

Guilt & Forgiveness

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Sermon prepared for **1 April 2007**,
Sixteenth sermon.
Occasion: **Palm Sunday**
Luke 23:1-49 (esp 39-43)
(20 minutes)
Theme: *"Jesus' love washes away all guilt"*

Introduction

Twenty something years ago, when I was in high school, I had a girlfriend called Cathy. Now this was before I met Trina – but don't tell her about this story, okay! I was a good boyfriend and one day I bought her a bouquet of flowers. I was also a good son, so I took them home to show my mother.

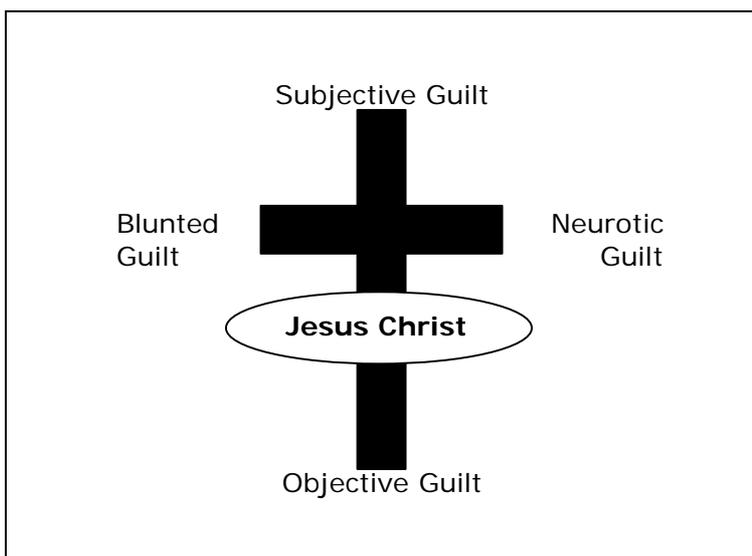
I remember walking into the lounge and holding them out to my Mum. Her eyes lit up and she smiled – and I said, "they're for Cathy". The smile on her face kind of froze, and she said, "Oh, that's nice, sweetie".

And I felt so bad and guilty, for having raised her hopes and then dashed them to the ground. Even today, 23 years later, I still feel guilty. Silly, isn't it? My mother probably doesn't even remember, and really I didn't do anything wrong as such.

But guilt has a way of sticking around, like glue that sticks and you struggle to get it off. I don't know about you, but I find guilt hard to deal with. Even when I know in my head that I'm not guilty, my feelings don't follow suit.

So I thought perhaps we should talk a bit about guilt and then see what Jesus' approach to guilt was. I will help to take out the card that you received on your way in this morning, because I'd like to explain a model of guilt that I hope will be helpful.

The Model



Let me suggest that there are two basic categories of guilt: the fact of guilt and the feeling of guilt.

The fact of guilt refers to the fact that you have something wrong – on the card I've called it **objective guilt**. It is not a question of how you feel, but rather a statement of fact, of what you've done. For example, if you murder someone in cold blood, then you are objectively guilty. You may not *feel* guilty, but that's not the issue – the issue is the fact that you have done something wrong and thus are objectively guilty.

Objective guilt comes when we break some kind of law, principle or rule. It may be the rule of law, of a country – for example, murdering someone is against the law of South Africa. Or it may be God's law, for example, keeping the Sabbath day holy. Or it could even be some personal principle that you hold for yourself. If you break that principle, even though no-one else may regard you as guilty, you are guilty because you've broken your own principles. The Bible calls objective guilt 'sin'.

The problem in our post-modern society is that the definitions of what is right or wrong are so fluid that we end up disagreeing on the issue of what constitutes objective guilt. We just have to think about some of the political leaders – Winnie, Tony, Jacob, Robert, George – to understand that while some people think they are objectively guilty, others do not.

So that's objective guilt – it lays the foundation of the model.

Next we come to the feelings of guilt, which refer to our experience of guilt. These can range from blunted, through subjective to neurotic – as you can see across the top of the model. These really are on a continuum, rather than being completely separate and discreet.

Blunted guilt is when you've done something wrong and you know you've done something wrong, but you do not experience a feeling of guilt. Think of a murderer who knows that murder is wrong, but feels nothing – it's kind of psychopathic. I am increasingly seeing people who are able to do wrong without feeling any kind of guilt, as our feelings become blunted. I think this is cause for great concern and that this will become a big problem over time.

Neurotic guilt is when your feelings of guilt are out of proportion to the fact of guilt. This is what I'm particularly good at! The wrong thing you did was small, but the feelings of guilt are overwhelming. Or you continue to feel guilty even 23 years later. Or you actually did nothing wrong, but feel guilty nevertheless. The problem with neurotic guilt is that it tends to paralyse us – it doesn't lead anywhere constructive, useful or healing – it runs in circles and paralyses us.

Somewhere between these two extremes is **subjective guilt**. Subjective guilt is a feeling of guilt, in proportion to the objective guilt, that mobilises us to do something to correct the wrong we have done. This is the hallmark of subjective guilt – it prompts us to make amends, to make reparation, to fix what we've broken, to correct what we've done wrong. If you feel guilty for something, but you are doing nothing in response to the feeling, then it's not subjective guilt, but rather neurotic guilt. Subjective guilt, by definition, leads to action.

Some textbooks call subjective guilt 'sorrow', because the feeling is less focused on myself and how bad I am, and rather on the other person whom I have wronged. There is a recognition that I have hurt them, and a feeling of sorrow over the effect that my objective guilt has had on them. This sorrow prompts action to correct the wrong.

The Focus

So the question that we need to consider this morning is, "Where do you stand in regards to objective guilt?" We need to think honestly and critically about this. Guilt and sin are serious issues. We are so good at pointing the finger at others – he did something wrong and should be brought to book. But we need to recognise that we too have done wrong and are objectively guilty.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Jesus set a stand of morality that is so high that none of us can attain it. We all fall short. We all stand objectively guilty.

Don't think only about the 'big' sins – murder, rape and so on. Think also of the other 'big' sins – envy and jealousy, greed, a harsh tongue, selfishness, sexual impurity. Surely there is not a single person here today who is not objectively guilty.

Let us spend a minute in silent reflection on our objective guilt.

Jesus' Response

In our Gospel reading today, we have a wonderful story about guilt and about how Jesus responded to it. Jesus was crucified between two criminals – one on either side. All the Gospels tell us this, but only Luke tells us about a conversation between them. I'm so grateful that Luke remembered this story and decided to include it in his version of the Gospel, because it teaches us something very important about guilt.

Let me read it again: Luke 23: 39-43.

Let us analyse the two criminals in light of the model we've looked at.

The **first criminal**, was he objectively guilty? Yes indeed he was – he had committed some crime that justified the death penalty – I'm not sure what one could do that justifies crucifixion, but I guess those were the days.

And what about his feelings of guilt – were they blunted, subjective or neurotic? Yes, they were blunted. He had done wrong, but he did not appear to feel any guilt or remorse about it. Even as he hangs dying on the cross, he insults and abuses Jesus, showing a remarkable degree of arrogance and bluntedness.

What about the **second criminal**. Was he objectively guilty? Yes, just like the first criminal, he too was guilty of a crime. Perhaps they were even accomplices.

And what were his feelings of guilt? Yes – his feeling of guilt was subjective. There are two important things that let us know this:

Firstly, he recognises that he has done wrong and that the punishment is justified. He says, "We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve". He knows he has done wrong and he knows that there is a consequence for his wrongdoing. He probably does not like being crucified, but he recognises that the penalty is just.

And more than that, he recognises that Jesus was innocent – "This man", he says, "has done nothing wrong". While he is objectively guilty, he acknowledges that Jesus is objectively not guilty, objectively innocent.

The second thing that tells us that he is feeling subjective guilt is that the feeling mobilises him to action. He does not hang on the cross, feeling that he is a worm who deserves this terrible fate. Rather, he reaches out to Jesus, saying, "Remember me when you come into your Kingdom". Remember me, forgive me, relate to me. His guilt mobilises him to seek out a relationship with Jesus.

And what is **Jesus'** response? Jesus immediately answers him, "Today, you will be with me in paradise". It's almost an impulsive response by Jesus – without thinking, he says, "Today" – not tomorrow, but today, now, immediately. You will be with me in paradise, we will have a relationship together, we will enjoy fellowship and friendship. Today. There is no ritual, no magic prayer, no baptism, no confirmation, no Eucharist, no church membership, nothing – just a man reaching out in faith and Jesus responding to his faith. This is the bare bones of salvation – a person who recognises that he has done wrong calling on Jesus to remember him.

The Call

I think this story is so important to us for at least two reasons:

Firstly, it tells us that it is never too late to turn to Jesus. This man probably died within an hour of this conversation with Jesus. There was no opportunity for him to make

reparation for what he had done, but Jesus still receives him. Friends, it is never too late for you to turn to Jesus. Sometimes we may feel that we have gone too far, left things too late. But for Jesus, it is never too late. Now is always a good time to reach out to Jesus and ask him to remember us.

And secondly, there is never anything that we can do that is so bad that Jesus cannot forgive us. Nothing. Jesus love is so great, so enduring, so resilient, that he is always capable of forgiving. Our feelings of guilt may be overwhelming. We may have done very wrong things. But Jesus is always, always, able and willing to forgive. We cannot create a permanent barrier between us and Jesus. Jesus, who was innocent, died, so that we, who are guilty, can live.

Some of you may be sitting on the periphery of the Christian faith today. Looking in from the edge, thinking that it looks interesting but feeling not quite ready. Or perhaps you feel you've gone too far, done too much and that God cannot accept you. If so, perhaps today is the day that you need to reach out to Jesus and ask him to remember you. That's really all that is required to become one of his children, to have a relationship with him – reach out and ask him to remember you.

In a moment, I'm going to pray a prayer. If you feel you are ready to take that step, pray along quietly with me. Or if you'd like to, but don't feel quite ready, then listen and think about what the words mean to you. Either way, come up to the front of the church after the service and talk with the people who will be waiting here. They will be able to pray with you and guide you.

Come. Come and receive Jesus' forgiveness. Hear him say to you, "Today, you will be with me in paradise".

Let's pray.

"Lord Jesus, I acknowledge that I have done wrong, that I stand guilty before you. And I'm sorry. I regret these things I've done. I ask that you will forgive me, that you'll remember me, that you'll take me into a relationship with you. I want to be a child of yours. I thank you that you will always answer a prayer like this. And so I receive you as my Lord, my Saviour, my King. Amen."

