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COPING WITH GUILT

Part 1

Wouldn't it be great to be listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records*?

Wouldn't it be awesome to do something no other woman in history has ever done? Wouldn't it be cool to be world famous?

Ffiona Campbell had all of that and yet she gave it all up. Campbell was the first woman to walk round the world. A problem developed though when the lady gave in to her conscience.

"I shouldn't be remembered as the first woman to walk around the world when I cheated," she said.

During one stage of the walk, she became pregnant, and unable to walk 25 miles a day, she rode on the back-up truck, and walked only the last few miles into towns. In the end, she could not live with the feeling of guilt. It nearly drove her to a breakdown. She eventually went to the office of her sponsor, Raleigh International, to confess. At her own request, her entry in the next *Guinness Book of World Records* was removed.

The chairman of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors received an unsigned note a while back. Enclosed with the note was a check for \$50. The letter read: "The enclosed should take care of a street sign-post which I knocked over some time ago in West Hollywood." The chairman commented: "Someone in West Hollywood has a conscience. This man or woman will sleep better tonight."

WHAT IS THE CONSCIENCE?

A poll was taken of children whose ages ranged from 5 to 9 years old. The most interesting question that they had to handle was, "What is a conscience?"

- One six year old answered that the conscience is the spot inside that burns if you're not good.
- Another kid, a boy, said that he didn't know but he thought that it had something to do with feeling bad when you have kicked a girl or a little dog.
- A nine year old likened it to a voice inside you that says no when you want to do something like beating up your little brother.

Actually, the conscience is somewhat like a burglar alarm or a fire alarm. Most of the time, it will be silent. You will hardly even notice that you have such a tool. However, when it does go off, it sounds so as to alert the owner that something is wrong; action must be taken.

In the New Testament, the Greek term that is translated "conscience" means "to be aware, to share knowledge".

Maybe some of you remember the newspaper carton "Moon Mullins". One of the main characters in the comic strip was a guy named Willie. In one strip, he's slumped in front of the television set with a coffee cup resting on his pot belly as he flicks his cigar ashes into his cup. He says to his wife, "You're awful quiet this morning, Mamie." And she says in return, "Willie, I've decided to let your conscience be your guide on your day off."

Next scene, Willie is surrounded by a lawnmower and an edger and a hoe and a shovel and he's frantically washing the windows and muttering, "Every time I listen to that dumb thing I end up ruinin' my relaxin'."

THE FACT IS, JUST AS PEOPLE RUN STOP SIGNS AT INTERSECTIONS, SO IT IS, PEOPLE LIKEWISE IGNORE THEIR CONSCIENCE.

Let me see the hands of everyone who has ever had to deal with a guilty conscience. The rest of you will now.

A key point: A guilty conscience will affect:

1. YOUR FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD. As I noted last week, sin will keep you from experiencing the Lord's presence. It's like when you were a small child, you never felt comfortable with your parents when you had a guilty conscience.

2. YOUR FAITH. A guilty conscience and a strong faith just don't go together.

3. YOUR PRAYER LIFE. The conscience seems to be the most tender when one bows in prayer. It is then that the Holy Spirit reminds us of areas that need to be righted. One fellow had hard feelings against another brother in a particular church. Every time he prayed, the other person's face came before him. He could not get victory in his prayer life until he made things right with his brother.

4. YOUR DESIRE FOR GOD'S WORD. A troubled conscience can rob a person of his appetite for natural food; how much more for spiritual food.

5. YOUR WITNESS. You may want to open your mouth to speak for the Lord, but Satan whispers, "You have no right to witness. You are a hypocrite."

In short, few human emotions are as distressing and painful as are feelings of guilt and personal self-disapproval. Guilt is a sense of despair that clings to a person like smoke clings to clothing. And yet, the problem is so common that it is estimated that some 85% of Americans suffer from varying degrees of guilt!

Mary Whelche, Christian author and speaker notes that sixty percent of all mothers today work at least part-time outside the home. And statistics show that the No. 1 emotion working mothers struggle with is guilt--guilt because you aren't home when the kids get home from school, guilt because your son doesn't like his sitter, guilt because you can't be a room mother. "Working mothers are under tremendous strain," she says.

I read a while back that the chaplains that serve our mental hospitals spend more time dealing with guilt than with any other malady.

Why not? 1 Timothy 5:24-25 states: (Phillips translation) "**Remember that some men's sins are obvious, bringing them to judgment. The sins of other men are not as apparent but are dogging them, nevertheless, under the surface and that is what happens to people who are never free from their guilt. Their sins are dogging them underneath the surface, they are dogging them night and day.**"

I wonder where the booze, drug, and psychiatric businesses would be today, if it weren't for this problem of guilt?

TWO TYPES OF GUILT: TRUE GUILT AND FALSE GUILT!

We feel **TRUE GUILT** when we're not listening to God. True guilt is specific: You know why you're feeling guilty and what you're supposed to do about it. True guilt is a state or condition that follows a free, personal, deliberate transgression of God's law.

I will cover this point in detail next week.

THIS MORNING THOUGH, I WANT TO FOCUS ON FALSE GUILT

Being a Christian is risky business. Revelation 12:10 speaks of the devil as being the "**ACCUSER OF THE BROTHERS WHO ACCUSES THEM BEFORE OUR GOD DAY AND NIGHT.**"

- Who is the accuser?
- Who does he accuse?
- When does he accuse?

Therefore, it is important to be able to distinguish between a tender conscience before God and the fiery accusations of the enemy. If you listen to the devil, you'll soon come to realize that you never give enough, do enough, pray enough, and serve enough to please the Lord.

Don't get me wrong. The devil doesn't want you to work for the Lord, to give or to pray. Not on your life. He simply wants you to feel guilty because you don't do more than you already do. That is just one of his ploys.

I have to deal with this. Many times at the end of the day, as I lay in my bed, I ponder over this or that which I should have done. Why didn't I accomplish more? Why didn't I pray more? Why wasn't I more organized or more disciplined? How frustrating! I'm already working the first and second shift, and sometimes a third. It would be hard for me to do any more but then there is the guilt, the sense of failure. It's almost as if I am driven in those moments, until I stop, I listen, and I pay attention to the voice that is doing the accusing. It is then that I recognize the accent. The spirit is undeniable. The smell is that of hell. It was the evil one who was once again bringing condemnation and accusations against the child of God!

- Satan accused Job of serving God only because Job was rich and happy.
- He twice questioned Jesus while in the wilderness of temptation, **"If you are the Son of God..."**
- Don't you know Peter felt those barbs as did Paul and the others?

Friends, he will accuse you too:

- "You shouldn't have done that."
- "You shouldn't have said that."
- "Why, look at yourself, and you call yourself a Christian? You ought to feel ashamed of yourself." Sound familiar?

LET'S NOW NOTICE FIVE SIGNS THAT WILL HELP YOU IDENTIFY FALSE GUILT

1. FALSE GUILT IS VERY HARD TO PIN DOWN.

It is a vague, cloudy feeling that cries, "I'm not right. I'm not what I should be."

False guilt seldom focuses on any specific action that can or should be changed. It can be a feeling of shame, without even knowing why you feel the shame.

This begs to be said here: if the Holy Spirit convicts you of a sin, you will know what is wrong and why. John 16:8 declares: **"When the Holy Spirit comes, he will convict (fully convince) the world of guilt in regard to sin..."** When the Holy Spirit deals with a person about some error, He is specific. He wants to direct and help the individual.

Hebrews 12:11 notes that God's correction **"produces righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."** It produces what? Righteousness and peace -- not false guilt and unclear condemnation.

David sinned. You know the story. Listen to the Lord's rebuke in 2 Samuel 12:9-10, **"Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own."**

There was nothing vague or hidden here. The guilt was real and justified. The Holy Spirit had been very direct and specific!

Notice now David's prayer of repentance. It is found in Psalm 51:1-4, **"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin**

is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.”

The prayer was equally direct and specific. Such a prayer would not, could not follow false guilt!

False guilt, unlike the Holy Spirit, does not want you to correct the situation; false guilt only wants you to feel bad!

2. FALSE GUILT MAJORS ON THAT WHICH IS QUESTIONABLE

For years I have kept a growing list of so-called questionable things. The list now encompasses some 115 different items. These objects are not found in the Bible but rather they are found on membership cards, articles of fellowship, in sermons, or in various traditions passed down through the years. The list is, quite simply put, made up of various things thought wrong by certain churches or congregations. The spiritually mature would call these things “convictions.” Some of the objects listed include:

- C. B. Radios
- Maxi dresses
- Eating out on Sunday
- Neckties
- Going to a circus
- Mustaches
- Playing ping pong
- Taking medicine
- Eating pork
- Having Barbie dolls
- As well as watching or playing football or baseball.

Again, the Bible never says, “Thou shalt not play ping pong” or, “Thou shalt not grow a mustache....” Man says it. There is a difference!

Many many people have labored under false guilt due to they’re trying to live off of someone else’s convictions, someone else’s rules, someone else’s sins.

The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 14:5, **“One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.”**

- You are to read and study the Scriptures.
- You are to be convinced of what is right and wrong in your own heart.
- You are to listen to the dictates of your own conscience.
- You are to obey the promptings of the Holy Spirit within you.

He will lead you into truth!

HEAR ME, PLEASE: JUST BECAUSE YOU FEEL GUILTY DOESN’T MEAN YOU ARE GUILTY.

I know a church that suffered from false guilt over baseball. The pastor, prior to his coming to Christ, loved and worshipped baseball. When he became a preacher, he took it for granted that everyone had the same affection for the game that he had had. They didn’t. Nonetheless, the fellow preached against baseball more often than he preached against of the listed sins of Scripture. Little old ladies that had never been to a game in their lives, no doubt suffered guilt due to this unbalanced brother’s preaching. Silly, isn’t it?

In essence, there is no hope in the system set up by false guilt. This is called, **“striving without arriving.”** You must always try harder, but you never cross the finish line. You seem to merely go in circles. Or perhaps it would be better to say you go in a spiral, as in a down-ward spiral. Life is a perpetual treadmill. You work hard and strive, but you never arrive. Life is hard work and frustration with little or no satisfaction. I call it FALSE guilt!

3. FALSE GUILT OFTEN MAJORS IN THE PAST. It draws to mind some action or word of long, long ago. The situation is long done with and under the blood of Jesus.

One of the enemy's most powerful allies in this area is other people. They too seemingly delight in throwing up the past with its many painful memories.

When, not if, when this happens remind yourself of the truth of God's word. Remind yourself of God's grace. Consider afresh His precious promises to forgive and to forget.

More on this point next week.

4. FALSE GUILT SHIFTS THE FOCUS FROM THINGS YOU HAVE DONE TO THINGS THAT HAVE HAPPENED TO YOU

This is important. There is no such thing as a pseudo-guilt. You are not to feel guilty because of a **SOMETHING** that happened to you. You should only feel real justifiable guilt because of something **you did, you said, or some attitude you manifested.**

Listen to the errant logic in these words:

- "I was laid off from my job therefore I must not be any good."
- "My children turned out to be rebellious and mean therefore I must be a lousy parent."
- "My husband died of a heart attack and I am somehow guilty of his death."

Saints, as a rule, this is faulty thinking. Other factors must be considered.

I want to now share with you a powerful quote from the book *Healing Grace* by David Seamands. "One of the most basic steps in finding freedom from unnecessary guilt is to distinguish between taking responsibility for our own sins and refusing to take it for the sins done against us by other people. Research into alcoholism, wife abuse, child abuse, and sexual abuse shows there are many situations in which people are victims of victims."

I have found this to be so very true! Hurt people hurt people! A tragic part of the hurt that they inflict is the pain of transferred guilt! They shift their guilt off on to another person.

A sad result of being abused emotionally, physically, or sexually, as children or young people, is that we feel guilt and shame for these terrible actions which we had no control over.

I will never forget counseling "Judy." She was a poised middle-aged lady. Pretty. Red-headed. Her husband was a deacon in the church that I pastored at the time. She was content to set on the sidelines and watch.

One day Judy came in to talk. She immediately put herself down. She talked about how dumb she was. She confessed that she was not a very good Christian. Anytime she asked a question, she prefaced it by telling me that she knew it was a stupid question. It was obvious that the lady had a terrible self image. Her mother was a confirmed alcoholic. Her father had deserted her when she was young. In many ways life had been cruel and abusive to her. While she was truly innocent of any real fault, in her mind she was guilty for every evil that took place in her life.

It warped her; it robbed her.

Eventually she was healed and became an outstanding outgoing Christian leader. But not until she came to realize that she was not responsible for other people's sins. She did not have to suffer guilt due to the awful things that had happened to her while she was a child!

Leaving that, I want to now share with you a quote from Dr. James Dobson: "Parenthood itself can be a very guilt-producing affair. Even when we give it our best effort, we can see our own failures and mistakes reflected in the lives of our children. We in the Western world are extremely vulnerable to family-related guilt. One mother whom I know walked toward a busy street with her three-year-old daughter. The little

toddler ran ahead and stopped on the curb until her mother told her it was safe to cross. The woman was thinking about something else and nodded in approval when the little child asked, "Can I go now, Mommy?"

The youngster ran into the street and was struck full force by a semi-trailer truck. The mother gasped in terror as she watched the front and back wheels of the truck crush the life from her precious little girl. The hysterical woman, screaming in anguish and grief, ran to the road and gathered the broken remains of the child in her arms. She had killed her own daughter who depended on her for safety. This mother will never escape the guilt of that moment. The "video tape recording" has been rerun a million times in her tormented mind--picturing a trusting baby asking her mother if it was safe to cross the street.

Clearly, God has not placed that guilt on the heartbroken woman, but her suffering is no less real.

I could give many other examples of severe guilt which were seemingly self-inflicted or imposed by circumstances. Clearly, at least in my opinion, guilt is not necessarily reflective of God's disapproval." Along this line, people who survive a bad accident or disaster, in which others were killed or injured, very often feel guilt that they have survived. This can be a very strong feeling. I have asked such people why do they feel guilty. Often-times they will reply, "I don't know. It doesn't make any sense. I just can't understand why I lived and they didn't."

Then too, I want to also point out that false guilt thrives when a child is born mentally retarded, or a parent suffers a miscarriage, a still birth, or some other uncontrollable malady.

It is obvious that God is not the author of such disapproval. He knows -- even better than we -- that the grief stricken parents did not intentionally produce a defective child. The genetic system simply somehow malfunctioned. Nevertheless, guilt is often unbearable for parents who hold themselves personally responsible for such unavoidable circumstances.

Notice, now, John 9:1: **"As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned,' said Jesus, 'but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.'"**

Did you hear Jesus? The man wasn't guilty nor were his parents. No one's sin caused the fellow's problems. Think about it. Nobody was supposed to bear guilt over this man's blindness.

Don't get me wrong, a number of folks were present ready to point an accusing finger. Jesus, however, would have no part of it. He simply said for the ages: **NO ONE** was to blame! Friends, this is oftentimes the case, **NO ONE IS TO BLAME!!!**

If you have been troubled by such evil, then I want to encourage you to tell false guilt to go take a hike!

5. FALSE GUILT INVOLVES TRYING TO PROVE ONE'S SELF WORTH

You simply try to overcome the bad by doing tons of good things. In doing so, you attempt to accumulate enough evidence of goodness to escape the accusation that you are worthless.

For the guilt-ridden person, this test involves taking on more duties, more responsibilities, more roles. As the burdens pile higher and higher, you become a beast of burden who takes on more responsibility than is healthy or necessary.

OBVIOUSLY, GOD WANTS US TO GET RID OF ANY FALSE GUILT. HOW CAN WE DO THAT?

There are four important steps:

1. IMMEDIATE CONFESSION OF SIN.

Do it the moment you become aware of sin. 1 John 1:9 promises, **"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."** Strive to keep your accounts short with God.

2. TRUST IN THE PROMISE OF CLEANSING.

Hebrews 9:14 promises that our very consciences are made clean when we confess our sins before Christ.

3. OBEY YOUR CONSCIENCE.

Do what you failed to do, or stop doing what you ought not to do. It's not enough to confess our failure. We must stop failing. James 1:22 warns: **“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”**

4. CONTINUE TO WALK IN THE LIGHT

That means keeping open to God, sensitive to the Holy Spirit, and ready to obey immediately. The Apostle Paul noted, **“I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.”** If that was good for Paul, then I dare say that would be a good rule for each of us to live by as well.

ARE YOU COPING WITH FALSE GUILT? The Spirit has come to set you free Receive that freedom in Jesus right now.

Continued...

COPING WITH GUILT

Part 2

The USA Today featured a survey a while back entitled, “Americans Not Guilty.” The top four responses to the question, “What do you feel most guilty about?” were:

Nothing in particular -- 34%

Having/spending too much money -- 15%

Taking poor care of their health -- 12%

Not spending time with friends/family -- 12%

I do not quite understand why, but the survey was commissioned by Fat Free Cracker Jack.

I find it interesting that nearly a third of us simply feel guilty even if it is over “nothing in particular.”

With this being the case, I want to once again talk to you about guilt. Last week I dealt with FALSE GUILT. This week I want us to look at the real thing -- true or what some might call justifiable guilt.

The danger of guilt can be seen in this quote from David Wilkerson’s book *Have You Felt Like Giving Up Lately*: Wilkerson notes: “Guilt, like a raging cancer, can eat away at the spiritual vitality of a Christian. It causes a person to lose control of life; it leads to a desire to quit or retire from spiritual activity; and it finally brings on physical pain and disease. Like cancer, guilt feeds upon itself, until all spiritual life is gone. Weakness and a sense of shame and failure are the end results.

I meet Christians across this nation who go about continually burdened down by an overwhelming load of guilt. They have made themselves believe they are traitors to the Lord. They live in spiritual agony and grief every waking hour, because of some hidden sin or weakness. They cannot appropriate divine forgiveness for themselves, and they live in dreaded fear of God’s judgment upon themselves or their families.” How sad; how tragic.

David Seamands notes “Guilt is a form of mental and emotional pain we experience when we feel responsible for doing, or not doing something which violates our personal moral standard.”

Are you hurting due to guilt? If I have just described you, then I want you to pay close attention to the rest of this message. I believe that I have a word, a healing word from God for you.

DO YOU REALIZE THAT FEELING BAD CAN BE GOOD?

I hate pain. In fact, I believe that I am allergic to it. Every time that I have a pain, I hurt. Do you relate? As unpleasant as pain is, though, it does serve a useful purpose. In fact, pain is one of the marvelous wonders of the human body. It is a cry for help. Pain warns us of impending or present danger. The feeling of pain forces the body to concentrate on a problem area and respond to it. The longer the response time, the greater the pain!

How many of you are acquainted with Hansen's disease? It is an age-old sickness otherwise known as leprosy. Worldwide, there are an estimated four million people affected by leprosy, with over 800,000 new cases detected each year and over 1 million people are on active treatment.

Leprosy is one of the most cruel diseases imaginable. Yet is not cruel in the way most other diseases are. It primarily acts as an anesthetic, numbing the pain cells of hands, feet, nose, ears, and eyes.

Now, that is not so bad, or so some might think. Most diseases are dreaded BECAUSE of their pain so what makes a painless disease so horrible? Please let me tell you. Terrible ulcers break out on the body which results in the flesh rotting and the subsequent loss of hands, nose, feet or whatever. Victims of leprosy have been known to pick up burning objects with their bare hands. They have been seen walking on splintered glass with their bare feet or have torn their hands with sharp pieces of metal not realizing what was happening. Again, pain can be good – very good.

GUILT, MY FRIENDS, IS A PAIN IN THE CONSCIENCE. The Apostle Paul warned that in the end times people would experience a form of spiritual leprosy – their consciences would be anesthetized. 1 Timothy 4:1 declares: **“The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.”**

The New Century Version has it: **“ whose consciences are destroyed....”**

Listen to the news accounts. Sadly, many killers kill for the thrill. They do not care that they are taking somebody's life. They kill without motive. This is a growing trend that has police departments deeply troubled.

- Think of the so-called "drive-by" shootings.
- Then too, I remember hearing of a gang of young men who murdered someone simply because they were bored and could find nothing else to do.
- Perhaps you remember the name of Charlie Starkweather. This psychopath went on a cross-country shooting spree in the 1950s and killed fourteen innocent victims. At his trial, when asked if he felt guilty, Starkweather replied, “No, it was just like shootin’ rabbits!”

It is as if such people – if you can call them that -- no longer have a conscience that cries out, NO, DON'T DO THAT. THAT IS WRONG! STOP BEFORE SOMEONE GETS HURT! It seems as if they have lost any sense of guilt!

Genuine guilt is meant to be a positive motivator. It is meant to bring us to our knees before God. It is a teacher that instructs us to check our course and adjust our sails. **THE VERY FACT THAT YOU FEEL WRONG MEANS THAT YOU CAN BE MADE TO FEEL RIGHT!** .

NOW, WHAT IF YOU ARE FEELING BAD AND YOU WANT TO FEEL GOOD? That's where this sermon comes in. Let me give you four important steps in dealing with real guilt:

1. ASK YOURSELF AND GOD, WHY WOULD YOU BE FEELING GUILTY?

It is sad to say, and yet I am convinced that I am right, some people who seek counseling today, do not seek truth, they seek someone to affirm some error.

C. S. Lewis pointed this out many years ago. “Much of the time” he said, “when we say, ‘Please forgive me,’ what we're really asking is, ‘Please excuse me.’ We're not asking for forgiveness, but to be excused. We don't want to admit that what we did was wrong; we simply want to be let off the hook. But God does not offer to excuse us; He offers to forgive us. And the first step toward receiving His forgiveness is to admit that we have sinned. No excuses, no justifications. We simply say, ‘Lord, I have offended You by my actions. I have chosen to displease You, and I have dishonored Your holy name by what I have done. I have sinned.’”

James 1:5 promises, **“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.”**

If you are feeling yucky, ask God for wisdom. Have Him tell you why. He will. If you ask and nothing specific comes up, then dismiss the guilt as false guilt. Ignore it. Don't let it trouble you one second more. OK?

But, on the other hand, if you inquire of God and something specific, something repeatedly comes to mind, some sin or offense, then confess it, repent of it, AND STOP IT. Remember, guilt is a cry of pain that signals SOMETHING IS WRONG! **Find out what is wrong and make it right --- right away!**

There isn't a doctor in this land that would put a Band-Aid on a cancer. No! He would seek to remove the growth by surgery, chemotherapy or by radiation. Drastic measures have to be taken! So it is with guilt. To get rid of the guilt one must get rid of the sin or the offense! Jesus told the lady that had been

caught in adultery, **“Neither do I condemn you... go now and leave your life of sin.”** *The King James Version* says, **“Go and sin no more”** (John 8:11). Continued sin results in continued guilt!

David therefore prayed in Psalm 51:1-10: **“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”**

Eight times in these ten verses David lays claim to his sins. They were his. No one else was responsible for them. He had committed them. He had to make them right. That is what this great Psalm is all about. He was righting that which was wrong!

If you are wrestling with some secret sin, confess it to God, repent of it, and go and sin no more. Don't settle for sameness. Ask and then act.

2. UNTYING A KNOTTY PAST

An old Irish proverb notes, "All sins cast long shadows." Sometimes the shadow goes in front of you; sometimes a shadow goes behind. It is the shadows that lag behind that I want us to now focus on.

Sins of the past are some of the most difficult issues that I have to deal with as a counselor/pastor.

- Unresolved conflict with a now deceased parent,
- A crime,
- Abortion,
- Sex prior to marriage,
- An undiscovered affair,

These sins are but the tip of the iceberg. The list could go on and on.

The truth of the matter is, we do not have the power to go back and live life over again. We only get one shot at it. What's done is done. Even the blood of Jesus cannot undo the past. So since we can't undo it, what then is the answer?

- Once again, confess any past fault or sin to God. He already knows all about it anyway.
- Then too, accept God's forgiveness. While He can't undo the past, His blood certainly can cover it.
- If you have sinned against another person, you will never have peace about it until the matter is made right. If the person is still alive, ask for their forgiveness.
 - If you have stolen something, confess it and give it back or it pay back. There is the story of the man who wrote to the tax office. "I am sending this money I owe, because I have been unable to sleep at night. If I still can't sleep, I will send you the other half." If it is impossible to pay the money back directly, (for instance, money taken from a company which no longer exists) then give the same amount of money to a charity.
- Guilt seems to be particularly hard on those who are dealing with some unresolved issues concerning someone who has died. Do you know how many people harbor bitterness against someone who is dead? How can you make it right with a dead person? Again, you can't.

The same is true if you don't know where the person is. He or she has moved away or deserted you. So, what do you do? Take the issue to God. If you have something from your past and it is truly not possible for you to make it right, then make it right with God and it is taken care of. You do not have to carry the guilt any longer. He judges by your heart; your intent. How else do you think the Apostle Paul dealt with the death of Stephen?

Rudyard Kipling said it well: Nothing is settled until it is settled right." Isn't it time to settle matters now?

I recall a particular Peanuts cartoon from several years ago. It seems that Lucy and Charlie Brown were discussing a just completed baseball game. Lucy had once again failed to catch a fly ball. When asked why, she said that she couldn't help but remember all the other fly balls that she had dropped in previous games. Then she declared, "I guess the past got in my eyes."

Are you having a hard time forgetting a certain something? Could Lucy's problem be your problem? Have you let the past get in your eyes?

3. UNDERSTAND, YOU CAN BE FORGIVEN.

I love this quote: "In the Gospels we discover we are far worse off than we thought, and far more loved than we ever dreamed." None of us are so good as to be called righteous. Paul noted in Romans 3:10, "**There is no one righteous, not even one.**" At the same time, it is extremely rare that one is so bad as to be beyond the reach of forgiveness.

The lady had been a stripper, prostitute, drug addict and demon-possessed witch. It was hard to imagine a perversion or Satanic form of depravity she hadn't wallowed in. Folks gave up on her as a lost cause. Nonetheless, in time she gave herself to Jesus; trading her wickedness for Christ's holiness. One day Jesus appeared to her and said, 'You are a chaste virgin in my sight.' His precious blood had washed her, sanctified her, and made her just as if she had never sinned.

Every once in a while somebody asks me about the unpardonable sin. They want to know if they have committed it. Well, if that question has ever troubled you, I want you to take this little test:

- Do you know when you do wrong?
- Do you feel conviction after committing a sin?
- Do you feel sorry over such an offense?
- Do you sense the Holy Spirit drawing you to repentance, to God, and to the altar?
- Do you ever experience a desire to serve the Lord and worship Him?
- Do you ever consider God?

If you answered even one of those questions with a yes, then in all likelihood, you are innocent of having committed this terrible sin.

Occasionally I hear a message on how people can cross over some unseen line and thereby be so terribly lost that they can not possibly be saved. I can not imagine the terror that such an individual would have to feel. If you have been hampered with worries that you have crossed over such a line – that God will no longer forgive you -- consider this.

- You are in church this morning.
- You are in the company of believers.
- You are sitting here listening to a sermon.

Why? I will tell you why! John 6:44 (*King James Version*), declares, "**No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him.**"

I submit to you that you that are here today by divine appointment. You are listening to a sermon dealing with the subject of guilt because the Heavenly Father loves you, wants to forgive you, and is drawing you unto Himself.

Look at the Apostle Paul. Scripture records that he was once "**a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man.**" Nevertheless 1 Timothy 1:13 says that he was "**shown mercy.**" 1 Timothy 1:15 then continues: "**What I say is true, and you should fully accept it: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst.**"

Worse than me; worse than you. If Jesus would save Paul, you are not beyond His reach either! You can be forgiven

Corrie Ten Boom once said, "There is no pit so deep but that God's love is not deeper still."

2 Peter 3:9 (*New Century Version*) adds, "**God is being patient with you. He does not want anyone to be lost, but he wants all people to change their hearts and lives.** Yes, you can be forgiven!

4. IF GOD HAS FORGIVEN YOU, FORGIVE YOURSELF!

I heard once of an Italian peasant woman who happened to bump into a monk who lived in a monastery high on a hill above her village. Since she had his attention, she said, "Father, I've always wanted to ask somebody what you men of God do up there on the top of the mountain. I've always wondered about the life of holiness that you lead up there." I like the old man's wise and honest answer: "What do we men of God do up there on that holy mountain? I'll tell you, my dear. We fall down; we get up. We fall down; we get up. We fall down; we get up."

That is the way of all Christian growth. It doesn't happen all at once. You fall down, you get up, you fall down, you get up....

With the passing of time, as a baby learning to walk, you start making some progress. Maybe only a little at a time. But, believe me, that is better than not trying at all. As your pastor, I accept the effort. I appreciate the attempt. "But, I have so many failures on my account. Too many aborted chances. Too many past sins." For you, maybe, but not for God.

Some fraternity members put Limburger cheese very gently on a brother's mustache while he slept. He woke up about an hour later and said, "This room stinks!" He walked into the hall and said, "This hall stinks!" He walked into the living room and said, "This living room stinks!" Then greatly perplexed as to where the smell was coming from, he walked outside and exclaimed, "The whole world stinks!"

Yet where was the problem? Right under his own nose! Could it be that your problem with guilt is your own lack of self-forgiveness? Do this for me please: Say to yourself: "Self, God has forgiven you of each and every sin. His word declares this to be fact. Now, self, accept His full and complete pardon. Realize that you are now clean because the blessed Word of God tells you so." Do it.

"But pastor, simply because they left, doesn't mean they're gone. I still feel rotten; I still feel guilty." Let me ask you, HAVE YOU EVER HEARD OF PHANTOM LIMB PAIN? If you have had a limb surgically removed you might still suffer some degree of pain that seems to come from the missing limb. This strange phenomena is called Phantom Limb Pain. The limb could still cause you pain, and yet it is no longer a part of you.

This same phenomena can happen with one's sins. Their presence can seem so real as to actually cause you pain. But despite what you feel, those sins are no longer part of you. They are gone forever.

Psalm 103:12 promises, "**Your sins have been removed as far as the east is from the west.**" To the Hebrew mind, you could travel east forever and never touch west. You were once in your sin. It was once part of you. But now, God has placed an infinite distance between you and your sins. The memory might still be with you, but the sin itself is no where to be found.

Jeremiah 50:20 (*The New Century Version*), "**The LORD says, "At that time people will try to find Israel's guilt, but there will be no guilt. People will try to find Judah's sins, but no sins will be found..., I will forgive their sins."**

Micah 7:18-19 adds, **“Your sins have been thrown into the depths of the sea....”**

Almighty God trampled your sins under his feet, thus destroying them, then banished them forever by hurling them into the ocean depths. The Israelites' technology was such that anything below a few feet of water was utterly inaccessible. Anything dropped into the ocean depths was lost forever. No one would ever see it again. That's like what has happened to your sins. Again, they're gone forever.

Notice with me the beautiful Romans 8:38-39. **“Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”**

Here the Apostle Paul contrasts certain things with God's love for His children. His lists includes both the positive as well as the negative:

- **“DEATH NOR LIFE”**
The events of life, or the finality of death – cannot separate us;
- **“ANGELS NOR DEMONS”**
The good angels or the powers and forces of hell --- cannot separate us;
- **“NEITHER THE PRESENT NOR THE FUTURE”**
All of the measureless dimensions of time (past, present or future) cannot separate us;
- **“NEITHER HEIGHT NOR DEPTH”**
All the limitless proportions of space cannot separate us;
- **“NOR ANY POWERS”**
Not any power, mighty work, strength or even miracle cannot separate us;

Then in one last sweeping phrase, he declared that **“NOR ANYTHING ELSE IN ALL CREATION will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus our Lord.”**

- Your sins are no match for the love of God,
- Your fear is no match for the love of God,
- Your guilt and shame is no match,
- Your past failures are no match,
- Your lack of self-forgiveness is no match,

Again, nothing in heaven or on earth, nor anything else in all of creation can come between us and the love of God! He and His love is more than a match for them all!

DO YOU SEE THIS CUP? Notice now as I pour water out on it. If I hold the cup upright, it quickly fills to the top. Notice now what happens when I hold the same cup upside down. Not a drop of water is going in. Not one.

- Same cup.
- Same water.
- Same holder.

The vessel is simply out of position to receive.

If you have failed to receive God's grace, why not turn the cup over this morning? The same grace and blessing that He gives to others, He will give to you. Receive it.

Bill Gaither wrote:

So long I had searched for life's meaning,
Enslaved by the world and its greed.
Then the door of my prison was opened by love,
For the ransom was paid, I was freed.

I'm free from the guilt that I carried.
From the dull empty life I'm set free.
For when I met Jesus He made me complete,

He forgot the foolish man I use to be.

I'm free from the fear of tomorrow,
I'm free from the guilt of the past.
For I've traded my shackles for a glorious song,
I'm free! Praise the Lord, free at last!

Free!
Totally free!
Free from the curse of sin.
Free from the ravages of guilt.
Free, praise the Lord, free at last!