



WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TEACH ABOUT GUILT?

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As a full time counselor, I encounter many people who struggle with guilt and shame. I often find this a challenging issue for people. Because I see Christians struggling with guilt in my counseling work, I decided to explore Biblical teaching on the topic of guilt, so that I could have an accurate "theology of guilt." This is a summary of what I discovered.

Guilt in the Old Testament was a result of the law. When people did not fulfill the law, they were then guilty. God developed the sacrifice system led by the priests to "satisfy" the people's guilt and cleanse them (until the next time!), There were even guilt offerings to pay for the sins committed under the law.

I didn't see that model as relevant to my clients since we live under grace rather than the law, so I dedicated my study to the New Testament, What is the role of guilt in the age of grace?

According to the Strong's Concordance, which uses the King James Version, there are only seven references to guilt in the entire New Testament:

- *Matthew 26:66* - Caiaphas declared Jesus guilty of death for blasphemy.
- *Mark 14:64* - Same incident as in Matthew 26: The high priest declares Jesus guilty and worthy of death.
- *Luke 23:4, 14, 22* - Pilate tells the high priest that he sees no guilt in Jesus – he says this three times!
- *Matthew 23:18* - Jesus said that if you swear by the animal sacrifice you are guilty to that - this is clearly tied to the Old Testament,
- *Romans 3:19* - The law judges all guilty before God,
- *James 2:10* - If you don't keep the whole law, you are then guilty of all of it.
- *1 Corinthians 11:27* - Paul confronts the Corinthians for abusing communion.

The first three references describe the "trial" of Jesus leading to his crucifixion. The high priest declared him guilty, and Pilate said he had no guilt. We already know Jesus was and is holy and blameless, which makes these judgments irrelevant both to Jesus and to us.

The next three references have to do with the law: If you try to live by the law, the law will judge you guilty. We already know this from reading the Old Testament. The only point for us in these verses is that we must not try to be good enough through our human efforts, because we will fail!

This leaves only one New Testament reference to guilt that does apply to us: 1 Corinthians 11:27. Jesus commanded us to observe communion until he returns. Rather than treating communion with the reverence it deserves, the Corinthians were getting drunk on the wine and eating the bread to satisfy their hunger!

Have you ever seen communion done this way? Paul says that because of this abuse of communion God judged the people guilty. He does not mention whether the Corinthians *felt* their guilt, though some were sick and some even died as a result of God's judgment (verses 30-32).

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WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TEACH ABOUT GUILT? (Continued)

Because this is the entire New Testament teaching on guilt, I can only draw the conclusion that under grace, God does not use guilt.

Why do so many Christians struggle with guilt if God does not want us to feel guilty? Perhaps it's because Satan does want us to feel guilty – so much that he accuses us directly to God (Revelation 12:10). Perhaps we are listening to his accusations! Other causes of guilt feelings include experiences with parents and churches who use guilt to direct and even manipulate those in their care.

Well, if God doesn't use guilt, what does He use under grace? *Conviction*. The Greek word used for “conviction” appears numerous times in the New Testament.

According to John 16:8-11, the Holy Spirit convicts the world. Why then does God use conviction rather than guilt? Do a side-by-side comparison:

1. How long does it last?
 Guilt: Forever
 Conviction: Until we take care of the sin in our life
2. What steps do we need to take?
 Guilt: Who knows?
 Conviction: Confess our sins, repent (turn 180° away) and if necessary make restitution
3. What is the result of it?
 Guilt: Makes us miserable
 Conviction: Restores us into a right relationship with the Lord

There are no doubt times when believers who are being convicted of sin do feel guilty. There may be other times when we feel convicted and know we need to obey the Lord, yet feel no guilt!

My conclusions are:

1. Under grace, God does not use guilt.
2. We feel guilty when we listen to Satan's accusations; try to make ourselves good enough by living by the law; or perhaps are under some kind of conviction.
3. Conviction is used by God because it frees us and restores us into right relationship with Him - it leads to peace.
4. Guilt is not used because it enslaves, does not lead to fruit of the Spirit and holds us forever in bondage.
5. Many people struggle with guilt because they were raised by adults who used guilt to control them growing up.
6. Christians should never use guilt to motivate others because that is not how God leads!
7. A Christian who feels guilty need first to pray and ask God to reveal any sin for which (s)he may be under conviction. If God reveals such a sin, let the believer follow the three steps God outlines for our restoration: confess, repent and, if necessary, make restitution. If there is no indication of sin from the Lord, then the believer can know the guilt feelings are not from God, and turn from them to seek communion with the Lord.