

4. Learning to Move from Guilt to Forgiveness

In our last topic, we talked about helping a new Christian begin to learn to move from fear to love. We saw that Christians will act out of fear when they depend on their own strength and they can act out of love at those times when they yield to the Holy Spirit so that the power of the Holy Spirit is working in them and the love of Christ is flowing through them.

The Christian who is depending on his own strength will act out of fear but he will act out of love when he yields to the Holy Spirit. In addition to acting out of fear, the Christian will also act out of guilt and shame when he or she is depending on his or her own strength. Today, we will be talking about how to help the new Christian learn to move from guilt to forgiveness, cleansing and forgiving others.

Many people who have been Christians for a long time still continue to have their lives controlled by guilt. Sometimes this guilt is genuine and sometimes it is false guilt. However, either way it still continues to control how they think and act. That is why it is so important to help the new Christian learn to deal with guilt as soon as possible after he becomes a Christian. There are three key words to help a Christian learn to deal with guilt:

- ◆ forgiveness
- ◆ cleansing
- ◆ forgiving others

First, we need to help the new Christian understand what happened to his sins the moment he became a Christian. 1 John 2:12 says, “I write to you, little children, Because your sins are forgiven you for His name’s sake.” One evidence that a Christian is growing is the fact that, as a spiritual child, he knows his sins are forgiven. This is never said of the spiritual newborn or the spiritual toddler. Many Christians never reach the point where they understand that their sins of the past, their sins that they commit today and all of the sins that they will ever commit in the future were paid for by Christ on the cross and that the Father has forgiven them for Christ’s sake - Ephesians 4:32. The new Christian needs to understand that God did the following things with their sins at the moment of salvation:

- God removed them as far as the east is from the west - Psalm 103:12
- God cast our sins into the depths of the sea - Micah 7:19
- God blotted out our transgressions for His own sake - Isaiah 43:25
- God chose to remember our sins (hold them against us) no more - Hebrews 10:17-18

I have found it helpful to give a visual word picture to illustrate each of these four points and to help impress them into the mind of the new Christian:

1. Ask, how long does a satellite travel east around the earth until it starts going west? (Aren’t you glad God did not say as far as the north is from the south?)
2. If I take a boat ten miles out into the ocean, lean over the side and drop a handful of rice into the ocean, can I get that rice back?
3. Why would God blot out our sins for His own sake?
4. What is the difference between forgetting our sins and choosing to hold our sins against us no

more?

The new Christian needs to reach the point where he understands that God has forgiven his sins and will never hold those sins against the Christian in the future.

Second, the new Christian needs to understand the importance of daily cleansing. Christ used a very important illustration in John 13:10 to help Christians understand the need for daily cleansing from sins we commit day-by-day. “Jesus said to him, He who is bathed needs only to wash *his* feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you.” Christ compares our salvation to a bath that has removed our sin. However, we continue to commit other sins daily and we need to confess those sins daily so that we experience daily cleansing from the guilt of sin. When we confess our sins, Christ gives us the following promise in 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” We see that when we confess our sins,

Christ:

- is faithful - He will always respond to us
- is just - He is doing right since He paid for our sins

Christ:

- forgives - He lets our sins go and does not hold them against us
- cleanses - He takes away the guilt so that our conscience is clear

Most new Christians need to have it explained to them that when they sin again they will definitely feel guilt, because their conscience was renewed at the time they placed their trust in Christ. However, they need to have it clearly explained that the purpose of guilt is not to burden them down but rather to remind them to confess their sins, so that they can experience the cleansing that Christ promises. We need to help them understand that confession of sin is like a spiritual foot washing. We confess our sins and God causes us to feel clean in our inner person. Two things happen:

- ◆ We confess our sins
- ◆ God cleanses our hearts

Many new Christians need to realize that they can confess sin immediately so that they do not have to continue to live with the burden of guilt. They also need to realize that they can confess many times throughout the day.

Third, the new Christian needs to understand the importance of learning to forgive others if he wants to be free from guilt. Forgiving others is not a natural response for us. It is only as we realize that we are forgiven that we have a desire to forgive others. Then we see that we will only forgive others as we depend on the strength of Christ to forgive instead of our own strength. In Ephesians 4:32 and Colossians 3:13 we see two reasons why we are to forgive:

- * God forgave us because we are in Christ
- * Christ forgave us and we are to follow His example

However, many people say that they could never forgive. That may have been true before they became Christians but it is no longer true for us as Christians. Without Christ we had no desire and no power to forgive. The fact that God forgave us and Christ forgave us should give us the

desire to forgive. However, many Christians say that they have a desire to forgive but no power to forgive. The following four verses teach us how to receive the power to forgive - John 15:5; Luke 24:49; Romans 6:16; Philippians 4:13. Those verses teach us the following:

- ◆ We are powerless to forgive in our own strength
- ◆ We have been given power by the Holy Spirit
- ◆ We have that power as we yield to God in obedience
- ◆ We are able to forgive through Christ's strength

Many times, I tell Christians that they are right when they say they cannot forgive. I tell them that is true because they are depending on their own strength. The next thing they tell me is that they are not ready to forgive. I agree that they are right, and point out from Ephesians 4:32 that the only reason God forgave them was for Christ's sake. Then I tell them, you may not be ready to forgive today, but when you are ready to forgive, whether that is tomorrow, next week, next month, or next year, here is what you do when God convicts you of the need to forgive:

- Pray and ask the Father to give you the willingness that He had to forgive you for Christ's sake - Ephesians 4:32
- Pray and yield your spirit to the Holy Spirit so that you are depending on His power and not your own to forgive - Romans 6:13, 16
- Pray and ask Christ to give you His strength to forgive and let go of the things you are holding against the other person - John 15:5; Philippians 4:13

As new Christians begin to understand that God has forgiven them for Christ's sake, that Christ is cleansing them as they confess their sins to Him moment-by-moment, and that the Holy Spirit is giving them the power to forgive others, they will begin to experience more and more joy in their daily lives because they are experiencing guilt with decreasing frequency. They will find that they are able to use this new freedom in Christ to serve one another in love as Galatians 5:13 tells us, "For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not *use* liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another." May the Lord richly bless you as you model for new Christians the joy we can experience and help them to experience that joy as guilt is changed in our lives through forgiveness, cleansing and forgiving others.