

“Guilt”

By: Doug Warren

Why do I feel so guilty or not true to myself?

Talking with people I find that many feel a tremendous amount of uncertainty in their own standing, whether that is expressed as guilt or self-compromise. Sometimes it is obvious. They can't sleep. They struggle with depression. They are restless and easily agitated. Other times it is more subtle. They work hard, but are not satisfied. They volunteer for lots of different causes, yet are unable to delight in them.

It may be that they have actually pinpointed the trouble and ask, “Why do I feel so morally compromised?” More often it is expressed with a vague, “Something is out of whack, but I don't know what.” Other times folks have not even identified that there is a problem, but as you talk about life it becomes clear that a lost sense of self is driving their frantic attempts at significance.

I have found that differing generations or cultures often express many of these same feelings differently. One paradigm stresses duty and an innate sense of right and wrong. Another stresses the importance of authenticity or being true to yourself. Struggles in the first view produce guilt, whereas failures in the latter result in a compromised self.

The real difference between the two expressions lies in the origin of the standard trying to be met. The first view generally holds to some kind of external standard (Golden Rule, Bible, Five Pillars, etc.) to determine right and wrong. Usually the second position rejects the idea of any external code in favor of an internal one. Right according to someone else's rules is not nearly as important (or even relevant) as being true to yourself.

While the vocabulary is different and often the specific values may be radically opposed, the conundrum is essentially the same. Whether the standard you are struggling to meet is an internal one or an external one, the reality is that we don't often meet it. I know that “x” is right/authentic/honorable/true, but I can't seem to do it. What do I do now?

The hard reality is that the reason we feel guilty or disconnected with our true self is because we are. None of us measure up. We don't meet standards outside of ourselves and we don't even meet our own standards. The real problem that we all face is how can we be forgiven and made authentic?

All religions from Buddhism to New Age, Wicca to Islam, Judaism to Confucianism seek in some manner to address this issue. They all offer some system to right the wrongs or restore the fractured self. The major problem with all of these systems is that they all depend on *our* effort to accomplish the restoration of self.

I say major problem because most of the people I talk with who are struggling with these issues find themselves powerless to change. They are already doing all kinds of things to compensate for their failures, but they are still plagued with hopelessness. When is their contrition enough? How many good deeds are necessary to offset the bad? How do you know when the standard has been satisfied?

The wonderful good news of what Jesus has done is that He is the One who has accomplished our restoration. We don't have to wonder if we have done enough, because He has done it all. The reality of His sufficiency transforms our guilt into gratitude.

Jesus doesn't just tell us we are okay; He makes us truly good. He doesn't just forgive our failures; He gives us His wholeness in exchange for our brokenness. What no other system can provide, He alone is able to do because He is uniquely qualified as our mediator. He is both God and man. He bridges the chasm between external and internal standards. He is both the eternal Law Giver and the Creator of our internal sense of self. He restores the disconnect between the person that we are and the person we long to be.

Anything else merely mollifies our heartache over our shortcomings, but cannot root it out and be done with it. No matter how many times we may seek to recreate our sense of identity we will always run into the same problem. Reinventing ourselves simply cannot solve our innate brokenness. But Jesus offers to remake us in His image; to give us what we cannot create alone—validation that is true and lasting.

So how do we deal with our inauthenticity or guilt? First, we need to admit it. Second, we need to call on the only One who can restore us. Jesus said that he did not come to heal the well, but the sick. What's more, He showed that He has the power to do it, raising the dead to life.

Will that mean we will never struggle with guilt again? No, but it will give us the truth to answer the fearful question: "How do I know that I am true or good enough?" I know that Jesus is *the* authentic reality and that He has made me real by making me His. It is in Him that I find the only self capable of remaining true. That is the hope that allows more than guilt management, but real victory over the doubts that plague us all.