

WHAT CAN I  
*Do with* MY GUILT?

The Crucial Questions Series

By R. C. Sproul

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R. C. SPROUL

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# GUILT AND GUILT FEELINGS

**D**uring my career as a seminary professor, I frequently have been called upon to teach courses on Christian apologetics. The term *apologetics* comes from the Greek word *apologia*, which means “to make a reply.” Thus, the discipline of apologetics is not concerned with apologizing for being a Christian, as the term might suggest. Rather, its aim is to provide a rational, intellectual defense of the truth claims of Christianity and to answer objections that people raise to the faith. This can be a very abstract, philosophical enterprise.

As I engage in apologetics, I often converse with people who are not Christian believers; some of them are indifferent, while others are openly hostile to Christianity. For this reason, when I have these discussions, I often encounter questions about various truth claims. I think, as Francis Schaeffer used to say, that it is the Christian responsibility to give honest answers to honest questions, as far as we are able, so I try my best to do that.

Sooner or later, however, particularly in discussions with skeptics and people who are philosophically hostile to Christianity, I pause from my attempts to give answers and raise a particularly pointed question of my own. I say: “We’ve discussed the abstractions, the rational arguments for the existence of God and so on. Let’s lay those aside just for a moment and let me ask you this: What do you do with your guilt?”

This question often provokes a dramatic shift in the tenor of the discussion. It touches on something that is a visceral matter for many people, something that affects them at an existential level, so it moves the discussion beyond the abstract realm. In most instances, the person with whom I am speaking does not become angry when I ask this question. Sometimes the person will say that he has

no guilt or that guilt is simply a term invented by religious people. Usually, however, the person treats the question seriously and tries to explain how he is dealing with guilt. This, I think, is evidence that every human being knows what guilt is. Every human being, at some level and at some point in his or her life, has to deal with it.

### GUILT: AN OBJECTIVE REALITY

What is guilt? In the first place, we have to say that guilt is not subjective but objective because it corresponds to an objective standard or reality. That leads me to the simplest definition of guilt that I can compose: Guilt is that which a person incurs when he violates a law.

We understand how this works in the criminal justice system. If someone breaks a law, a statute that has been enacted by a government, and that person is apprehended for having broken the law, he may have to appear in court. The person may say he is not guilty, in which case he is entitled to a trial, frequently a trial by jury. At such a trial, evidence is produced and testimony is heard. At the end of the trial, the members of the jury come to a verdict. They decide whether, in their judgment, the person is, in fact,

guilty of breaking the law he is charged with violating.

There is a wide range of kinds of trials, kinds of arguments that are used, and levels of evidence. Some years ago, it seemed that the entire United States was transfixed by the two trials of O. J. Simpson—one a criminal trial, the other a civil trial—which featured different rules on evidence, different guidelines for reaching a verdict, and so forth. But in any kind of trial, the key question is this: Is the person guilty? In other words, did the suspect do it? Did he or she transgress the law?

Laws are an inescapable reality in our world. There are rules imposed by our parents. There are rules imposed by teachers and by employers. There are laws enacted by the states and the federal government. All of us are subject to rules and laws. We might disagree with some of these laws or even with the idea of laws altogether. We might not have had the opportunity to vote on the laws we are required to heed. Still, those laws are there. We cannot ignore them. When we talk about guilt, we're talking about the transgression or violation of these rules or laws.

The biblical view is that God is the supreme Lawgiver and that He holds every person who is alive accountable for conforming to His mandates. Yes, God has rules and

laws. People have said to me on many occasions that Christianity is not about rules and regulations; it's about love. That's simply not true. Christianity is about love, but that is because love is one of the rules—God commands us to love Him and to love one another. Christianity is not just about rules and laws, but rules and laws decreed by God have been a fact of life since the day of creation. So if we define guilt as that which a person incurs when he violates a law, we incur supreme guilt when we break the law of God. That is because His law is perfect. It is never arbitrary. It does not reflect merely the vested interests of a particular lobby group, but the perfect, holy, righteous character of God Himself.

Obviously, if there is no God, we don't have to worry about breaking His rules, because He doesn't have any rules. Still, we have the rules of the lesser magistrates to deal with. I believe all of us have broken the law of God, but even if we have not violated God's laws, we've certainly broken the laws of men. So all of us have experienced the objective situation of having transgressed a law.

Suppose a person commits murder with malice aforethought; he willfully plans to take another person's life, then executes his plan. The vast majority of people in this world

agree that killing is a bad thing, that murder is wrong. Even in this age of relativism, when many people say there are no absolutes, a person will fudge on his commitment to relativism if someone comes at him with a knife and threatens to kill him. He will say, “That’s wrong, and if you kill me maliciously, you will incur guilt.” He’s right. At some level, we all understand that there are certain things that are inherently wrong, and if we do those things, we incur guilt.

#### GUILT FEELINGS: A SUBJECTIVE RESPONSE

An interesting thing occurs when I ask people, “What do you do with your guilt?” I don’t ask what the person is going to do about his or her guilt *feelings*. My question has to do with his or her guilt. However, almost everyone to whom I pose this question tends to respond concerning his or her guilt feelings. At that point, I stop the discussion to make a careful distinction between guilt and guilt feelings. While these two are closely related, they are not precisely the same thing. The basic distinction is between objectivity and subjectivity.

Let’s think about feelings for a moment. Feelings are things that personal beings experience. Rocks, to our

knowledge, do not experience personal feelings. They are cold, lifeless objects. Therefore, if someone throws a stone and it hits me in the head, the person who threw the stone may or may not experience guilt, but I can safely conclude that the stone suffers no trauma of psychological import. The stone is the instrument that is used in this particular assault, but it doesn't have feelings. People are different. People are personal beings. They have minds and wills. Each of them has a feeling aspect in his or her life. So when we talk about guilt feelings, we're talking about something that is personal and subjective.

***Guilt without guilt feelings.*** As we seek to sort out the differences between guilt and guilt feelings, it is important to remember that our feelings do not always have a perfect correspondence to our status under the law. A pair of examples will help make this clear.

We have an expression for people who cannot be deterred from parking in no-parking zones. They get tickets for it and simply throw them in the garbage can, or they get summonses to pay or appear in court but simply ignore them. We call them "scofflaws." They seem able to repeat their habit of violating no-parking zones without any sense of personal remorse.

Taking this idea to a higher level, in the study of psychology, there is a category of people who are called psychopaths or sociopaths. The common element of these two terms is the suffix *path*; it comes from the Greek term *pathos*, which means “suffering, feeling, emotion.” A psychopath or a sociopath is a person who can commit antisocial behavior, such as a heinous crime, with no apparent feeling of remorse. Sometimes it is said that a person is a psychopathic liar. This means that the person not only lies habitually and consistently, but does so without suffering any particular assaults from his conscience.

When people commit terrible crimes without feeling guilty, their feelings are not proportionate to the guilt that they have actually incurred. So, it is possible for people to have guilt without guilt feelings, or at least without proportionate guilt feelings. The lack of guilt feelings does not always indicate a lack of guilt.

Imagine that someone is arrested for murder in the first degree, and the prosecution has audio and videotapes of the person declaring in advance his hostility toward the victim and his firm intent to murder the person. There is also video of the actual murder, DNA evidence, and even the murder weapon. However, the person comes into

court and, when the judge asks, “How do you plead?” he says, “I plead not guilty.” He then elects to defend himself rather than use an attorney. He stands before the court and mounts his defense, saying: “I am not guilty because I don’t feel guilty. Never mind all the objective evidence. My subjective testimony establishes my innocence. I can’t be guilty because I don’t feel guilty.” How far do you think that defense would go in a secular courtroom? The fact that a person says he is not guilty because he does not feel guilty does not establish his innocence, because the mere fact that a person does not feel guilty says absolutely nothing about whether he actually broke the law regarding murder.

It is possible for people not to feel even the guilt they bear before God. In the third chapter of the book of Jeremiah, the prophet speaks of the infidelity of the people of God in the Old Testament. As is often the case in the Bible, Israel’s unfaithfulness is described by use of the metaphor of adultery—Israel is seen as a harlot who has joined herself to foreign deities. Jeremiah writes:

“If a man divorces his wife and she goes from him and becomes another man’s wife, will he return to her? Would not that land be greatly polluted? You

have played the whore with many lovers; and would you return to me? declares the LORD. Lift up your eyes to the bare heights, and see! Where have you not been ravished? By the waysides you have sat awaiting lovers like an Arab in the wilderness. You have polluted the land with your vile whoredom. Therefore the showers have been withheld, and the spring rain has not come; yet you have the forehead of a whore; you refuse to be ashamed.” (3:1–3)

Jeremiah’s imagery here is quite graphic. In voicing God’s judgment against Israel, he accuses Israel of committing harlotry and describes Israel as having a harlot’s forehead. What does that mean? Jeremiah is saying that Israel has forgotten how to blush. She is so practiced and habitual in her infidelity, she has lost any sense of embarrassment or shame.

Scriptural passages like this make it clear that there is often a large gap between objective guilt and the ensuing guilt feelings that flow from it. We are told in Scripture that it is possible for people, by repeated sins, to lose the capacity for embarrassment and shame. The Bible frequently speaks of the hardened heart, which causes a person no

longer to feel remorse for his or her transgression. It is dangerous for us to rely totally on our guilt feelings to reveal to us the reality of our guilt itself because we can quench the pangs of conscience.

***Guilt feelings without guilt.*** On the other hand, there are people who are plagued by all sorts of feelings of guilt for things they did not do. Objectively, they violated no laws, but because of one mental aberration or another, they feel guilty; they feel that they have violated a law or laws.

It is possible for people to feel guilty about things that, considered in and of themselves, are not sinful. Suppose, for example, you are raised in a Christian home that is part of a Christian subculture that teaches that this or that behavior is wicked. Your parents, teachers, and authority figures in the church drum into you that Christians are not allowed to do various things. In some cases, these rules and regulations are not found in Scripture. There is such a thing as legalism, which imposes laws where God has left men free. But whether they are truly sinful or not, you are taught that certain actions are against God's law, so if you do them, you incur a great sense of guilt. In short, you have guilt feelings, even though the behaviors you engage in are not under the judgment of God.

One common example of this concerns alcoholic beverages. Many people are taught that any consumption of alcoholic beverages is sinful. I do not believe the Bible teaches that. I am sure that I will get calls and letters from people who disagree with me, who have been taught in their churches or in their families that the wine of which the Bible speaks is merely unfermented grape juice. However, in ancient Israel, the religious festivals that were instituted by God, most notably the Passover, used real wine. It was a beverage that had the capacity, if overused or abused, to make people drunk. In Old Testament Israel, drunkenness was a problem, and God spoke against drunkenness and saw it as a serious sin. But the problem was the drunkenness, not the drink.

Likewise, the New Testament makes it clear that drunkenness is a sin. Nevertheless, Jesus made real wine at the wedding feast of Cana (John 2). *Oinos* is the Greek word that is translated as “wine,” and it means the fermented fruit of the vine. Such wine was used for religious purposes, for daily dietary doses, and also in times of celebration. The Bible speaks of the wine that makes the heart glad (Ps. 104:15). When Jesus established the Lord’s Supper, He consecrated real wine. Jesus was celebrating the Passover

with His disciples when He instituted the Lord's Supper, and wine was used in the Passover celebration.

The common Christian teaching against alcoholic beverages grew out of Prohibition and the temperance movement in the United States. It has no foundation in the lexicography of the ancient languages. Nevertheless, many who are exposed to this teaching and then consume alcohol come away with feelings of guilt, even though they have committed no sin.

At the same time, the Bible tells us that whatever is not of faith is sin (Rom. 14:23). Let me illustrate this. I have a friend who loved to play Ping-Pong. Now the Bible doesn't say anything about playing Ping-Pong; Ping-Pong was not even invented at the time the Bible was written, and I think that we can readily see that there is no intrinsic evil in engaging in a simple pastime or recreational sport such as Ping-Pong. But even this simple activity can become an occasion for sin. My friend was an earnest Christian who had serious responsibilities at his job, but he became so caught up in Ping-Pong that he started to neglect his job, his family, and his other responsibilities. He was addicted to playing Ping-Pong. So for him, Ping-Pong became a moral issue, not because Ping-Pong in and of itself is evil,

but because this activity had become an occasion for sin and for irresponsibility in his life. So he began to have to struggle with Ping-Pong.

Likewise, if you believe that taking a drink of wine is a sin, and you take a drink of wine, then you have sinned. In my judgment, the sin is not in drinking the wine, because if taking a taste of wine is a sin, then Jesus was a sinner, and He would not qualify to be the sinless Savior of His people. He would be the Lamb *with* a blemish rather than the Lamb *without* blemish (1 Peter 1:19). But the principle is that that which is done without faith is sin, and if you do something that you believe is wrong, then the sin that you have committed is in acting against your conscience. You have done something with the thought of transgressing, and to choose to do something that you believe is wrong, even if it is not wrong, is wrong.

With these examples, I hope you can see why it is very important for us to get a clear understanding of the relationship between guilt and guilt feelings. The presence of guilt feelings does not automatically indicate the presence of objective guilt with respect to a particular action, but it may represent the presence of the guilt of acting against one's conscience. The bottom line is that any time we

experience feelings of guilt, we need to step back and ask ourselves as honestly as we possibly can, “Have I broken the law of God?”

Whenever we confuse guilt and guilt feelings, we open ourselves to several problems. For example, people may take advantage of our sensitivity to certain behavioral patterns and try to impose on us guilt feelings that are not appropriate for the actions we have done. One of the easiest ways to manipulate people is to heap some kind of guilt upon them in an effort to shame or embarrass them into doing what we want. There are people who have become masters at guilt manipulation. The process of guilt manipulation can be very destructive and devastating in human relationships.

But that’s a small problem compared to the other side of the coin. We can become professionals at silencing the feelings of real guilt. We live in a culture that teaches us that guilt feelings are inherently destructive because they undermine a person’s sense of self-esteem. Even in the realm of psychology today, we’re told that there’s something wrong about telling people that their behavior is sinful. Karl Menninger wrote a book a few years ago titled *Whatever Became of Sin?* The driving idea here is that we don’t want to tell

anyone that his behavior is wrong because we might make him feel guilty, and if he feels guilty, he may suffer some kind of psychological distress.

### THE REALITY OF OUR GUILT

Let me return now to the question I use in my apologetics discussions: “What do you do with your guilt?” A clever attorney would recognize that there is a problem with this question. The problem is that I have not established that there is any guilt. My question presupposes that the person has guilt with which he needs to deal.

This question is something like the question, “Have you stopped beating your wife?” If a man answers that question by saying “Yes,” he is admitting that he once beat his wife, and if he answers “No,” he is saying that he’s still beating his wife. No matter how he answers the question, he is admitting to some kind of guilt. The question is in an illegitimate form.

So if I say to you without knowing you, “What do you do with your guilt?” you have every right to respond to me by saying: “What guilt? You’re assuming that I have guilt.” That is true, but I can make that assumption based on my

theological and biblical perspective. That's why, when I ask this question, I do not start by arguing that there is such a thing as guilt. I can assume that people understand the reality of guilt.

In Romans 3, the apostle Paul gives an elaborate exposition of the fallenness of the human race. He writes: "Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. . . . For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:19–23). Manifestly and unambiguously, the Scriptures teach here not only the reality of human guilt but the universality of it. God has declared the whole world and every person in it to be guilty of breaking His law.

You may say that I'm begging the question again, simply declaring the universality of guilt by reading a passage from the New Testament. But the universality of human guilt is not just the testimony of Scripture; it is part of the folklore or natural wisdom of many cultures. In technical terms, this idea is known as the *jus gentium*, "the law of

the nations,” which is the universal testimony of people, not only those who read the Bible or are committed to a particular religion, to the universality of guilt.

Have you ever said, “Nobody’s perfect”? Do you agree with that universal negative affirmation? How many people do you know who really believe they are perfect? I never have met a person outside the Christian church who told me that he or she was perfect. I have met people inside the Christian church who claimed to have been perfected and to live in a perfect state. I think that they were hopelessly deluded at that point, but I cannot say I never have met a person who said he was perfect now. But even such people admit to past imperfections, and I have yet to meet a human being who has looked me in the eye and said, “I have never done anything wrong in my life.”

Now, there may be people who think that, and I would have to give special attention to those who do, but I’m going to cut the Gordian knot here and speak to those who are not in that situation, because they are the overwhelming majority of people. They know that they have broken the law of God. Again, Paul says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” The word *sin* in the New Testament in the Greek language, *harmartia*, literally

means “to miss the mark.” It was borrowed from the sport of archery. The bowmen of antiquity would practice very much as archers do today, with targets, and the targets had segments and bull’s-eyes, so that the archer would aim his bow and try to reach a particular level of accuracy by putting his arrow on that mark. *Harmartia* was the word used in antiquity when the archer missed the bull’s-eye and came short of a perfect score. But when it is carried over into the theological categories of the New Testament, we’re not talking about shooting arrows at targets, we’re talking about life. We’re talking about reaching the standard of the perfection of God’s law, and the Scriptures say that no one has hit the mark. Everyone falls short of the standard of righteousness, the standard of moral conduct that has been established by God Himself. Because that’s the case, everyone in the world is guilty before God.

Therefore, I can cut to the chase in normal conversation and say to a person, “What do you do with your guilt?” I’m not talking about his or her guilt before a kindergarten teacher, before the local police officer, or before the traffic court. I’m talking about the person’s guilt before God. The most frequent response to that question is this: “I don’t really worry about it that much, because it’s God’s job to

forgive.” The hope is that since everyone is in the same boat, the Maker of the boat and the Captain of the boat will not be all that distressed by one more person in the boat. If nobody’s perfect, certainly God is going to have to grade us on a curve. He will have to do what we do—adjust the standard lower so He can meet us where we are.

In a sense, those who give this answer know they are missing the target with their arrows, so instead of moving further away from the target, they begin to move closer to the target to make it easier to hit the bull’s-eye. But it’s one thing to adjust the sight on the bow or to reduce the distance to the target, and it’s another thing to ask God to adjust His character. Remember, the law of God flows out of the character of God, and His laws are righteous because He is righteous. He will not adjust the law that reflects His perfection to accommodate you and me. As long as He doesn’t adjust that law, we remain guilty before that law.

We know from the study of psychology that there is probably nothing more paralyzing to human action than unresolved guilt feelings. Such feelings paralyze people. That’s why, when we are confronted with guilt feelings, we need to deal with them. Unfortunately, all too often, we

## GUILT AND GUILT FEELINGS

attempt to deal with our guilt and guilt feelings by man-made methods. In the next chapter, I want to examine these methods before turning to God's prescription for guilt and guilt feelings in the final chapter.