

## February 3 The Joy Stealers - Guilt

I John 1:5-10

Today, we tackle one of the most difficult of the joy stealers. Why I say it is so difficult is that it is hard to eradicate it from our lives. I am talking about guilt and we have to deal with guilt because we have a conscience. There are lots of positive things about having a conscience. It helps us to stay centered on the moral and ethical highway. The reason having a conscience is a problem is that sometimes you do what you shouldn't do and you feel guilty. At other times, you don't do what you should and you feel guilty. Guilt makes us feel unworthy. Over time it can destroy our self-esteem and make us feel alienated from God. It can definitely rob us of joy.

C.S. Lewis writes in "Mere Christianity" that, "there are two odd facts about human beings. The first is that we believe in right and wrong. We may define it differently, but all of us believe there are certain behaviors that are right and certain behaviors that are wrong. The second odd fact is that very often instead of doing what is right, we do what is wrong—not just what others say is wrong, but what we ourselves believe to be wrong."

We have always been aware of this disparity between beliefs and actions. Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit and immediately they began to hide from God because they felt guilty. Paul wrote, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." Romans 7:15

Shakespeare, Edgar Allan Poe and other authors share this same idea through their plays and stories. We have a problem with guilt. When we do wrong, we feel not just that we have violated some standard of right and wrong but we feel as if we have violated ourselves. The results are often guilt and shame. How do we escape the joy stealer of guilt?

One way would be to live a perfect life, never making another moral mistake for the rest of our lives. Now I have tried this and actually succeeded for a few hours but then I do or don't do something and feel guilty about having failed. I am guessing you can identify. Call me negative, but I am thinking that this is not going to be our way out.

Rob Renfroe came up with four ways to eliminate guilt from our lives. I am going to give you a spoiler alert. Only the last one, is the one that really will work and is what God is calling us to do. The other three, however, are used all of the time. We probably have used them ourselves.

When we do something that makes us feel guilty blame someone else. This is the oldest and most reliable way of ridding ourselves of guilt that human beings have devised. In fact, it was developed in the Garden of Eden. Adam ate the apple. When God confronts him about his disobedience, he blames Eve. She gave me the apple and I ate it. What does Eve do? She blames the serpent. What a brilliant strategy. If you can't deny your guilt you can always deny your responsibility. If you work at it you can always find some other person to blame for what you did and for the guilt you feel. If that fails, you can always blame God. Eve tried this by implying that God was really at fault. After all God had made the forbidden fruit too attractive; God had made the serpent; and so it was really God's fault that they sinned! You don't have to actually say the words. There are lots of ways to communicate the attitude that "God, you bear some responsibility for the mess I have made of things. If you were doing your part a little better I would do my part better." Blaming is a pattern we often use but it really doesn't get rid of the guilt, it just hides it or causes us to ignore it.

Another tactic we use in dealing with guilt is to compare ourselves to others. If you can stay busy looking at the shortcomings of others, you can almost always avoid looking at your own failings. Now you have to be careful whom you compare yourself to. You never want to compare yourself to the standards of God, which would likely cause guilt, or to some great person of faith like Mother Teresa. We compare ourselves to others who make us look good! In the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee we find a story of this type. The Pharisee compared himself to the tax collector and, using that measuring stick, he looked pretty good. God should be really proud of him. He would have nothing to feel guilty about. The tax collector, on the other hand, knew he was a sinner and felt like a hypocrite. He knew what he should be doing and was sorry to God that he failed. In his confession he felt forgiven. The Pharisee went home feeling

self-satisfied. He never felt guilty or hypocritical. The best Christians I know sometimes have guilt and feel like hypocrites. The best hypocrites I know never do.

To not have guilt, compare yourself to people whose sins are more obvious than yours or compare yourself to someone you don't know very well, and if you catch that person doing something good assume they are doing it for the wrong reason. Use these three little things and you can compare yourself to others and almost never be bothered with feelings of guilt.

To avoid guilt, worship a false God. I know it sounds extreme but people do this all the time to avoid their guilt. Create a "you-friendly god" who is not bothered by the mistakes you most often make or the practices you don't want to give up, and then you don't have to sweat that stuff. Your new god will be particularly impressed with the good you do. What matters most to this god is that your heart is in the right place. For example if you find it easy to love your neighbor, that really pleases your god and you get extra points. If you find it hard to love your neighbor, it's okay because he is not like us, the special people of God. Mottos for our created god include: "God knows I am only human. God wants me to be happy." Worship this God and you will feel affirmed and free from guilt.

There is one other way to get rid of guilt. We are called to "Get Right With God." Do you want an easy conscience or a clean conscience? Do you want your sins to be quieted or your sins to be forgiven? Do you wish for your guilty feelings to be relieved or for your guilt before God and within yourself to be removed? The first three help you get rid of guilty feelings but only the last one will remove the guilt itself. So how do you get right with God?

Be honest about what you have done and take responsibility for your actions. The tax collector who went home from the temple feeling right with God did this. It is hard. Too often our pride gets in the way of doing this. We want to compare and think, yes we messed up, but others do so much worse than we. God doesn't care about others. God cares about you. God wants you to live the best, most faithful and joy filled life possible and that means taking responsibility for your actions. For then, you will

learn from them, grow in your walk with faith and find joy in knowing you are faithfully following Jesus.

Confess your sins to God. When we confess we are saying we agree with God that what we did was wrong and are asking for forgiveness. Confession means that we trust in God's grace and mercy. Think about how the story in the Garden of Eden might have been different. We know God to be a loving and compassionate God. If Adam and Eve had said, "O God, we messed up. We ate the fruit we were not to eat, forgive us." How do you think God might have responded? They got into a blame game and it led to their expulsion from the Garden and distancing them from God. Confession would have kept their relationship with God intact and they might even have stayed. Confession, though hard, gets rid of guilt and joy fills that spot, for we feel that deep connection with God that our guilt has kept us from experiencing.

Finally, we are to make amends to whomever we have harmed. It is not a requirement for receiving forgiveness but it is an appropriate response to the forgiveness we have received. Zacchaeus, after receiving Jesus into his house says he will pay back everyone he has defrauded. He did this in response to the acceptance and forgiveness he had received. It was not "buying his forgiveness" but a wanting to do what he could to eliminate the hurt and pain he had given others. God forgives without conditions but in making amends we get right with God, we get right with others and our hearts are filled with joy.

There is no greater joy in life than knowing that you are right with God, right with yourself and you have done all you can to be right with others.

Guilt, it is something we all deal with. I guess we need to thank God for our conscience, especially when it is a guilty one. For it shares where we have failed in our walk, reminds us of the good we really want to do in our lives and points us where we need to confess, to change and to grow. For God wants us to know joy, not guilt, and that conscience we have will get us there.

