

“HOW TO HANDLE GUILT”

Dr. John Allan Lavender
Jos. 6:17,18; 7:13, 19-22, 25a; 8:1

The book of Joshua, from which we have just read, records how, at the end of their forty years of wilderness wandering, the Israelites finally began to take God at his word and marched out to claim the promised land. They crossed the river Jordan and made their way to the plains of Jericho there they had a fresh encounter with the Lord, (5:13-15) and received assurance of victory. A plan for the conquest of Jericho was devised, and the children of Israel were given specific instructions not to plunder the city.

“Keep yourselves from the accursed thing” said the Lord, “lest you make yourselves accursed . . . and make the camp of Israel a curse and trouble it” (6:18).

For the most part, the children of Israel were obedient to God’s command. But there was one man who felt God had been too narrow-minded and intolerant. His name was Achan. Like many before and after him, Achan thought he could improve on God’s plan. He failed to reckon with the fact that God is a God of law, and that true happiness can only be found in obedience to those laws. Achan was the progenitor of those moderns who resent and resist what seems to them to be the unfairness of God. They resent the restrictive clauses within the gospel. Such as --

“There is no other name given among men whereby ye must be saved but the name of Jesus.”

“Straight is the gate and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.”

“If any man will come after me, let him deny himself.”

Such sayings distressed them. They want a world in which tolerant, broad-mindedness and liberalism are the order of the day. They forget this is a universe of law and, in such a universe, there are many areas in which there is no room for broad-mindedness. Let me show you what I mean.

Water always boils at 212 degrees F at sea level. Not 210 or 211. Water always freezes at 32 degrees. Not 29 or 31. That may seem intolerant, but the laws of physics are not broad-minded. Or again, the sum of 2 and 2 is always 4. Never $3\frac{1}{2}$ or $4\frac{1}{2}$. That may seem narrow, but arithmetic is never tolerant.

Neither is the compass. It always points to magnetic north. That may seem unfair, but there is no room for broad-mindedness as far as the compass is concerned. If there were, ships at sea, planes in the air, and people in the forest would be in danger.

This is a universe of law. Laws which have been established for our benefit. True happiness lies in conforming to them. And just as there are physical laws which have been set up for our good, so, too, there are spiritual laws which have been set up for our good. One of them is this --

“The wages of sin is death.”

That may seem narrow minded, intolerant, and unfair. But that is the way it is. And, try as we might, we can't change it.

Well, Achan thought he could change God's laws. He felt sure he could improve upon God's plan. So, when the children of Israel conquered Jericho, he made off with a bit of booty. Almost immediately the judgment of God fell upon the Israelites. It's interesting to note the communal implications of personal evil. Because of the sin of one man the entire nation fell into disrepute. That may seem intolerant and unjust, but such are the wages of sin.

If you go back through history and trace the course of human events, you will see how again and again whole nations reaped a bitter harvest of evil seeds sown by their leaders. Germany and Hitler. Italy and Mussolini. Japan and Tojo. Rome and Nero. And many many others.

“No man is an island. No man lives alone.”

The sins of one generation eventually take their toll upon the generations which follow. The folly of a parent is inherited by the child. The conduct of the individual contributes to the character of

the community. And so, because of the sin of Achan, the smile of God was withdrawn from the children of Israel, and when they moved on from Jericho to Ai, which was their next objective, they met defeat. Even though the armies of Ai were very small, the children of Israel were unable to overcome them and fell back in disorderly retreat.

Joshua was stunned at this loss, fell upon his face before God the Lord, and I paraphrase,

“Lord, why have you brought us this far only to see us destroyed? Did we make a mistake in thinking you wanted us to claim the promised land? Should we have stayed on the other side of Jordan? What are we going to do?” (Jos. 7:6-9).

The Lord said to Joshua , and again I paraphrase,

“Why are you lying on your face? Get up! Israel has sinned. They have disobeyed my command not to plunder the city of Jericho. They have taken the treasures of that city and have put it among their own stuff. That’s why Israel couldn’t stand before their enemies. That’s why they turned tail and fled. Guilt! And I will not be with them anymore until they get rid of the evil within them.” (Jos. 7:11,12).

So Joshua called all the children of Israel together and began to interrogate them. Finally, after he had questioned nearly everyone, he came to Achan and the truth was out.

“I have sinned against the Lord,” Achan cried. “When I saw the beautiful garments and treasures of Jericho I coveted them and took them and hid them in my tent.”

Sure enough, when Joshua’s messengers went into Achan’s tent, they found the loot.

From that point on the story of Israel’s conquest moves swiftly. Having already overcome feelings of inferiority, fear, and hate, they now tackled guilt. Achan was punished. The power of God returned to Israel. They went on from victory to victory until, as recorded in Joshua 11:23, the Israelites,

“Claimed the whole land which God had promised them and they rested from war.”

What a powerful illustration of the peace which can be ours if we conquer guilt. For, while there are many things which contribute to unrest, discouragement, defeat, and despair, nothing is so pernicious as guilt. It has a dreadful affect upon the human spirit. It utterly destroys all sense of self-respect. It makes it impossible for a man to look himself in the eye. And, when self-respect is gone, a soul cannot long survive.

The other day I was having a philosophical discussion with Jeff, our four-year-old son. After telling him how much I loved him, and how glad I was that he had come to live in our house, he said, “Do you love Jodi, too?”

“Yes.”

“Do you love mommy?”

“Yes.”

“Do you love yourself?”

“Why do you ask?” “Well, I love you and mommy and Jodi, but I love me, too.” Isn’t that wonderful? I hope, as he grows, he retains that self-love and self-respect. A man can live without books, without friends, without music, without beauty, but he cannot live without self-respect. He must be able to love and live with himself, or he dies.

For that reason it’s absolutely necessary for a person to build a self with which he or she can live with peace.

“I have to live with myself and so,
I want to be fit for myself to know.
I want to be able as the days go by
To always look myself straight in the eye.
I don’t want to stand at the setting sun
And hate myself for the things I have done.

I don't want to keep on the closet shelf
A lot of secrets about myself,
And fool myself as I come and go
Into thinking no one else will know
The kind of man I really am.
I don't want to dress myself up in a sham.

I never can hide myself from me.
I see what others may never see.
I know what others may never know,
I never can fool myself and so
Whatever happens I want to be
Self-respecting and conscience free.”

This business of building a self with which we can live doesn't happen overnight. It's a life-long job. We come into the world with a set of potentialities and from there on out it is a process of learning to make the most out of them.

Winifred Rhodes expresses it this way --

“Life's greatest achievement is the continual remaking of yourself so that at last
you know how to live.”

I suppose the most salient example of a person who learned that lesson and overcame guilt is the Apostle Paul. By his own admission, Paul was riddled with guilt and inner conflict.

“The things I want to do, I don't do,” he said. “The things I don't want to do, I do. Oh, wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me?”

What a graphic description of a soul in turmoil. And yet, later on, Paul was able to say, “I am more than conqueror. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.”

What was his secret? It is expressed in one simple sentence, “Christ liveth in me.”

He turned his life over to God. He gave Jesus the job of reshaping his personality. He linked God’s power to his problem and, as a result, was able to build a self with which he could live in peace. Paul learned the Christian life is an impossibility from the human perspective, and is only possible by allowing Christ to live in and through him.

What took place in Paul’s life 2,000 years ago, can take place in your life this morning. There’s nothing mysterious or secretive about it. If you would have a clean heart and a clear mind, you must put your life in the hands of Christ. With him there is peace. For every time and every situation. But, without him, there is no peace for any time or any situation.

How do you go about gaining this clean heart and clear mind, this sense of forgiveness, this freedom from guilt? To begin with, you accept the fact that --

Normal Guilt Has Its Place In All Our Hearts

The man whose sin never gets him down is like a pilot who never knows or cares where he is flying. Who has thrown his compass and altimeter overboard. He is like a leper whose feet become ulcerated because of nerve-endings damaged by that disease. He is no longer able to detect minor irritations which become infected when they are not cared for.

The pangs of conscience are as important to our well-being as are the stabs of pain which warn us of some physical ill. If we lie, cheat, steal, or engage in any number of improper acts, we *should* feel guilty. That doesn’t mean we are fit subjects for the psychiatrist’s couch. Normal guilt *should* follow wrong doing. Mental pain is just as important as physical pain. It is a warning that all is not well within us. And, properly handled, guilt is a stimulus to the building of a better self. A self with which we can live in peace.

Abnormal Guilt

Our problem is not normal guilt. It is the manner or means we use to handle it. If we tackle guilt God's way and not our own, we must first lift it out of the non-verbal area where it festers and corrupts us, and place it on the verbal area where it can be seen and discussed. In other words, we must --

Confess It

There are some people who try to conquer guilt by minimizing their wrongness. They try to convince themselves that sin is not sin. That the laws of society and God are out of date. These are the modern bed-fellows of Achan who thought he could improve upon God's laws, only to discover that, instead of breaking them, he was broken on them. The secret in overcoming guilt is confession.

“If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sin, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

We can't live our lives over. We can't change what we've done in the past. We can't escape the consequences of our choices. But we *can* experience forgiveness and cleansing if we turn it all over to Jesus. And we *can* receive creative power whereby, with God's help, evil can be turned to good!

So, if your sin has gotten you down, you can gain relief by seeking help from God. You can say--
“Lord, I've made a mess of things. I've tried to live my life as if your laws did not exist. I've come to the end of my rope. I have no one else to turn to but you. Please God! Be merciful to me a sinner.”

If your guilt is great, if your sins have gotten you down, you won't pray that prayer in a casual, off-handed, indifferent way. You will *grapple* with God. Like Jacob of old, you will say, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” And, when you do *that*, you discover God's promise is true, and he cleanses you from all unrighteousness. The next step is to --

Accept God's Great Forgiveness

I suppose the hardest thing for most of us to do is to accept and understand the forgiveness and forgetfulness of God. It just seems too good to be true.

But it *is* true! We have the assurance that, by his grace, our sins have been taken from us as far as the east is from the west. They have been cast into the depths of the sea to be remembered against us no more.

“Though your sins be a scarlet, they shall be white as snow, though they be red as crimson, they shall be as wool.”

For years the city of London had one of the finest and most efficient sewerage systems in the world. Recently they developed an even better one. But, in decades past, a sludge vessel would take the vile, refined poison from the sewerage plants and carry it out to one of the deepest parts of the ocean. The vile poison was dumped into the sea and yet, within twenty minutes, the water which a moment ago was so poisonous a drop of it would kill a person were it placed on his tongue, is as clean and clear and pure as any in the ocean.

What a vivid illustration of the cleansing power of God’s forgiveness. For he has said, “I will cast your sin into the depth of the sea.”

“Oh, how many things he will forget,
Our every sin, both great and small, and yet
He will remember and reward
The smallest service done for our dear Lord.

Divine forgetfulness,
Unfathomed grace
And love which knows no bounds
Of time and space.”

And then, having been forgiven by God, you must --

Forgive Yourself

You say,

“But John, how can I forgive myself when I keep doing the same thing over and over again? I confess my sins, I ask for forgiveness, and I feel clean. Then, the next day or week or month, I sin again. With tears, I go to God again and pray for forgiveness and, for awhile, I feel clean. And then, one day, it happens again. How can I forgive myself when I continually yield to temptation?”

Perhaps it will help to remember the words of Jesus --

“If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him: and if he repents, forgive him, and if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turns again to thee saying, ‘I repent,’ thou shalt forgive him.” (Lk. 17:3-4).

Think of it! We are to be ready to forgive our brother seven times a day when he falls. In another passage the Bible extends that figure to seventy times seven and, in yet another place it adds --

“Be ye kind, one to another, tenderhearted forgiving one another, *even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.*”

We are to forgive others seven times a day. Indeed, seventy times seven! Why? Because that is how God, for Christ’s sake has forgiven us.

God does not do less *for* you than he asks *of* you. To the contrary, his forgiveness sets the standard you are to follow. God is ready, willing, and able to forgive seventy times seven a day, if you ask him. Why? Because he is aware of the debilitating influence of unresolved guilt. He wants you to avail yourself of his cleansing power, so you can be the blessing you have been blessed to be.

Let me put it this way --

If you wash your hands in the morning and then pick up some object which soils them, it doesn’t

mean your initial cleansing was ineffective. It simply means your hands need to be washed again. In the same way, God does not promise that his cleansing “from all unrighteousness” will be permanent in the sense of your never needing his forgiveness again. But he *does* promise that when his forgiveness is applied it is *thorough!* And, it may be applied as often as you need it. Oh, dear friend, can you not forgive yourself if God has already forgiven you? Of course you can. And you must! And then, the fourth requirement for the removal of guilt is that you --

Forgive Others

I wouldn’t be a bit surprised but that the reasons some people cannot find forgiveness for themselves is that they are unwilling to forgive others. The Bible specifically states that if you refuse to forgive others, you cannot be forgiven. Jesus said --

“If you forgive men their trespasses your heavenly father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive you your trespasses.” (Mt. 6:14).

That doesn’t mean God’s forgiveness is something you get for being good to others. What it *does* mean is that being good to others is an inevitable outgrowth of God’s being good to you. If you are unable to forgive others, it is evidence of the fact that you have not fully accepted God’s forgiveness for yourself. In other words, his forgiving *you*, and your forgiving *others*, go together.

There is an old legend about Abraham who had the habit of giving lodging to strangers traveling by. One night he was approached by a man whose looks he did not like, and Abraham refused him lodging. The man turned away and, as he disappeared into the night, God said,

“Abraham, I have borne with you these seventy years. Could you not bear with this stranger one night?”

According to the legend Abraham was so conscience-stricken he rushed out in search of the

stranger and brought him back.

I wonder if we can bring that legend up-to-date a bit and paraphrase it by saying,

“Oh, John. Oh, Paul. Oh, Mary. Oh, Martha. Have I forgiven you all your sins and you cannot forgive your wife, your husband, your brother, your sister, your neighbor, your employer, your employee *one* sin?”

If you can’t, you will continue to struggle beneath the yoke of guilt. Abundant life only comes to those who forgive others as God, for Christ’s sake has forgiven them. The final factor that must be faced, if you will be free from guilt --

Restitution

It isn’t easy to go to a person you have wronged, admit it, and ask forgiveness. It isn’t easy to go to someone who has wronged *you* and against whom you hold a grudge, a resentment, a feeling of hostility, and ask his pardon for that negative feeling. But it is essential to a sense of cleansing.

I had not been in the ministry very long when a man in a position of great influence did something that hurt me very much. Actually, it wasn’t something he did so much as something he didn’t do. I allowed that thing to fester away until it began to affect my whole personality. Resentment is a most injurious thing. Finally, after several years, I saw this man at a summer conference, called him aside and said,

“I’d like to ask your forgiveness for a feeling of resentment I felt against you for several years.”

He was quite surprised and said,

“John, I didn’t know you felt that way, whatever did I do?”

“It doesn’t really matter. The important thing is that I’ve gotten this load off my chest.”

“Oh, but it *does* matter. Maybe it’s something I’ve unconsciously done to others.”

So I told him. He thanked me. We prayed together and we’re the best of friends.

Guilt is more than a theological concept. It is a moral, spiritual and emotional infection which must be removed by radical surgery if the person who suffers from it is to survive. And so, if your sins are getting you down this morning, if you have been struggling beneath the yoke of guilt, if there are those who have wronged you or those whom you have wronged, go to the root of the problem. Confess it. Accept God’s forgiveness. Forgive yourself or the one who has wronged you. And finally, if possible, make restitution.

In that way, the real, but unseen barriers between you and God -- and between you and your brother -- can be removed. When that happens, you, like the Israelites of Old, will be fit for citizenship in the land which God has promised to those who are his own. And tell me, wouldn’t it *be* abundant living if you were at peace with God, with others, and yourself!

“So let me draw you to the great forgiveness,
Not as one who stoops to save you.
Not as one who stands aside with counsel,
Nay, as one who says, ‘I, too, was poisoned
With the flower that stings! But now, arisen,
I struggle up the path beside you.
Come! Let us face the heights together.”

Spiritual Prescription

“I have to live with myself and so, I want to be fit for myself to know.”
The abundant life can be mine if through Christ I succeed in building
a self with which I can live in peace. Normal guilt is part of a healthy
mind. Abnormal guilt is pernicious and must go. This can be done by --
Honestly confessing my sin. Making restitution where possible.
Accepting God’s complete forgiveness. Genuinely forgiving myself.
It is also imperative that I forgive any who have done me some real or
imagined wrong. Resentment toward others is an impenetrable block

to personal peace (Mt.6:14-15).