

I HAVE MADE A MESS

Forgiveness: The Road Back Series



Human beings need to be held accountable for our behavior. Part of being an adult is admitting it when you have made a mess and knowing what to do to begin cleaning it up. Our American pragmatism has long made light of guilt with the dictum that one simply can't change what is in the past and therefore "guilt feelings" are not helpful to our psychological growth. Hogwash! When one child pushes another off a chair, the instincts of most parents **rise above** saying, "Well, she's already been pushed off, so there's no point in doing anything about it now. And I sure hope the child who did the pushing doesn't feel bad about it later!"

About 16 years ago Katherine Power turned herself in to authorities for her part in a 1970 bank robbery. A bank guard, the father of nine children, was killed during the holdup. Ms. Power had evaded discovery and prosecution for over 20 years. When she turned herself in 1993, she said she wanted to regain a sense of her self and "full authenticity" as a final step in her therapy for depression. Yet she asked that her deeds be weighed in light of the turbulent, anti-Vietnam sentiment of the 1960s. Specifically, she compared herself to the man who released the so-called "Pentagon Papers," Daniel Ellsberg. And her case elicited considerable press and public sympathy. A

judge who wasn't convinced by her self-justifying defense sentenced her to eight to twelve years in prison.

I believe that episode is something of a microcosm of how our culture has come to see itself and what will yet happen when we stand before the ultimate judge. Yes, the God of the Bible is infinitely merciful and loving. But He is also infinitely holy and just. He therefore has the right to demand upright behavior of us and to hold us accountable for our rebellion against righteousness.

If you lie to me, you shouldn't feel good about it; you have undermined our friendship. If someone cheats on his taxes or in her business dealings, he or she ought to feel uncomfortable at church.

So what are we supposed to do when we really mess up?

RESPONDING TO PERSONAL GUILT

I realize that Believers have been taught that guilt is a satanic tool. I thought of it that way myself in the past. Guilt is not the end but the beginning of the work of a healthy conscience. It is a red flag to warn us that something needs attention. It is an alarm bell to call ethical people to repentance. It is heaven's invitation to come home, to be forgiven, to restore one's relationship with God. If we allow what I called "therapeutic religion" to replace the biblical message, though, we will reduce all guilt to mere guilt feelings, make peace with the warnings meant to put us on a journey back to God and forfeit the process that was meant to bring us salvation and peace with God.

I recall being on a flight once. I sat on the plane for almost an hour past its scheduled departure time. The pilot's voice came over the cabin speakers to explain, "One of our sensor lights came on during the pre-flight check that signals a problem with one of our engines. We think the problem is with the sensor, but we've asked maintenance to check it out before we push back from the terminal." Well, since I was already restless about missing my connecting flight — as others were as well — I marched into the cockpit and asked permission to get on the intercom. "Does anybody have a hammer in your luggage?" I

asked. "We can fix this problem by just bustin' the red light that's flashing!" So somebody handed me a hammer, and I proceeded . . .

Seriously, you know I wouldn't do something like that. It would be stupid for me to break the sensor lamps rather than let the mechanics check for the real problem. But we are doing the spiritual equivalent of that when we dull our consciences and compromise with evil behavior.

The defense I've heard some people advancing during the recent Washington scandals is the old everybody-does-it line. "Everybody lies. Everybody cheats on his wife. Everybody does anything he thinks he can get by with." That simply isn't true! Many people still care about principle. Many still honor their promises. Many still tell the truth, keep their marriage vows, and treat other people with respect. Yet all of those people sometimes do things that are wrong. Their moral sensor lights flash — and they pay attention.

Yes, there is such a thing as false guilt and unjustified guilt feelings. For example, many people who have suffered verbal, physical, or sexual abuse have incredibly low self-esteem as a result of what has been done to them. Thus they internalize practically everything that happens in terms of guilt and shame. These people need to be encouraged to see reality more clearly — to be angry about the wrong done them rather than carrying around guilt feelings (i.e., a false sense of guilt) about their past.

We are supposed to feel guilty and dirty when we do something wrong, not when something wrong is done to us. The human mind can be tricky here! A Christian counselor can often help a person distinguish between relevant guilt and irrelevant shame, between wrong to be repented of and wrong to be offended by. But someone who dismisses the notion of guilt out of hand is not helping anyone. One person helps another person in the greatest way one human can aid another by pointing him or her to real forgiveness for real guilt.

FORGIVENESS: TWO DIMENSIONS

So let me try to help you understand about forgiveness for **your guilt**, if you don't already know Jesus Christ. I would like nothing better than to take you to the place and person where

you can lay down your load of guilt — as I have mine. There are two dimensions to forgiveness and it is important that you understand both of them.

First, there is the objective reality of forgiveness. God does not remove guilt by overlooking our sin but by the all-important biblical procedure called "substitution." The wages of sin is death and heaven graciously permitted Jesus to bear the penalty we were due to suffer. He substituted Himself for us at the cross. **"God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. . . . God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (II Corinthians 5:19, 21).**

Firefighters who battle the monster forest fires in the western United States have a technique for survival that illustrates the one God has given us. If surrounded by flames and unable to find an escape route, a firefighter sets a fire right where he is standing. Letting it burn outward from his location, he digs a shallow grave and covers himself with a reflector shield in his backpack. Salvation is in that burned-over place.

Similarly, our salvation is in the burned-over place called Calvary. Sin's just due was meted out to Christ on the cross. He suffered the death you were due to die. Now, if you are willing to put your full faith for salvation in that event, God will credit you with His perfect righteousness. If you are willing to lie down with Him in His grave, the same power of the Spirit that raised Him from the dead will give spiritual life to you.

Second, there is the subjective assurance of forgiveness. For someone who comes to take his or her sin seriously, it stands to be a difficult thing to accept forgiveness, even to believe that forgiveness is possible. God knew it would be that way. So He has given us tangible, physical signs of pardon that are meant to help us receive, appreciate and sense our forgiveness. These signs are baptism and Holy Communion (Lord's Supper).

Peter wrote about Christian baptism against the Old Testament account of Noah and the ark. **"[O]nly a few were saved then, eight to be exact — saved from the water by the water. The waters of baptism do that for you, not by washing away dirt from your skin but by presenting you through Jesus' resurrection before God with a clear conscience" (I Peter 3:18-21, The Message).** The physical effect of water on flesh is not to

wash away sin as if it were dirt that sticks to one's face, arms, or legs. Sin isn't sand-lot grime — although it certainly makes you "feel dirty." Thus God offers salvation through faith in Jesus' completed work on the cross and gives baptism as a physical sign of spiritual cleansing. Invisible faith becomes a visible action in one's immersion. Like a bath, water baptism communicates the sense that one can "feel clean."

Then, for the community of persons already baptized in Jesus' name (i.e., the church), the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion is a concrete, palpable sign of forgiveness. It is the covenant meal that reminds one of the price paid for his redemption, of his acceptance of God's grace through faith and of his role as a living witness to God's love in accepting all others who are in the Body of Christ. **"What you must solemnly realize is that every time you eat this bread and every time you drink this cup, you reenact in your words and actions the death of the Master," said Paul. "You will be drawn back to this meal again and again until the Master returns. You must never let familiarity breed contempt" (I Corinthians 11:26, The Message).**

Together these two events communicate to pardoned sinners that the presence and activity of God in our lives is real. The water of baptism "takes your breath away" in the startling reality of God's redemptive work in your life. The bread and wine of the communion "nourish" your faith in His continuing work of bringing His people to the glorious triumph over sin and death He has promised.

How complete is this divine provision! Heaven has acted objectively to provide forgiveness through the substitutionary death of Jesus for sinners. And the personal, subjective assurance of one's participation in that death is signified to each believer in her or his baptism and participation in the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion.

THE GOSPEL IN WASHINGTON

Earlier I made a passing reference to the latest scandals in Washington. Would you please indulge me here for just a few minutes? No one who takes the Word of God seriously can approve of marital infidelity or be silent in its presence. Yet I repeat my concern that what is happening in Washington will

be the springboard for angry anathemas that reflect more about culture and politics than the gospel message.

Before you tune me out as a compromiser of biblical ethics please hear me out.

One of the principal reasons people don't come to church is the judgmental spirit they perceive in our reactions to culture. Perhaps those non-church people would even choose to use the word "hypocritical" of us. What they are accustomed to hearing are harsh rhetoric and stinging denunciations. What they are accustomed to seeing are veins raised in necks and sweat scowling brows.

The net result of this unbalanced message is the following conclusion drawn by an unchurched person: They wouldn't want somebody with my history in their church. Is that the message we want to communicate? Is that the gospel? Is that what Jesus would say to our time and place?

Jesus wants us to be a church that welcomes anyone who has been hurt by sin and wants a Savior. That person may have AIDS, may be responsible for an ugly divorce, may be carrying a public criminal record, or may be disgraced by a political scandal.

We may never be asked to receive and provide the nurturing spiritual environment for the salvation of a politician in any of our churches. But we are called to be that place for one another — and for anyone else the Lord may choose to send us. Maybe that person is you today. Others of us can tell you of the day and circumstance when we heard this word from God: **"Now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation" (II Corinthians 6:2b).**

CONCLUSION

The question that ultimately confronts everyone is this: What do I do with this awful mess I have made?

The Christian response to that question is this: Jesus came to tell us that He preferred to leave heaven and die than to abandon us to the mess we have made.

Will you accept that answer as yours today?