

# How to Resolve *Guilt* and *Self-Critical Thoughts*

At a book signing event, I left my table to welcome two out-of-town authors. One gave me a withering glare. The other responded coolly but with less hostility. As the evening wound down, I tried again. Perhaps I'd interrupted an important conversation. However, I was met with the same icy response.

What had I done to offend them? Should I apologize? If so, for what?

I joined my friend for lunch three days later. When she brought up these women, I couldn't believe it. She'd also worried over what she could have done to offend them. We laughed at ourselves. They'd been rude to us, and we felt guilty! Yet, without my friend's experience, I might not have recognized my false guilt.

Have you ever assumed guilt for something that isn't your fault? If someone is rude or unreasonable, we wonder what we did to provoke their response. Even when we can't point to anything, the nagging sense that we should have been able to prevent the unpleasantness dogs us.

A group of professional women talked about their constant battle with guilt and self-reproach. Having battled those feelings, I understood. Guilt's persistent taunts distract and drain the joy out of life. Guilt sabotages our relationships too. We keep people—and God—at a distance, covering our



self-consciousness with perfectionism, professionalism, busyness, or humor.

Working through this battle with my clients and myself has taught me a lot. Here are some proven truths that can deliver you from both real and false guilt.

## Real Guilt Versus False Guilt

Let's look at two kinds of guilt—real and false.

**Real guilt:** Being at fault or responsible for some wrong. Having committed an offense or crime. Having violated God's law or standards.

- I did something I shouldn't have. (I lost my temper. I gossiped about my neighbor.)
- I didn't do something I should have. (I didn't keep my promise.)

**False guilt:** Feeling guilty for something beyond my control or for someone else's decisions.

- I feel guilty, condemned, or ashamed for imagined offenses. (Someone frowned at my idea, therefore I must have said something stupid or wrong.)
- I feel responsible for something beyond my control, knowledge, or maturity. (The flu kept me from attending my best friend's wedding.)
- I failed to meet my own standards or the values of someone I respect and want to please. (I worked hard but fell short of my sales goal. A highway accident made me late to my child's recital.)



## Solution for Real Guilt

Jesus provided the solution for real guilt on the cross.

*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21 NIV)*

The moment we accept Jesus's death as payment for our guilt and sin, He gives us His righteousness. All our sins were future when Jesus died on the cross. The moment we accept Him, His blood takes care of our past, present, and future sins.

But we still sin. Because believers stumble and fall short of God's glory, the Bible tells us to confess our sins to maintain unbroken fellowship.

*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9 NIV)*

Our English word confess comes from the Greek word *homologō* which means to say the same thing or to agree. When we confess our sins, we agree with what God says about our sins. "I did it. I was wrong." We don't cover them with excuses or blame someone else.

To confess our sins includes agreeing with God that Christ's sacrifice covered my every sin. Biblical confession reminds me that Jesus loved me enough to carry all my sins in His body on the cross.

### 3 Truths You Need to Know

#### 1. False guilt is not from God.

False guilt can come from childhood emotional wounds or other past



injuries. It can come from breaking family rules. These rules may be good, like “be on time,” but keeping them won’t make you more acceptable to God. Falling short of these standards doesn’t bring God’s condemnation.

Rule-oriented righteousness takes the focus off what Christ accomplished and puts it on us, our righteousness. This leads to pride or shame, not closeness with the Lord. There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).

## **2.False guilt is destructive.**

Taking the focus off Christ and putting it on ourselves or on the hurtful incident is never productive. We become self-focused instead of Savior-focused. We find ourselves distracted and unable to concentrate on our work or conversations. We don’t pick up on others’ real needs.

Feeling guilty compromises our decision-making. Instead of doing what’s best, we avoid discomfort. Working mothers who feel guilty for not being home more may ignore disciplining their children.

## **3.False guilt can be corralled and used to draw us to Christ for truth and healing.**

When self-critical and condemning thoughts paralyze us because we fell short of our standards, we must run to the throne of grace where Jesus will provide help in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16). Any standard for accepting myself that is higher than God’s is unrighteous.

As we bring our painful feelings to our High Priest, He points out the true source of our guilt, heals our wounds, and corrects our misunderstanding. We learn to look to Jesus instead of our broken consciences for understanding and truth.



## So how do you recognize false guilt?

*Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. (2 Corinthians 7:10-11 NIV)*

## Correction vs. Condemnation

<b>CORRECTION IS HELPFUL</b>	<b>CONDEMNATION IS HARMFUL</b>
From: Holy Spirit (Psalm 139:23-24; John 16:8-9)	From: the world, flesh, devil (Rom. 8:1, 33, 34; Rev. 12:10)
Causes temporary, motivating sorrow that brings repentance without regret, leading to restored fellowship with God (2 Cor. 7:8-10).  Protects me from continued loss and sin.  Transforms my heart, mind, and behavior.  Produces gratitude for Christ's cleansing.	Creates a destructive sorrow that causes death or distance from God (2 Cor. 7:10).  Produces shame that feeds addiction, depression, aggression, and other destructive behaviors.  Makes us feel powerless to change or please God.



CHRIST-CONSCIOUS	SELF-CONSCIOUS OR SIN-CONSCIOUS
<p>Draws me to Christ for help (Hebrews 4:16).</p> <p>I made 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>

Wallowing in self-condemnation and guilt paralyzes us. It sidelines us from our higher calling. Holding on to shame makes us self-conscious instead of Christ-conscious. If you have sinned, confess it, and receive Christ's cleansing. If your guilt is false, thank Him for using it to teach you to walk by faith.

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 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 love and forgiveness. He already knows. He's not shocked. He's waiting to restore you and get you back on track.

**To learn more about winning the battles in your mind and emotions, get your copy of [\*Give Yourself a Break\*](#).**

