# Why do I feel so guilty?

Many of us are plagued with a nagging sense of guilt—sometimes repeatedly throughout the day. Where do these feelings come from?

### *Our expectations*

I crawled into bed exhausted from a long day of work and frenzied attempts to accomplish everything on my "to do" list. However, my mind recounted not all the work I did, but all the work I didn't do. Maybe you, too, chastise yourself with comments like "I should have exercised more this week," or "I shouldn't have eaten that mud pie for dessert!" When you are playing with your kids, do you tell yourself, "I should be folding that pile of laundry or working on that project from the office"? And of course, if you are folding laundry or working on the project from the office, "I should be spending more time with the kids." Even spiritual disciplines can become another form of a guilt-evoking "to do" list. Whatever we do, somehow it never seems quite enough.

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When we yoke ourselves with expectations of what we want to "achieve for God," remember Jesus' words to the multitude who asked Him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" he replied, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (Jn. 6:28-29). To believe His sacrifice is sufficient is the real work of which He calls us, not the many works we busy ourselves with to gain His (or others') approval. In Christ, we are already approved. Yet often we become slaves to expectations that God never asked or required of us.

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### *The accuser*

Recently, as I prepared to use a spiritual gift God has been developing in me, defeating thoughts loomed: Who am I to think that I have something of worth to share with other believers? Do I really have the gift of teaching? Besides, my gift is nothing like Jon's gift. Other voices chimed in, "Yeah. Don't waste your time. Jon is much more gifted than you. Your gift is so insignificant, it's not worth using."

When you read passages us has Galatians 5, which describes fruit of the Spirit, are you ever overwhelmed with feelings of defeat? Perhaps you have been a Christian for 10 years, yet your life seems more aptly described by the "deeds of the flesh" than the "fruit of the Spirit." Condemning thoughts flood your mind such as, You will never really be free from those sins. You will never really be what God wants you to be. You have failed to show self-control and once again God is deeply disappointed in you. How long can you expect Him to put up with you?

These assaults are a vicious accusation from our adversary who seeks to devour us (1 Pet. 5:8). Paul describes Satan as the one who "accuses [our brothers] before our God day and night" (Rev. 12:10). The accuser maliciously uses this guilt—in the guise of conviction from the Spirit—to imprison us and keep us bound. He haunts us with accusations

like, “You will never live up to God’s commands in Scripture, so why bother reading it?” Bother we must. For it is precisely the truth, the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17), that we so desperately need to slay these accusatory attacks.

Christ stands in front of us and says, “This one is my child! I shed my innocent blood for him, for her.” Though inadequate in ourselves, He is our adequacy. When Satan tries to defeat us by pointing out how far we have to go toward maturity in Christ, we must boldly state it is God’s work to complete what He has begun in us (Phil.1:6) and to “make [us] strong, firm and steadfast” (1 Pet. 5:10).

### *Conviction of the Spirit*

Does that mean we should never listen to guilty feelings? No. There is a third source of guilt—the only valid one—which we are wise to stop and consider: the conviction of the Holy Spirit. Notice the word conviction—not condemnation. When the Spirit convicts us about sin in our lives, we will indeed experience great remorse at the gravity of our sin. Yet the Spirit’s conviction always comes with the hope of restoration. Satan would have us wallow in our guilt, believing we have pushed God’s grace beyond its limit. The Spirit shows us how He wants to free us, restore us, and lead us back on the path of grace and obedience.

While we need to be quick to recognize and resist condemnation and false guilt from the accuser, we must also be quick to surrender to conviction from the Spirit. The more quickly we confess, repent, and make amends with those involved, the more quickly we can be back on the way of healing and life.

### *Walking in freedom*

If you are struggling with guilt and uncertain of the source, ask yourself some of the following questions:

1. Does this guilt drive me into God’s arms for mercy and restoration, or drive me away from Him, believing He condemns and banishes me?

2. When I tell myself I “should” be doing something, am I secretly hoping that by doing it, God will love me more than He already does?

3. Is there a scriptural command about the act for which I am feeling guilty? (Consider Jas. 4:17.)

4. What is the Spirit convicting me of today? Am I making any excuses for my actions in attempts to evade His conviction? Do I need to make amends with someone?

5. What words of condemnation am I listening to today that contradicts God’s teaching of grace?

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