

## STRUGGLES ON THE JESUS WAY:

### **Guilt**

Psalm 32

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**AUDIO:** <http://fbcjc.buzzsprout.com/7678/156368>

This season of Lent we're going to be dealing with struggles we have on the Jesus way. The Jesus way is not easy. I wonder what your struggle is. We'd like to keep this conversation going throughout Lent. I encourage you to share your struggles on the Jesus way. Use the hashtag #struggles on Twitter and Facebook and let's talk about our struggles (and other upcoming topics).

This morning, we think about our struggle with guilt. Let's be clear about something. Guilt serves a purpose and has a place. Someone has said guilt is like the brakes on a car. You are in extreme danger if you don't have and use them. But you don't want them on all the time. You'd never get anywhere.

Sometimes, the guilt we experience is all out of proportion to the infraction or the sin we commit. The Camry I drive has an automatic light switch which causes my lights to come on at dusk. A few weeks ago, I was leaving midweek prayer and Bible study about 7:30pm and forgot that I had just had my car serviced. They always check the headlights and leave them on manual, not automatic. As I was driving around the Capitol that night, it dawned on me--my lights aren't on! But just as I flipped the switch, bright red lights started strobing in my rearview mirror. Yes, there I was, pulled over by Capitol Police, right in front of our state's Capitol building. And of course, the officer left her flashing lights on the whole time as I explained my mistake. I was so rattled by it all, I handed the officer my Barnes and Noble gift card instead of my auto insurance card. Do you know what I felt above everything? Guilt. Guilt and shame. Her flashlight was in my eyes. Cars were going by. Now here's the thing. The shame and guilt I was feeling were way of proportion to the infraction.

And then I thought: if I'm feeling public guilt and shame for this minor infraction, what happens inside me--and us--when big failures occur? What about the guilt and shame we feel for mistakes and sins in our past? Things we can't help? Things like illness, poverty, job loss, disability, divorce or abuse.

But remember. There is the other extreme. The opposite of our brakes always being on—feeling guilty about everything—is feeling guilty about nothing. A woman once wrote an anonymous letter to the IRS and said, "I can't sleep. Last year, when I filled out my return, I misrepresented my income. Enclosed is \$325 cash. If I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest." This is maybe the worst of all possible ways to handle guilt--rationalizing, making excuses and acting as if it doesn't make any difference.

So we need a dose of reality. The Bible always offers us reality. God loves us enough to tell us the truth. Here are some of the Bible's words for sin. "Transgression" (v. 1), which means revolt or rebellion, a sin of COMmission. "Sin" (v. 1), which means failure to attain or to miss the mark, a sin of OMission. And then "iniquity" (v. 2), which means evil, perversion, twisting. But as bad as these things are, they're not the worst part. This psalm isn't just dealing with the effects of sin but also with the effects of unconfessed, unacknowledged sin (vv. 3-4).

One of the most memorable pictures of the power of unconfessed sin is in the famous novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*. It's not just the pastor's sin...it's the hiding of the sin that eats at him every moment. Poor Arthur Dimmesdale. He even tried to punish himself, trying to alleviate the guilt. When I read Ps. 32:3-4, I always think of him. All of us have been there. You know what it's like? The longer we bottle up our unconfessed sins, it's like putting off taking out the kitchen trash. Nobody ever wants to take it out. So you just mash it down. Well, guess what? The longer you put it off, two things happen: it just stinks more and it's harder to get it out when you finally take care of it. And by the way, the analogy holds on both of those points.

I truly believe v. 5 is the turning point of this psalm. When we confess, we open our lives to the fresh work of God's Spirit. So that takes us back to the opening verses of this psalm. John Stott suggests that just as we looked at three words for sin, we should carefully note three words for the new washing, guilt-relieving work of God's Spirit [*Favorite Psalms*, p. 38]. Here they are. "Forgiven" (v. 1), meaning sin has been removed or lifted. "Covered" (v. 1), meaning out of sight, not present. And "not computed" (v. 2), meaning the debt has been canceled. Now if it's removed, not present and canceled, there remains no more guilt!

But please don't miss the point. This is not just "being good to ourselves." This isn't us excusing ourselves and rationalizing our behavior. This is about the deep, costly love of God. The Cross isn't about temporary relief or an emotional moment. It's about an objective, historical act, whereby God in Christ has cleared the way for us.

I remember so clearly the day my pastoral care professor, Dr. Meigs, was talking about this in class at seminary. He quietly said, "If you don't believe God can forgive you, isn't that idolatry? Because you've set up something in your life bigger than God." Do you remember that scene in John 1, when John the Baptist lays eyes on Jesus as our Savior launches his public ministry? John pointed his boney finger at the Messiah. And he did NOT say, "Behold the Lamb of God, who covers the sins of the world." He said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." (John 1:29). And if he takes it away, there is no more sin and no more guilt. We are free.