



“Living in the Shadows: Guilt”

Psalm 51

April 7, 2019

This morning’s scripture is a psalm of honest confession, a plea for forgiveness. The words constitute a raw, transparent, vulnerable prayer: “have mercy on me, God...let me hear joy and gladness...hide your face from my sins...create in me a clean heart...restore to me the joy of your salvation.” The Psalmist does not avoid the truth of his sin, nor does he wallow in guilt; he believes in the promise of forgiveness and leans into that promise. His is a good word for us as we near the conclusion of our Lenten journey to the cross and as we explore another of the shadows that cover our lives. Guilt; the feeling of failure and self-condemnation.

Guilt’s shadow over us is long and difficult to escape. Often, it is deeply rooted in past experiences of painful judgment. I know more than a few people who have been unable to release feelings of guilt that they have been hauling around for years, even decades. Did I miss an opportunity to stand up for someone who was being bullied or harassed? Do I spend enough time with my children? Have I done enough to care for my aging parents? Am I worthy of love? Guilt haunts us as we consider how our lives are spent—how we use our time, our money, our talents.

And, too often, the Christian community has intensified our struggle with these paralyzing questions. Desperate for a message of hope and redemption, some struggling soul hesitantly enters a church on Sunday morning just after the service has begun. The one word that this child of God most needs to hear is a word of forgiveness and love. And the one word that is spoken is one of judgment and shame, a list of ways that we depraved humans fall short of God’s glory. How often we in the church have missed an opportunity to offer the grace of God to one who needed it most! I have friends whose faith in God survives but who will not, or cannot enter a church sanctuary because of the burden of guilt they still carry, cast upon them decades ago by self-righteous, church-going Christians. I know a woman who is still scarred from an experience she had after surgery. She was lying in the hospital bed when her pastor came and asked if he could pray for her. Of course, she was pleased by that invitation. The man began to pray, asking God to

forgive the woman for whatever she had done to deserve the illness that required surgery. For shame, for shame.

More often, well-meaning pastors and laypeople stir up the latent guilt that worshippers carry with them. “Sure haven’t seen you in a long time...where have you been?” we innocently ask, as our conversation partner’s face turns red with guilt. Most of us do not need to be reminded of where we fall short of perfection. Many of us judge ourselves harshly and, when we judge ourselves we are likely to condemn others as well. The downward spiral of judgment leads to paralysis, we are unable to free ourselves or offer grace to another. And so we walk through life as self-condemned critics, failing to see the light through the shadows of guilt.

The narrative of depravity is powerful and all-encompassing: it asserts that the world is hell-bent on being hell-bound. That God is seething with wrath and preparing punishment for sinners even now. It urges feelings of shame and guilt, believing that this is the pathway to redemption. Some churches subscribe to this theology of preaching: that we have to break people down in order to build them up. Elicit fear of God’s judgment and then swoop in with the trump card of God’s saving act in Jesus Christ.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that guilt is never appropriate or that it can never be productive. This is where shame and guilt part ways. Shame is crushing and disempowering. Guilt can lead to repentance and change. This is one of the clearest messages of Psalm 51—that our willingness to be honest about our brokenness is a pathway to new life: “a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

What I am saying is that, when we stop with guilt, the feeling can lead to despair, hostility, and misery. I am saying the message of the gospel, delivered by Jesus Christ and embodied in his own life, is that forgiveness is far more powerful than guilt. What I am saying is that the call of the church is to preach redemption and grace, to preach the truth that we never fall beyond God’s ability to reach us. I am saying

that very few of us need to be reminded of our guilt but many of us could use a reminder of the promise of forgiveness.

Every single Sunday morning at Second, we rehearse a narrative that challenges the cultural myth of effortless perfection *and* the insufficient theology of self-abasement. That narrative is acted out in a ritual. In a moment of transparent honesty before God, we confess the sinful ways of our world and our lives. We admit that we seem unable to get it right, that we fail God and one another and ourselves. But the ritual never stops there because the story we tell is not one of depravity but redemption. In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. Whatever guilt we carry can be left at the foot of the cross, offering us a fresh start on a new path.

The truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ is this: we are welcomed into God's presence not because we are righteous or good but because each of us is a beloved child of God. And so is everyone else. Those who carry signs proclaiming God's hatred for individuals or groups of people miss the central focus of the gospel. Grace is not a limited resource to be hoarded and held back. God's love comes with no condition. Unlimited grace. Unconditional love. For you, for me, for all of this broken and fragile creation. This redemptive theology of grace has the power to change our lives.

Paul says that the message of reconciliation has been entrusted to us. I have always assumed that Paul was speaking of our being reconciled with other people, and perhaps with God. But this morning I'm wondering if our deeper need might be reconciliation to ourselves. Is guilt not one of the heaviest burdens we carry? Are we not our own worst critics? Too often, we are able to extend grace to everyone except ourselves.

Lent is a season of self-reflection and honest confession. It is not a season of self-abasement or abuse. It is a season to acknowledge our brokenness, but not a time to wallow in it. What would it look like for you to be reconciled with yourself this morning? It might mean letting go of that constant crushing companion—the guilt heaped upon you by others that you have carefully collected and internalized. Guilt from past mistakes, things left undone, hurtful actions taken. Guilt from not living up to expectations of perfection. How dare we be anything less than perfect? The perfect child, the perfect parent, the perfect grandparent, the perfect spouse, the perfect employee, the perfect boss, the perfect student, the perfect Christian. We are deeply aware of how we fail.

The season of Lent is a time to face our own weakness and sinfulness. We come to terms with all in our life that separates us from God, including the heavy burden of guilt that we carry. Lent is a time to release that guilt, to seek God's forgiveness, to forgive others and ourselves.

Such freedom requires courage, honest confession, and an openness to forgiveness. But the alternative is to dwell in the shadows even when the bright light of day surrounds us. In one of the most powerful sermons of the 20th Century, Paul Tillich preaches to each of us: "You are accepted. *You are accepted*, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. *Simply accept the fact that you are accepted.*"ⁱ

In Romans 8, another Paul puts it this way: "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." No condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. God does not condemn us. We should stop condemning ourselves. Receive the truth of this promise: you are forgiven by the one who makes all things new, and you are freed to embody the incredible grace of God. Forgiven. Freed. Accepted. Beloved. You. Everyone. A Child of God. Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=378&C=84>