt doesn't solve our problems or lead us to holiness. It is not God's will that we become so strapped down with our guilt that we no longer accept His love, the love that forgives. When we become guilty we are not listening to Him, we are listening to ourselves. Our souls are out of kilter. We are paralyzed, frozen on our spiritual journey. The sorrow and the repentance that we should be experiencing are instead replaced by an overactive imagination.

Guilty until Proven Innocent

Understanding guilt is a very delicate business, because there is no handy rule book for figuring out what is good guilt and what is bad guilt. But you can be sure of this much – an enlightened conscience, one that nudges you toward right action, is good guilt. It becomes bad guilt when it leads to remorse, despair, and self-hatred.

Our goal is for you to stop living at the memory level, if that is what you are doing, and learn to use your other faculties properly. You need to understand your sin and to use your will to emerge stronger and holier from a sinful experience.

Why is it good to feel guilt in each of these cases? Because if we feel guilty, we are less likely to make our mistake again. Chances are, we're going to be more careful about what we say.

But one of the biggest problems I've seen over the past few years is a tendency among Christians – usually very devout Christians – to get all wrapped up in “perfectionism”. These people set themselves up to suffer enormous guilt simply because they're not perfect. As a result, they're “perfectly guilty”!

Our mission in this life is not perfection, but holiness. God doesn't want you to feel guilty because you can't do it all. Perfectionism is, as a matter of fact, a form of pride, because you are not accepting yourself and your limitations. Some people get caught up in the “super” syndrome. Others start nit-picking at themselves over their own temperaments or personalities – and when they fail, as they often do, they are overcome by guilt and depression and sometimes despair. The only Person you have to worry about failing is God. If you fail Him, you *should* feel guilty. But if you fail some arbitrary standard of perfection, you should feel silly. You are running the wrong course.

Right Course

If you trust in God and His mercy, your guilt will just be a station on the way to holiness. You won't get stuck there, because you'll know that He's going to move you right along on your journey. You won't look back; you'll look ahead. you'll see what you can do now. You will witness the goodness and glory of God.

- If you have hurt someone, go to that person and ask for forgiveness, and then ask God to heal you both.
- If you are punishing yourself for a past sin, ask God for forgiveness and for the strength and the wisdom to forgive yourself.
- If you are engaged in a sinful situation, pray to God for the strength to get out of it, and ask Him for His mercy on your soul.