

Guilt is a feeling of conviction that arises from your own sinful actions; “What have I done?” Shame is a painful feeling about who you are as a person because of your actions or the actions of others; “Who am I?” These feelings affect self-perception, how you interact with others, and how you relate to God.

Guilt and shame are emotions given by God to draw you to Himself for personal healing and healing of your relationships. Guilt makes you aware of your sin, sin's consequences, and your need to repent (change direction). Shame reveals that you are broken human being in need of forgiveness and renewal that only God can provide. Feelings of humiliation, disgrace, and embarrassment about what you've done is guilt; these same feelings focused toward how you are perceived as a person (by others, by God, or by yourself) is shame. Guilt, if not addressed biblically, can lead to shame.

People can carry feelings of false guilt and shame, too. False guilt is a feeling of conviction for actions that fail to meet standards that are not God's standards (these can be other's expectations, personal standards for yourself, or an event that is not your fault). False shame is when your own low opinion of who you are as a person or your value is determined by something other than God's opinion of you (your failures, sufferings, or another's low opinion of who you are, etc.).

God does not want you to carry burdens of guilt or shame. Jesus came to wash away guilt and give you a new identity of eternal significance. He wants to heal you from sin's damage and for you to see yourself through His eyes. God's grace offers freedom and purpose for you as a beloved child of God.

Common Characteristics of Those Struggling with Guilt and/or Shame

- **Unpredictable moods and behaviors.** How you feel about yourself or suspect how others perceive you varies day-to-day, greatly affecting your emotions and response to life.
- **Easily distracted by wandering thoughts.** It is hard to focus or complete tasks because your thoughts wander to sin, hurt you've caused, what others may think, or whether the “real you” will be exposed.
- **Feeling weighed down or “heavy.”** You feel tired, weak, sluggish, like you are carrying extra weight.
- **Suspicious and critical of others.** You suspect others of having poor motives. You are critical of others and disparage them in your mind, if not aloud. You see others as “tainted” or out to “get you.”
- **Extreme sensitivity to constructive criticism.** You have extreme responses to slight criticism even when it is well-intended. You may explode in anger or retreat from the relationship altogether.
- **Self-defeating or self-punishing behavior.** You sabotage opportunities for success or try to atone for guilt by punishing yourself. It's hard to enjoy success or celebrate life because you think you don't deserve it.
- **Preoccupation with how you are perceived by others.** You strive to prove yourself at work, school or socially primarily to look good in others' eyes.
- **Feelings of worthlessness.** You routinely criticize yourself. You don't feel lovable or worthy of love.

Biblical Insights

Sin destroys relationships. Foremost, God allows you to feel the guilt and shame of sin, so that your relationship with Him can be made right. Christ's death on the cross satisfies God's penalty for any sin. This “payment” is a free gift offered to all and credited to you when you receive Christ as Lord. In God's eyes, when you accept Christ, you are cleansed from sin, made right with Him (justified), and given a new identity as His child who He transforms to become like Jesus (sanctified). If you have not received Christ as Savior, know that God wants to free you from sin's destruction and to make you new.

- *“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)*

True feelings of guilt are a result of sin. They reveal that God's standards have been violated and that steps of healing are necessary for you and others who have been affected by sin. Ignoring or denying known sin will not remove feelings of guilt or shame—doing so can make matters worse. Confessing and forsaking sin to follow God's will, are His path for healing and freedom.

- *Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy. (Proverbs 28:13)*

If, after receiving Christ's forgiveness, confessing and making amends for your sin, feelings of guilt and shame persist (because of how you view your sin, a sin committed against you, shortcomings that are not sin, etc.), you may be struggling with false guilt and shame. Here are some causes:

- **Feelings of low worth:** "I don't deserve grace; I'm not worth God's forgiveness." Christ's price for your soul (not self-worth or merit) has determined your true value. You are priceless to God and loved just as you are. Jesus endured abuse, humiliation, shame, and death so that you could become a child of God. You are infinitely valuable to the One whose opinion matters most. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)
 - **God's Word is not authoritative:** You believe another's claim about your sin more than God's Word (e.g. Satan's accusations, someone you hurt, an abuser, your own thoughts). (Romans 8:33)
 - **Pride:** "I can't believe I would stoop so low, I'm better than that." Your human nature is above no sin. You need God's charity. You cannot overcome your sinful nature on your own or make up for your sinful choices. You need a Savior for your past, present, and future. (Romans 7:18)
 - **Misplaced identity:** You seek significance in something more than being God's child (e.g. a career, a loved one's esteem, a goal, how others see you). For you, God's grace is insufficient. (Gal 1:10)
- **Note:** We are all sinners, capable of great harm, unable to overcome sin. Forgiveness is a gift of God offered to all. God reclaims those who receive this gift as forgiven, righteous children. "Forgiving yourself" will never free you from guilt and shame. Freedom comes when you trust that Christ's claims upon your soul and identity as a child of God are true and allow these truths to define you.

In the spiritual battle against sin, guilt, and shame, recall that you have an Advocate. Satan wants to keep us trapped by sin (even accusing you of sin already forgiven by God), but Christians have Christ as an advocate. We can trust our Advocate and embrace grace with confidence through Him.

- *"And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, 'Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.'" (Revelation 12:10)*
- *"... if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." (1 John 2:1-2)*

Next Steps

- If you have unconfessed sin, admit it to yourself, confess it to God and to someone you trust (Psalm 32, James 5:16). If you haven't received Christ's payment for sin, visit regenrecovery.org/freedom.
- When dwelling on a past failure that you've confessed and turned from, remember God's grace. He doesn't want you to carry a burden that He nailed to the cross. Let reminders of your need for grace, lead you to praise God for His love and for Christ's sacrifice that cleanses you from sin. Recall that you now belong to Him. Consider memorizing Colossians 2:13-14, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Titus 3:3-7.
- Find a safe place, like a *re:generation* group, where you can explore if pride or misplaced identity is causing feelings of guilt or shame. (1 John 1:7-9, James 5:16)
- Embrace your new identity in Christ and live in His purpose for you. (2 Cor 5:17-18, Ephesians 5:8-10)

Additional Resources

- Listen to this story: watermark.org/dallas/ministries/regeneration-recovery: Claudia-Guilt and Shame
- *re:generation* blogs: [Why Should I Share a Secret Sin?](#), [Why I Can't Forgive Myself](#)
- Watch *Real Truth Real Quick*: [How Can a Christian Overcome Guilt and Shame](#)
- Books: *Grace That Breaks the Chains: Freedom from Guilt, Shame, and Trying Too Hard* - Neil T. Anderson, Rich Miller, Paul Travis; *Unashamed: Healing Our Brokenness and Finding Freedom from Shame* - Heather Davis Nelson

**This Information Sheet is also available online at <http://www.regenerationrecovery.org/struggles/>*