

GUILT AND GRACE
Good News About Grace - Part 2 of 10
James 2:10 (TLB)
Tom Holladay

"The person who keeps every law of God but makes one little slip is just as guilty as the person who has broken every law there is." James 2:10 (TLB)

I. WHAT IS GUILT?

"My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear." Psa. 38:4 (NIV)

Guilt is _____

There are two kinds of guilt

* _____ Guilt

* _____ Guilt

"You began your life in Christ by the Spirit. Now are you trying to make it complete by your own power? That is foolish." Gal. 3:3

How do I tell the difference? Is the focus on ...

People or God?

Vague or Specific?

Rules or Relationship?

II. OUR WAYS OF HANDING GUILT

"... they sewed fig leaves together and made something to cover themselves...they hid from the Lord God... 'I was afraid because I was naked'... 'she gave me fruit from the tree, so I ate it.'" Gen. 3:7-12 (NCV)

III. GOD'S WAY OF HANDLING GUILT: _____

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

1. Confess _____

* Tell _____

"God, You know what I have done wrong. I cannot hide my guilt from You."
Psa. 69:5 (NCV)

* Trust _____

"Let us come near to God with a sincere heart and a sure faith, because we have been made free from a guilty conscience." Heb. 10:22 (NCV)

* Accept _____

"People who believe in God's Son are not judged guilty." John 3:18 (NCV)

"I finally admitted all my sins to You and stopped trying to hide them. I said to myself, 'I will confess them to the Lord.' And You forgave me! All my guilt is gone." Psa. 32:5 (TLB)

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Article in the *San Diego Union*. The scene was the San Diego superior court. Two men were on trial for armed robbery. An eye witness took the stand and the prosecutor got up to begin his questioning. First he asked the eyewitness, "You were at the scene of the robbery?" Yes, answered the witness. "You saw a vehicle leave at a high rate of speed?" Yes. "Did you observe the occupants?" asked the prosecutor. Yes. The prosecutor in a booming prosecutor's voice said, "And are those two men in this courtroom today?" At this point the defendants sealed their fate. They both raised their hand.

Let's admit it. We're going to be talking about guilt today. The truth is, All of us at some point in our lives have to honestly say "I did it." There are things we've all struggled with. We're all in the same boat.

James 2:10 *"The person who keeps every law of God but makes one little slip is just as guilty as the person who has broken every law there is."*

Obviously, when it comes to the way we evaluate guilt, there are different degrees of guilt. Some people commit crime they deserve to have "this" happen to them. This is justice.

But this is talking about God's kind of justice. Recognizing the fact that whether it's one sin or many in our lives we've all slipped, we've all sinned and we're all in the same boat. Let's deal with this together and recognize that God has an answer.

We're going to talk this morning about, What is it that real guilt is? What's the difference between real guilt and another kind of guilt, a false kind of guilt? We're going to talk about how our ways of dealing with guilt differ greatly from God's way of dealing with guilt. We're going to hear a story from a man who's life was almost overwhelmed by his guilt before he found the answer.

1. WHAT IS GUILT?

We all know what it feels like. This verse in the Bible reminds us what it feels like, *"My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear."* Everyone of us knows that overwhelmed, burdened feeling. That feeling of, "I hope nobody finds out." But is that all there is to guilt? Is that what God means it to be? Is it some kind of punishment that He sends into my life/your life when we've done something wrong? He says "OK, you did something wrong. Live with this for a while!" Does He mean for us to do that, for a while or the rest of our lives? No.

The purpose of guilt is not just to make you feel bad. He has a greater purpose than that. Guilt is actually a warning light. Picture it that way. It's a warning light that goes off that says, "Something's wrong. Something needs to be fixed." It's like the warning light that goes off on the dashboard of your car which says something's wrong.

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Does it help to break the warning light when it's going off? No, it's saying something needs to be fixed.

Chaundel and I have this conversation that goes on in the car sometimes. We're driving down the road and she says, "What was that? I heard a sound in the engine. Sounds like something's wrong." I say, "I didn't hear anything." She's got a pretty good ear. She's usually hearing that something actually is wrong. But I know if something's wrong, I'm going to have to fix it, so I "don't hear anything"! For me, the engine has to actually fall out before I admit that something is actually wrong.

That's the way we deal with guilt many times. We try to ignore it or pretend it's not there. We've got lots of different ways of dealing with this warning light that God sends into our life.

But the truth is, if something really is wrong, the best thing to do is to get it fixed. I could try to fix the car myself but I'm not very good at that. So I need to take it back to the manufacturer.

That's what we need to do with our lives. That's what the warning light is saying. It's saying, "You need some time with God. You need God to heal this." That's the warning light that God's bringing in.

Before we look at the difference of how we try to deal with that warning light and how God's able to deal with it, how we try to fix ourselves and how He's able to fix us, we've got to make a very important distinction. There's an important distinction to discover about guilt. There's two different kinds.

There is genuine guilt. The real deal. We've all dealt with that, the genuine guilt that comes from the fact that we've all done wrong things that have hurt ourselves, hurt others, and hurt the heart of God. That's the honest truth. Unless we're perfect (and none of us are) we've all had to deal with this real thing of guilt. This feeling of genuine guilt.

There's another brand of guilt that is very important to understand if you're going to get past this and find God's grace in the midst of it. That is false guilt. That's thinking that maybe there might be a light on the dashboard that comes on and you're so worried about it that you worry yourself into a guilt. That's feeling like, "If a light on the dashboard ever came on, what would people think of me?" There's many people who deal with this false guilt. I can't tell you how many times I've heard people say something like this, "I just have this overwhelming feeling of guilt. I don't know where it comes from. I can't really put my thumb on it. I don't know the source of it. But I just feel bad." If you're dealing with false guilt you're probably sending yourself a lot of mental e-mail. And they read something like this, "You think that's enough... You call that acceptable Look at all the things you haven't gotten finished. ... You have disappointed the people that are around you." That's the kinds of things you're hearing a lot if you're dealing with false guilt.

We need to understand that often false guilt in our lives, if we struggle a lot with this, is the result of incidences that may not have been your fault. Some of the people who struggle the most with false guilt, struggle because they were caught up in the circle of someone else's sin at some point

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in their lives. It may be a parent, a friend, a physical, mental or emotional abuse. But somehow, maybe even at an early age, you were caught up in the cycle of someone else's sin and you feel that you just can't get that out of your life. Maybe it was even one of your own children. You feel like because of what they have done, that's come upon your life.

There is also times that false guilt is there because you just can't get past your past. This is what I hear people say when they're feeling this way. "I've asked God a thousand times to forgive me and I just can't feel forgiven." That's when you can't get past your past.

Probably all of us have dealt in some ways with false guilt. What we need to understand today is that false guilt is very popular among church goers. It's a great thing in church. It produces a faith that is more walls than doors. There's no way out. It closes in on you. It's been a problem for those who've been trying to find the truth of God for a long time.

Way back in the New Testament, in the book of Galatians, Paul talks to some people who are struggling with false guilt trying to make themselves feel better by doing a lot of good things. He wrote to them in Galatia and said, *"You began your life in Christ by the Spirit. Now are you trying to make it complete by your own power? That is foolish."* But that's the sign of what happens when we struggle with false guilt. We can't feel forgiven by God so we try more and more to make it better by our own power.

I think one of the best things we can do as we talk about guilt is talk about how do you know the difference. How do you know the difference between true guilt and false guilt? How do you know if it's God who's speaking to you or your Jewish grandmother or Sister Margaret from parochial school or Brother Bob from some fundamentalist church? How do you know who it is who's really speaking to you?

Three tests. Three tests that will help you and I determine, discern whether this is true guilt or false guilt.

1. Is the focus on people or is it on God? Dr. Paul Tournier says, "False guilt is that which comes as the results of judgments and the suggestions of men." True guilt is that which comes as a result of divine judgment, what God thinks about the situation. If you're struggling with false guilt, you're going to find yourself striving a lot for approval. You'll be an approval junkie. You need other people's approval to make you feel better about yourself. It's a daily fix that you need. And you need more and more to help you feel better about yourself. The real problem with this, when you're struggling with false guilt, is you live a lot of life worn out. Why? I have a hard enough time just living up to my own expectations. If you have to live up to everybody else's expectations to get their approval, that wears you out. A lot of you know exactly what I'm talking about. Is it people or is it God?

2. Is it vague or is it specific? Sometimes people will say something like this, "It's this cloud of doubt... a fog of guiltiness..." and they don't know how to get rid of it. I'll ask them what it leads back to, what's the struggle they're facing. And they really can't say. Almost all the time when it's the vague, foggy feeling of guilt, it's Satan talking to you and not God. God, when He wants to tell us we've done something wrong and help us get it right, He does it like a pinpoint of

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light, not this vague cloudy thing. When God wants to speak to me about something, He's able to do it like a pinpoint of light. He just does it everywhere I am. I hear a sermon and it's on that subject. I turn on the radio -- somebody's preaching on that subject, or singing a song on that subject. I watch a situation comedy and it's on that subject! Everything is about that. God does that. So is it this vague feeling of guilt that you don't really know where it's coming from or is it God's pinpoint of light saying, "Here's what is wrong and here's how to get it fixed."

3. Rules or relationships? When you're struggling with false guilt the big feeling is, "I broke the rules." When you're struggling with genuine guilt the feeling is, "I hurt someone. I hurt my wife/husband/children/the heart of God because of what I did." That's the difference between the two. The rules become more important than the relationship. So it becomes a religion rather than a relationship. In church it becomes duty rather than desire. False guilt blinds us to the miraculous work of God and it binds us to the meticulous rules of men. Which would you rather have?

Whatever kind of guilt we're dealing with -- true guilt/false guilt -- we've got ways of dealing with it and God's got ways of dealing with it.

OUR WAYS OF HANDING GUILT

Back to the light on the dashboard: What are you going to do when that light goes off? How do you handle it? It's amazing how we have common ways of handling these feelings. They go all the way back to the first man, the first woman, the first sin. The ways they dealt with that first sin are pretty common today. Probably all of us can relate to them.

Genesis 3 the Bible tells us that they first sewed fig leaves together and made something to cover themselves. Then they hid from the Lord God. Then when challenged, Adam said, "*I was afraid because I was naked. She gave me some fruit from the tree, so I ate it.*" Three ways that are indicated in the way they responded and the way we respond today too.

1. We often respond with shame. We feel bad about it. If you think you can feel bad enough about the wrong things you've done to make them ok, probably most of you have already discovered that doesn't work. I sure have. Shame doesn't work. They sewed fig leaves and tried to hide out.

2. Hiding. They hid in the bushes from God, as if God couldn't see them there. That's like trying to put your hand over the light on the dashboard that's going off, pretending that nothing is really wrong. It doesn't work. But they tried that one. They hid out.

3. Blame. This is a popular one. It's sort of a tragic, humorous story what happens in Genesis. You've got Adam and Eve and the serpent standing there and God comes. God asks Adam, "Did you eat of that fruit of that tree?" Adam took it like a man and he blamed his wife. He points right at Eve, "She did it. It's her fault. She gave me the fruit." So Eve's standing here, blamed too. She points at the serpent, "The serpent did it." Of course the serpent didn't have a leg to stand on...

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Isn't it easy to try to blame your way out of the wrong things that have happened? We all do this.

I was thinking about the first car that I ever owned back in college, a '64 Dodge Dart. I was driving this car to church one day, about 20 minutes away from our dorm. On the way I heard this incredibly terrible sound from the back. I pulled over, looked at the car. The car looked absolutely fine to me. I called a mechanic that I knew and he said that sounded bad, "You'd better get that in to somebody right away." But I knew another mechanic about twenty miles down the road that I thought might be cheaper. The car looked fine to me. I thought I'd drive it down to the other mechanic. I got about two miles down the freeway and the rear tire flew off the car.

What do you do when the wheels come off? When you've looked at it and said, "Everything looks fine and I can make it a little bit further." Then it doesn't work any more. All the blame, all the shame, all the ways we've got of dealing with guilt. What do you do when that happens?

God has a way of dealing with guilt, too. Very different from our ways.

GOD'S WAY OF HANDLING GUILT: GRACE

When I was a brand new Christ -- 23, 24 years ago -- one of the first verses of the Bible that I was taught about how to live this new life that God was giving to me was 1 John 1:9 *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."* Circle *"if we confess our sins"* -- that's part of dealing with guilt. That's part of God's grace. Circle *"He is faithful and just"* -- seeing how true that is, is also a part of grace and how it works. Circle *"will forgive us"*.

That's how we deal with the guilt that makes us sick and splits us up and tears us apart.

1. Confess your sins. You say, "God, I did it. I confess my sin." Not just our need -- our sin. Not just our frustration -- our sin. Not just our problems -- our sin.

What does that word mean -- sin? There's a lot of fancy definitions out there. The easiest way to understand it for me is to look at the middle letter in the word. Sin is all about "I". It's all about my way. It's all about me saying to God, "Excuse me, but I'm going to live my life my own way. I've got my own plans." It's about me looking at the car and saying, "It looks ok to me so I'm leaving you out." That's what it's all about. Whether you look very moral in this world's eyes, or very immoral, you can still have that "I" right in the middle of your life. Leaving God out.

That's what sin is all about. Tell God, "God, I left You out. Because of it, I messed up and it messed my life up."

When it comes to sin we do one of two things -- cover up or face up. We try to cover it up and pretend it's not there or we face up to it. When you face up to it, the number one thing we need to do is to tell God that we're facing up to it. How do you confess your sin? You tell God. You might as well tell Him, He already knows. He already knows everything so why not tell Him.

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Why not be honest about it? Psalm 69:5 *"God you know what I have done wrong. I cannot hide my guilt from You."* There's nothing more difficult than trying to hide something that cannot be hidden. There is nothing more wearying, nothing more costly. Why try to hide it from God? Tell Him. Be honest with Him.

Telling God -- confessing to God -- means more than just admitting. The literal meaning of this word is "saying the same thing about". You say to God, "I agree with You about this. It's wrong and it hurt. I agree with what You think about this sin. I agree with what You think about this wrong that I've done."

How do you do that? How do you tell God? You do it through prayer. You can talk to God. Even right now where you're seated just start to talk to Him about it. He'll listen. Talk to Him about the things you've done. Just make a list of the things that come to mind. Some of you might want to do this in a more visible way. I've found it a very healthy thing to do. Sit down with a piece of paper and write down the sins that come to mind whether you feel like they're true guilt or false guilt, just write them down. After you've written them down, do something very visual. Take this verse -- 1 John 1:9 -- over each of those sins. Then burn it. It visually says to you, "God forgave that sin. He's willing to forgive that sin...." His grace covers my sins. Tell God.

The Bible also encourages us to also tell a trusted friend. There's something healing about that. Look at what James 5:16 says, *"Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so God can heal you."* You may have told God a hundred times but never told anyone else. Because of that you're still struggling with guilt that keeps coming up about that sin. There's something healing about telling a trusted friend. It's got to be the right person, but when you tell the right person it takes that sin that looks so big when you keep it in the dark when you keep it hidden, when you don't tell anyone, and it shrinks it down to size. You tell somebody else and they say, "Oh, yeah, I've struggled with that too." All of a sudden you realize, "I'm not alone! I'm not so impressed with this sin anymore. Or depressed by it. I realize that we all struggle with the same thing." There's something healing about realizing, "I'm not alone in this. We all struggle with the same thing. We all need God's forgiveness. It's one of the healing things that come.

So tell God, tell a friend. That's part of God's way of handling the guilt that comes into our lives.

I know some of you are thinking, "I've done that. You don't know how many times I've confessed this sin. It may have happened 20- 25 years ago. I've talked to God about it again and again and I still don't feel forgiven."

Before we talk about two additional things we need to do to sense God's forgiveness, I want you to hear a story from Dave Borelli in our church who almost had guilt destroy his life before he found the grace of God.

Dave:

I would like to say that guilt began to get control of my life at an early age. It was part of my upbringing. Starting back in my early teens I can remember the pressure of my step father

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who was a career marine officer. He would run our house as he would run his marine detachment at Camp Pendleton. I felt I never rose above the rank of private in his eyes and I remember how both my mother and I fell short of his expectations constantly. I also began at an early age to struggle with guilt about religion. I recall in early years of my catechism classes and all the ritualistic ceremonies that I participated in. I remember I was going to confession every other Saturday afternoon so I could be cleansed. At eight or nine the guilt that I had receiving communion the following Sunday morning after sinning really started eating at me. Soon I began to block out those feelings. I'd go to confession, confess what I wanted the priest to hear and get out. I developed a non-caring, so- what attitude. I didn't understand at all about a living God or about grace. I felt the church had let me down. I became bitter. For years I never stepped into a church except for a wedding or a funeral. I lived with the feeling that one day God was going to strike me down for this.

After high school I met my first wife and a year later we were married in church. After our marriage I did not go to church. I was hardened to church and God as I knew Him. I thought that my being a good person would get me by. The guilt was there but I desensitized myself and blocked it out. There were reminders of God's love in my life. At the adoption of our daughter, Carla, I remember thinking at that time that God had to have had something to do with this little girl that we adopted. I wasn't at all sure how but I felt that divine intervention took place. But except for these few events, my life was unhappy and empty. I went ahead of my family to the Bay area with the promise of a better job. I told my wife I would send for her when I got established. When the job they promised to me fell through, I became discouraged and started feeling sorry for myself. I went on a drinking and party binge for well over two months. During that period, I told my wife that I didn't want any part of her any more. I was ashamed of myself, had no self worth and she and Carla would be better off without me.

The next three years I became a successful sales rep and had a very active social life but I still had a void and emptiness in my life. I found myself repeating the same patterns of guilt and shame that I'd grown up with. In February of 1975, a Sunday afternoon, in my apartment in Menlo Park, California, I remember vividly reaching for the telephone book and looking up the local church directory. I ran my fingers down to a church in the area. I said to myself, "If I going to do this, I might as well make it convenient." Little did I know that God was intervening. I still felt this was my decision. A calmness came over me through the whole process. I jumped in my car, drove over to the church for the 6:00 p.m. service I noted in the directory. I waited until the service started so I could sneak in and sit in the back unnoticed. What I didn't know is they asked the first time visitors to stand up and introduce themselves. So much for getting lost in the crowd!

I got through that ordeal and very shortly after that I received Jesus as my Lord and Savior. Yes, my burden was lifted off my shoulder but my guilt was still there. I tried to put my life back together again. I asked my wife and daughter to move up to the Bay area with me. The churches we were in over the next several years we found ourselves doing just busy work. I worked with children, teenagers, and even became a deacon. But as busy as I was in church I never took the time to get to know the God of grace. He certainly was not first in my life, second or third. Our marriage was strained, to say the least. I felt trapped, angry and

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confused. I began to question my salvation. I wanted out of my marriage and the church family. I just wanted out!

I remember talking to fellow believers about having a life changing experience. Yes, I had somewhat of a change but my guilt was not being silenced by all the things I was doing. If I was a Christian, why wasn't this miraculous change taking place in my life?

I kept making the same mistakes. I left my family again and went back to the same life style I had in San Francisco only with a lot more money. I knew that God detested divorce and truly believed that I was a marked man. I especially heard from my daughter for what I put her through. I blocked out my guilt by pouring myself into my work. Looking back, I see how futile that was. I tried all the ways of dealing with guilt that Tom has talked about this morning. Shame, religion, hiding out, and of course, blaming others. Nothing worked. My way of handling my guilt was slowly stealing my life from me.

In 1984, a turn around very slowly began. My drinking was winding down dramatically. The drugs were out of my life. I married my wife, Angela, one of the greatest things that has ever happened to me. She was seeking God and I was re- seeking. The few times we went to church together, we heard a God of grace. That was new to both of us. But we always ended up getting involved in other things. I just continued on my own power.

Then in August of 1995 one of my customers in Irvine told me about Saddleback church. Angela and I met them the following Sunday and attended our first service. We were both blown away by the music, the message but my old nature crept in. I thought to myself, "Perfect! This church is so big I can get lost, attend services Saturday or Sunday and be done with it." It would fit around my job and my hobbies. This will work! But God had other plans.

In December of 1995 Angela accepted Christ as her Lord and Savior. Angela was baptized by Pastor Rick in February of 1996. We attended class 101, 201, and 301 together. We got used to eating the pizza served at those classes also! As Angela continued to grow in her new life in Christ, God put a living example of His unconditional love and His free gift of grace right in front of me. As Angela modeled God's love, forgiveness and grace in our marriage, I finally got it! You could say that I'm a slow learner. But thank God, after all these years of living in guilt I was finally able to accept God's gift of grace.

The growth I'm beginning to experience is mind boggling. It can only be from Christ. The freedom from guilt has freed me to do things I thought I could never do. Last year I was able to re-open communications with my ex-wife. I was able to take responsibility for my past actions and ask her forgiveness for my part in our failed marriage. I cannot begin to express to you how doing this relieved years of guilt that I had been carrying with me. Because I took God's direction and asked my ex-wife's forgiveness, God was able to use me in service again. I am currently ministry leader of the information ministry and Angela's involved with helping in Adventure Land. But this time we're doing things God's way, not mine. I find myself wanting to get to know God, no longer afraid. Angela and I attend mid week services, more great pizza and Pastor Tom's Bible study. Also this fall we've begun taking

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Life's Perspectives so we can grow together in God's word. For the first time in my walk I can finally understand and accept God's free gift of grace. Where I once perceived a God of wrath and an unloving God, I now know in my heart a loving God. I no longer feel that God is looking over my shoulder but I feel His hands on my shoulder, guiding me as I seek His will for my life and share the good news of Jesus Christ.

I'm sure you heard what Dave said about how getting to know who God really was, really has helped him to come to an understanding what His grace is all about.

The second part of 1 John 1:9 reminds us to really experience God's grace we not only have to confess our sins but we need to ...

2. Trust God's character. Many people confess their sins but really never get to know the God who is forgiving them. Because of that they never feel the forgiveness that He wants to give. *"... He is faithful and just..."* You can count on God. You can count on His faithfulness. I know a lot of people who think they can't get close to God because they just don't feel forgiven. In a way that's a trap, because the truth is the closer you get to God, the more you'll feel forgiven. When you and I get close to the God who loves us, who gave His life for us in Christ, when we get close to Him, we really sense what His forgiveness is all about. So as long as you hold God at arm's length, you're not going to feel His forgiveness.

Look at His invitation in Hebrews 10:22. *"Let us come near to God with a sincere heart and a sure faith, because we have been made free from a guilty conscience."* Jesus makes us free from a guilty conscious. That's what the cross is all about. That's what Him giving His life for us is all about. Once I've accepted that gift, the invitation is, "Get close to me." When you get close to God and understand His grace in a new way it frees you to become the person that He wants you to be. It doesn't happen through guilt. You don't become the person God wants you to be through guilt. You become the person God wants you to be through His grace.

I remember when I was in junior high -- 7th grade I think it was -- I was going to ice skate for the first time. We had to drive about a half an hour with the high school group (junior highers in the back of the bus, high schoolers in the front of the bus). On the way down the high schoolers in the front of the bus started to talk just loud enough so we could hear in the back of the bus about how just last week someone had fallen on the ice and their finger had been sliced off. Then they proceeded to tell gorey story after gorey story of what happened when you fell and how those ice skates sliced you up. I determined in the back of that bus, "I am not going to fall on that ice. No matter what happens, I am not going to fall!" I can probably say that the first time I went ice skating I did not fall once. Because I clutched onto the boards around the outside the entire time! Scared to get out in the middle. What would happen to me?

That's how we deal with God's grace sometimes. You are in the arena, you know God's forgiven you, but you're clutching onto the boards of legalism around the edges, holding onto those rules like that's the way to really enjoy God. It's not. I encourage you. I challenge you today. Get out in the middle of the rink -- skate! In God's grace. Enjoy His grace.

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You're thinking, "I'll fall!" Sure you'll fall. None of us are perfect. But He'll pick you up again. He'll give you new strength. And you'll skate a little further the next time. Yes, you'll fall again. But He'll pick you up again and by His grace He'll help you skate a little further the next time. If you think you're going to become all that God wants you to be by hanging on to the outside boards of guilt, it will never happen. It's grace. It's grace that allows you and allows me to become all that God wants us to be. Get out in the middle. You can trust God. He is faithful. He is just.

3. Accept God's forgiveness. If we confess our sins, He's faithful, He can be trusted to forgive us our sins and the verse ends by saying, "... *and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" He will purify us from all unrighteousness. Not, "He'll purify us from most unrighteousness or a lot of unrighteousness." But He will purify us from all. What an important three letter word about grace, what God's able to do! Yet I know a lot of people who ask for God's forgiveness, recognize that Jesus is willing to forgive and yet they only feel cleansed from part of their sins rather than all. Look at God's promise. You just accept God's forgiveness. John 3:8 "*People who believe in God's Son are not judged guilty.*" When we believe in Christ and trust what He did for us on the cross, the Bible says you're not judged guilty.

If you've already trusted in Christ and believed in what He's done, why are you continuing to judge yourself guilty when God's already said, "I judge you not guilty." If you've never trusted in what Christ has done for you, His willingness to forgive you -- and God's saying, "I'm willing! I'm willing to say `Not guilty!' to you!" why not take advantage of that offer? We all have this picture that we're going to be in heaven at the pearly gates and that's where we're going to be judged guilty or not guilty. That's not where it happens. It's determined here on earth, not in heaven. Right here and now. Today. You can settle the issue. God's willing through Christ to say, "I will judge you `Not guilty!'" Why? Because you deserve it? Of course not. I don't deserve it. You don't deserve it. But because of God's grace. Accept God's forgiveness.

Does that mean you'll never fail again? Never make a mistake again? Of course not. But it does mean when you do, you confess your sin again, you recognize His willingness to forgive, you take the consequences and recognize that His grace can even help you with the consequences.

This thing of accepting God's forgiveness is somewhat like getting a medical bill in the mail. Maybe you've had a big bill at the hospital and all of a sudden the words, "Paid in Full" appear on that bill. If it says "Paid in Full" are you going to worry any longer about that bill? Only if you feel like, "I didn't really pay it." If you feel like, "Some computer somewhere made a mistake and someday they're going to catch up with me." I know a lot of people who feel that way about their sins. They feel like "I know the Bible says this thing about Paid in Full, but someday God's going to catch up with me." But what if, along with that hospital bill, that invoice, there was a letter inside from the director of the hospital that said, "We're deciding to pay this bill in full for you and if there is ever any problem with the accounting department take this letter with my personal signature, my name on it. Take it in and show it to them and that will make sure that they know that this bill is paid in full." Would that make a difference? Would that give you more confidence?

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God's given us a letter called the Bible. The Bible was written to us to clearly say He wants you to know that the sin debt in our lives is paid in full. Next time Satan from the accounting department calls, show him the letter.

I'm sure there's some of you who are still struggling with this. It's a big struggle to recognize how great God's grace is. You're thinking, "You don't know how big my sin is! You don't know what I did. You don't know the crime I committed." It may have been years ago and know one knows about it; I've been running from it. You don't know the abuse I created. You don't know the domestic violence that was a part of my life. You don't know how I hurt my kids, how I hurt my wife, how I hurt my parents. You have no idea. How could God forgive me?"

When you pick up this book, God's letter to us, you start to read story after story that says, "Yes, God can not only forgive us but use us." You read the story of a guy named Abraham in the Old Testament. He started out as a guy worshiping idols. He had a lot of struggles with lying. Yet we call him the father of our faith. You read a story about a guy named Moses who at the start of his life was a murderer. Yet today we call him the one who set the children free to go to the Promised Land. You read the story of a guy named John Mark who was a coward. He left a missionary trip because some reason he was afraid. You and I call him the writer of a book of the Bible called the book of Mark. You read the story of a guy named Paul. He started out being named Saul. He went to churches and persecuted people. He actually stood by while Christians were murdered. Yet you and I call him an apostle and a writer of the New Testament.

God not only wants to free you of your guilt, He wants to use you in a new way. That's the good news about grace. I realize that this has not been easy for some of you to hear. For some of you, guilt has become sort of a strange best friend in your life. Sort of like a Teddy Bear with fangs. You cuddle it but it will get you in the end. You get real used to your guilt sometimes. It motivates you in the morning. You get up, have a little guilt for breakfast to get you going, have a little right before you go to bed. You really are wondering, "If I step out into the fresh air of God's grace I don't think I can stay motivated. I think I'd plummet if I do that." As if your guilt could hold you up better than God's grace. It doesn't make sense but it's how we feel. It's scary. It's scary to step out into God's grace. It takes faith.

For others of you, guilt has been the enemy that you've been running from all your life. You're pretending that it's not there. You've got a lot of different tricks, a lot of different ways like all of us do for hiding from it.

Whatever the case, I have a verse for you. Psalm 32:5 *"I finally admitted all my sins to You and stopped trying to hide them. I said to myself, 'I will confess them to the Lord.' And You forgave me. All my guilt is gone."* Incredible! Some of you need the first half of that verse. *"I finally admitted all my sins to You and stopped trying to hide them..."* You need to say, "God, I admit it! I need Your forgiveness. I'm tired of trying all my ways of making up for it."

Some of you need the second half of the verse. *"... and You forgave me. All my guilt is gone."* The sad thing is that for some people it's taken them 10, 15, 25 years to get from the first half of this verse to the second half of the verse. Don't let it be that way with you. Recognize that He's

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the God of grace who wants to forgive and showers grace upon us. Why? Because we deserve it? No. Because He love us? Yes.

Prayer:

Take a moment to talk to God about what we've talked about today. Admit your sins to God. Talk to Him in your heart and say something like this, "Father, I confess my sins to You today. I agree with You. I've done wrong things. They've hurt me. They've hurt others. They've hurt You. I'm tired of trying to make up for them on my own. Would You forgive me? Thanks for sending Jesus to die on the cross so they could be forgiven. Thank You that He paid the penalty for my sins. I trust You. I trust Your character today. You're faithful. You will forgive me. Today, as best as I know how, I accept Your forgiveness into my life. Help me to begin to live out the life of grace." Some of you, you may have prayed that prayer a long time ago. But you need to pray this morning, "Father, help me to live Your life by grace and not guilt. Help me to step into the fresh air of Your grace today. It's a little scary but today I'm making a commitment to take You at Your word and to trust You. All my guilt is gone." In Jesus' name, Amen.