

MOVING ON TO MATURITY
God's Answer to Our Guilt
Hebrews 10:1-18

I read this past week the story of Gary Gilmore, the well-known Portland, Oregon criminal who was finally executed by a firing squad in the State of Utah back in 1977. Gilmore started getting in trouble with the law at the young age of 12. After spending time in various correctional institutes, he ended up at the Oregon State Penitentiary for robbery and assault. Then in 1976 he robbed and murdered a gas station attendant and a motel manager in Utah.

Gary Gilmore struggled intensely with guilt. Just prior to his execution, here's what he wrote to his girlfriend:

“It seems that I know evil more intimately than I know goodness and that's not a good thing either. I want...to have no blemish, no reason to feel guilt or fear...I'd like to stand in the sight of God. To know that I'm just and right and clean. When you're this way, you know it. And when you're not, you know that, too. It's all inside of us, each of us.”¹

Just like Gary Gilmore, each of us wants to be “just and right and clean” before God. And he's right in saying, “And when you're not, you know it.”

OUR GUILT

Few, if any of us, have committed murder, like Gary Gilmore. But we are each just as guilty. The Bible says that if we've broken the law at one point, we're guilty of breaking all of it (James 2:10). A harsh word, a bout of anger, an impure thought, an illicit relationship, a critical spirit...all of us stand guilty before God in action and attitude.

We have various ways of dealing with our guilt. How do you deal with yours? Some try to drown it out in alcohol or drug abuse. Over 14 million Americans are in 12-step programs today, trying to deal with their alcohol abuse.

Others try to deny the idea of guilt all together. Of course, to do so you have to deny the very existence of God. For if there is no God, then there are no moral absolutes. And if there are no moral absolutes, there is no ultimate standard for determining right and wrong. And if there is no ultimate standard for determining right and wrong, then we can base our rules for living on societal consensus. And if we base our rules for living on societal consensus, then we can conveniently adjust them as we please. And we always adjust them downward. In this way, we can live as we please and there is no genuine guilt before God. In this way, guilt is nothing more than a psychosis to be denied or a nagging puritan relic from the past.

Still others deal with guilt by blaming others. They blame their parents or their environment. Such deflection of guilt goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden when Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent.

Believers in the days of the Old Testament had a way of dealing with guilt. In fact, even though this approach to guilt was given to them by God, it was insufficient. It may have temporarily

diminished guilt; but it didn't really dissolve it or take it away. Take a look at Hebrews 10:1-4: (page number in NIV)

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming-not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Hebrews 10:1-4

The idea is that, if sacrifices had to be offered each year on the Day of Atonement for the sins of the people, this only shows that they were ineffective in taking away sin. Even though the guilty sinner would lay his or her hands on that animal as it was slain, symbolizing the transfer of sin and guilt to the animal, the guilt of sin was not really removed. That's what verse 4 says, "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to *take away* sins."

The expression, "take away," means literally "to sever, to remove." It's used to describe the "cutting off" of the ear of the servant of the high priest in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was apprehended (Luke 22:50). Our sin and its consequent guilt are *not* "severed, removed" from us by drowning it, by denying it, by deflecting it to others, and not even by doing the good law as prescribed in the Old Testament sacrifices. That's why Jeremiah 2:22 says, "No amount of soap or lye can make you clean; you are stained with guilt that can never be taken away."

GOD'S ANSWER

What then is the solution? How do we deal with our guilt? We can't drown it, deny it, deflect it or diminish it by doing good. It has to be *dismissed, dissolved, taken away*. And the only way that guilt can be dissolved is by the once-for-all blood sacrifice of Jesus Christ. That's what the writer to the Hebrews is telling us in Hebrews 10:5-18.

To help us get a hold of the truly liberating truth of these verses, I want to zero in on verse 10. For here in verse 10 we have summarized in one clear statement the truth of this entire section. Notice what it says. Would you read it with me?

And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Hebrews 10:10

God's answer to our problem of guilt **is to make us holy.** ⁱⁱ This means more than forgiveness, though it begins with forgiveness. We sometimes have a hard time believing that we are truly forgiven by God. Rosalind Goforth, along with her husband, Jonathan, were well-known missionaries to China. But even after serving in that country for many years, Rosalind felt oppressed by an inward sense of guilt. She was constantly nursing a sense of spiritual failure. Finally, she one day took a clean sheet of paper and wrote on the top of it these words: *What God Does With Our Sins*. Then she began looking up as many passages as she could find in the Bible that dealt with God's forgiveness. One of those verses is found right here in Hebrews 10, verse

17: “Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.” Micah 7:19 says that he casts our sins into the depth of the sea. And as someone has said, he puts up a sign that says “No fishing.” If God doesn’t “remember” your sins in the sense of holding your sins against you, why do you?

However, to be made holy (as this verse says) is more than forgiveness. It’s what the Apostle Paul calls “justification.” Now that’s a big word for some here this morning. What does it mean? It means this: “to be declared right with God.”

When I was growing up, I heard the word defined this way: justification is “*just as if I’d never sinned.*” Well, that’s part of it. When I am “justified” (or as Hebrews puts it, “made holy”) before God, I am innocent, “just as if I’d never sinned.” That’s forgiveness. But it is more than that. I am not only innocent, I am righteous. I am not only declared to be without sin, I am given the very righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Now read verse 10 with me one more time: And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Hebrews 10:10 Notice what it says: “we have been *made* holy.” To be made holy is something *God* does for us, not something *we* do ourselves. We are “made holy.” What that tells me is that the solution to my guilt is not in what I can do, but entirely in what God does for me.

“Being made holy” is not simply making up what is lacking in your own goodness or righteousness. If you say “I have attained on my own 10% of God’s holiness and in “making me holy” God is giving me the other 90% of what is needed,” then you have totally missed the point. God does not “make up” what we lack. He rejects all of our own righteousness as “filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6). In making us holy, he gives to us 100% of the holiness that we need to stand confidently and guilt-free before a holy God.

But notice what else the verse says: “*we have been* made holy...” That means a definitive, once-for-all past act with continuing results. It has to do with our *position* before God and not our *progress* with God. It takes place immediately and once-for-all the moment we place our faith in God’s provision for our guilt – Jesus Christ. It is entire in the sense that there are no “degrees” of being made holy. A Mary Magdalene (the believing prostitute in the Bible) is just as holy as the Virgin Mary. If you are a new believer sitting here this morning, you are just as holy in God’s eyes as the most mature believer in our congregation.

This leads us to the second thing in this verse about God’s answer to our problem of guilt. The answer to our guilt is found only in ***the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ.*** Verse 10 goes on to say: “we have been made holy *through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.*”

Why is it that the Old Testament sacrifices could not solve the problem of a guilty conscience? And why is it that all of our contrived means of dealing with guilt are not satisfactory? The reason is that, in God’s plan of things, there is only one way to relieve our guilt – the perfect, willing and once-for-all sacrifice of God’s Son.

Jesus Christ is the *perfect* sacrifice for our sin. That’s why verse 5 says,

“Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said, ‘Sacrifice and offerings you did not desire, but *a body* you prepared for me...’ [quoting Psalm 40:6].

The sacrifices of the Old Testament were insufficient because they were neither divine (sharing in God’s nature) nor human (sharing in our nature). But when Jesus came into the world, he took on a human “body.” He is the perfect bridge between God and man.

Jesus Christ’s sacrifice for us was perfect because it was *willing*. Notice what verses 6-7 tell us: ...with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, “Here I am – as it is written about me in the scroll – I have come to do your will, O God.”

Jesus Christ was the great “cosmic volunteer.”ⁱⁱⁱ What I mean by that is that his sacrificial death on our behalf *was his own choosing*. He himself said on one occasion, “No man takes my life from me; I lay it down of my own accord” (John 10:18). Jesus Christ’s sacrifice for us was perfect because it was a *willing* sacrifice.

But notice this. Jesus’ sacrifice for you and me was perfect because it was *once-for-all*. That’s the idea of verses 11-14:

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

I want you to see here the sharp contrast between the way of dealing with guilt in the Old Testament and God’s provision for guilt today. We can view it this way:

God’s Old Provision for Guilt	God’s New Provision for Guilt
Daily sacrifices (v 11)	Once-for-all sacrifice (v 12)
Priests stood (v 11)	Jesus sat down (v 12)
Sacrifices offered repeatedly (v 11)	One sacrifice for all time (v 12)
Sacrifices could never take away sin (v 11)	Jesus’ sacrifice makes us perfect (v 14)

The Old Testament priests could never sit down on the job! Why? Their work was never finished. People kept sinning, and the priests had to keep sacrificing. Today, our sin is the same, but the sacrifice is different. We too keep sinning (as long as we are this side of heaven), but the sacrifice for our sin was made once for all. On the cross, Jesus cried out “It is finished!” That’s why he, once ascended to heaven, “sat down” at God the Father’s right hand. He could sit down, because the work was done...perfectly done.

Not only does Jesus’ once-for-all sacrificial death completely deal with your problem of guilt, it also gives you assurance of a right relationship with God. We live in a world where we can’t be sure of anything. Cars break down, refrigerators stop working; our photocopier in the church office has a major problem at least once-a-week. People break down too. Our bodies fail. Relationships fail. Marriages fail. We can’t even depend upon ourselves. The idea of a “new year’s resolution” has become a cliché because no one really expects you to follow through.

Furthermore, we fail in our relationship with God. We struggle to be consistent in prayer, his Word, and in obedience to his commands. And sometimes we wonder, “If I can’t do better than this, am I really a Christian?”

What gives you and me assurance in our relationship with God? The answer is the *perfect, willing, once-for-all sacrifice* of Jesus Christ. This has been a great encouragement to me personally. I went through a time in my Christian life when I constantly doubted my salvation. I was constantly looking back to my conversion experience, wondering if it really “took.” Was it genuine? Was I for real?

You know what my problem was? I wasn’t looking back far enough. We should never look back to our conversion experience for assurance of salvation. Our assurance can’t be found there. If we’re doing that, we haven’t gone back far enough. We need to go all that way back to the cross and Jesus’ once-for-all death. He said, “It is finished!” And he meant it. That’s why he “sat down” and is seated there today at the right hand of God – because his work is perfect and complete. You and I can’t add anything to it. It’s this truth that brings assurance.

One more thing about assurance: Our assurance of a right standing with God is *not* based on our perseverance in the Christian life. Rather, it’s the other way around. Our perseverance in the Christian life is based on our assurance. There are some who teach that *if* you persevere in the Christian life, then and only then can you have real assurance that you are a child of God, forgiven and cleansed of all guilt. But this is a far cry from what the book of Hebrews is saying. Take, for example, Hebrews 10:19, 23:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence [or “assurance”] to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus...*let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.*

What comes first? Assurance. Assurance of God’s forgiveness. Assurance of being made holy. What comes next? Perseverance. In other words, we won’t persevere in the Christian life without this assurance of forgiveness and being made right with God. And we don’t have this assurance of forgiveness and being made holy apart from faith in the perfect, willing and once-for-all sacrificial death of Jesus Christ.

This one verse tells us a final thing about God’s answer to our guilt. **God wants you and me to be guilt free.** Read the verse with me one more time: And *by that will*, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Hebrews 10:10 By what “will” have we been made holy? By God’s will. It’s God’s will that we live a life free of guilt.

But what if I consistently neglect my prayer life? What if I surf the web and look at what I shouldn’t be looking at? Or what if I yelled at your wife on the way to church this morning? I’m sitting here in church and I’m feeling guilty? Are you telling me that I *shouldn’t* feel guilty? No, you *should* feel guilty. That’s the Spirit of God convicting you of wrong. But as a believer, that sin does not destroy your *relationship* with God, but it does hinder your *fellowship* with God. That’s why John reminds us: “If we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9)

How are you handling your guilt? Are you trying to deny it, or to drown it out, or to deflect it to someone else, or to diminish it somehow by doing good things? There is only one way to deal definitively with our guilt. It is to depend, not on our own means, but on God's means. And his means is the perfect, willing, once-for-all sacrifice of his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus is ready to both forgive your sin and impart to you his holiness. As a result, you can stand with a clear conscience before God. And there is nothing as liberating as that!

ⁱ *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, ed. Michael P. Green (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1982), 181 and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gary_Gilmore.

ⁱⁱ This same idea is repeated again in verse 14: "...because by one sacrifice *he has made perfect forever* those who are *being made holy*."

ⁱⁱⁱ Term coined by George H. Guthrie, *The NIV Application Commentary, Hebrews*.