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DROPPING THE WEIGHT OF GUILT Michael B. Beough  
Psalm 32:1-5; I John 1:8-10 January 24, 2010  
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(Show video: The Spitfire Grill, 01.30.00 – 01.33.00)

Is there anyone who has never felt the weight of guilt? Not only the guilt of an act or thought or word that you know in your heart of hearts was wrong, immoral, or sinful by whatever standard you live; but also the guilt of an innocent mistake or bad decision that leads to suffering? Is it possible to live free of guilt?

Actress Angelina Jolie believes it is possible. She is reported to have said, "I don't believe in **guilt**. I believe in living on impulse as long as you never intentionally hurt another person, and don't judge people in your life. I think you should live completely free."

If Angelina Jolie has figured out how to live without hurting another person, or feeling guilty when it happens, I would like to know her formula of success. However, since most mortals experience guilt, every major religion has a remedy for it. So does psychotherapy. But in neither case does the remedy explain away guilt. Both recognize that guilt is a given. What we need is a healthy sense of guilt. In other words, guilt is a good thing, but too much of it unrelieved is a bad thing. Too little of it is dangerous.

The psalmist in Psalm 32 reveals the affects of unrelieved heavy guilt. It has a physical affect on his body – 'my body was wasting away'. In Psalm 38, he says the guilt of his sins "weigh like a burden too heavy for me."

Guilt is one of those weights that can keep us from running the race God has set before us. (cf. Hebrews 12:1-2) How do we drop the weight of guilt so we can run the race and reach the prize?

Let me share with you four insights from the Bible.

**Make sure your guilt is deserved.** I John 1:8-10 says we are all guilty. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." We have all sinned against God. But this does not mean we are guilty of every sin or wrongdoing. The beginning point in dealing with guilt is to ask, "Is the thing you feel guilty about your responsibility? Or is it false guilt?" Psychotherapists know that many of us bear guilt for something we are not responsible for.

Children are especially vulnerable. They seem least capable of distinguishing responsibility. They quite often feel guilty, say, for the divorce of their parents or for the death of a parent or a sibling. They carry this guilt throughout their lives. It affects the decisions they make. It affects what they

think of themselves. Sometimes we parents load undeserved guilt on our children. We may even blame them unjustly for our own problems. We have to be careful because it is not possible to live a healthy life when lugging around someone else's guilt. One of our developmental tasks as humans is to mature in our understanding of responsibility and guilt. We are guilty, but not for everyone else's problems. If it is a guilt arising out of something in the past, we need to go back there to see if it belongs to us.

If it does belong to us, **the next step is to talk it out, to confess it.** Denial only adds fuel to the fire.

The psalmist said he was a basket case until he finally confessed his sin. "Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity." It was in this confession that he experience relief from his guilt. I John 1:8-10 says "if we confess our sins, God will forgive us." God will lift the weight of our guilt.

I have always admired the Catholic tradition of the confessional from a distance. Don't tell the Presbytery office this. And I am not suggesting we put one in our new building. But there is the potential for good when we have the courage to confess our sins and wrongdoings to someone else.

In our Presbyterian tradition, we believe it is critically important to our health and spirituality to confess our sins to God on a daily basis. To talk it out with God. To take responsibility and seek forgiveness. Confession is good for the soul.

But talk is not necessarily enough. **If it is possible to make restitution for the thing that spurs our guilt, then we should do it.** Ask for forgiveness from the one we have hurt. Or let the guilt spur us to some action that improves the relationship or the world in some way.

Guilt can be a fine teacher and motivator. God uses our guilt to get our attention.

It is no accident that in the Bible those with the most guilt ended up being the strongest leaders for God. Moses killed a man and ran away to hide, but God chose him to lead His people to freedom. Abraham gave away his wife, not once but twice, to avoid being killed, but God made of him a great nation. David sent Bathsheba's husband to the front of the battle where he was certain to die so David could have Bath for his wife. God made David the greatest king in Israel's history and the model for the messiah to come. In the New Testament, Saul consented to the murder of Christians before he became one and changed the world. Augustine of Hippo in the fifth century and Francis of Assisi in the twelfth were wealthy playboys before becoming giants of faith who still influence our thinking and practice of faith today.

Don't disregard your guilt! Let it teach you. "I'll never do that again. I'll never let that happen again. From this day forward, I will do everything in my power to make it up to you. I will dedicate my life to seeing that others don't fall into the same temptation and sin that I have fallen into. I will go and make amends, God, where you lead me."

### **Finally, accept God's forgiveness.**

In this regard, Christianity is outrageously unique among all the other religions of the world. In all other religions, you have to work your way out of guilt. You either have to pay the price of your sin, atone for it in your own body and spirit, do penance, or maybe even do some good deed or make a sacrifice pleasing to your god.

In the New Testament, all of these famous ways of dealing with sin and guilt are rejected. And for one good reason. All sins and all guilt arise in us because of a fundamental estrangement from God, an estrangement unique to the human creature God put upon this earth. There is nothing we can do to overcome this estrangement. We exist at the profoundest level of our beings in the drowning pools of guilt, whether we "feel" the guilt or not. It is the condition of our existence brought on by our rejection of God. It is the white noise that lies in the background of all our thoughts and actions.

In some bizarre way, the New Testament came to see that the misery and suffering we experience is really self-condemnation for this estrangement from our Divine Ground of Being. It is like we are punishing ourselves for this inherent, unconscious guilt. We are always trying to make up lost ground, trying to get ourselves, not just back into the good graces of God, but into a position of self-acceptance.

The remarkable message of our faith is this:

The God whom we have offended and drawn away from has drawn close to us, become one of us, and taken upon himself the punishment for our sin. Instead of exacting a price from us, God has declared that all who trust in Him are forgiven. "There is now no condemnation for those who love the Lord." This is the amazing grace of which we sing. We know what we deserve, but God does not condemn us. God saves us from the weight of our sin and guilt.

The question is, Can we believe that? Does this message draw us to God like a moth to a flame? Can we now forgive ourselves? The Bible says if we believe this, if we accept Christ as God's gift, we become nothing less than a new creature. It is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us.