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Knowing vs. Feeling: A Biblical Look at True Guilt and False Guilt



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Knowing vs. Feeling: A Biblical Look at True Guilt and False Guilt

Purpose of paper.

As human beings, we sometimes know something is true, but it doesn't "feel" true. Or someone may say, "I know it in my head, but I don't feel it in my heart." There are many situations where emotions and logic work together, and there are times when they seem to be in opposition to each other. This paper is designed to give some thoughts on the logical and theological truths related to guilt as opposed to the emotion of guilt. For some this may seem like an unnecessary distinction, but it is quite important to consider what the Bible teaches about guilt and how that may or may not line up with the emotional experience of guilt.

This paper will primarily focus on outlining a theological framework of guilt. This will be done by acknowledging that the feeling of guilt is experienced by all people in a similar fashion and a variety of contexts. However, our standing before God, converted or unconverted, determines what guilt means for each of us.

What is true guilt?

The Law given to Moses in the Old Testament was meant to show mankind that they are guilty before God (*Romans 3:20, Galatians 3:24*) and are in need of forgiveness from God. Christ taught that God's standard is far above behavioral compliance, and He focused on the heart (see the Sermon on the Mount *Matthew* chapters 5-7). Taking an honest look at Scripture and seeking out what is required to meet God's standard will rightly lead everyone to conclude that they are guilty before God. We have fallen short of God's standard of holiness and purity in intent and action; therefore, we are guilty. This is true guilt.

There are two types of true guilt.

1. **True guilt experienced by the unconverted:** We have inherited a sin nature from Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden (*Genesis 3, Romans 5:6-21*). Scripture teaches that everyone enters this world guilty before God (*Psalms 51:5*). True guilt is the result of man having this sin nature which leads to separation from God through sin. The Bible teaches that all unrighteousness is sin (*1 John 5:17*), all have sinned (*Romans 3:23*), and sin brings death (*Romans 6:23*). True guilt exists not as merely a feeling, but as a reality resulting from the distance between sinful man and a perfect God. Where God's law is broken through any unrighteous act, desire, or motive, man is guilty before God. The unconverted soul is condemned to hell (eternity apart from God) which is the consequence of being guilty before God as an unconverted person.

This guilt may or may not be experienced as an emotion. Some feel the emotion of guilt when they disobey God's law, where others do not. This is one reason why it is very important to distinguish between the emotion of guilt and being guilty before God positionally. We are either converted, positionally God's child, or unconverted, positionally God's enemy. Our position with Christ is not determined by evaluating our emotions. If we are unconverted, we are guilty before God whether or not we feel guilty.

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- Remedy for the unconverted person's true guilt: God, through His Son Jesus, has provided a way for this type of true guilt to be removed. The Bible tells us that Jesus was perfect (*2 Corinthians 5:21, 1 Peter 2:20-25*). Due to being both God and man, He was born without the sin nature that everyone else inherited from Adam. He walked through life perfectly and became the once-for-all-time sacrifice (*Hebrews 10:11-22*). Through faith in Christ's shed blood man is regenerated, meaning man is changed from spiritually dead to spiritually alive. Becoming spiritually alive also shifts the individual from guilty before God to cleansed and justified (*Romans 5:1*). Faith in Christ is the only way true guilt is removed from an individual.
2. **True guilt experienced by the converted soul:** Once an individual is justified, they are no longer condemned or guilty before God (*Romans 8:1*). The penalty of sin, eternal death, has been removed through faith in Jesus' sacrifice (*1 Cor. 15:52-57*). Once justified, an individual experiences true guilt in a different way than the unconverted. The difference is that the penalty for the believer is no longer eternity in hell. Instead, the believer experiences true guilt in the sense that when they break God's commandments they feel conviction (true guilt from the Holy Spirit) of sin (*1 Jn. 1:4-10*). This is vastly different than eternal condemnation. The message from God during these times is, "Come unto Me." He desires that we recognize our sin, experience sorrow for our sin, remember our need for Him and turn to His open arms (*Matthew 11:28-30, Hebrews 12:5-7*). The believer should always understand that they are not worthy of God's forgiveness nor are they "good enough" in themselves to meet God's standard. This reality can be felt or experienced through the emotion of guilt. There is truth in the reality the believer is not 100% righteous if they look at themselves; however, the reality of justification through faith is the believer has been given 100% righteousness through Christ (i.e., imputed righteousness; *2 Cor. 5:21*). When the believer feels conviction (true guilt from the Holy Spirit) and seeks to turn toward Christ, their imputed righteousness from Christ is not at risk. Instead, the Holy Spirit is exposing the individual's need for continued growth and sanctification.

While the believer experiences conviction (true guilt from the Holy Spirit) when they sin, they no longer have the penalty of eternal death. Instead, they have the continued need for sanctification. Sanctification is the ongoing process of becoming more like Christ. It is what *Romans 8:29* calls "to be conformed to the image of his Son. . ." While the believer grows they will continue to experience guilt over the ongoing battle with their sinful nature. This battle will continue until they are taken from this life into eternity in heaven (*1 Cor. 15:52-57*). The believer is justified by grace through faith alone. This truth is essential to understand so we do not falsely conclude that our justification rests on our works or obedience. It is true that true faith produces obedience and good works (see the graphic which follows); however, true faith does not produce perfect human beings. The believer is to grow in obedience and good works, but our salvation depends solely on our justification through faith in Christ.

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Fruit:

Sanctified living and good works springing out of a redeemed life.

Root:

Salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.



The Root & The Fruit

The doctrine of justification by grace through faith can be difficult for us to accept partly because we can wrongly conclude this doctrine minimizes sin. The Apostle Paul likely ran into the same questions and clearly addressed this concern in Romans 6 after teaching the doctrine of salvation through faith in *Romans 3-5*. The believer is called to live an overcoming life even though they have been rescued from the penalty of sin (*Romans 6:1-2*).

- **Remedy for the converted person's true guilt:** The remedy for the believer and unbeliever alike is and will always be Christ's shed blood. The difference between the believer and unbeliever is the believer has had their penalty for sin paid for by Christ and stands in His righteousness (*2 Corinthians 5:21*). This reconciles the believer to God (*Colossians 1:12-14*). When God looks at the believer He sees Christ's perfection rather than the believer's sin. This is not to say God does not see the believer's sin. God sees and knows all things. It means God sees the righteousness of Christ which allows Him to have communion with imperfect man. For the believer, we should experience true guilt (conviction) when we sin, and we are called to turn to Christ for forgiveness while seeking to grow in obedience to God's commands (*1 John 1:9; 1 John 2:1-2*). True guilt/conviction does not condemn the believer (*Romans 8:1*); instead, it is to prompt the believer to acknowledge sin, confess, and turn from sin to Christ. This in turn is to lead the believer to worship the one true God who loves us and is faithful to His promises (*Psalms 42:5, Psalm 62:7, Isaiah 41:10, 1 Peter 1:2-5*). The graphic which follows, outlines the process of experiencing and moving through true guilt.

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What is false guilt?

False guilt is when the believer feels guilt when guilt is not warranted or when they feel guilt without the hope of salvation. False guilt is experienced by the believer (and only by the believer). The unbeliever stands condemned before God and therefore cannot experience “false guilt” as defined in this paper. The unbeliever can experience a type of false guilt as a result of confused emotions, which is beyond the scope of this paper. In the context of this paper, false guilt is when an individual feels condemnation when he is not condemned.

False guilt comes in several forms, but two of the most common will be specifically addressed. Examples of these types of false guilt are:

1. When an individual experiences the emotion of guilt even when they have not committed a sin.
 - a. An individual fills out paperwork at the doctor’s office and leaves the appointment with the pen from the office. Once he realizes this, he feels guilty for “stealing.”
 - b. An individual is seeking to go about her day in faithfulness to the Lord and feels guilty, but she is not able to specifically identify what she did that may have resulted in the feeling of guilt. She gets stuck in this feeling of guilt and loses sight of her hope in Christ.
2. When a believer who is not condemned feels condemned.
 - a. An individual desires to be close to Christ but fears she has missed something that keeps her from Christ. When she talks with those who know her well she is told they believe she has followed the biblical path of repentance.
 - b. An individual is overly focused on behavior, motive, feelings, or desires as indicators of salvation. This leads the individual to judge himself on works though he would readily agree that salvation comes through faith.

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The graphic below outlines the process and experience of false guilt.



What is false guilt's remedy?

The remedy for believers dealing with false guilt is understanding and holding onto truth while reducing one's focus and reliance on emotions. Truth, as laid out in Scripture, tells us salvation is a gift from God through faith in Christ's sacrifice (*Ephesians 2:8-9*). False guilt's message is, "There is no hope for me." This is clearly not in accordance with Scripture. Yet Satan can use our emotions or beliefs to lead us to false guilt when they are not in line with truth. Emotions try to convince us that since we feel guilt, we must be guilty. If we believe salvation is based on our own perfection, we can easily be swayed to believing we are condemned when we come face-to-face with our lack of perfection. Yet scriptural truth teaches that we as believers will feel guilt/conviction yet we are not condemned. Scriptural truth tells us we are saved through Christ's work and not our own (*Titus 3:5*). Scriptural truth is our best tool to moving through "false guilt."

When we know false guilt's tactics we are best able to identify it and combat its lies. There are three main sources of suffering in this world; Satan, the fallen world, and the human heart. Each of these can be the starting point for false guilt. Satan will attack the believer with anything that will cause confusion and hurt (*1 Peter 5:8*). This is how Satan can play a role in false guilt. The fallen world can contribute to false guilt through things like disease, mental health disorders (e.g., depression, OCD), and other challenges we face as a result of living in a fallen world. Finally, the human heart contributes to false guilt by having a propensity toward evil even in the believer's converted state (*Romans 7:14-25*). More often than not the human heart's propensity toward evil leads to true guilt, but it can also lead to false guilt when the believer confuses temptation with sin. Experiencing temptation is not sin, but Satan can use the experience of temptation to lead the scrupulous believer toward feeling false guilt. When combined, these three forces (Satan, the fallen world, and the human heart) can lead the believer down the path of *feeling* condemnation when they are actually redeemed.

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When true guilt moves into false guilt.

As mentioned earlier, the believer can and should experience true guilt (conviction) about unrighteousness (*Hebrews 12:5-7*). Again, for believers true guilt is not about their position as God's child, but, rather, it is God's chastening of the child that He loves (*Proverbs 3:11-12*). When the believer experiences conviction they are to follow the biblical instruction of repentance, confession, and restitution resulting in forgiveness from God. This is part of the continual sanctification process of a believer in being conformed into the image of Christ (*2 Corinthians 7:1*).

True guilt shifts into false guilt when an individual believes or feels they are not forgiven even after following the biblical teaching on how to deal with conviction. Satan, the effects of living in a fallen world, or the human heart can all play a role in confusing the believer into thinking or feeling they are condemned when they are not.

Conclusion.

Truth is found in The Word. We are to recognize our emotions as we walk through life, but we must look to truth to determine our position in Christ and the correct response to our emotions. When what we know from the Word and what we feel emotionally is in conflict, we should always stick with what we know from the Word. To rightly assess the path forward in life, we must start with truth and be led forward by truth for each additional step. When truth and our emotions are in line, this will feel more natural than it does at other times. When emotions and life's experiences create confusion, it is imperative to hold onto what is true according to the Scripture.