

Baggage: How To Conquer Guilt

Two weeks ago we were inundated with news reports that a 33-year-old Israeli citizen was charged with assault with intent to murder in connection with 18 stabbings that left five people dead in Michigan, Virginia and Ohio.

Elias Abuelazam was arrested August 11th at Hartsfield Jackson International Airport in Atlanta, Georgia. He was trying to board a flight to Tel Aviv when he was taken into custody.

What fascinated me is that even before we really knew anything about the guy, cable news shows were bringing on “experts” and criminal profilers and asking them specific questions which they really couldn’t answer.

About the best explanation I heard from any of the profilers was this. “What we do know is he’s a psychopath.”

The dictionary defines a psychopath as someone, “Characterized by an abnormal lack of empathy combined with strongly amoral conduct but masked by an ability to appear outwardly normal.”

In other words a psychopath is the name we use for someone who doesn’t feel any shame, remorse, or guilt when they do wrong or hurt others.

We normally put psychopaths in maximum security prisons because we realize that if a person doesn’t experience guilt, they can never be trusted. If they never experience guilt, they’ll never take ownership of their actions.

So guilt is an important component of life. But what happens when guilt becomes a hindrance instead of a help.

We’re in week 4 of a 5 week series we’re calling *Baggage: Lightening The Load*.

What we’re attempting to do in this series is see the things that often ensnare us in life. They could come from our childhood. They could come from us not knowing how to deal with them. They could have their roots in how we’ve been treated by others. The problem is they’ve become encumbrances to us so we want to discover what God says about how to deal with them.

We’ve already looked at anger, depression, and fear & worry. Today we’re going to unpack the subject of guilt.

As we said when we started this series, these are areas of baggage that we get tangled up in and sometimes can’t seem to shake don’t all affect all of us at the same time. That means something absolutely crucial to the long-term success of this church body.

We want to repeat this and drive this point and drive it home because it's been several weeks since we've looked at this. If the subject matter hits you personally grab onto all that you can from God's Word. If it's a piece of baggage that you're not carrying around don't just kind of hit the off button on the remote.

Keep your eyes and ears open because inevitably you're going to have friends, relatives, coworkers, fellow church members who will be wrestling with these issues. God wants to change your life this morning but God wants to use you to serve others, too.

This morning I want you to see that guilt is a good thing when it shows us what we've done wrong and drives us to make changes, but it can become baggage if we don't know how to deal with it.

There's really two types of guilt. There's true guilt and there's false guilt. They both have different origins but I believe the answer is ultimately the same.

I. False Guilt Is Guilt We Feel Because We Haven't Met Expectations

False guilt is really about us feeling inadequate because we can't meet expectations. These expectations come from ourselves, our parents (whether alive or not), our friends, our bosses, our peers, or from a distorted image of God. False guilt is about pleasing people and keeping rules.

Jesus said this, *You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.* (John 8:32) Jesus is all about truth and freedom. Jesus is all about delivering us from baggage.

Isn't it interesting how even well-meaning Christians can stir up false guilt in others. A mother tells her daughter who lives in another state and works full time, "You don't visit me as often. You're not here like you used to be. Not that you never come, but you need to come more."

So the daughter feels what? She feels guilty. She feels guilty because she's not pleasing mom but she thinks, "I'm doing all I can. I'm maxed out as it is." So she struggles with guilt.

Somebody at church tells a new Christian who is working two jobs and getting far too little sleep, "You need to spend more time praying and reading the Bible every day. By the way, you missed church two weeks in a row. You'll never grow if you keep that up."

Even when we're trying to encourage someone spiritually we can be building false guilt up in their lives.

What is the truth that sets us free? *Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.* (I Corinthians 10:31)

The truth is that we are here to worship and please God, and not people.

Turn to Galatians 1 page 1033

Galatians is a letter written just 20 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. It was written to a group of churches in a region of Asia Minor known as Galatia.

The author was a man named Paul who was specially chosen by God to be an apostle. Paul traveled around the Roman Empire starting churches and he was the founder of the Galatian churches.

Paul's message was simple and straightforward. It's the biblical message. We are all rebels who have sinned against our Creator. That rebellion has brought a pronouncement of divine judgment.

God is a righteous judge. He must punish sin. It's part of His character.

But God is also love. And in love He made a way for our forgiveness. He sent His Son to take on humanity as Jesus Christ, live a life of perfect obedience, and then die on a cross as our substitute.

Being forgiven and made part of God's eternal family isn't through anything we could ever do. It's by the finished work of Jesus Christ.

That was Paul's message to the Galatians. That was the message they gladly received. They believed and churches were started.

But as soon as Paul left to start churches in another place the attack started. Men came down from Judea saying that they were sent by the apostles in Jerusalem to tell the Galatians that Paul deceived them.

They said, "Paul didn't give the whole story. The truth is you needed to keep the OT law plus believe in Jesus Christ."

When Paul found out about what these guys were telling the Galatians he wrote this letter that we have in our Bibles.

Remember, the point of contention was that they were telling the people that God wouldn't accept them unless they did something.

What did he write?

Read verses 9-10

Those are some strong words. If anyone changes the good news from grace to works (even me) let him be accursed. He uses the word *anathema* in Greek. It means "dedicated to judgment."

These guys came to the Galatians and said, "Paul's just telling you what you want to hear. We're the ones bringing the truth."

His answer was this: "If I was just about pleasing everybody, I wouldn't be going around pronouncing judgment on people. If I was about pleasing everybody I

wouldn't preach salvation by faith. People don't like that message. It hits at their pride. But, then if I just told people what they wanted to hear I wouldn't be a servant of Christ."

We need to be careful of sacrificing the truth that sets us free so we can please people.

Now let me just clarify something. The Bible says we're supposed to love and serve others.

Philippians 2:3 Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.

Pleasing others is a theme that permeates the Bible. Preferring others is the very opposite of selfishness and self-centeredness.

Our great example is Jesus Himself. The Bible says, *Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification. For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me."* (Romans 15:2-3)

But there is a point when pleasing others becomes wrong. It's when we have to compromise biblical truth to do it.

For the Galatians it was the gospel. What about us? How does this relate to guilt?

For us it's not accepting the biblical truth that we're free in Christ. For us it's the biblical truth that our highest priority is to please God. When we compromise those truths to please others we'll be trapped under the oppression of false guilt.

Paul wrote to another church in Asia Minor. This one was in the city of Colossae and he wanted them to understand his heart's prayer for them. He said, "This is what matters above everything else."

We do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. (Colossians 1:9-10)

The center of our life shouldn't be pleasing people. The burden of our heart shouldn't be meeting everyone else's expectations. As soon as that's our priority we become bogged down in a quagmire.

Steve Shores says that the central question becomes, "Do I look and act enough like those around me to fit in and be accepted?" Instead we should be asking, "Regardless of how I look and act, am I passionately worshiping God, deeply thirsting for Him, and allowing Him to change my relationships so that I love others in a way that reflects the sacrifice of Christ?"

Kerby Anderson writes, "In essence, false guilt is a stern warden that may give a temporary reprieve but is always ready to call upon you to prove your worthiness

once again. We feel unworthy and feel as if we must prove ourselves at a moment's notice."

So false guilt can be caused by people's expectations but it can also come from a distorted view of God and His expectations.

Jarrett Stevens, in his book *The Deity Formerly Known As God* lists several misguided ideas that we unknowingly develop about God. We don't realize it, but misconceptions about God always lead to confusion in our lives so we end up missing out on what God really has for us.

Here's his list: Cop Around the Corner, Sweet Old Man, Cosmic Slot Machine, Talent Show Judge, All-You-Can-Eat Buffet, and Your Parents... Supersized.

Two on that list, Cop Around the Corner and Talent Show Judge are real false guilt manufacturers.

If you think that God is just the cosmic rule maker who never is pleased but always lurking behind the next corner waiting for you to mess up so He can let you have it, you'll live your life in fear and guilt without knowing freedom.

I've often thought about the fact that in some ways I was better off being brought up in a basically non-religious home because when God finally got a hold of my life He didn't have to scrape off layers of religious misconceptions. I was pretty much a clean slate.

It's not that was for some people brought up in religion. And when I say religion I mean any system that teaches you can work your way to heaven.

Over the years I have talked with countless people who struggle with guilt because of what they were taught about God when they were young. They were taught the judgment side of God. That's important. But they were never taught about the grace of God.

The other misconception about God that produces false guilt is the Talent Show Judge. If you think that God is never satisfied, that He's always asking just a little bit more, you're never going to at peace. Instead you'll walk around with guilt.

I. False Guilt Is Guilt We Feel Because We Haven't Met Expectations

II. True Guilt Is Guilt We Feel Because We're Guilty Before A Holy God

Romans 3 page 101 read verse 19

It's amazing how we have this inborn knack for turning God's truths around.

So many people go to church week after week. They do the ritual. They go through the motions. And they leave thinking, "If I just do my best to keep God's commandments I'll be OK."

They're never sure how good is good enough for God but they hope somehow they can make it.

Notice what the Bible says here in Romans. God's law was never given to forgive. What it does is stop every boast of self-righteousness. It puts it up there in front of our face in high deff so there's no mistaking it we're guilty. The whole world is guilty before God.

Read verse 20

No body can be made right before God by keeping His laws because His laws are perfect. The law of God is given to show us the character of God, but it's also to prove to us that we're sinners in need of a savior.

Listen to this. The Bible couldn't be any clearer. *Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law. But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.* (Galatians 3:21, 22)

The Scripture boxes us in and shows us that there's no way out except Jesus Christ.

Here's where authentic guilt comes from. Real guilt says, "I feel guilt because I'm guilty before God. Not because of the expectations of others or because of some distorted concept of God, but because I am a sinner."

In his book *The Future of an Illusion* Sigmund Freud said all religion is infantile and has basically four parts: ignorance, fear, fantasy and guilt. He thought the solution to getting rid of most guilt was to get rid of the false belief in God. In other words, get rid of the lawgiver and you'll get rid of guilt.

The problem is it doesn't work. You can't get rid of your creator. You can't just wish God away. Every one of us is eternally and righteously accountable to God.

In Freud's last book, *Civilization and its Discontents* he declared that real human purpose and happiness could never be a reality. Instead, he promised to move us through successful psychotherapy, "from unmanageable unhappiness to manageable unhappiness."

That's exciting.

We live in an time when a lot people want to blame the problems of the world on "sickness." Stuff happens and right away you hear, "We live in a sick society." Elias Abuelazam stabs 18 people and kills 5 and we say, "That guy is really sick."

But see, when we start using "sickness" as the underlying cause of personal problems we undermine the reality of personal human responsibility, and this is a real problem! People no longer consider themselves responsible for what they do wrong!

“It was my mother, my 6th grade teacher, it was my legalistic church, It was the painful experiences of life, *whatever* that caused me to do this wrong thing.”

The Bible doesn't identify the problems of the world as “sickness.” The few times that it uses the word sickness to describe somebody's rebellion it's speaking metaphorically about their response to sin. It says the real culprit is sin before a holy and righteous God.

Now at this point you say, “Ed that sounds so harsh. I thought you were going to tell me how to deal with guilt. Instead your making me feel more guilty!”

Listen, by blaming the problems of the world on “sickness” we cause people to lose all hope. That's the cruelest thing you can do. The most unloving thing you can do is blame some nebulous sick society for problems.

You know why? Because there is no vaccine, there's no antibiotics, to cure the “sickness” of the world. That's like going to the doctor and hearing that you have NDM-1. That's a super bug that's coming out of India that's resistant to every known antibiotic. “You've got the sickness but we don't have the cure.”

I mean, is that depressing or what?

Now think about this, when we point out that the problem of the world, and our personal lives, is “sin,” we give people hope. We give people hope because *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.* (I Timothy 1:15) There's an answer, there's a solution, there's an antidote.

In the end, if I'm riddled with genuine guilt, the reason is sin.

The Bible says, “*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23). If we are interested in straitening out our lives and our relationship with God and dealing with the shame of guilt, we have to confess our own sinfulness and we have to seek God's forgiveness.

I. False Guilt Is Guilt We Feel Because We Haven't Met Expectations

II. True Guilt Is Guilt We Feel Because We're Guilty Before A Holy God

III. Whether Guilt Is False Or True, Our One Hope Is In God's Grace

If our guilt is false, we need to know that there is hope in God's forgiveness. If our guilt is real, we need to know the same thing, that there is hope in God's forgiveness.

Are you struggling with guilt this morning? You'll read so many bizarre and confusing things in pop psychology today.

If you Google the phrase “forgive yourself” you'll get 231,000 hits. Here's an example. This is from Oprah.com, “Time and again we've seen the power of forgiving someone else, but many of us struggle with guilt, blame and the inability to forgive ourselves. Whether it's feeling responsible for a death or something

much simpler, if you can't forgive yourself, you can't move on. Begin to heal and open your life to new possibilities."

Here's why we need the Bible to set us straight. It sounds so logical. We have guilt, we can't move on, we need to forgive ourselves. The thing is the Bible never tells us that we need to forgive ourselves. What it tells us is we need to claim the forgiveness we have from God through Christ.

It's not that we need to forgive ourselves, it's that we truly need to believe we are forgiven.

Turn to Ephesians 1 page 1038 read verse 7-8

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is God's eternal remedy for human sin. When we trust Him as savior, He not only forgives our sins, but He also cleanses our conscience from guilt. What happens to our sins? Once God has forgiven them, they are:

- Out of sight: *You have put all my sins behind your back.* (Isaiah 38:17)
- Out of mind: *For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.* (Jeremiah 31:34)
- Out of reach: *You will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.* (Micah 7:19)
- Out of existence: *I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.* (Isaiah 43:25)

Our sins are gone, removed from existence as if they had never happened in the first place. We can start our new life with a clean slate. And God gives us His Holy Spirit to empower us with new strength.

Have you been trying to make it on your own?

Maybe you have done things that have filled you with guilt, and you think if you're sorry enough and if you do enough good things, you can make up for the bad. No way!

Scripture tells us we are washed clean and given new life through faith in Jesus Christ: *But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.* (Titus 3:4-6)

What refreshing words for guilty people, kindness, love, and mercy!

Psalm 32 begins with the words: *Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him...* The Hebrew word *esher* that's translated "blessed" literally means "happy."

The Psalm starts with being happy and ends: *Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!* (Psalm 32:1,2,11)

Are you forgiven this morning? Are you part of God's family?

The Bible says *Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand...* (Romans 5:1-2)

The access point, the doorway, to God's undeserved mercy is faith. Faith in Jesus Christ and faith in His work on the cross.

The Bible says; *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.* (Acts 16:31)

Once we're in the family of God we're eternally secure in His love. But there will be times that we sin. There will be times that we disobey our heavenly Father. When that happens we're not out of the Family, but we're out of fellowship. Forgiven eternally but feeling guilty because we know we've disobeyed God.

That's where confession comes in. The Bible says: *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* (I John 1:9)

God doesn't forgive because we deserve it. If we deserved it it wouldn't be mercy. God forgives because He's faithful and just.

God is faithful to give eternal salvation to everyone who trusts Christ. It's based on the cross.

And God is faithful to restore broken fellowship for all who confess their sins. It's based on the cross too. God is faithful to free us from guilt.