

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

GOD'S ANSWER FOR GUILT

Romans 8:33-34

By

Steven J. Cole

October 23, 2011

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October 23, 2011
Romans, Lesson 55

God's Answer for Guilt Romans 8:33-34

Some years ago, a cartoon pictured a psychologist talking to a patient. "Mr. Figby," he said, "I think I can explain your feelings of guilt. You're guilty!"

While we may chuckle at the cartoon, it hits a nerve. Before God, we're all guilty of violating His two great commandments, which sum up all of His commandments. We all have failed to love God with our entire being. What is worse, we've even deliberately shoved Him aside and replaced Him with things as our "gods." And because we're selfish, we have failed to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. And so we all have true moral guilt before the holy God of the universe.

How do you deal with your guilt? Many suppress or deny it. Others try to excuse their guilt by thinking, "I have my faults, but I'm a basically good person. I've never deliberately hurt anyone." But however we may try to get rid of our guilty feelings, there is still the stubborn fact that we stand truly guilty of sin before God, who knows every wrong thought, word, and deed that we've done.

God's answer for our guilt is the cross of Jesus Christ, where He bore the punishment that we deserve. As God in human flesh, His sacrifice satisfied God's holy wrath against our sin, so that God could be both "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26). Because He paid our debt, Paul proclaimed (8:1), "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

But even though Paul has made this wonderful truth crystal clear, he knew that guilt can be a stubborn, nagging problem even for believers. The Swiss commentator, F. Godet (*Commentary on Romans* [Kregel], p. 330), suggests that as Paul wrote these verses, he may have been remembering the cries of the believers whom he had dragged out of their homes and thrown in prison when he was persecuting the church. Perhaps he could still see Stephen just before he died, with his head bloodied from the stones, crying out

(Acts 7:60), "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Whether Paul was thinking of those shameful events from his past or not, he knew that even those who have trusted in Christ for salvation often have to wrestle with guilt, whether from distant or recent sins.

Guilty Christians are not joyous Christians. They cannot enjoy close fellowship with the Savior. They cannot be bold in witness. They cannot confidently disciple others. They usually end up living as hypocrites, putting up a front in fear that the truth about their sin will be exposed.

And so as he applies the benefits of the gospel that he has summed up in 8:29-30, Paul asks two parallel questions: "Who will bring a charge against God's elect?" And, "Who is the one who condemns?" In answering those questions he doesn't tell us anything that he hasn't already said. But he wants to hammer home God's answer to guilt one more time so that we will know how to win the battle when guilt attacks.

God's answer to guilt is that He justifies His elect through Christ's mediation on our behalf.

First, let's think about who charges us with guilt.

1. The world, the devil, and our consciences seek to condemn us with guilt.
 - A. The world charges us of being guilty of hypocrisy, intolerance, self-righteousness, and other sins.

All of us have heard unbelievers complain, "The church is full of hypocrites!" The answer is, "Yes, but what will you do with the claims of Christ?" We're all prone to put on a false front so that people do not see what we're really like. Sometimes, we may not deliberately deceive others, but at the same time, we don't correct their misconceptions in our favor. "Pastor, what a man of prayer you are!" I should correct you by saying, "I struggle and often fail to be faithful in prayer!" If I don't, I'm guilty of hypocrisy.

Unbelievers also frequently accuse us of intolerance and self-righteousness. We're close-minded. We're judgmental. We think that we're right and everyone else is wrong. We say that our way is the only way to heaven. Often, of course, the charges are merely a

smokescreen so that the unbeliever can dodge the truth. But, sometimes the charges are true and inwardly we wince in guilt.

B. The devil charges us as guilty when we fall short of God's holiness.

"Satan" means adversary. "Devil" literally means "one who throws things against you." He is called (Rev. 12:10), "the accuser of the brethren," "who accuses them before our God day and night." Job 1 & 2 gives us an example, where Satan accuses Job before the Lord of being righteous only so that he will enjoy God's blessing and protection. There is another example in Zechariah 3:1, "Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him." It goes on to say how Joshua was clothed with filthy garments: he was guilty as charged!

There is debate over whether Satan can inject accusatory or evil thoughts into our minds, or whether these thoughts originate within us. It seems to me that his role as accuser implies that somehow he is able to remind us of our guilt. Sometimes, you just can't shake off those feelings, even after you've repented and confessed the sin to the Lord. At such times, it's not the Holy Spirit convicting you, in that you have responded to His conviction by repentance. Rather, you're under attack from the accuser of the brethren. You need to know how to put him to flight.

C. Our consciences charge us with guilt when we know that we have sinned.

Someone has called the conscience a *faults* alarm: It goes off to let us know our faults. The conscience by itself is not a reliable guide. Sometimes it may be overly sensitive. Some with a weak conscience feel guilty over things that the Bible doesn't even label as sins, producing false guilt (1 Cor. 8:7-12). Or, sometimes a believer agonizes over something that is a sin, but he blows it way out of proportion.

On the other hand, some have calloused, insensitive, or seared consciences (Eph. 4:17-19; 1 Tim. 4:2). This person feels no guilt even though he is disobeying the clear commands of God's Word. In some cases such people are ignorant of God's commandments. For example, I've known professing Christians who are engaging in

sexual relations outside of marriage, but they feel no twinge of guilt. Their consciences are insensitive or untrained.

The Bible teaches that it's important to maintain a good conscience before the Lord (Acts 24:16; 1 Tim. 1:5, 19). If the Bible calls something a sin, so should we. If the Bible does not call it a sin, we do not need to either. But even mature believers, who have biblically-sensitive consciences, will have times when their consciences say, "You're guilty. You sinned." Maybe we did something that we know to be wrong or we didn't do what we know to be right. How do we answer these charges?

2. After confession, answer charges of condemnation with God's promise to justify His elect through Christ's mediation on your behalf.

To correct some common errors, I begin with a point from other Scriptures. Then we'll look at three lines of defense that Paul sets forth.

A. If you are truly guilty, confess your sin and turn from it.

Some argue that since God has forgiven all our sins and removed our guilt at the cross, we should *never* feel guilty (even if we've sinned) or confess our sins or ask God for forgiveness. It's a done deal, so we should just shrug it off and move on.

I believe that such teaching is out of balance. While it's true that our eternal standing before God is secure through the blood of Christ, at the same time, if we love the Savior who gave Himself for us on the cross, when we grieve Him by sinning, we should feel grief that prompts us to confess our sin, ask His forgiveness, and turn from the sin. It's not a matter of our *standing* before God, but rather of our *relationship* with Him.

For example if I sin against my earthly father, I'm still his son; I know that he won't disown me. But my sin has strained our relationship. I need to confess my sin, ask his forgiveness, and seek to restore the relationship. It's the same with the heavenly Father. Although He will never disown me as His blood-bought son, if I sin, I need to be restored in my relationship with Him. I need to be forgiven *relationally*. I need my conscience to be cleansed by Jesus' blood. That takes place when I repent, confess my sin, and ask His forgiveness (John 13:10; 1 John 1:7, 9).

Be careful! Even as believers, we're prone to respond to our guilt by blaming others, or by denying, excusing, or covering up our sin. One of the most common marital problems to overcome is for a couple to stop blaming each other or excusing their own sins and for each one to confess his or her sins and to ask forgiveness from their mate. Also, one of the most common mistakes that Christian parents make is not to humble themselves and ask forgiveness of their children when they sin against them. If you don't do that, your kids will see your hypocrisy and it will turn them off to the faith. Teach them verbally and by your example that when we sin as believers, we ask God's forgiveness and we ask forgiveness from the one we sinned against.

Also, if you sin against an unbeliever, you'll be prone to cover it up or ignore it so that he won't think badly about you or about the Savior. But if you don't own up to your sin, he will rightly think that you're a hypocrite. When you as a Christian sin against an unbeliever, go to him, acknowledge your sin, and humbly ask his forgiveness. Do not try to use the occasion to witness to him. Just confess your sin and make restitution if it's appropriate. That will be an adequate witness.

This point is from other Scriptures, not from our text, but I wanted to clarify it because I encounter so much confusion on it. In our text, Paul sets forth three answers to the charges of guilt and condemnation (B, C, and D below):

- B. Answer charges of condemnation with the fact of God's sovereign election.

"Who will bring a charge against God's elect?" Why did Paul say that? Why didn't he say, "Who will bring a charge against *believers* in Christ?" Why did he bring up election?

Paul emphasized election because when you're feeling guilty over your sin, you're prone to doubt your faith in Christ. "Maybe I'm not a believer. How could a true believer do what I just did?" If salvation rests on *your* faith or *your* choice of Christ, then it's really going to be shaky when you sin. If the accuser can get you to focus on your feeble faith, he can condemn you.

But "God's elect" means that the root cause of your salvation is that *God* chose you. Yes, you chose to believe in Christ, but the

reason you did so is that He first chose you. If He had not done so, you would have happily gone on in your sin. Election does not mean, as many try to explain it away, that God foresaw that you would believe and chose you on that basis. If that were so, then it would not be according to grace, but according to something good in you, namely, your faith. Your faith would be a work that you originated and could take credit for (Rom. 11:6; Eph. 2:8-9).

Knowing that you're saved because God first chose you in spite of your sin is essential in battling guilt. It means that no one can produce new evidence to get God to change His mind and disown you, because He chose you before the foundation of the world, knowing all about your sins that you would commit both before and after He saved you.

But, maybe you're wondering, "How can I know that I'm elect? Maybe my sin shows that I'm not one of the elect." It's true that a lifestyle of disobedience and sin should make you question whether your calling and election are sure (2 Pet. 1:9-11). "By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:3-4). John is describing a habitually disobedient way of life (1 John 3:7-10). God's elect cannot be content living in sin.

Ask yourself these questions: Has God changed my heart? Has He shown me my sin and guilt and my desperate need for the Savior, so that I have abandoned all trust in my own good works to save me? Has He given me faith to believe in Christ as my only hope for heaven? Has He given me a love for Him and His Word and a hatred of sin? Am I growing in conformity to Christ? While we all have room to grow in these things, this should be the direction of our lives if we are one of God's elect.

C. Answer charges of condemnation with God's promise to justify the ungodly by grace alone through faith alone.

Paul does not mention here that we are justified by faith. Rather, in answer to the charges against God's elect, he emphasizes God's action (8:33b): "God is the one who justifies." To learn *how* God justifies us, we need to go back to chapters 3 & 4, where Paul shows that we are justified by faith, apart from works. Romans 4:5:

“But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.”

Paul’s argument in Romans 8:33 is in legal language. God alone is the supreme and final judge of the universe. If He condemns you, you’re eternally condemned! If He acquits you, you’re eternally acquitted! So it’s essential to make sure that *God is* for you (8:31)! No one can go above God’s head to change His decision to justify the sinner who has faith in Jesus. If *God* has justified you, you’re justified! He’s the Supreme Court of all Supreme Courts!

Also, as we’ve seen, there is nothing meritorious in us to deserve being justified. God justifies *the ungodly*, not pretty good people. We are truly guilty and deserve to be condemned, but Jesus paid the penalty that we deserved. The cause of our faith that justified us was not because we were brilliant enough to figure it out or because we had an inclination toward God. Rather, our justification is rooted in God’s sovereign election. Because He chose us and justified us, we can answer any charges against us.

But maybe the enemy keeps hounding us. He keeps pointing his accusing finger, saying, “You’re not a Christian. You’re condemned!” So Paul gives another decisive answer to guilt:

D. Answer charges of condemnation with Christ’s effectiveness and sufficiency as your Mediator.

Romans 8:34b: “Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.” I considered taking an entire message on this, but I’m going to hit it briefly and hope that for most of you, this is just a review. Verse 34 gives the theological reason why God can justify sinners, namely, the work of Christ as Savior and Mediator. Paul mentions four aspects of Christ’s mediation on our behalf:

(1) Christ Jesus died for our sins.

Paul doesn’t add, “for our sins” here, which he has already covered (3:25; 5:6-9; 8:32). He states only that Christ died and was raised to put the focus on Him. Again, there is no security and no defense against guilt when you focus on yourself or even on your faith. Your focus must be on God who has chosen and justified you, and on Christ who died and was raised bodily from the dead. We see the same emphasis on God’s role in salvation in Zechariah

3, where Satan accuses Joshua, who was guilty. The Lord said to Satan (Zech. 3:2), "The Lord rebuke you, Satan! Indeed, the Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?"

Paul's point in Romans 8:34 is that it would be absurd for Jesus, who came to earth to be the sacrifice for the sins of God's elect, to condemn the very ones He died for! So when the enemy accuses you, point to the cross. "And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb..." (Rev. 12:11).

(2) Christ Jesus was raised for our justification.

Here, Paul simply adds, "yes, rather who was raised." But as he stated (Rom. 4:25), He "was raised because of our justification." Christ's death satisfied God's justice, thus providing the basis for our justification. But His resurrection was God's stamp of approval, showing that God accepted Christ's death as payment for our sins. Paul staked *everything* in the Christian faith on the bodily resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:17): "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins." When you struggle with doubts or with guilt, go back to the evidence for Jesus' resurrection. It is a solid place to stand.

(3) Christ Jesus is now exalted to the right hand of God.

"The right hand of God" is figurative language to say that Jesus is now far above all rule and authority. He is over every power in heaven and on earth (Ps. 110:1; Eph. 1:20; 1 Pet. 3:22). This means that no one, not even Satan, can challenge Christ's rule or His decisions, including His decision to pluck you as a brand from the burning in spite of your sin.

(4) Christ Jesus is interceding for us.

John Calvin (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], p. 325) says that Paul adds this so that we will not be terrified by the majesty of Christ's absolute authority at the right hand of God. His purpose in that place of authority is not to condemn us, but to support us by His prayers, especially when we stumble and sin.

There are two helpful examples of this in the Bible. The first is when Jesus tells Peter that Satan has demanded permission to sift him like wheat, and then adds (Luke 22:32), "but I have prayed for

you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." The other is Christ's wonderful prayer in John 17, just before the cross, where He prays for His disciples and He even prays for us, who would believe through their witness. For us, Jesus' throne at the right hand of the Father is not a throne of judgment, but rather a throne of grace, where we are invited to find mercy and grace to help with all our needs (Heb. 4:16). But even when we feel too ashamed to pray because of our sin and guilt, we can be assured that Jesus is there praying for us!

Conclusion

In John Bunyan's autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, he tells how he went through several years of wrestling with his guilty conscience. He shares this helpful and practical insight (*The Works of John Bunyan* [Baker], 1:35-36, paragraph 229):

But one day, as I was passing in the field, and that too with some dashes in my conscience, fearing lest yet all was not right, suddenly this sentence fell upon my soul, Thy righteousness is in heaven; and I ... saw, with the eyes of my soul, Jesus Christ at God's right hand; there, I say, as my righteousness; so that wherever I was, or whatever I was a-doing, God could not say of me, He wants [lacks] my righteousness, for that was just before him. I also saw, moreover, that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse; for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, the same yesterday, and today, and forever.

Bunyan saw that God's answer to guilt does not lie with us, but with God and Christ alone. If God has chosen you and justified you through the effective mediation of the crucified, risen, exalted, and praying Savior, then you can answer any charge against you. If God, the sovereign Judge of all has said (8:1), "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," then you are *not* condemned!

Application Questions

1. How can a believer distinguish between true and false guilt? How should we deal with each of these?
2. Can Christians be overly obsessed with confessing every minor sin? If we don't confess even minor sins, will our conscience grow more sensitive or more callused?
3. How can a professing Christian know that he is one of God's elect (2 Pet. 1:10-11)? Will this lead to pride? Why/why not?
4. Are believers capable of committing seriously wrong sins? What is the unpardonable sin?

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