

"THE DIGNITY OF OUR GUILT" By: Rev. Theodore S. Atkinson

Old Testament Scripture: Isaiah 64

New Testament Scripture: Romans 7:14 - 8:4

Text: Isaiah 64:6

I
To know guilt is to know that we are free persons. We are significant and responsible. We are accountable for the choices we make. To know guilt is to know that we are free to do as we please.

We are not machines. We are not animals driven by the blind impulses of nature. Nor are we puppets whose strings are pulled by God, or by the stars, or by our superiors. Guilt is the dreadful reminder that we are free men and women.

The Greeks, in general, believed that all mistakes were due to human ignorance or the distortion of the senses. If a person knew what was right and wrong, he would certainly choose the right--automatically. If Oedipus had known all the facts he would have never slept with his mother.

For the Greeks, man was not really free, because persons that are free do not act automatically. Free persons act deliberately and intentionally.

But our guilt tells us that a choice has come before us, a choice between what we feel to be right and what we feel to be wrong. No one is exempt from this choice. Whether a man worships Christ or Buddha he still makes moral judgements every day. Guilt assures us that we have not chosen what we felt to be right. WE are free to choose what we know very well to be wrong and we deliberately and intentionally choose the wrong and we feel guilty regardless of our belief and trust in the true God.

Christopher Marlowe's, Dr. Faustus, illustrates this point. Dr. Faustus is a man who has sold his soul to the devil. When hell is very near, he cries out: "See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament. One drop would save my soul, half a drop, ah my Christ..?" But he does not repent and is lost. But he knew and he chose and he rejected. He was a free man. His choice made a difference; though he chose against God his choice testified that he was significant.

II
Isaiah, eloquently speaking for his people, cries out the same truth. The passage you heard read is really a prayer; a confession of sin; an admission of guilt. The guilt of the children of Israel testified to their dreadful freedom. Isaiah confesses, "we have sinned...there is none that callieth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee." They had freely turned from God. They had freely turned from what they believed to be the true and the good.

We, who are the children of the Twentieth Century, have experienced a loss of moral sensitivity perhaps because of the wars, or the constant reminders of poverty, or the racial turmoils that are always rippling beneath the surface.

Regardless of the reasons, we have experienced a loss of moral sensitivity with a corresponding loss of guilt. If the life of the Puritans seems to us to be lacking in pleasure certainly our age is characterized by joylessness and aimlessness. And I am becoming to believe more and more with C. S. Lewis that pleasures are but cheap substitutes for the loss of joy.

We attribute to an over-sensitive conscience the words of Jonathan Edwards when he wrote, "The very thought of any joy arising in me on any consideration of my own amiableness, performances or experiences or any goodness of heart and life, is nauseous and detestable to me. And yet, I am greatly afflicted with a proud and self-righteous spirit, much more sensibly than I used to be formerly. I see that serpent rising and putting forth its head continually everywhere, all around me."

But we forget that the Puritans who painfully acknowledged their guilt were also a joyful people. In Herman Melville's famous novel of the sea, Moby Dick, a preacher says to his New England congregation of crusty and weathered seamen:

"...Oh! shipmates! on the star board side of every woe, there is a sure delight; higher, the top of that delight, than the bottom of the woe is deep....Delight is to him...who acknowledges no law or lord, but the Lord his God, and is only a patriot to heaven....And eternal delight....will be his, who coming to lay him down, can say with his final breath-- O Father! I have striven to be Thine, more than to be this world's, or mine own.... I leave eternity to Thee...."

Gladly would many of us trade our pleasures for that delight. Perhaps...but maybe not. If our age is joyless and anxious can not we attribute at least some of this to our loss of moral sensitivity with the corresponding loss of guilt? Today we no longer sin. We make mistake and find ourselves to be in difficult situations.

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Paul, in his guilt cried out in despair, "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me?" But directly following this is the joyful prayer of thanksgiving, "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord."

To feel guilty; to admit our guilt; to cry out for forgiveness is to at once express the dignity of our human freedom and to admit that we are helpless to turn from our own ways that give rise to wars, and hatred, or the petty arguments that separate us from our friends and ultimately from God. We are free, yet we are helpless. We are free to do as we please, but we are helpless to do as we should.

Isaiah confesses, "Thou hast abandoned us to our iniquities." We are free to do as we please but we have deliberately forfeited our freedom to become the slaves of all sorts of pleasures and habits that destroy our joy and separate us not only from our friends and loved ones, but from God himself.

Paul expressed this in the seventh chapter of his intricately reasoned Epistle to the Romans. He speaks from the standpoint of one who wants to obey God and have fellowship with him but finds himself helpless. His freedom from God has established a habit of disobedience that he finds impossible to break. "For to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not."

He uses the metaphor of warfare to describe the conflict within himself. "But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members."

John Donne uses the analogy of a city to describe this paradox. Our lives are like a city which has deposed its good and kind king and has delivered itself freely into the hands of its cruel enemy and is helpless to restore the throne to the rightful king.

"I, like an usurped town, to another due, Labour to admit you,
but Oh, to no end; Reason, your viceroy, in me, me should defend,
But is captived and proves weak or untrue."

We are free to do as we please, but we are helpless to do as we should. Isaiah's cry to God is a confession that we need more than freedom. We need health. His cry is a confession that our freedom has ruined our health and separated us from the source of healing.

iv

Guilt is a dark night. It is utter loneliness. It is the outer darkness. It is the dreadful burden of having lost the one we love above all others.

John Donne writes,

"Yet dearly I love you and would be loved fain, But am betrothed
unto your enemy:"

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Guilt means Isaiah's cry is a confession that he is alienated from God. He can't see God "for thou hast hidden thy face from us and abandoned us...." But it was his own hand that hid God's face. Freedom has separated both Isaiah and his people from God.

His cry in verse one is a cry of a man abandoned by God. It is the cry that could be found on the lips of any number of the most sensitive of us. "Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down, that the mountains might flow down at thy presence."

God is not evident. Our whole culture fairly screams that God is not needed or wanted. Where in the wastelands of entertainment, of business, or politics, is God evident. A thousand gods are more evident than the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is not at all evident to either the Christian or the non-Christian that God has spoken to us in Jesus Christ.

"Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down." But he doesn't. God is silent. God is not evident. And anyone who says that he is has not faced up to the dreadful reality of evil in himself and in the world. As long as there are Viet-Nams, and Egypts and Palestines; as long as there are people with too much to eat and people that are starving; as long as there are negligent parents and unwanted children; as long as these things are present, God is not evident. Our guilt has hidden him from us.

Isaiah confesses that he lives in a God-forsaken world (v. 10). God's face is hidden "because of our iniquities." Everything is laid waste. "...the holy cities are a wilderness, Zion is a wilderness, Jerusalem is a desolation. Our holy and our beautiful house where our fathers praised thee is burned up with fire and all our pleasant things are laid waste." And where is God?

But look! Isaiah does not cry out, "Where is God?" Nor does he shout into the darkness "There is no God!" No, he addresses his thoughts not to the void but to God himself. He speaks in the second person to him by whom he feels forsaken. He calls him Father. He seeks and re-establishes his personal contact. In his guilt and alienation from God, he talks with him and demands to be heard.

"Do not be angry beyond measure, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever; look on us all, look on thy people...O Lord, wilt thou hold back, wilt thou keep silence and punish us beyond measure?"

Our guilt is the complement to our freedom and it is the call of God to acknowledge the source of our last freedom. It calls us back to God as a humble yet dignified person. Isaiah comes before God as a son to his father, and not as a criminal to a judge or a slave to his master. He comes not as a worthless and debased creature but with the humble dignity of a prodigal son.

This is what Isaiah was expressing when with childlike submission and quiet dignity he confesses, "But now O Lord, thou art our Father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand."

Guilt is the pain that tells me that I am not who I should be. It evidences the dignity of my human personality. It is the evidence of the royal blood that flows through my body. Guilt is the tender skin that is chafed and rubbed sore with the "filthy rags" that "our righteous deeds" have become.

It tells me that I was not meant to wear filthy rags. I was meant to wear the fine clothing befitting a prince. We are not to be the withered leaves that the wind blows away. We are to be "like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that

that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper." (Psa. 1:3)

Though we are guilty we are not worthless. And it is our infinite value as children of the King of Heaven and earth that makes our guilt so tragic. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." This is why we must take our guilt seriously, because we are valuable in God's sight.

To dismiss our guilt lightly or to remove it cheaply is to do violence to our personality. Our guilt expresses our moral sensitivity as a free human being. It expresses my sensitivity for the pain I have caused others.

By dismissing it as a puritanical hang-up; by rationalizing and psychologizing it away; by attributing it to a misguided childhood is to do violence to my personality and destroys my humanity.

John Donne asks the profound and humorous question,

"If lecherous goats, if serpents envious
Cannot be damned, Alas! Why
should I be? Why should intent or reason,
born in me, Make sins,
else equal, in me more heinous?"

To dismiss our guilt lightly or to remove it cheaply is to destroy my humanity, to make me callous, insensitive, hard, animalistic. It is to tell me that my choices are meaningless and inconsequential.

I am not a lecherous goat or an envious serpent driven by the blind impulses of nature. NO! But we are guilty men and women born with "intent and reason" and free to do as we please, and as such even my guilt is valuable.

Helmut Thielicke, Rector of the University of Hamburg, writes, "To incur guilt is really only the second worst; the very worst is not to be able to feel guilt anymore.

But to feel guilt and to respond to its pain is to know the irresistible grace of God working in us to restore in us the image of His Son that has been disfigured and all but obliterated.

In the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith. "The liberty which Christ hath purchased for believers under the gospel consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin, but also in their free access to God, and their yielding obedience unto Him, not out of slavish fear, but a childlike love and a willing mind."

Thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord' we do not have to bear the burden of our guilt. We can know the joy of forgiveness whose delight is higher, much higher, "than the bottom of the woe (of our guilt) is deep!"