

Why Do I Still Feel Guilty?

-Pastor Steve Cornell-

Many problems in life stem from unresolved guilt over actual failures. Yet why do we struggle with guilty feelings after confessing our sins to God? Why do people find it difficult to fully accept God's forgiveness? Here are seven possible reasons:

1. Unfinished business

When there is unfinished business with regard to our sin the door to guilt is open. There are many examples: a clerk at a store gives you too much change and you keep it; you speak hurtful words to someone and walk away; you were dishonest in a business deal. In each of these cases, guilty feelings remain because of our need to finish things — to complete the circle of confession and make restitution. Remember: The circle of confession should equal the circle of offense (See: Proverbs 28:13).

2. Inability to bring closure

When we cannot go back to make things right concerning the wrong we've done, we often struggle with guilt. This happens when we have lost contact with the person we hurt or when the offended part dies. Those who choose to get an abortion, for example, will often carry unresolved guilt because they feel they cannot make right the wrong they have done.

3. Unwillingness to accept the possibility of forgiveness

When we can't believe that someone could forgive us because we doubt that we would forgive a person who did the same thing. Sometimes this results from the fact that we carry an unforgiving spirit toward a person who hurt us in a way less severe than the offense we committed. This is a case where our unwillingness to forgive makes it hard for us to receive the forgiveness we need. (See: Matthew 6:14-15)

4. Determination to punish ourselves

When we feel a need to carry our guilt as a type of payment for our sin, we have difficulty fully accepting forgiveness. Sometimes we do this because we wrongly believe it feels better to experience a type of punishment for our sin than to accept forgiveness. This can be very subtle. Clearly, we should make changes in relation to the behavior that hurt others. But such changes should not be viewed as payment for our sins (See: Galatians 2:21; Ephesians 2:8-9).

5. Working to deserve forgiveness

Sometimes we feel a need to counter-balance our sin with enough good deeds to make us feel worthy of forgiveness. For example, a person who gets an abortion may throw herself into crisis pregnancy work as a kind of repayment for her sin. A parent might look back with regret on the job he did as a parent and try to "make up for it." Like all the reasons for not receiving forgiveness, this one involves a performance-based forgiveness. These efforts insult the grace of God. They do not take the cross seriously (See: verses under # 4 and Titus 3:5).

6. Struggling with the "What ifs" and "If onlys"

When we constantly replay our sin in our minds, it becomes easy to get caught in the "what ifs" and "If onlys." This happens to parents when their child suffers or dies and they feel they could have done things to change the situation. The reality is that the only thing you can change about the past is how you let it affect you in the future (See: Genesis 45:1-5; Job 1:21).

7. Equating forgiveness and reconciliation

When people assume forgiveness and reconciliation are the same, they are sometimes hesitant to forgive their offenders. This results in unresolved guilt. If forgiveness requires an offended person to immediately restore a broken relationship no matter how seriously it was damaged, it is conceivable that she will struggle to forgive. What needs to be understood, however, is that it is possible to forgive an offender without being reconciled to him. Forgiveness can take place in the context of a person's relationship with God apart from contact with her offender.

* Remember: the consequences of carrying the baggage of guilt can be devastating.