

41. A BURDEN TOO HEAVY TO BEAR

A person with dark hair tied back, wearing a plaid shirt, is sitting on a bed. They are looking down at a smartphone in their hand, with their other hand resting on their forehead in a gesture of distress or frustration. The room is dimly lit, with a window visible in the background.

Guilt often stems from trying to live up to others standards. Which may deep down conflict with your own beliefs.

#NCSAMENTALHEALTHDEVOTIONS

A BURDEN TO HEAVY TO BEAR

Micah 7:19: "He will have compassion upon us; He will subdue our iniquities and You will cast all of their sins into the depths of the sea. Let them go because you have been forgiven."

Many of us are sometimes faced with guilt and with things of the past that we regret doing, things that we are currently still struggling to overcome. Guilt can really be a burden that weighs us down and holds us back from truly living our lives. I am not saying that we should run away from guilt because it is often what we do. For many of us, guilt is an uncomfortable feeling. Guilt is the emotion we experience when we have done something wrong or when we've neglected to do what is right (a type of sin of omission). Sometimes we even experience feelings of guilt when we think we've done something wrong, but we haven't done anything wrong. We perceive to have crossed the boundary or perceive to have done something wrong.

When we experience guilt, we often try and run away from it because it is a nasty feeling to have, it is a very uncomfortable feeling that kind of sits in your gut. We don't like the feeling of guilt because it is unsettling to our inner peace and stability. You might be struggling with guilt now, guilt from the past, guilt from the present or whatever it may be. If so, I do not want guilt to be the thing that holds you back in life, to be something that keeps unsettling your inner-peace and stability. Guilt has a job it needs to do and we need to allow what it needs to do and get it over and done with and move on with our lives.

**GUILT CAN REALLY BE A BURDEN
THAT WEIGHS YOU DOWN AND
STOPS YOU FROM TRULY LIVING
YOUR LIFE TO ITS FULLEST
POTENTIAL.**

Guilt originates when a boundary is overstepped. All of us have certain rules and morals and values inside of us that we keep or not keep. When we overstep these boundaries and morals and rules and values, we start to struggle with feelings of guilt. Before we can go into this, we need to understand where our idea of right and wrong comes from. In other words, we need to understand where our boundaries come from in order to understand whether we are feeling guilty for an appropriate reason or for an inappropriate reason. Yes, there is such a thing as inappropriate guilt. Some of us are feeling guilty about something we shouldn't even be feeling guilty of. (More about this later.)

So, where do we get our concept of right and wrong from? If I were to ask you whether it is right or wrong to engage in premarital intercourse, what would you answer? By using this example, I want to demonstrate to you where our idea of right and wrong comes from. It comes from various places: The first place where you learn what is right or wrong is from your **parents**. If I were to ask you what your parents taught you regarding premarital sex, whether it is right or wrong to have sex before marriage, you would probably tell me: "Nandi, my parents said it is not right, I need to wait until I am married." It depends on which family you come from because it is different for each one of us.

You also get your idea of what's right and wrong from your **extended family**, not just your parents, but your brothers, your sisters, your grandparents, your aunts, uncles and cousins. If you were to ask them the same question, you might get different answers within your family; even regarding the specific rules. They might tell you: "You know what, if you wait until you are 18, when you're an adult, when you are formally old enough to make your own choices, then you can decide whether you want to engage in sexual relations before or after marriage."

**GUILT ORIGINATES WHEN
PERSONAL OR COMMUNAL
BOUNDARIES ARE OVERSTEPPED.**

Another source where you learn your morals and certain rules and boundaries are your **friends**. If you were to ask yourself today what your friends said about premarital sex when you were growing up, they might have said something like: "If it feels good, why not? It cannot be wrong if it feels good." The **school** also taught us certain morals and values, certain rules and boundaries. Schools might have said: "No you shouldn't." But then they would hand out a condom which kind of speaks for something else, saying: "You're not supposed to, but if you do, please be safe."

Then, if you go to **church**, the church would also have taught you something about sex before marriage. The **society** that you live in might have said something like: "You know what, it's really your business, it is none of our business. You do what you feel is right." What did your **culture** teach you about sex before marriage? Is it right or wrong? I am specifically using sex before marriage, but you can use this illustration with any type of moral or rule or boundary. There are some cultures that actually say you should wait until marriage, but then when it comes to initiation time I've been told, they dabble in sexual things. Then of course there is the **Bible and God**. When you read the Bible and you ask yourself what would God say, the answer would be no. The Bible calls sex before marriage fornication and it is listed as one of the sins of the Bible.

Then of course there's the **government**. The government also makes rules and if you go and ask any government official in South Africa about the laws regarding sex before marriage, they will tell you that there is an age limit to sex. Back in the day, it was 16 or 18 and today as South Africa stands, the legal age limit for children to have sex is 12 years old. This is very confusing. The rules of your **workplace** might tell you if you want to have sex before marriage, it is your problem, just don't do it at work.

YOUR BOUNDARIES ORIGINATE FROM YOUR FAMILY, FRIENDS, CHURCH, SOCIETY, CULTURE, THE BIBLE AND EVEN THE GOVERNMENT. SO WHO HAS MOULDED YOUR BOUNDARIES?

Then we also have the **media** that teaches us certain morals. The media like television, magazines and social media have their own set of rules and morals. They will tell you regarding sex: "Anyone, anytime, anywhere, however you please." That is concerning, because at the end of the day you have your own decisions to make. You have your own internal morals and standards to adhere to.

With all the voices in your head you can listen to, that of your parents, school, society, culture, Bible, government, workplace and the media, who will you listen to? Who is right and who is wrong?

John 16:8 tells us: "When the Holy Spirit comes, He will convict the world of its sin, and of God's righteousness." In other words, the Bible is telling you that the Holy Spirit is the One who is going to teach you what is right and what is wrong. The Bible is perpetuating that there is going to be a small voice inside you that will tell you which way to go. That is only going to happen when you have spent time in the Word of God. The Holy Spirit can only bring back to your remembrance what you've learnt in the Word of God. If you are spending time in the world and society and listening to people and all of that, then your morals and standards and the small voice that is going to speak to you, are going to come from the world. In other words, your subconscious is going to be taught by the things you spend time in.

Offentimes the reason why you end up feeling guilty is because you are trying to live up to the standards of everybody and everything else around you. There are so many voices in your head and they tend to conflict one another. You need to learn which voice to listen to.

Each of these entities that I've mentioned, approach right and wrong from their own perspective and they don't always agree with one another.

**WHEN IT COMES TO WHATS RIGHT
AND WRONG THERE ARE TOO MANY
CONFLICTING VOICES WE LISTEN TO
WHICH WILL CAUSE CONFUSION.**

None of the places where you've learnt right and wrong are infallible. In the end you need to decide where your morality lies, where you are going to learn your boundaries from. I am biased, so I obviously recommend that we go to the boundaries and the rules and the morals that the Bible teaches us – where we get it straight from God. God who does not change. God who does not lie. God who has our best interest at heart and where we can find the real truth to follow and to adhere to. Then afterwards we can go for advice to our parents, our families and our church groups. I would recommend staying away from social media regarding whether things are right or wrong because they are just completely immoral.

We need to realise that we sometimes do look at these other places. Sometimes, without even realising it, we look at people and we look at other people's lives and what they say is right and wrong and we get into trouble. Just because men and women of high position that we look up to, commit sin openly and it appears as if they don't experience guilt, doesn't mean that we should now follow in their footsteps and feel that our sin and guilt and its enormity is less. We need to choose the Bible as our standard. We should measure everything in life by the Bible. In everything we do, we need to ask, "Am I feeling guilty because it is something the Bible prohibits or is it something that somebody else has pushed onto me because of their own ideas?" Sin should always appear sinful and filthy because the Bible points it out as sinful and filthy.

So I recommend establishing the Word of God as your guiding rule. When you know what your boundaries are, you will truly feel rational or appropriate guilt because you will know that you are following the right rules.

Another reason why we tend to feel guilty is not because we overstep boundaries, but because of circumstances. **Circumstances** play a role in whether something is considered right or wrong.

**NONE OF THE PLACES WE LEARN
OUR MORALS ARE INFALLIBLE,
EXCEPT FOR THE WORD OF GOD.
IN THAT LAY YOUR SAFETY.**

Let me explain. You might say that it is correct for a couple who is married to each other to have intercourse with one another. But if I take that very same couple and I put them in a public place where there are lots of people around, would it still be appropriate and right to have sexual intercourse in public? You might say to me: "No Nandi, it is not appropriate." So be aware of the fact that circumstances do play a role in whether something is right or wrong in certain instances.

We further need to realise that the **cause of guilt** is not just from **overstepping boundaries** like breaking the law of the country or your Christian laws. It is not just about disrespecting people or doing things like lying and stealing and abusing and causing shame, but guilt comes from **blaming** as well. Sometimes we blame ourselves for things that are appropriate or even for things that are not appropriate. Sometimes we receive **negative criticism** from people whose boundaries are not the same as ours. Then we feel like a failure and not very good at what we do. We then start feeling guilty because we haven't lived up to our standards or to the standards of others around us. If you are struggling with a **low self-esteem** and a **damaged self-concept**, you will also experience guilt inside of you – guilt which is maybe not appropriate. You are feeling guilty because you've been broken down by life. We can also feel guilty because of neglect. We neglect people or people neglect us or we neglect things that we should do. We feel guilty because we haven't done what is right, we've neglected our duty and our responsibility to the world around us. We also get something like **irrational** and inappropriate **perceptions** of guilt. **Misunderstandings** can also cause guilt. Then of course we have **spiritual misunderstandings** which can cause guilt because we misunderstand what God is expecting from us. This can place unnecessary spiritual guilt on us.

On the other hand, a type of guilt that we shouldn't feel guilty over is called **inappropriate or irrational guilt**. What is this? People usually feel guilty for things that they did not do wrong.

**IRRATIONAL GUILT HAPPENS WHEN
YOU FEEL GUILTY OVER
SOMETHING THATS NOT YOUR
FAULT.**

When we go through experiences of guilt, appropriate or inappropriate, we often go into what we call **destructive reactions** to guilt. Sometimes the guilt is so heavy to bear that we just want the guilt to go away. The way you do this is with **self-punishment**, saying: "I am such a bad person and therefore I need to punish myself." Some people go into very negative and **destructive thoughts** and behaviour, reckless behaviour, like saying: "I am never going to conquer this thing. I keep doing this wrong thing over and over again, I might as well give up and just do whatever I want to, just live an immoral life." I know that many of you have had these thoughts where you said: "This is too hard, I can't do it." Then there are some who go into **substance abuse** because it has the temporary effect of numbing your emotions, numbing the thoughts of guilt so that you don't think about the wrong things you've done for a short while. But when the substance wears off, the guilt comes back like a floodgate. So be careful of this.

Excessive guilt can also cause increased **stress, anxiety** and **depression**. Some people tend to isolate within their guilt if they know that they've done something wrong. I don't know if you've ever experienced this, but sometimes when you go out into society it kind of feels like people can see what you've done. It feels like your sins are written on your forehead and so you tend to isolate. You tend to not be with your family members because you have this guilt weighing you down. Or you isolate from God, like Adam and Eve. They ran from God when they felt the guilt of sin on them.

You also get another bad type of reaction to guilt called overcompensation. For example, a mum was caught kissing a stranger and now every time the kid does something wrong, the mum let the kid get away with it because how can she rebuke her kid when she herself is guilty of worse. I think Moses overcompensated. There was the incident when he went to the two Israelites who were fighting and said to them: "Don't do this, you are brothers. You shouldn't be fighting with one another."

**EXCESSIVE GUILT CAN LEAD TO
INCREASED STRESS, ANXIETY AND
DEPRESSION. START BY
ILLIMINATING IRRATIONAL GUILT.**

They turned to him and quickly reminded him: "Hold on, didn't you kill that Egyptian just the other day?" And his guilt caused him to run away. Guilt caused him not to be able to stand up for what is right and wrong because he himself felt guilty. So be aware of the fact that your guilt can actually cause you to not be able to point out the guilt of others. Not that we should be pointing out their guilt in judging, but with your children it is sometimes necessary to call out things that they have done that are wrong.

Guilt also causes **self-doubt** and **mistrust** inside us. When you notice that you are constantly overstepping your own boundaries and doing things that are wrong, you are going to be so disappointed in yourself eventually. You are going to end up feeling so low in your self-esteem, thinking that you can't even follow your own rules and regulations, how are you going to follow everything God expects you to do. Then you end up **not being able to say no**. You tend to agree with everything in life because you feel that you don't have the right to stand up and form boundaries and create a certain type of life you want. Guilt can sometimes drive you out of the arms of God where it should really drive you towards God.

Yesterday we looked at David. David is somebody whose life we can study to see how he experienced sin, how he experienced guilt and how he experienced forgiveness through the Lord. Psalms 38:4-11 speaks about the guilt that he experienced. I want you to listen to his experience carefully. He says: *"My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear. My wounds fester and are loathsome because of my sinful folly. I am bowed down and brought very low; all day long I go about mourning. My back is filled with searing pain; there is no health in my body. I am feeble and utterly crushed; I groan in anguish of heart. All my longings lie open before You, Lord; my sighing is not hidden from You. My heart pounds, my strength fails me; even the light has gone from my eyes. My friends and my companions avoid me because of my wounds; my neighbours stay far away from me."*

**GUILT CAN CAUSE MISTRUST AND
SELF-DOUBT. IT BREAKS DOWN
SELF-ESTEEM WHICH IN THE END
CAN DESTROY YOUR LIFE.**

As I read this passage from David, I realise he was explaining that he was literally feeling a bodily pain in his experience of guilt. He was explaining his emotional crushness, where he didn't feel any strength. He felt so overwhelmed and he couldn't bear the guilt anymore. He even explained that he felt like his companions stayed far away from him. I wonder if they really stayed far away from him or was it him staying far away from them because of his feelings of guilt of all the wrong he had done.

Yes, oftentimes guilt does come. Guilt is something that we do experience when things have gone wrong, when we have overstepped boundaries. But there is a **purpose** for this guilt. As much as we try and run from it or numb it or try to make it go away, there is a purpose to guilt. The purpose of guilt is to warn us that something is going wrong, that boundaries have been overstepped. But we often try and run away from the guilt. We don't want to feel the guilt. We don't want to listen to the guilt, so we numb it and push it aside, kind of like the warning signals on a car. When you switch on your car's ignition, there are certain warning lights that come up on the dashboard, warning lights that tell you whether something in the car is malfunctioning or not working or needs to be replaced. I don't know how your car works, but I know my car. When I switch on the car's ignition to the first click, it shows the warning lights. When I switch it on completely, the warning lights should go off. If they don't go off, it means that something needs to be fixed.

What do you do when the warning light that shows your right indicator light is faulty, goes on? Well, I tell you what you do. You get out of the car. You go to the boot. You take out a wrench and you smack that light until it is broken. You get back into the car, switch on the car and if the warning light is off, you continue driving. Isn't that right? Isn't that what we are doing? We destroy the light so that the warning light can go off. No, that is not what we do. We fix the light. The warning light tells us that the light needs to be fixed. But we often do this with guilt.

**GUILT IS LIKE THE WARNING LIGHTS
OF A CAR, IT IS THERE TO INFORM
YOU SOMETHING HAS GONE WRONG
AND NEEDS TO BE FIXED.**

We crush guilt. We destroy that which causes the guilt instead of fixing it. Guilt tells us that a boundary has been overstepped. It is time to **re-assess** our boundaries, to say: "Okay, maybe I need to put better boundaries in place because I keep overstepping this boundary." It is an opportunity to **learn** about ourselves and our weaknesses and to fix them. It is an opportunity to **change our behaviour**. It is a warning to be **cautious**. Sometimes we start feeling guilty before we've overstepped the boundaries – we feel guilty because we are about to overstep a boundary. Guilt is a warning light, a signal that goes off, saying: "Woooo, woooo, hold on, hold on, you're about to overstep a boundary, you're about to do something that is wrong, or you have already done something that is wrong." It is kind of like the Holy Spirit, that conscience, that voice in your head that leads you to know what is right and what is wrong.

If we allow guilt to do the work it needs to do inside of us, it is supposed to drive us into the arms of God and into confession to say: "I've done wrong, I need to fix it. Please help me to fix it." God stands with His arms wide open, mercifully saying to the sinner: "You have come to Me, your guilt has overwhelmed you. I will forgive you, I will heal you, I will pardon you and I will give you peace."

How do we deal with guilt? For **inappropriate guilt** (the one where you feel guilty when you haven't done anything wrong), there are only three things you do: let go, put it down and walk away – it is inappropriate, just leave it behind you, don't even think about it again.

1 John 1:8 tells you what to do with **appropriate guilt** (the guilt where you have done something wrong). You should acknowledge and confess your errors before the Lord. Go to the Lord and tell Him what you've done wrong. Previously I said when you've done something wrong, confess it immediately. Don't wait for a week or two weeks from now. Confess your errors before the Lord every day and fix what needs to be fixed.

**RATIONAL GUILT HAS A WORK TO
DO IN US, IT SHOULD DRIVE US
TO REPENTANCE AND A CHANGED
LIFE.**

If you have done something wrong, take **responsibility** where necessary. Let me use a silly illustration. If you are playing cricket with your son or your daughter or whoever else and you accidentally knock out the neighbour's window, you've crossed a boundary, something has gone wrong. Then you take responsibility and you fix the window.

So, if you can **fix** what you've done wrong, fix it. Kind of like Zacchaeus in the Bible. Zacchaeus stole money from people, but he fixed it by giving back more than what he had taken. We need to **learn what needs to be learned**, in other words, if you know that your weakness is a specific weakness, learn the lesson and don't go back there. **Re-evaluate your boundaries**. Maybe you've noticed that your boundaries aren't strong enough and that you need to put certain rules in place to keep you from doing wrong.

The reason why you sometimes overstep a social boundary is because other people push you to overstep the boundaries. So, be more **assertive** and say: "No, I am not going to do those things you are pushing me to do. Even though you say it is okay, it is not bad, I have my own boundaries and you have yours. Please respect mine." Then you need to **change** what needs to be changed. You also need to **forgive** yourself. This is extremely important. Sometimes you forget that forgiveness is not only towards others, but it is about forgiving yourself for what you have done wrong and to be able to move on with life. Sometimes you don't forgive yourself and you hold on to the burden of unforgiveness and guilt of things that you did many, many years ago. You are still carrying the guilt of things that went wrong in your childhood. God has long since forgiven you, but you haven't forgiven yourself.

1 John 1:9 says: "*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us of all unrighteousness.*" Can you today also cleanse yourself of unrighteousness by forgiving yourself and saying: "I made a mistake, but I've made the necessary changes and I'm not that person any more"?

THE BIBLE TELLS US HOW TO DEAL
WITH GUILT. IF WE CONFESS OUR
SINS, CHRIST WILL FORGIVE.

Feelings of guilt are normal. They are there to warn you of things that have gone wrong, to point out a problem in your life that needs to be revisited so that your boundaries can be re-established. You need to let go of inappropriate guilt, things you feel guilty about that you played no role in. Take responsibility where you are guilty and forgive yourself for it.

The story of the prodigal son teaches us that when we have strayed from God's laws, we can come home anytime. We can confess our wrongful ways and return to the Father who is waiting on the road and watching to see when we will return.

1 John 1:9 says: *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us of all unrighteousness."* Confess whatever is making you feel shame and guilt and regret and return to your Father. Return to God so that He can heal you and help you to live life the way you always wanted to.

**THE STORY OF THE PRODIGAL SON
TELLS US EVEN WHEN WE HAVE
STRAYED FROM GODS LAW WE
CAN COME HOME ANYTIME.**

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*Northern Conference, Pastoral Counselling Department
Revive, Refresh, Restore
flemingn@nc.adventist.org
Cell: +27836584296
Author: Nandi Fleming
Editors: Kobus & Adele Beukes*