

## HOW TO MAKE OUR LIVES COUNT FOR SOMETHING GREAT!

### Part 2: Dealing with Unresolved Guilt (a)

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1 John 1:9

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In this series, “How to make our lives count for something great,” we are exploring certain obstacles that are keeping us from loving others with greatness. In our first installment we focused on one of the greatest obstacles in truly loving others, namely, **the preoccupation of the self**. We learned a number of ways to begin breaking this formidable wall down. In our second and third installment (which will take place next time), we will direct our attention to another formidable barrier that is keeping us from loving other with greatness: **unresolved guilt**.

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Consider:

There are times in our lives when we lay in bed filled with regret. Our stomach is in knots and no relief is in sight. We stare at the walls and so desperately wish we could change what we have done in the past. Our nights are sleepless, our shame is great. For some of us, it was not what we intended at all. But led by illegitimate pleasures that are contrary to God and His ways, we found ourselves intoxicated by the pheromones of false pleasures. Lingering too long, we yielded to the temptation and after it was all said and done, we woke up from our stupor only to discover that not only was the false pleasure fleeting like steam from a hot cup of coffee, our sinful choice was also destructive. The choice we made damaged our lives, and sadly, hurt those we love the most. Risking the possibility of being exposed, we compound the problem with deception, half-truths, and lies. But with every act of disobedience in an attempt to

cover up what we did, the regret deepens, the pain becomes more acute, and the anxiety worsens.

While some of us are haunted by skeletons from our past, others of us can't seem to get victory over our temptations. As a result, we love AND hate our sins. We confess our sins, as 1 John 1:9 explains, but we find ourselves, time and time again, committing the same sins over and over again. We wonder, perhaps even cry out to God at times, saying something like:

*“Lord, why can't I seem to be delivered from this sin! Am I so dishonest with you even in my confession of sin? Am I so deceitful because I tell you that I am turning away from the sin in repentance but only to find myself committing it over and over again?”*

We are afraid to tell others about our “love” for this sin because of what people might think about us. So, we sit there, praying to God, hoping for a miracle, but God seems to be altogether silent. “God, what am I to do?” The guilt continues to build for we have developed a fleshly appetite, a sinful propensity for this sin.

Some of us believers, if we are brutally honest, have even come to question our very identity in Christ because this unresolved guilt continues to grow. We know the Bible claims that if we place our trust in Jesus Christ, believing that He is the Son of God, who died on the cross and rose bodily from the dead, we are new creatures in Christ. We have a new heart to love Him, a new mind to know Him, and a new will to obey know Him. But certain questions plague us such as:

*“God, it seems like so many other people have this victory over temptation, but at every corner, it seems to elude me. Why God? Where are you? Why do I have such an appetite for this sin and can't seem to be delivered from it? What does that say about me? What does that say about you, God?”*

While we are suffering from unresolved guilt because of some past sin or can't seem to get victory over sinful appetites and fleshly tendencies, others of us have unresolved guilt because we can't seem to forgive those who have hurt us. Even though the sin was not originally caused by our own decision-making but the wrong doing of others, we have been pained, marred, and scarred by them. We didn't do it but their choices have wounded us, crushed our dreams and hopes, and sapped our strength away. As a result, we find ourselves unable to forgive them; so much water is under the bridge. Yet, because we are unwilling to let it all go, we know within that things are not right. We feel the guilt in the midst of anger. Though we may attempt to cover our guilt with the attitude of indifference, saying something like, "*I no longer care about this person!*" we really do care. We are hurt but because of pride, resentment, or even fear if we reopen that wound again, the anger, the guilt, and the resentment remains. We want things to change and yet we do not; we are conflicted. We wish for restoration yet we are unable to pursue it. While we understand that things will never be the same, even if we are to sincerely accept forgiveness and forgive the one who has wronged us, we hold onto our pain, not willing to let it go. So, the guilt from not forgiving the one (s) who has wronged us lingers around like arthritis; the pain, the guilt has become part of who we are! And if we are not careful, the pain others induced in us will turn into a poison of bitterness that will then induce us to cause pain in the lives of others. See, a lack of forgiveness causes a rippling effect in the lives of those who are in our sphere of influence. Sort a like we become bullied at school and after a while, we turn around and bully others in our neighborhood. The bottom line is that *a lack of forgiveness is sin.*

Therefore, whether we are dealing with past mistakes, controlled by our fleshly appetites, or impacted by the wrong choice of others to the extent that we are unable to forgive them, in all three cases we struggle with unresolved guilt. In all three cases, the problems are compounded by reasons and excuses to rationalize the entangling chains of guilt. In the first situation, it is the classic, "*What I have done is sooo bad! There is no way I can*

*be forgiven!*" The second situation, "*I'm scared to release this habit! I need it to function for I am fearful that without it, I will do something worse!*" And the third situation, "*Letting go a little forgiveness is nothing compared to the sins committed against me!*"

### ***What are we to do?***

Let us consider 1 John 1:9 as our starting point for dealing with all three areas of unresolved guilt. For today devotional, I am particularly indebted to the exegetical insights of Dr. Daniel B. Wallace's article, "Honest to God! Or, God is not a Pit Stop (1 John 1:5-10)" located at [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org).

Then next time meet we will consider how to deal with our reoccurring sins and explore practical steps to help us honestly forgive those who have wounded us (third installment). If we can gain the victory in these areas of our lives, then we will discover a freedom so liberating we will be able to truly begin loving others with greatness. Like an eagle we will soar high in the sky!

First, the foundational basis upon which to deal with our unresolved guilt demands that we come to saving faith in Jesus Christ. When we place our trust in Jesus Christ for salvation we receive eternal life; it is a divine gift that we could never earn no matter how good we try to be. We can never be good enough for salvation! But once we receive eternal life, we learn from God's Word that we are planted in union with Him and absolutely nothing can separate our union with God. We are in Christ and Christ is in us. Like two plants that have been planted to the extent that they are not only intertwined, they are also united (Romans 6:5). Dr. Lewis S. Chafer summarizes our identity and our union in Christ in his classic work, *Grace: God's Marvelous Theme*:

We are in Christ and Christ in us. We are in Christ in terms of position, possessions, safe-keeping, and

association and Christ is in us giving life, character, and dynamic for conduct.

See, when you place your faith in Jesus Christ, believing that He is God who died on the cross for your sins and rose bodily from the dead, you receive at least 215 positional benefits that can never be taken away from you. Because of what Jesus did on the cross for you, in fulfillment of Old Testament passages like Isaiah 52:13-53:12, you have been declared righteous by God even though you continue to sin in your earthly body. Because Jesus Christ substituted Himself for you, when you place your trust in Jesus Christ for salvation, you and God are *reconciled*; you are *redeemed*; you are now God's child and He has become your Father; this union will last for eternity.

Thus, one of the most beautiful and unique aspects of the Christian faith compared to all other religions of this world is God's grace, that is, His undeserved favor upon anyone who is willing to believe—no matter how dark, horrific, or twisted one's life has become. If God can forgive Saul who became the apostle Paul, a person who persecuted and murdered Christians, and the one who wrote most of our New Testament, then God can forgive you! Like Dr. Dan Wallace of Dallas Seminary writes, "One of the most remarkable things about Christianity is this fellowship with God....The difference is not a lowering of God's standard, but an elevation of the believer: we are hoisted up to heaven on the cross of Christ."<sup>1</sup>

Once again, we can never be good enough for salvation. It all had to be done for us and all we have to do is receive this love gift of divine favor in the open arms of faith. Once we place our trust in Him for salvation, we now belong to God; He is our Father and we are His children. As a result, our lives are changed, our emptiness is filled, and our path is secured. We now have meaning, purpose, significance, and value that not only are

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Dan Wallace, "Honest to God! Or, God is not a Pit Stop (1 John 1:5-10)". Retrieved on 12 May 2013 at <http://bible.org/article/honest-god-or-god-not-pit-stop-1-john-15-10>.

capable of touching lives in the most dynamic way, but are also everlasting for we will be in God's presence forevermore.

Even though we may become believers we still live in unredeemed bodies. This helps explain why there is so much hypocrisy among even the best of us believers. And because we believers live in unredeemed bodies, inflamed by a culture that exalts decadence, materialism, pleasure, and sensuality, controlled by a counterfeit kingdom that is a system hostile to God and those who love Him, the factors of unresolved guilt can take its deadly toil on believers. We will struggle with sin till the day we physically die. But God provides a remedy in 1 John 1:9 for the believer until that time occurs when either we take our first celestial breath in heaven or are taken up into heaven when the Rapture of the Church takes place (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

1 John 1:9 states:

***If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.***

Within the context of emphasizing believer fellowship with God in the first portion of this letter (1 John 1:5-2:27) with assurance of salvation dominating the remainder, we have to reckon this divine provision for the believer to be true. But we also need to step back and realize, as hard as it may be to digest, we need guilt. *Why?* Guilt is what leads us to get things right with God! It is guilt that opens the door to forgiveness and qualitative change. *My Nelson Study Bible* puts it this way:

Confession works against the worst part of human nature, the part that imagines itself to be better than it really is. What person has not felt, 'I'm not perfect, but I'm not as bad as my next door neighbor?' This mindset always stops short of confessing; it would rather ignore or ease feelings of guilt than admit them. But only open confession of our sins will completely cleanse us. Only

when we admit that we are sinners, unworthy of God's grace, can we make a fresh start.<sup>2</sup>

Sadly many believers are uninformed of this divine provision found in 1 John 1:9. Others abuse this passage by thinking that as long as they admit to God the wrong they have done, no matter how insincere or flippant they may be in their confession, God is obligated to forgive them. But the negligence they bring to 1 John 1:9 reveals a failure to note the context in which this passage is imbedded.

If we look more closely at the immediate context beginning 1 John 1:5, the Apostle John demands that we recognize the following foundational truth: ***"God is light and in Him is no darkness at all."*** The nuance for "light" is not a reference to God's holiness alone. Rather, He is shedding light on who He is! "Whatever other qualities this metaphorical designation may include, it clearly involves the intellectual and moral—*enlightenment* and *holiness*. Just as light reveals and purifies, so by His very nature God illuminates and purifies those who come to Him."<sup>3</sup> Thus, God's nature determines the conditions for fellowship with Him. As we engage Him, we not only discover more about Him, but we also learn more about ourselves. This better fits context because of what is said in verses 6-8:

**6 If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His son cleanses us from all sin. 8 If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.**

Therefore, if you want to walk in the light you must be honest to God. Since the overarching theme of this John's first epistle is

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<sup>2</sup> *NKJV Study Bible*, general editor Earl D. Radmacher, second edition (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 1997, 2007), 2005.

<sup>3</sup> D. Edmond Hiebert, "An Expository Study of 1 John," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145:578 (April-June 1988): 331.

*"fellowship with God,"* and "fellowship" means to *"have something in common,"* utter honesty is demanded.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the apostle John calls us to be candid and forthright to Him, and as we walk with Him. Moreover, think about what light does! Light reveals what is hidden. Since God is light, possessing no sin, and cannot be defiled by sin, He exposes us of our sin.<sup>5</sup> Thus, when we sincerely agree with God about that particular sin, we are *"walking in the light."*<sup>6</sup> In other words, walking in the light means honesty, integrity, and transparency.<sup>7</sup> This disposition of the heart is demanded if we want to resolve our guilt. Dr. Tom Constable explains how we walk in the light. He writes:

If I enter a lighted room and walk around in it, I am walking in the light; I am moving in a sphere which the light illuminates as it shines not only on me but upon everything around me. If I were to personalize the light, I could also say that I was walking in the presence of the light. Since according to this passage God not only is light (verse 5), but He is also in the light, to walk in the light must mean essentially to live in God's presence, exposed to what He has revealed about Himself. This, of course, is done through openness in prayer and through openness to the Word of God in which He is revealed."<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, to walk in darkness is an attempt to hide from God, refusing to acknowledge what we know about our glorious God and ourselves.<sup>9</sup>

Whereas the first step to dealing with unresolved guilt is to come saving faith whereby He washes our sins away, the second step

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<sup>4</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>5</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>6</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>7</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>8</sup> Thomas L. Constable, "Notes on 1 John" (2013 edition), retrieved on 5/13/2013 at [www.soniclight.com](http://www.soniclight.com).

<sup>9</sup> *Idem* cf. Zane C. Hodges.

to dealing with unresolved guilt is to be sincerely honest with God about our sins as we commit them. God values authenticity! See, your honesty to God will reveal how serious you are willing to pursue and follow after Him. While you may have to confess your sins hundreds a times day, true confession begins with honesty before God. This passage is not saying we have to be morally perfect before we can walk with God. Otherwise the cleansing blood of Jesus (present tense) would not be needed if we were not walking in the light. In fact, if examine all the verbs in verse 7 you will discover that they are all in present tense: **But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.**"

But let us be sure we understand what happened at conversion and what Jesus is doing now. When we placed our faith in Christ, God redeemed us from all our sins, namely, past, present, and future. We are no longer under condemnation (Romans 8:1; 1 Cor. 6:11; Eph. 1:7). But as believers, we continue to sin in our daily lives. Even though particular acts of sin do not cause us to lose our salvation, what they do is hinder our intimacy with the God of the Bible (John 13:10) like blockage in an artery hinders blood flow. To be sure, the word, "*blood of Jesus*" is a figure of speech (metonymy) for the death of Jesus. We are cleansed from all our sins positionally by Christ's death; we are declared righteous. In contrast, what John is saying is stated well by F. F. Bruce:

What John has in mind here is the cleansing of the conscience from guilt and moral defilement which is so insisted on in the Epistle to the Hebrews (Heb. 9:14; 10:2, 22), and which takes a leading place among the saving benefits of the redemptive self-sacrifice of Christ.<sup>10</sup>

Once again, your honesty before Him displays the sincerity of your confession.

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<sup>10</sup> Idem cf. F. F. Bruce.

And the third step in resolving guilt is to sincerely confess our sins. This is stated in verse 9:

**If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**

There is a lot of confusion about what confession of sin means. The word "*confess*" once again in the Greek literally means to say the same thing. Dr. Tom Constable of Dallas Seminary summarizes this action and attitude of the heart this way, "Confessing therefore means saying about our sins what God says about them, namely, that they are indeed sins, offenses against Him, and not just mistakes, blunders, or errors."<sup>11</sup>

But let us take a closer look at what confession of sin looks like to make sure we really understand how to handle unresolved guilt. In his article "Honest to God! Or God is not a Pit Stop!" New Testament scholar Dr. Dan Wallace unpacks five aspects of what is involved in the confession of sin. Understanding these five aspects of confessing our sin will free us from ignorance and put us on the right place to give our unresolved guilt to God.

***The first aspect of confession of sin is an admission of guilt; it is agreeing with God that this wrong.***<sup>12</sup> This is more than cognitive assent; it also involves our deep-seated affections, that is, the disposition of our heart. This is substantiated in verse 8: **"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. God wants us to be entirely honest with him."** Thus, sincere confession of sin is sincere agreement with God that this particular sin is wrong, contrary to God and His character.

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<sup>11</sup>Dr. Dan Wallace, "Honest to God! Or, God is not a Pit Stop (1 John 1:5-10)."

<sup>12</sup>Idem.

***The second aspect of confession of sin is namely bringing attention to our inadequacy and our need.***<sup>13</sup> We have to remember that when we confess our sins and say something like, “*God I will never commit this sin again*” or that “*I am shocked I would do such a thing,*” we are truly underestimating our need to utterly depend upon Him in moment-by-moment living.<sup>14</sup> We should not be surprised when we sin nor should we claim that we will not do that particular sin again given the depravity of flesh. In either case, we underestimate our need to depend upon Him.

***Third aspect of confession of sin is that it is both judicial and relational.***<sup>15</sup> See, Jesus already paid the full price of sin. So, we do not have to plead to God to forgive us because He already has forgiven us. If you are in Christ, then you are forgiven! You have to reckon this to be true! If you fail to grips with these truths, then I encourage you to seriously pursue a study of God’s grace and closely examine all the benefits of salvation you have received the moment you placed your faith in Jesus Christ. But we must also understand that God is our Father (vv. 2-3).<sup>16</sup> Thus, we must also come to grips with understanding that sin impacts our intimacy with our Father-God. So, understanding this relationship will not only help us be honest with Him, but it will also help us in understanding the depths of our forgiveness. But like Dr. Wallace states, “God is not just a place where we dump our sins. God is a person; he is our Father.”<sup>17</sup>

***Fourth, confession of sin involves a willingness to change.***<sup>18</sup> Though repentance is not used in this passage, it is implied. See, when we look at the seven churches of Revelation in chapters 2-

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<sup>13</sup> Idem.

<sup>14</sup> Idem.

<sup>15</sup> Idem.

<sup>16</sup> Idem.

<sup>17</sup> Idem.

<sup>18</sup> Idem.

3, Jesus Christ exhorts these churches eight times to repent (e.g., Rev. 3:19). So, given the context that deals with sin, there is not a significant difference between confession and repentance; both are dealing with acts of sin. Thus, confession includes a willingness to change, to turn away. But notice the following truth: we are talking with our Father! We are turning away from sin for it is affecting our intimacy with our Father; sin is abhorrent to Him! Repentance is expressed in a sincerity to change knowing the Father’s view of sin. So, often I pray to God “*Help me to want to want to change.*”

***Lastly, the content of our confession should involve not only the particular acts of sin we have committed, but also what we are-given what is said in verse 8, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”*** Dr. Wallace states, “We are not honest to God if we simply admit the *symptoms*, or *feel sorry only* for the consequences.”<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, ladies and gentlemen, let us genuinely confess our sins to our Father. While your sins were resolved at the cross, your intimacy with God as believers is restored when you honestly and sincerely confess your sins to Him with a willingness to change. Therefore, when those guilt feelings unnecessarily emerge after you have laid them all before God, focus on the truth of this divine provision in 1 John 1:9. You are forgiven! Once again, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness! **You are forgiven! You are forgiven! Count it to be true!**

In conclusion, why there might be a wide spectrum for the resolved guilt you are experiencing, such as past sins that haunt you, reoccurring temptations that taunt you, or/and a lack of forgiveness that is hardening your heart, know that God’s forgiveness is not merely the remedy, it is the best remedy for dealing with unresolved guilt. Other remedies have failed and will take you places you never want to go, changing you into

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<sup>19</sup> Idem.

ways you never imagined. For example, alcohol may numb the pain, but it will take another drink to numb it again. The appetite for alcoholism may emerge. Drugs may cause your pain to temporarily leave, but the crash that follows wreaks havoc on every aspect of your person. Turning to false pleasures to alleviate your pain only validates the law of diminishing returns. It will take another pleasure, then another pleasure... with each pleasure being more decadent and more indulgent than the one previously experienced. Dissatisfaction will also characterize such a pursuit and meaninglessness will be its spoiled fruit. Lastly, those who attempt to drown out their unresolved guilt by work, work, and work, will only find exhaustion.

In contrast, if you will go before the throne of God in prayer and lay all your unresolved guilt at His feet, you can receive the freedom, the healing, and the peace that He alone can offer. If you know our Father, having placed your faith in Him for salvation, then with sincerity of heart, go before His throne of grace in prayer, confess your sin, acknowledging to Him how much you need to depend upon Him in the moment-by-moment details of daily living. Change your mind about what this particular sin is in His strength. Lastly, remember He is your Father. Once you have settled these things with your heavenly Father, you will then be in a position to love others with greatness.

But if you do not know Jesus Christ as your Savior, then why don't you, right now, place your trust in Jesus Christ, believing that Jesus is the Son of God, who died on the cross for your sins and rose bodily from the dead? Experience and relish in His gift of grace; God, right now, stands willing to give you His very best as revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Will you not receive His invitation and experience His gift of unconditional love and freedom that will last for eternity?