COPING WITH 
SHAME AND GUILT

by Norman Bales

INTRODUCTION

Shame and guilt often hinder the progress of satisfactory family relationships. Lewis Smedes in his book, _Shame and Grace_ tells about visiting his mother in the hospital in Muskegon, Michigan. She was going to die within a few weeks and she knew it. She said to her son, "Oh, Lewis, I'm so glad that the Lord forgives all my sins; I've been a greater sinner, you know."

Her son was shocked. He didn't think of his mother as a great sinner. He remembered that she spent her days scrubbing people's kitchen floors to make a living. She spent her nights dealing with the problems of five children and he remembered seeing her on her knees late at night asking the Lord for the strength to get through one more day. When did she ever have either the time or energy to do any great sinning?

As Smedes saw it his mother was feeling guilty because she had not been "good enough." She had not been good enough as a mother or good enough as a Christian. Lewis Smedes said to his mother,"What makes you feel so bad about yourself is not sin, but shame." Guilt and shame aren't exactly the same thing, but they are very closely related. Guilt produces a sense of regret; shame causes us to feel that we are unacceptable. This study is based on the belief that

1. The twin burden of guilt and shame are sources of great unhappiness among people.
2. The burden of guilt and shame often cause us to feel that we are trapped in a web from which there is no escape.

DEFINING GUILT

Among the definitions of guilt, that have been suggested, are the following:

James Dobson  "Guilt is a message of disapproval from the conscience which says in effect, 'you should be ashamed of yourself.'" (_Dr. Dobson Talks About Guilt_ p. 4).
Meier and Minirth. "Guilt is anger toward yourself."  (_Happiness is a Choice_  p. 69).
Bill Flatt said that guilt is "a bothered conscience."
Everybody who has thought very deeply on the matter agrees that guilt is a function of the conscience. In Romans 2, Paul indicates that everyone has a conscience, even those who had no awareness of God's written law had a conscience and they felt guilty. In verse 15 he says "they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and now accusing, now even defending them."

It is the conscience that separates the good from the bad. William Shakespeare wrote,

My conscience hath a thousand several tongues  
And every tongue brings in a several tale  
And every tale condemns me for a villain  
_Richard III_

But conscience does not function in the same way for everybody. Remember the apostle Paul. In Acts 23:1, who said, "I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day." But of course his background included some things that God didn't approve of. He held the garments of the execution squad that stoned Stephen to death and gave consent to their actions. He breathed out threatening and slaughter against the church and put Christians in prison. None of that violated his conscience.

Some of the most heinous crimes that have ever been committed were carried out by men who felt no remorse for their evil actions. Adolph Hitler's final solution to the "Jewish problem" was the indiscriminate killing of men and women and children. There is absolutely no evidence that he ever
felt any remorse or self doubt. It has been alleged that Joseph Stalin was responsible for the death 20 to 30 million people during his reign as Russia's premier, but again there is no evidence that there was any regret or feeling of wrong doing.

On the other hand some people have such consciences that seem to work overtime. It's not unusual for someone to call and say, "I owe you an apology." More often than not, I wasn't even aware of the so-called offense and it involved some kind of minor occurrence that I never gave a second thought. Yet the individual who calls suffers from a pained conscience.

DEFINING SHAME

According to the dictionary shame is a "feeling of guilt." That's important. Guilt is determined by objective criteria. If you've been accused of a crime, the jury will decide whether you are guilty or not guilty. If they do their work properly that decision is rendered on the basis of evidence presented in the trial. But you can feel guilty about things for which there is no concrete evidence of guilt. The dictionary also says that it is a feeling of incompetence. Watch the press conferences with football coaches who are being fired. Many of them show shame in the way they handle themselves. They say things like, "I just didn't get the job done." They feel incompetent and of course thousands of screaming fans help that feeling along. Shame is also a feeling of indecency or blameworthiness.

Smedes gives a slightly different twist in his definition of shame. He says, "We feel guilty for what we do. We feel shame for what we are." Suppose a teen age boys wears a pair of jeans with holes in the knees to church on Sunday night. His mother may feel shame. She thinks the holes in the knees are a reflection on her competence as a mother. In her mind people are forming value judgment. The after dinner conversation in other families will describe her as a bad mother. That's why she feels shame.

TYPES OF GUILT

First of all there is TRUE GUILT. A person feels a sense or shame, embarrassment, unworthiness because he really is guilty. He has sinned in the presence of a holy God. That's what David felt when he said to Nathan in II Samuel 12:13, "I have sinned against the Lord."

But there's also FALSE GUILT. The guilt that mother was feeling because her son showed up a church in ragged clothes is an artificially conditioned guilt. In third world countries, Christians don't have anything else to wear to church. I know a young man who has gone through some tremendous problems relating to his parents. He's not immoral. He's a faithful Christian and active in the church. He reads his Bible regularly, but his parents feel a great burden of guilt. They feel they did an inadequate job of raising him because he reads the New International Version of the Bible and not the King James. That's false guilt. The false guilt has produced an unnecessary sense of shame.

False guilt usually occurs because somebody desires to have power over us and they use guilt as a weapon to bring us under their control. They may use scripture as part of the tool, but quite often the scripture is misinterpreted, taken out of context, and turned into a club to bring a person into subjection.

Clearly, a person must have an awareness of what he has done and what the Bible says about it in order to be convicted of sin and to be able to repent, but once you have done that there is no precedent anywhere in God's word to use guilt feelings as a tool to motivate people to do right. The Biblical standard is to point out sin and then to respect the decision making rights of the individual. The gospel is for whosoever will, not for whosoever's arm we can twist.

"MOOT" OR DEBATABLE GUILT - guilt that we have concerning matters which are open to question. Romans 14 indicates that such matters do exist. And the standard there is, "don't go against your conscience until you can work it out in your mind," and while you're working through it, don't impose your own scruples on others.

HOW GUILT AFFECTS US
It’s fairly obvious that guilt destroys happiness. Mental health experts aren’t in universal agreement with each other on very many things, but nearly all of them agree that guilt is a major cause of clinical depression. Meier and Minirth go so far as to say, "A true Christian will not be able to willfully continue in a known sin for a very long time without developing guilt and depression." (p. 102).

Remember Esau. Hebrews 12:16-17 says, "See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears." Please notice that he sought the blessing. He did not seek to extricate himself from his perverse behavior.

Guilt also has a way of damaging relationships. I think of Saul. He was first disobedient to God in war against the Amalekites. Then when he heard the women singing that Saul had slain his thousands, but David had slain his tens of thousands, he was consumed by an ungodly jealousy. And even though David had once eaten at his table and played the music to soothe this man's troubled heart, Saul determined to get rid of David and David had to run for his life. And the whole thing went back to unresolved guilt.

Besides that, long term unresolved guilt devastates our physical strength. Most scholars believe that David wrote the 32nd Psalm following his sin with Bathsheba. In verses 3 and 4, he said, "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer." Gary Collins suggests that "Whenever tension builds in a person and is not released, the body weakens and eventually breaks down."(Christian Counseling p. 123).

**COPING WITH GUILT**

We've talked all around the subject without actually getting down to how we cope with guilt. In order to effectively cope with guilt we must first of all know as best we can, what's really right and what's really wrong. In other words we need to separate true guilt from false guilt and we need to eliminate as much of the moot or debatable guilt as we can from our system of values.

We often hear people say "Let your conscience be your guide" and we react to that by saying "No, your conscience isn’t always right." But the truth of the matter is that you can't live very effectively if you constantly go against your conscience. So what's needed is a willingness to allow your conscience to be molded and changed by the Word of God. In Acts 24:16, Paul said, "So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man." To do that you've got to maintain an openness with the Word of God. You've got to be a truth seeker. You've to be willing to change when the Word of God conflicts with old patterns of behavior and belief.

In I Peter 2:2-3, the great apostle said, "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good." Notice that he does not say they are new born babies in the family of God. Most of them probably weren't, but they need to crave the truth of God with the same enthusiasm that newly won Christians do. In James 1:21, James says, "Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you." Sometimes people ask me, "Do you believe the same things you believed back in 1955 when you first started preaching?" Of course not. I've grown in my comprehension of the scriptures since then and I hope to do that as long as I live. It's no credit to any individual to say "I don't ever change." To admit that you don't change is to admit that you don't grow.

The second thing we must do in order to cope with guilt is to align ourselves with the demands of an enlightened conscience. That's what the Bible calls repentance. It's not very popular, but it's absolutely essential. Do you remember the statement God made in II Chronicles 7:14, "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked says, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."
The third thing we need to do is to be willing to accept God's offer of grace. Nobody lives a sinlessly perfect life and if he tries to convince you otherwise, you know he's a sinner, because that very claim makes him a liar.

But that's why grace is in the Bible. We can't do it on our own, but the word of God says in Romans 5:8, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." In I John 2:1, John said, "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense--Jesus Christ the righteous one." Many years ago, I met an old gentleman who has since gone on to his reward. He gave me a bit of advice about preaching. He said, "Norman, I grew up under preaching in which sin was exposed and eternal condemnation was proclaimed as the inevitable end of the sinner, but I never heard our preachers talk about forgiveness." He said "I left the church and stayed away for many years until I came to realize that the same Bible that teaches eternal condemnation as the punishment for sin teaches that God wants to forgive our sins." He said "Norman, by all means condemn sin, and preach about the punishment for sin, but don't leave out forgiveness." I think that was good advice.

CONCLUSION

The key to coping with guilt is to align yourself with Christ first and then let Christ help you make the adjustments. You can't do it the other way. It's impossible, because human strength alone cannot overcome the power of evil. Christ is the key to coping with our guilt. He must be our everything. If it's not that way, the only option that I can see is to be consumed and overwhelmed by our guilt. And to me that's not a comforting option.