

No. 7

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DON'T BE A DONKEY

Psalm 32:1-5

INTRODUCTION

A young Jewish man calls his Jewish mother who lives in Florida. He says, "How are you mom?" "Not so good," she says, "I'm very weak." Alarmed the son says, "What's wrong, Mom? Why are you so weak?" "I haven't eaten in a month," she answers. The son says, "Mom, that's awful! Why haven't you eaten for a month?" She says, "Because I didn't want my mouth to be full of food if you should call."

Ah, guilt. The stereotypical Jewish mother is superb at inflicting it. I actually had an encounter with a Jewish mother at a wedding once in which she started down the road to a guilt trip for me before I was able to step on the brakes. It was kind of funny. And we laugh at jokes about moms who bring the guilt. But there's nothing funny about guilt. A study of 5th, 8th and 11th graders on the subject of guilt was done back 20 years ago and they found to no one's surprise that parents are the people who most frequently engendered guilt for the kids. One journal of psychiatry defined guilt this way: "Guilt is conceptualized as a negative cognitive and emotional experience that occurs when a person realizes or believes that they have violated a standard of conduct or morals and that they could have done better." One thing in that definition that I know is true is that guilt is both cognitive and emotional. It impacts both our heads and our hearts and it can be a very unpleasant experience.

As we are considering some of the downsides of life one of them we must address is guilt. We will see an excellent example of how we should handle it in Psalm 32:1-5 where David dealt with his personal guilt.

EXPOSITION

GUILT IS REAL

1. Scholars do not agree on the date of the composition of this Psalm. Some think David wrote it following the incident when he committed adultery with Bathsheba. Others disagree and believe this Psalm was written on some other occasion. Whatever the case, it is clear that David felt guilty.
2. David used 3 different Hebrew words in this Psalm to refer to the cause of his guilt. He spoke of transgressions, which are direct violations of God's commands, sin, which is the general term for deviating in any way

- from true good and holiness, and iniquity, which means being distorted. Part of the reason for this use of different expressions was literary. David was writing a poem. But the very existence of these various terms for causes of guilt tells us they come in a variety of forms. David was feeling guilty of wrong in all of its breadth.
3. There is a key question we must ask. Why did David feel guilty? David felt guilty because he was guilty. He had transgressed God's commands. He was not lined up with what is good and holy and there was distortion in him. He is not the only one.
 4. Guilt is a pervasive reality. Psychologist Roy Baumeister of Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland did extensive studies on guilt. He concluded that on average people feel guilty about 2 hours a day. They feel moderate to severe guilt for 39 minutes every day. In his book *Guilt: How To Recognize It and Cope With It*, Leo Madow wrote, "We all feel (guilt) in varying amounts and for different reasons. We experience some form of it almost every day of our lives."
 5. We have feelings of guilt for the same reason David did. We are guilty. Our guilt derives from two basic problems. The first is that *what we do* is wrong.
 - a. Likely this Psalm was written in the aftermath of a particular action that David knew to be wrong. All of us will experience this in our lives because we all are imperfect.
 - b. It could be a lie you told, a time you fudged on your tax return, a time you shared the latest gossip about a friend that cast the person in a less than favorable light. It might be the time your patience wore thin and you lost your temper at someone or the time you said or did something that was unkind, insensitive or downright mean. That is often understandable. It could be something way more significant, something that could really harm someone you love. It could be that there was something you should have done but you didn't do it.
 - c. In John 8 a group of religious leaders brought a woman who was caught in the act of adultery to Jesus. Maybe this woman's husband came home and found her with another man. We don't know what happened but she was guilty and had no excuse. They brought the woman to Jesus to put him in a bind. They wanted to make him either

look harsh or weak on God's Law. His solution was brilliant. He uttered the famous words in John 8:7, "Let any of you who is without sin throw the first stone at her." No one took him up on it because they all knew they had sinned. These were the religious leaders, the most righteous people in a theocratic nation.

- d. Voltaire added to our burden of grief when he said, "Every man is guilty of all the good he did not do." Wow, there's a lot of good I could have done in this world that I haven't managed. Great, now I've really got a load of guilt.
 - e. Generally speaking in the church there is a lot of focus on sins, on the things we do wrong. I don't wish to minimize or make wrong actions like that seem less wrong. Whenever we violate a command of God it is a bad thing. But there is a deeper level we can and must go to on the issue of guilt. It is important that we understand this other level because it affects every day of our lives.
6. The other aspect of sin is that something about ***who we are*** is wrong.
- a. When David used the term for "iniquity" he gives a glimpse of this. The verb form of this word meant to bend, or to distort. A common meaning for the root of it was "twist." So iniquity is being twisted. In Isaiah 24:1 the prophet wrote, "See the Lord is going to lay waste to the earth and devastate it; he will ruin its face." The word "ruin" is the verb form of "iniquity." When David used this word he was saying he was ruined, twisted. There was something wrong with who he was.
 - b. We recently visited the National World War II museum. If you ever go there you will at some points find yourself appalled. There is no way to tell the story of that conflict without depicting the utter horror of the Nazi's revolting campaign against Jewish people. But nearly as awful was the brutality of the Japanese in the Pacific. That evening after we had been there when we were eating dinner I asked, "What is your reaction to the museum?" Michael answered immediately, "There's something terribly wrong with the human race."
 - c. You see pictures of concentration camps, of tortured prisoners and read the stories of unimaginable brutality and horror and it is just sickening. But then you reflect on the larger context in which the human race dealt with its problems through the slaughter of millions

of people. It makes no sense. Michael is right. There is something deeply wrong with us.

- d. We could excuse ourselves saying that we have never been a part of any of that. Yet we all have this sense that there is something wrong with us. I find that often when I am quiet, perhaps when I spend some time in prayer I become aware of this sense that there is something wrong with me. I do not measure up. I'm not what I ought to be and I'm certainly not what God wants me to be. I feel that inside.
- e. Do you ever find that in your heart? Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly (cheek sent mi hai), now at Claremont Graduate School, discovered when people were asked to record their thoughts in moments of silence they tended toward disquiet, a sense of unease. Others have found the same thing. What they find is we are uneasy because we know we're not what we should be. We're bent, twisted.
- f. The Scriptures tell us that since the disaster in the Garden of Eden there has been something wrong with human nature. Romans 3:10 says, "there is no one righteous, not even one." Romans 3:23 says, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." The glory of God is his character. It is such goodness, such love, such purity, such kindness and grace that it is glorious. Who would say, "If you could know my heart and my thoughts you would see that it is all Godlike. It is that pure and good"? No one. Far from it. We know deep within us we are not like God.
- g. That wrongness is deeper than simply doing some sins, though those are surely wrong. It is a twistedness about the human soul that has caused it to turn in on itself. It makes everything about self. This wrongness taints even the good things that we do. Imagine that the main pipe bringing water into your house somehow gets contaminated with bacteria that can give you Montezuma's Revenge. Everything that comes out of that pipe will be contaminated. The water is not the problem. Before it hit your pipe it was just fine. It was something in the pipe that's the problem. That's like us. Some of the things we do are good. But they get contaminated by the thing within us. It is this contaminating twistedness that we sense in those quiet moments and that is a much deeper problem than the wrongs we might commit. The wrongs are the result of it.

7. I don't have to talk to some of you about guilt, because it is your default. You feel guilty even when you're not guilty of anything other than being a fallen human like every other person on the planet. There are people who are travel agents anxious to send you on a guilt trip. There are churches that major in guilt. The whole point is to make you feel like you need to do more, give more, feel worse about yourself because you are so awful. The point today is not to pour guilt on you. It is to acknowledge that we are all guilty and that we struggle with guilt. In other words, we can all identify with David in his dilemma.

GUILT IS GOOD

1. It doesn't feel like guilt is good. Guilt absolutely destroys some people and it feels bad to all of us. It can cause us to be depressed, discouraged, even to become physically ill. It can cause us to go overboard trying to compensate for our guilt in unhealthy ways. In what sense is guilt good?
2. There is a village called Vittangi in northern Sweden that has only 784 residents. This small town is famous for an odd anomaly. Of those 784 villagers 40 have congenital analgesia. That means they do not feel pain. Experts estimate one person in a million has this condition. Few of us would say that pain is good. But neurologist Dr. David Bennett says, "Pain has a real biological usefulness. It tells you that something is amiss so that you can take action." Feeling no pain is a dangerous condition.
 - a. Steve Pete grew up in rural Washington state. He and his brother both had congenital analgesia. He describes how dangerous it is. When he was very young he chewed off a quarter of his tongue while he was teething. He felt no pain. He recalls a time he went roller skating at a skating rink when he was a boy. He only realized something was amiss when he saw people with horrified looks on their faces pointing at him. They were stunned by his blood soaked pants and the sight of his broken tibia sticking out through his skin.
 - b. Pain doesn't feel good and no normal person enjoys it. But as Dr. Bennett says it serves a vital function. It warns us that something is wrong. Part of the reason cancer is such a dangerous disease is that it usually causes no pain in its early stages when it is most curable. By the time one feels pain from cancer it is very serious.

- c. Guilt is kind of like pain. No one enjoys it. It does not feel good. But it serves a crucial function. It tells us that something is wrong. It says we need help.
3. In David's case were it not for the guilt he might well have persisted in whatever he was doing that was wrong behavior. He began feeling the effect of guilt. In verse 3 he says, "My bones wasted away through my groaning all day long." In verse 4 he says "my strength was sapped." He realized that something had to change. He was getting signals that he needed help. He did turn to the Lord and you see the result in verse 1. "Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered." The noun form of the word "blessed" meant "happiness." *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* says it meant "to be envied." In verse 11 David talked about the result of being forgiven. "Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous. Sing, all you who are upright in heart." That's a very different place to be. But David would never have gotten there had it not been for his guilt.
4. So it is important for us to pay attention to the guilt that we feel. It can keep us from doing further damage to ourselves. It can lead to health, to being able to sing and rejoice. But that will only happen if we respond correctly to guilt.

GUILT CAN BE RELIEVED

1. There are only 4 alternatives for dealing with guilt.
 - a. The first is to **ignore it**.

Do you know anyone who has great pain tolerance and whose approach to dealing with pain is to just grin and bear it? Some people do this with guilt, and most of us have done it at some point in our lives. Maybe it will go away.

The problem is physical pain tells you there is something wrong and usually that doesn't get better by continuing to do the thing that caused the pain in the first place. For a couple of years I had some minor pain in my forearm. I just ignored it. I figured it would eventually go away. But it didn't go away. Then I started playing tennis. The pain in my arm started getting worse. It got a lot worse. I finally did something about it. I went to the doctor and he gave me a cortisone shot. Within days it got better. It was good for about 5 months and then it came

back. It came back with a vengeance. It got to where it hurt to shake someone's hand. Even shaving or turning a knob to open a door was very painful. I finally decided I needed to treat the problem and resolve it. I found an exercise that has solved it.

You can ignore guilt, but it is not going away and it will not get better by doing nothing. David's example is important. When he ignored the guilt he was in pain. God's hand was heavy on him so that his strength was sapped. Everything became hard.

Recently when we were visiting Michael and Carissa they asked if we could help them move their treadmill. It was out in the garage, but they wanted to move it into the house because it was too stinking hot in the garage to use it there. No problem. Well, actually there were two. One was it is big, so big it wouldn't fit through the door from the garage into the house. We had to carry it all the way out of the garage and around the house to the front door which is wider. The other problem is in addition to being big it is heavy. It weighs 300 pounds. It is the easiest thing in the world to walk from their garage around to the front door. I can do it in seconds with no exertion whatsoever. But Michael and I had to exert mightily and at a couple of points thought that thing was going to defeat us. My arms were a little sore for several days after that effort.

Think of yourself on guilt as going through life carrying that 300 pound treadmill. A couple of years ago Steven Berglas, a psychotherapist, wrote in an article in *Forbes* magazine that it takes a ton of energy to suppress guilt. Suppressing guilt makes life exhausting and you may well spiritually injure yourself.

Sometimes people try to not feel guilt by anaesthetizing themselves to it. Typically that involves drugs or alcohol to dull it so they can ignore it, though it may involve other addictions. But that never works. Last year Laurie had surgery in which some of her original manufacturer's equipment was removed. When she was in the hospital that had her on an IV that included a powerful pain killer. They gave her a button she could push whenever she was hurting to get a shot of the painkiller and get relief. She loved that button and she was not

the least bit shy about using it. The problem is that pain killer was not healing her. What she needed was for all the wounds from the incisions where they had cut out part of her body to heal. Only when that happened would she be healthy and would the pain go away for good.

So much of what our society is doing is trying to take spiritual pain killers. The problem is they're not solving the underlying problem.

b. The second alternative is to *excuse it*.

This option has become an art form in our society. Listen to some of the apologies when the latest athlete or celebrity has stuck his foot in his mouth or been caught in yet another misstep. The apologies seem to lack the ring of sincerity.

But the most common thing we see today is rationalizing the wrong. There are the ones you heard from your kids. "He started it." "Everybody else is doing it." There are others we commonly come up with. "It could have been worse." "That person deserved it." "I need this to be happy." "I can't help it, it's just the way I'm wired."

Have you ever wondered about why some people seem so intent on insisting that we are all here only as a result of lots of accidents, that we are nothing but the product of physical events and chance? Have you ever noticed that there seems to be a strong push to eliminate God from all public conversation in our society? Why is that? A big part of the reason is everyone knows if you can remove God from the equation maybe you can do away with guilt. If there is no God ultimately there is no morality and there is no one we have to answer to. This enables us to do whatever we feel like and we don't have to feel bad about it being "wrong" since there is no wrong. That way we can tell ourselves we don't ever have to feel guilty.

In her book, *Rumors*, Anna Godberson pinpoints this problem when she writes, "Diana knew it wouldn't be right, but then she told herself things only looked wrong when there was someone to see you."

There are now counselors whose main objective in dealing with guilt is to tell people they don't need to feel it. There are surely times when people feel false guilt and it is appropriate to tell them they don't need to feel it. But our society is intent on convincing itself that what used to be taboo is now acceptable. We have evolved so that we don't need to feel bad about those ancient social dicta that no longer apply in our advanced, enlightened age. In other words, we don't need to feel guilty. What we are doing is just fine. The mantra now is that the only thing you need to feel bad about is feeling bad about yourself or making others feel bad about themselves.

We're becoming like the guy who goes into a restaurant and is seated at a table. When his server asks what he would like to drink he orders a Coke. When the server delivers it the patron throws it in his face. The server is incensed, but the patron says, "I am so terribly sorry. I have this horrible compulsion. I can't help it. Whenever someone hands me a drink I throw it in their face and I can't stop myself." The server angrily says, "You need get help." He agrees. He decides right then he has to get this under control so he checks himself into a clinic to get help. He undergoes intense therapy for a month. When he gets out of the clinic he returns to the restaurant. He says to the server, "I've just been through a month in a clinic, and I am happy to tell you that I am cured. Would you please bring me a Coke?" The server says, "I'm not sure about this. Are you really cured?" The guy says, "Trust me, I am truly cured." The server brings him the drink, but as soon as he hands it to him the guy throws it right in his face. The server is furious and yells, "I thought you were cured!" He says, "I am cured. I still have the compulsion, but I don't feel guilty about it anymore." Maybe not, but it's still a problem. Until we resolve the problem we will never be healthy.

c. The third alternative is to *obsess over it*.

Another approach is to keep beating ourselves up over our guilt. We tell ourselves how awful we are, how we are lower than worm castings, and that we deserve something awful in order to somehow make up for it.

The *Psychological Science* journal published the results of an interesting study about guilt in April, 2011. Some subjects were asked to think about a time when they had done something mean or unkind and to write a short essay about it. Others were asked to think about a routine event and write about that. Following the writing all subjects were asked to put their hands in a bucket of agonizingly cold ice water. Those who had reflected on something they felt guilty about inflicted more pain on themselves by leaving their hands in the painfully cold water longer than the others. The study concluded, “We tend to associate pain with justice, as a form of punishment. So when we’re feeling bad about an immoral act we committed experiencing pain makes us feel like we have rebalanced the scales of justice, and therefore it resolves our guilt.”

That’s why we beat ourselves up. We’re trying to resolve our own guilt. It won’t work. Aldous Huxley correctly wrote, “Rolling in the muck is not the best way of getting clean.” What we need is more real than trying to cause ourselves pain.

d. The fourth alternative is to *confess it*.

David shows us the way in this Psalm. “I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord’ and you forgave the guilt of my sin.” Turn to God and confess.

The Hebrew word translated “acknowledge” actually is the word for “to know.” That doesn’t seem like a particularly significant thing to do. I know my sin? Yeah, uh, that’s why I felt guilty in the first place. But the translators got it right by using the word “acknowledge.” When you acknowledge sin you say it exists and that it is a bad thing you don’t want.

This step of acknowledging our wrong to God is critical. In the New Testament we see it in 1 John 1:9. “If we confess our sins, he (God) is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” Being forgiven and having the problem fixed begins with confessing, acknowledging.

Some people turn try to turn that verse into a formula. Here are the steps for dealing with sin, they say. That's not really John's point. He's contrasting the one who acknowledges the problem simply with one who refuses to do so. In verse 8 you see the contrast. "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." If we excuse it or ignore it, we kidding ourselves and telling lies. We need to acknowledge it.

2. Why does God make a big deal out of acknowledging sin?
 - a. I can understand this to some extent even at the human level. We recently took our new car into the dealer to get it detailed. We did this because they told us it needed to happen because there was some sap on the car from the storage lot. We took it in and they washed it, then said it would require more than that, so we needed to bring it back and leave it for the day so they could detail it. We did, but when we picked it up it was obvious they had done nothing. The sap was still there and the car was dirtier than when we dropped it off. So we called them and told them there was a problem. They said bring it back in. They didn't really believe us. But then Laurie took the car in and showed the service manager. His response was interesting. He said, "I don't know what happened there. I can't say what was done or what wasn't done, but you should leave the car with us and we'll get this taken care of." I found that to be a poor response. The fact that he told us we needed to leave it there, again, and they needed to do the work means as we had told them they hadn't done a thing. Eventually he called and said, "We sinned. We kept your car, told you we had detailed it but we did not do the work." Well, he didn't say they sinned, he did admit they had detailed someone else's car by mistake and hadn't touched ours. There is something right and important about acknowledging sin and full reconciliation doesn't happen until that step is taken. Had he not taken that step I would have not trusted that company much. His acknowledging their sin resolved the problem.
 - b. Until we acknowledge that there is wrong we have no need to address the wrong. It is only when we acknowledge wrong that we agree that something needs to be done about it. It is at that next step that we often miss the bigger issue. For our car dealer the right steps were to apologize, to actually do the work on the car and to do something to make up for the extra inconvenience they caused us, which they did. They promised a free car detail whenever we want it. We typically

think when we acknowledge the wrong the next step is that we simply need to fix the problem. So if my sin is I've been mean to people I need to stop being mean. If I've lusted I need to stop.

- c. Now certainly if there are wrong actions I need to change them. But remember one of the problems is not just what we do, it's who we are. We must acknowledge there is something wrong inside of us. How are we going to fix that? Am I supposed to somehow change my nature? But then am I supposed to be something other than human? How can I do that? Furthermore, how am I going atone for that? If I have done wrong to someone, I need to make that right. But what if every single deed I've done in my entire life is tainted? How am I supposed to make up for that nearly infinite litany of tainted deeds?
 - d. The answer is, of course, I can't fix those things. My only hope is to throw myself upon the mercy and grace of God. And that's exactly what God wants. If I do anything else all I will do is in my human effort create more tainted deeds as a way of trying to make it right.
3. In 1 John 1:9 the apostle wrote that God is faithful and just. He is just in that he will judge every single hint of evil that is in us. That's what we need him to do. He would not be good if he just winked at evil and said, "Oh, it's all right." He must judge it, and he has. That's where the "faithful" part comes in. He has judged it by sending his Son, Jesus Christ, into this world to take the judgment of our evil on himself. Our wrong, all of it, has been dealt with. Hebrews 10:14 says of Jesus' death on the cross, "by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy." In verses 17-18 the writer quotes God saying, "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more. And where these have been forgiven there is no longer any sacrifice for sin."
4. But I still sense that wrong in me. I still fall short. How can it be that God would accept me despite all that? Well, the bill has been paid. We have had this happen twice in our lives. We were in a restaurant and when we finished our meal we asked for the bill. Our server said, "Actually your bill has been paid. Some people, apparently friends of yours, covered it for you." At that point there is nothing left to pay. Even if I feel guilty about not paying for my food, the bill has been paid. The bill for our wrong has been paid. The whole thing has been paid. What can you add

to what Jesus did on that cross? Nothing. You are forgiven, and as David said, that makes you a person who is blessed, happy, to be envied.

5. But I am imperfect. How can God put up with me? I have mentioned before that I used to play hockey with some guys in our church. A few times Laurie came to watch our games. When she was there I always wanted to play well so that she could be proud of me. I never did. I tried hard but I played the way I always did, which was poorly. Not once did Laurie yell out, "Come on Rick. You're embarrassing me here. You stink so badly I can smell it way over here." She never once said after another game of mostly epic fail on my part, "I don't think I want to be married to you. You're just so awful I don't want to be associated with you." No, she just loved me and my failures on the rink didn't make one iota of difference. And that's how God loves us when we turn to him.

CONCLUSION

There are three things we can do to apply this message:

First, heed verse 9. "Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle." Don't be a donkey. In other words, don't refuse to acknowledge what is wrong in your before God. Acknowledge to God your wrong and your need for his forgiveness. Don't excuse your sin, don't ignore it, don't obsess over it. Turn to him and trust that in Jesus he will forgive it, all of it, completely. If the guilt you feel is because of something you have done to another person the same principle applies. You need to go to that person and admit your wrong, asking for forgiveness. You may need to do that today. Remember, guilt is sapping your strength, so deal with it.

Second if you find yourself struggling because you feel guilty before God even though you have put your faith in him, remind yourself of the truth of this passage. God does not want you to be defeated, wallowing and beating yourself up. He wants you to rejoice because you are forgiven.

Finally, thank God continually for the gift of forgiveness. Thank him that he has set you free from guilt.