

# Discerning *Real Guilt* from *False Guilt*

Carrying guilt is like walking around with greasy hair, pimples, and bad breath. We keep others, including God, at arm's length, so they won't get a whiff of our problem. Shame can cause us to hide behind a fastidious façade or carry a nonchalant attitude.

Yet, God knows everything about us, including the fact that our righteousness comes from Christ's perfect performance, not our own. That is why we can approach God's throne with confidence. Christ is the source of our righteous standing.

God sees past our flaws and into our new hearts. An erring Christian doesn't stand before God as a criminal before a judge but as a disobedient child before a loving father. When my poodles get in the mud, I know they can't clean themselves up, but I need them to stand still while I hose them off. God expects to clean us up when we mess up.

Sometimes, we still feel guilty even after we've confessed and left our sins. False guilt is when we carry guilt for imagined offenses, personal weaknesses, confessed sin, or something that's beyond our scope of knowledge and control.

In other words, real guilt is about doing wrong. I did wrong or failed to do right in thought, word, or deed. I have something specific to confess and forsake. False guilt is feeling something's wrong with me. I'm flawed. I should have predicted my child would get sick and not sent her to school. I've confessed all known sin, but I still feel soiled.

When the Holy Spirit points out sin, He highlights Christ's worthiness, not our worthlessness. He reminds us Jesus' blood paid for this particular sin too. He has scrubbed us clean. Jesus knows how to pray for us and supplies the grace we need to forsake our sin.

When you feel guilty, ask the Holy Spirit to search you. God's Word, like an MRI, is able to see deep into the hidden parts of our souls and pinpoint where we are off base. His Spirit points out sin so we can confess and forsake it. When that happens we simply agree with Him. "I was wrong. I'm sorry for my sin. Thank You for pointing this out and taking care of it at the cross. Thank You for the power to change."

Learning to take personal responsibility for our mistakes empowers us to change. Sometimes this includes making restitution to those we've wronged.

Take the lesson you learned and move on. Beating yourself up shows unbelief, not faith. Humble repentance brings health and rest. Any standard for accepting myself that is higher than God's is unrighteous. "Can a mortal be more righteous than God?" (Job 4:17).

The chart on the page two clarifies the difference between the freeing correction of the Holy Spirit and the condemnation of the world, the flesh, and the devil.



CORRECTION IS HELPFUL	CONDEMNATION IS HARMFUL
<i>From: Holy Spirit (Psalm 139:23-24; John 16:8-9)</i>	<i>From: the world, flesh, devil (Rom. 8:1, 33, 34; Rev. 12:10)</i>
<p>Causes temporary, motivating sorrow that brings repentance without regret, leading to restored fellowship with God (2 Cor. 7:8-10).</p> <p>Protects me from continued loss and sin.</p> <p>Transforms my heart, mind, and behavior.</p> <p>Produces gratitude for Christ's cleansing.</p>	<p>Creates a destructive sorrow that causes death or distance from God (2 Cor. 7:10).</p> <p>Produces shame that feeds addiction, depression, aggression, and other destructive behaviors.</p> <p>Makes us feel powerless to change or please God.</p>
CHRIST-CONSCIOUS	SELF-CONSCIOUS OR SIN-CONSCIOUS
<p>Draws me to Christ for help (Hebrews 4:16).</p> <p>I <i>made</i> a mistake. I did something wrong.</p> <p>Provides clear, specific actions, attitudes, or beliefs to forsake or adopt. Empowers positive change.</p> <p>Reminds me of God's grace and forgiveness.</p> <p>Restores joy and fellowship with the Lord.</p> <p>Cares more what God thinks than what people think (Gal. 1:10; 1 Cor. 4:3-5. 1 Thess. 2:4, 6).</p>	<p>Is isolating and self-focused (Rom.8:6).</p> <p>I am the mistake. Something's wrong with me.</p> <p>Vague, general accusations, unclear on what to do from here. Feel paralyzed.</p> <p>Resurrects guilt over previously confessed sins.</p> <p>Concerned with how others view me.</p> <p>Focuses on sin instead of the Savior.</p>

## Trust the Holy Spirit, Not Your Conscience

Have you ever been around someone who constantly says she's sorry? Such hypersensitivity may reflect a damaged self-image. If you wrestle with this, consider what may be prompting the need to apologize. Did you grow up with a critical authority figure and learn to apologize to protect yourself? Are you seeking affirmation or asking, "Am I okay?" Do you often feel guilty when you aren't sure if you did wrong?

Take your insecurity and false sense of guilt to God. Affirm the truth of your new identity with your actions and words, even when your feelings resist.

Instead of a hypersensitive conscience, some have a hardened one. Are you more likely to resist the correction of the Holy Spirit? Do you make excuses or blame others for your sin? Those actions entrap us in sin. Biblical confession sets us free from sin's stronghold.



God sympathizes with our weaknesses, whether that weakness is an overactive conscience or a hard heart. He supplies the grace to help us with our needs.

If you still can't shake a taunting accusation, you may be in a spiritual battle. We will talk more about that in chapter eight. Try writing down your sin. Then write out 1 John 1:9 over your confession. You may want to shred, burn, or bury it as a symbol of what God has done with it. It is gone. Don't go back and dig it up!

Remember, “No weapon forged against you will prevail, and you will refute every tongue that accuses you. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and this is their vindication from me,” declares the LORD” (Isaiah 54:17).

## Sometimes Sad, but Never Disappointed

Do you think God's disappointed in you? He's not. You cannot surprise, shock, or disappoint God. How can I say such a thing? Because the Bible says that we were chosen “according to the *foreknowledge* of God the Father” (1 Peter 1:2). In other words, God knew everything about us before we were born.

He knew *everything* He was getting in me, yet still chose me to be His child and participate in His Kingdom. That is not a pass to misbehave. It is an incentive to get up when we fall down—to press on. God knows He did not make a mistake in choosing you or me. He's committed to fulfilling His purpose in us. He knows the Spirit won't fail ultimately to form Christlikeness in us.

We disappoint when we fail to meet someone's expectations. God did not expect me to be different than I am, so He is not disappointed with me. Not understanding the depth of sin's influence causes me to be shocked or disappointed with myself when sin rears its ugly head, but God isn't surprised. I imagine Him thinking, *Dear child, you think that is bad, you haven't seen the half of it. There is more where that came from. But My Son's blood has covered that too!*

I may not disappoint God, but I can sadden Him. When I cave to sinful impulses and disobey His wise standards, I hurt Him, others, and myself. Knowing this would happen, God provided the blood of Jesus to wash us continually, so we can continue the process of being transformed into the image of Christ (1 John 1:5-10).

Wallowing in self-condemnation and guilt paralyzes us and sidelines us from our higher calling. Holding on to shame is destructive and makes us self-conscious instead of Christ-conscious. Just as God knew Adam and Eve would fall, David would miserably fail, and Peter would deny Him, He knew you and I would mess up. Yet, He still chose them and us to be part of His forever family and build His kingdom on earth.

What have you done to disappoint yourself? Admit it to God and experience His forgiveness. He already knows; He's not shocked: He's waiting to restore you and get you back on track.

