

**Habits of the Heart: 2. Dealing with Guilt**  
**Numbers 5:6-7; Luke 19:1-10**  
**January 9, 2022**  
**Pastor Tami Luckhardt**

Christmas 2020 was a huge disappointment for our family as I imagine it was for most of you. Our son and his family were stuck in Canada because the border was closed and even though we lived close to our other kids and grandkids, there was no way for our family to be together safely and celebrate Christmas. So, this year, with the availability of vaccinations and boosters and at home tests, the family began to think about how we might be able to get together safely, and we came up with a plan that we all agreed to so that we could minimize (or possibly even eliminate) our exposure to COVID. Our kids all kept their children home from school the entire week preceding Christmas so that there was no chance of bringing the virus home from school. They canceled all other playdates and get togethers. We all agreed to mask whenever we went out of the house, even for a quick run to Target. Then, on Christmas morning before they arrived at our house, we all tested, and we all got negative results. So, with our 3 kids and their partners and our 5 grandsons arrived at our house, and we did Christmas! We exchanged gifts, shared meals together, held the new baby, played playdough and did science experiments. Throughout the course of that week, I read more Berenstain Bear books and made more Lego creations than I knew was possible. We made snow angels and played hockey on the pond behind our home. We thought we did everything right. But over the course of this past week, four of our family members have test positive for COVID. Thankfully, their symptoms are light or nonexistent. But we are all wondering, was it me? Did Jerry bring it home from one of his concerts earlier in the week? Did I bring it home with me after the in-person Christmas Eve worship services? Or did our daughter, who is Children's Ministry Director at a church in Lakeville, bring it home with her on Christmas Eve? Our son and his wife can't help but wonder if they got it on the plane or in the airport? We will never know, and it doesn't really matter now, but what I do know is that we are all feel guilty and wonder, was it me?

We are in week two of a message series we're calling *Habits of the Heart*. We know the importance of taking care of our physical heart by eating right, exercising, getting enough sleep, and reducing our stress. But what we may not realize is that spiritual heart care is also essential for living, maintaining, and growing relationships with God and with each other. And the greatest threat to a healthy heart comes from within us. In this series we will examine four specific emotions that (if left unchecked) can infiltrate our lives and destroy our relationships. Pastor Steve and I will offer up new habits or antidotes, along with practical biblical direction to help us fight back, take charge of those feelings that mysteriously and inexplicably control us, so that we can restore our relationships with each other and with God. Today we're going to focus on the first emotion. It is something that we all carry in our hearts. Its uncomfortable to admit much less talk about. That is the emotion is guilt.

I think we all know what it is to feel guilty but what is guilt? **Guilt is the emotion associated with the acknowledgment that we've done something wrong.** It's when we let our inner, unhealthy emotions slip through the filter we've put in place to protect ourselves and others and do something that is destructive and hurtful. Maybe it's something you said in a heated argument, or an action that was driven by jealousy or greed. Just this past week, I did something that I felt guilty about. I sent an important email message to our Servant Steering Team, but I accidentally forgot to include the chair of the Servant Steering Team, Maria on that email. I only realized it later that night when Maria sent out the same exact message to the team. I felt badly about this and didn't sleep well that night. You may be thinking, "Oh, that's not so bad. It was an honest mistake." But here's the deal. It was the second time I had done that

in the past month. The next morning, I called Maria and offered her my apology, again. She was gracious and kind and accepted my apology and because Maria forgave me, I was able to let go of the weight of that guilt.

But sometimes our guilt is so bad, so terrifying, so overwhelming that we do everything we can to just stuff it away, bury it deep inside and try to ignore it. But every once in a while, it seeps up to the surface. And when that happens, we create our narratives, the excuses, or justifications to explain why we did what we did. These narratives allow us to carry our guilt without allowing it to overwhelm us. We all have those narratives. Maybe you'll recognize one. They go something like this:

Well, it wasn't just me. They did it too

Well, I was only in high school or college when I did that.

Well, it was my first job.

Well, I didn't know any better.

I mean, yes, I'm guilty, I did it, but I have a good excuse.

We write these narratives that allow us to distance ourselves and ignore or deny our actual guilt.

But when we deny our guilt, we give it power and that power throws us off balance. It's like carrying around this dead weight. And when it throws us off balance, especially in our relationships with those we care the most about, it controls our lives. It creates a debt/debtor relationship, within us and with other people. In every single wrong we've committed against another person; we took something from them. It may have been their time, money, possession. Maybe it was their innocence, self-esteem, sense of safety or their reputation. And because we took something from them, guilt says, "I owe you." We actually have language for this. We say, "I owe her an apology." And why do we feel we owe her an apology? Because our heart or hearts tells us that we took something from her. Or maybe you've said this, "I don't know how I will ever repay him." It's that debt/debtor relationship and the only way to make it right is to pay up.

Proverbs 22:7 says, "the borrower is slave to the lender." In other words, authority belongs to those who are owed, not those who owe. Nothing less than paying the debt will relieve a guilty heart of a burden of guilt. We may try to work it off, serve it off, give it off, and even pray it off. But no amounts of good deeds, community service or charitable giving, or Sundays in a pew or online can relieve the guilt. It's a debt and it must be paid or canceled for the heart to experience relief. And how do we do that? It comes through confession, confession to God and to the people we have hurt.

In the New Testament, we find a story about the infamous tax collector, Zacchaeus. In Luke's telling of the story, we see Zacchaeus following the Old Testament model of confession that we heard in today's scripture reading. It says when we do something that wrongs someone else, we must "make payment for [our] guilt, add one-fifth more, and give it to the injured party." (Numbers 5:6-7) But instead of the required one-fifth, Zacchaeus gave back four times what he had taken illegally.

But let's not get too far ahead of ourselves. Zacchaeus wasn't a cute little man that we sing about in the childhood song. He was a wicked man considered a sinner to his nation. He was a Jew, but his job was collecting taxes for the Roman government. And he was wealthy. And how did he get wealthy? By extortion and embezzlement. By taking advantage of the elderly, by exploiting the working poor, and by taking care of his cronies. He wronged many of his fellow Jews, leaving a trail of relational wreckage in his wake. But when Jesus invited himself over to

Zacchaeus' house that fateful day, the little tax collector was changed. He found in Jesus the hope and forgiveness he had long given up on. But Zacchaeus knew instinctively that it wasn't enough to confess his sins to Jesus. That was the first step, but only a first step. *"Look, Lord! Here and now, I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."*

And how did Jesus respond? He didn't say, "Oh no, no, no, Zacchaeus. You're forgiven. It is enough that you confessed your sins to me. There's no need to make a public spectacle of yourself." Instead, Jesus said in effect, "Now I know for sure why salvation has come to this house today. Your public admission is evidence of a changed heart, a healthy heart!" Zacchaeus didn't just admit to his sins of the past, he took public responsibility for them. He confessed in the truest sense of the word.

Over and over the Bible speaks of confession, not in terms of relieving our conscience but in terms of a changed life. James, the brother of Jesus had this to say about the role of confession in the life of a believer: "Prayer that comes from faith will heal the sick, for the Lord will restore them to health. And if they have sinned, they will be forgiven. For this reason, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." (James 5:15-16)

Confession to one another is part of restoring our heart health. James seems to indicate here that our spiritual heart disease is sometimes caused by hidden sin and so the smartest thing you can do is confess, not only to God but to other people. In other words, bring your secrets out into the light. Confession precedes physical and spiritual restoration. You cannot restore your relationship with God if you are unwilling to resolve your relationships with the people around you. Part of walking with God is making that phone call you dread making, setting up that appointment that you know will be incredibly awkward, or writing that letter that you should have written long ago. It means humbling yourself, owning up to your part of the problem, and doing everything within your power to make those relationships right. And when you swallow your pride and take that extra step, something remarkable happens. Guilt loses its grip on your heart, and the power of sin is broken in your life.

Let's look now to the words of a man who had more regret and guilt than we can even begin to imagine. This is a man whose life experiences left him broken, ashamed, and riddled with guilt. The apostle Paul was a man who in his former life arrested, tortured, imprisoned, and even killed innocent men and women in the name of God. This was a man who knew guilt. But here's the powerful thing about Paul's guilt, he didn't deny it. He wrote about it. We know his story because he wrote about it. Instead of allowing it to define him or trying to bury it deep inside and ignore it, he found a third way. In a letter that he wrote to Christians in Rome here's what he said to them. *"Therefore, there is now no condemnation..."* (Remember when we hear the word "therefore" in scripture, we are to ask, "I wonder what it's there for?") Paul is saying something new has happened. It is a new day, a new covenant. God has done something new and as a result, *"there is now no condemnation."* There is a space where your past is neither forgotten nor condemned. You no longer must deny it or pretend it didn't happen. You don't have to recall that narrative that you have rehearsed any longer. You can face your past and not allow guilt to control your life any longer.

Paul goes on. *"There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."* If we acknowledge Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, face our past, confess our sins God, we stand un-condemned in God's eyes and can regain our balance in life. *"Because through Christ*

*Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives us life has set you free from the laws of sin and death.” (Romans 8:1-3)*

The law of sin and death says that when you sin, you're just stuck with it. When you do something that hurt somebody, you're guilty and you're stuck with it. And that guilt goes with you wherever you go. Maybe you remember Garrison Keillor's famous quote, "Guilt is the gift that keeps on giving." But "*the Law of the Spirit of Life has set you free from sin and death.*" How? "*For what the law was powerless to do.... God did...*" Whether it is a moral law, a federal or state law, the law sets the standard as low as we can go without being condemned or punished. But these laws can't restore you or set you free from your past. Through Christ Jesus, God did something even the best law could not. "*God did....by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering.*" God sent Jesus, who was guilty of nothing, to take upon himself what we all deserve so that we can be free from either having to face it and be defined by it, or deny it, stuff it down deep inside and live our life off balance. At the cross, Jesus took on himself what we actually deserve.

Our new covenant is to love as we have been loved. God humbled himself so we could get what we do not deserve. So how can we not go back and make it right with those we have hurt? If you are willing to step into this new kind of relationship with God, where you bring your guilt, and yet know that you are not condemned, you will be able to go back, confess your past and ask for forgiveness.

So, here's a question to ask yourself this week. Is somebody waiting for you to make the first move? Is there somebody from your past that is carrying around hurt or brokenness from what you did to them? Is there someone who is waiting for you to make the first move and confess your guilt? Jesus humbled himself for you and now you're free to humble yourself for others. And if you are having a hard time forgiving yourself, here's the good news. You have already been forgiven. You have already been forgiven! There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

**Let us pray:** O God, sometimes we cannot see you. We search for you but have to strain to hear your voice. And yet you come to us where we are. You forgive us and change our hearts through the grace of your son, Jesus and his liberating love. Help us to confess our sins not only to you but to those we have sinned against, asking for their forgiveness, to bring our guilt into the light of your love and allow you to heal our hearts. Forgive us again and make in us a clean heart. For in you, there is now no condemnation. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of January 9, 2022**

**Weekly Prayer:** We are no longer our own but yours, O God. Let us be full, let us be empty. Let us have all things, let us have nothing. We freely and heartily yield all things to your pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we are yours, and you are our God. So be it. May this covenant which we have made with you on earth be ratified in heaven. Amen.

### **Monday, January 10**

#### **Scripture: Matthew 5:3-10**

"Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

"Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad.

"Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth.

“Happy are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, because they will be fed until they are full.

“Happy are people who show mercy, because they will receive mercy.

“Happy are people who have pure hearts, because they will see God.

“Happy are people who make peace, because they will be called God’s children.

“Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

**Observation:** In biblical language, the heart is the center of the human spirit, from which spring emotions, thoughts, motivations, and courage and action. (*Guard your heart for everything you do comes from it.* Proverbs 4:23) Today, we are reading the Beatitudes – ultimate well-being and spiritual joy. Especially note verse 8 and what benefit there is in having a “pure heart.”

**Application:** A pure heart is the opposite of deceit or trickery but refers to integrity and sincerity. How do you understand the importance of “heart” in your life? When have you experienced joy that has come from your heart?

**Prayer:** Lord of Life, grant me an understanding of what is guiding my words and actions. May your presence satisfy the deeper longing within me for joy and happiness. Give me a pure heart, O God. Amen.

**Tuesday, January 11**

**Scripture: 2 Samuel 12:1-13**

So the LORD sent Nathan to David. When Nathan arrived he said, “There were two men in the same city, one rich, one poor. The rich man had a lot of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing—just one small ewe lamb that he had bought. He raised that lamb, and it grew up with him and his children. It would eat from his food and drink from his cup—even sleep in his arms! It was like a daughter to him. “Now a traveler came to visit the rich man, but he wasn’t willing to take anything from his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had arrived. Instead, he took the poor man’s ewe lamb and prepared it for the visitor.” David got very angry at the man, and he said to Nathan, “As surely as the LORD lives, the one who did this is demonic! He must restore the ewe lamb seven times over because he did this and because he had no compassion.” “You are that man!” Nathan told David. “This is what the LORD God of Israel says: I anointed you king over Israel and delivered you from Saul’s power. I gave your master’s house to you, and gave his wives into your embrace. I gave you the house of Israel and Judah. If that was too little, I would have given even more. Why have you despised the LORD’s word by doing what is evil in his eyes? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and taken his wife as your own. You used the Ammonites to kill him. Because of that, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite as your own, the sword will never leave your own house. “This is what the LORD says: I am making trouble come against you from inside your own family. Before your very eyes I will take your wives away and give them to your friend, and he will have sex with your wives in broad daylight. You did what you did secretly, but I will do what I am doing before all Israel in the light of day.” “I’ve sinned against the LORD!” David said to Nathan. “The LORD has removed your sin,” Nathan replied to David. “You won’t die.

**Observation:** Not only had King David violated God’s laws (adultery with Bathsheba and then killing her husband to cover up his adultery), but he had shamelessly abused his royal power, which God had entrusted to him to care for God’s people. Now, David is confronted by the prophet, Nathan. David confesses his guilt. God spares David from the customary penalty of death for adultery and murder.

**Application:** The Good News of this reading is that we are not left in guilt but are called to confession. This does not mean that we are free from the consequences of our actions. The first step in repentance is “to turn” – change directions. How has confession set you free? Or how have you witnessed this in another person’s life?

**Prayer:** Merciful God, I confess that I have not loved you with my whole heart. I have not done your will and have rebelled against your love. Forgive me. Set me free for joyful obedience through Jesus Christ, my Lord. Amen.

### **Wednesday, January 12**

#### **Scripture: Numbers 5:5-10**

The LORD spoke to Moses: Tell the Israelites: When a man or a woman commits any sin against anyone else, thus breaking faith with the LORD, that person becomes guilty. Such persons will confess the sin they have done. Each will make payment for his guilt, add one-fifth more, and give it to the injured party. If the person has no close relative to whom the payment can be made, then the compensation payment will go to the LORD for the priest. This is in addition to the ram of reconciliation by which the guilty party himself is reconciled. Any gift offering from all the sacred donations that the Israelites offer will be the property of the priest. The sacred donations belong to each person alone; whatever anyone gives to the priest will be his.

**Observation:** These verses deal with the breakdown of relationships. Notice that when a wrong was committed against another person, God was also offended. The Hebrew word meaning “to be guilty” was a condition resulting from an action. The removal of guilt required purification and restitution.

**Application:** The scripture indicates our relationship with God suffers when our actions hurt another person. How is that possible? How could restitution bring healing to a relationship? What are examples of restitution?

**Prayer:** Lord, speak your word of grace into my heart. Where I have offended another person, give me the wisdom to know what to do and the courage to do it. Create within me a heart that seeks to do your will. Amen.

### **Thursday, January 13**

#### **Scripture: Luke 19:1-10**

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through town. A man there named Zacchaeus, a ruler among tax collectors, was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but, being a short man, he couldn’t because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. When Jesus came to that spot, he looked up and said, “Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay in your home today.” So Zacchaeus came down at once, happy to welcome Jesus. Everyone who saw this grumbled, saying, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.” Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much.” Jesus said to him, “Today, salvation has come to this household because he too is a son of Abraham. The Human One came to seek and save the lost.”

**Observation:** As head tax collector at the important road center of Jericho, Zacchaeus had amassed a fortune by methods which his conscience did not approve. I (Steve) have always

interpreted his act of climbing into a tree as less about his physical size and more about the nature of his heart. He was hiding and yet he wanted to see. In a word, he was “guilty.” But what happened when Jesus entered into his life? How did Zacchaeus respond?

**Application:** When we turn on a light, we see what was there and we get to work to clean it up. When Jesus enters one’s heart, what happens? How is guilt removed? What can you learn from this story?

**Prayer:** Dear Jesus, thank you that you come even to those who feel unworthy of your presence. Help us to see what you see within us. Let hope reign as we let your light shine in us and cleanse us. Give us the courage to reach out to those we have hurt. And give us the readiness to accept the efforts of others who seek forgiveness from us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

### **Friday, January 14**

#### **Scripture: James 5:15-16**

Prayer that comes from faith will heal the sick, for the Lord will restore them to health. And if they have sinned, they will be forgiven. For this reason, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous person is powerful in what it can achieve.

**Observation:** Confession and intercession are the tasks of all Christians. We are commanded not to judge (Matthew 7:1), while at the same time we pray for the weaknesses of fellow Christians. We need the power of the prayers of others. This passage does not give us permission to share publicly what may harm others, but it does require that Christians be open for prayer in areas of need.

**Application:** How can sharing what’s on your heart be a step toward healing? Before you would share or seek prayers from someone, what would you want to know about the person who is listening/praying?

**Prayer:** Thank you, Lord, for the way you send people into our lives to care and to offer hope. Help me to be a person who can be trusted to hear the pain in another’s life and to lift that pain to you in prayer. Hear my prayer this day for those persons and needs that are on my heart... Amen.

### **Saturday, January 15**

#### **Scripture: 1 John 1:8-2:2**

If we claim, “We don’t have any sin,” we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from everything we’ve done wrong. If we claim, “We have never sinned,” we make him a liar and his word is not in us.

My little children, I’m writing these things to you so that you don’t sin. But if you do sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one. He is God’s way of dealing with our sins, not only ours but the sins of the whole world.

**Observation:** John encourages us to face up to the past. After all, is there anything that God cannot see? God’s response toward those who confess their sins will be in accordance with his

nature and his gracious commitment to his people. Forgiveness through Christ's atoning sacrifice is not limited to certain people but is available to the whole world.

**Application:** There is an expression: confession is good for the soul. How have you found that to be true? When does confession not bring forgiveness?

**Prayer:** Thank you, God, for your faithfulness and your desire to keep me close. You know where I've been, what I've said, and even the thoughts that I have carried within me. Forgive me when I have been less than what you created me to be. When my words and actions have hurt others, help me to see clearly what I have done. Teach me your ways, and lead me in your path that I may be your faithful disciple, in Jesus' name. Amen.