

“The Gift That Keeps on Giving ... Guilt!”

The message of Psalm 51 is timeless, and almost every word in Psalm 51 asks for our undivided attention. In fact, the message is quite relevant and needed by us today. Most commentators believe that King David composed this prayerful petition after his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba, and his attempt to cover-up of the murder of her husband, a conspiracy exposed by the prophet Nathan. Psalm 51 is a powerful Hebrew expression of guilt and penitence unparalleled even in Christianity. It contains all the Lenten themes: a strong expression of guilt, conviction, penitence, forgiveness, and renewal. Psalm 51's sense of remorse, confession, broken spirit and contrition parallel David's experience as well as affirms his greatness ... greatness because he was strong enough to be broken ... wise enough to know that he had to be washed clean ... honest enough to accept the bottom line. David's path is one we must take in order to renew, restore, and maintain a right relationship with God.

During Old Testament times, one could make a sacrifice to God in order to atone for their sins. With the aid of a religious sacrificial system, all sins could be atoned for ... except two. The two un-atonable sins were murder, and rape and/or incest. These two sins were equated in their heinousness by recognizing that murder leads to death of the body, and rape to the death of the soul. King David, at one point in his life, divorced himself from God by refusing to accept God's covenant of love. He believed that he could run his own life better than God could. But after the prophet Nathan confronted David with the truth, David saw that there was nothing left for him to do, but to throw himself upon the mercy of God.

This inspiring psalm tells us what was in David's heart when he did so. With the Prophet Nathan's help, David appealed straight to God ... pleading for mercy and forgiveness. David appealed to God's "steadfast love." The Hebrew word for "steadfast love" is "hesed," and "hesed" literally translates: "unshakable covenant love." David's plea for mercy is grounded in the fact that if a person breaks their side of the covenant, God will never break His side. Some commentaries mention that David is appealing to God's "mother-love." The word "mercy" is derived from the noun for "womb." Therefore, God's steadfast love is like a mother's love for a child ... a child that was once part of her very body. It is what is known in the New Testament as "agape" ... God's unconditional, eternal love! David is motivated to seek God's forgiveness because of his contrite or broken spirit brought about by his shattered pride. God can mend a broken spirit, however, not much can be done for the human spirit that is not contrite ... the soul that does not acknowledge that a sin has been committed against God, as well as against oneself.

Today, I believe, our society suffers from "contritional deficiency." There is little or no remorse for illegal deeds. The ego won't allow it. There is only a sorrowful expression for being caught. There are so many examples, I have trouble picking one. Politicians, sports and public figures are famous for passing the blame. Everyone pleads innocent despite conclusive evidence. Where is the remorse for doing wrong today! Where is the display of the contrite heart? Is there no such thing as a conscience? Is the human heart that hard? Is evil that powerful in our world today? Are people no longer guided by that corrective force called ... guilt? Or has every wrong deed given way to "plausible deniability," or "by reason of insanity"? Is the spirit of the human soul that dead? God, out of pure love, gave us the "Ten Commandments" as sign posts leading to a satisfying and joyful life. As I have said on numerous occasions, they are not to be thought of as the "Ten Suggestions."

Comedian Alan King got a lot of mileage out of telling about the guilt trips his mother tried to send him on. "She'd give me two sweaters for my birthday," he would say in one of his monologues, "and the first time I wore one of them, she looks at me sadly and in her basic tone of voice sats, 'The other one ... you didn't like?'" Guilt trips like that go nowhere. But human guilt can lead to something positive. It is up to the individual to establish the course. Guilt can lead a person to self-destruction or to constructive growth. Guilt can be toxic or healthy ... a curse or a blessing ... depending on the direction of the guilt trip. Understood properly, guilt can be a good thing. This world would be a better place if those who trample upon God's law in hurting others suffered from guilt. Violence, theft, sexual harassment, prejudice, hate --- all of these have increased as human guilt has lessened! One author writes: *Guilt is the pit of penitence out of which God can lift us and heal our brokenness, but the balm of healing can only be laid upon a clean wound of genuine repentance if the soul is to receive a clean bill of health, and not struggle against sins*

never really left behind.

Then, of course, there is the other extreme. To an eavesdropper, "I feel so guilty" is one of the most common confessions heard. There is, it seems, almost no experience in life that will not lead to guilt. People feel guilty about being too rich. People feel guilty about being too poor. People even feel guilty about not feeling guilty. This is known as "free-floating guilt," but there is nothing about guilt that floats and nothing about guilt that it free. In the work place, guilt makes conscientious employees reluctant to go home at a normal quitting time. Guilt propels vacationers to carry and use cell phones to call the office. The latest guilt trip involves the environment: The simple act of throwing paper into a wastebasket rather than a recycling bin can produce uneasiness. Guilt does serve a necessary purpose for the truly guilty by pricking the conscience and improving errant behavior. However, could anything be more silly than needless guilt?

Dr. Karl Menninger, the noted psychoanalyst, began his book, "Whatever Happened to Sin," with the illustration of a plainly-dressed man in the Chicago Loop who pointed to each passerby and yelled, "Guilty!" Menninger observed that this man had a strange effect on people, as you can imagine. One person turned to strangers walking alongside and said, "How did he know?" He "knew" because guilt is so prevalent in most of us. And, we allow it to fester far too long. We go on to other things in religion, trying to suppress the guilt. We emphasize faith but not repentance ... peace, but not purity ... comfort, but not cleansing ... relief of guilt, but not regeneration of personality.

In Archibald MacLeish's outstanding play, "J.B.," based on the biblical character Job who suffered without knowing why, MacLeish has three comforters come to J.B. just as three friends visited the character Job. The three modern-day friends are a Christian, a Marxist, and a psychiatrist. They approach J.B., the modern Job, and use the no-guilt approach. The Christian says: "It is not your fault. You are the victim of original sin." The Marxist tells J.B.: "It's not your fault. You are the victim of economic determination." The psychiatrist also absolves J.B. by saying: "It's not your fault. You are the victim of unconscious drives you can't control." J.B., however, does not accept this no-guilt approach. He sees the value of constructive guilt when he says, "No, I want to be responsible. I want it to be my fault. Because that's what it means to be a human being. It means to say: 'I have the power to choose the moral content of my life.'"

Constructive guilt is helpful because it teaches us a sense of responsibility. It reminds us that we are held accountable for what we do. Of course, constructive guilt can torture and torment us. We have duties to other people. When we do not fulfill these, our guilt is appropriate. Constructive guilt impresses upon us the acceptance of the consequences of our actions, even when they are unpleasant and painful. Sometimes we need to be punished for our misdeeds. Yet, constructive guilt is not intended to engender gloom and depression because of what we have done. Rather, it is to foster hope. No matter how serious our misdeeds, we have the power to change and do the good. Constructive guilt enables us ultimately to regenerate ourselves, to gain renewed self-esteem, and to become responsible and caring adults. Constructive guilt is the guardian of our goodness.

From the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation, guilt feelings are the predictable results when we do what we ought not to do, or fail to do what we ought to do. When we "feel guilty" --- as when the Prodigal Son came to himself --- it is usually safe to assume that we've done something wrong and need to make things right. Consequently, we need to re-emphasize that the ability to feel guilt is not a "bad trip" to be avoided at almost any cost, but rather a gift from God which helps us to live with moral and spiritual integrity. Kept in proper perspective, our guilt feelings bring us back to the right path when we have strayed from God's direction. Guilt feelings also nudge us to renew our relationship with God as well as with other people.

As you approach Easter, may you pray with earnest the 51st Psalm. By so doing, the hope is that you will come to truly know and appreciate the steadfast love and grace of God, and live accordingly. With greater understanding for the purpose of "constructive guilt", you will come to better acknowledge the significance of Good Friday and Easter for your life.