

Th224 Sin and Atonement: The Restoration of Relationship

Lesson Th224-14 God's Law: Guilty of Breaking the Law

The judge looked down from his elevated desk called the 'bench.' The accused, who stood before him, was a young man. "The crime you have committed is terrible. I find you guilty of assaulting an elderly woman and robbing her. You took her wedding ring and the small amount of money she had in her purse." The judge then added, "You should be ashamed of your cruel and wicked behavior."

The judge has mentioned two distinct concepts, one legal, and one emotional. In this story 'guilt' is a legal term. The accused has broken the law and thus has become guilty of his crime. This guilt is a legal condition. It does not matter whether the young man feels guilty or whether anyone else feels he is guilty. His guilt describes his legal standing. He can offer excuses. Perhaps there are other people who have committed much worse crimes. Or maybe he committed his crime because he was desperate and in need of money. Guilt is not defined by emotions or special conditions. He has broken the law and thus has brought upon himself guilt.

The other word the judge used was 'shame.' Many people can feel shame or embarrassment at being caught and their crimes made public. Shame is a feeling or emotion that can be felt by the person, their family, and even their community. Since shame is an emotion, it can become less intense as time goes by. But guilt is a legal condition. One's guilt does not go away simply because the crime happened in the past. Whether a person feels guilty or not, does not change their legal standing. To break the law, one becomes guilty of the crime. And the guilt remains whether the crime is ever discovered or not.

This concept of guilt is found in the Bible. The word 'guilt' is mentioned over 130 times in the Bible. In the Book of Leviticus, the Israelites are commanded when and how to bring a guilt offering. By obeying these instructions, they could have the guilt of their sin removed. Here is what Yahweh told Moses: "They must bring to the priest, that is, to the Lord, their guilt offering, a ram from the flock, one without defect and of the proper value. In this way the priest will make atonement for them before the Lord, and they will be forgiven for any of the things they did that made them guilty" (Lev 6:6-7).

In these verses we see both the concept of guilt and the need for atonement. Some might argue that guilt is an Old Testament idea, which applies only to the 10 commandments and Jewish law. This is not true. In the New Testament, James the brother of Jesus, said this concerning guilt: "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point, is guilty of breaking all of it" (James 2:10).

Jesus himself spoke about guilt when he delivered his Sermon on the Mount. When Jesus saw crowds of people gathering around him, he walked up onto the mountain and found a place to sit down. The people followed him and sat around him to listen to what he would say. Jesus began to teach the people on many subjects. He also taught them about the law and guilt. This is what he said,

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:17-20).

Now everyone listening to this statement was shocked. For the scribes and the Pharisees were considered the most righteous and holy among all of the people. The Pharisees were the lawyers who studied every little detail of the Law of Moses and went to great lengths to obey them.

Jesus continued, “You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not commit murder,’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever shall say to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever shall say, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the hell of fire” (Matt 5:21-22, NASB).

This concept is difficult to comprehend. How can anyone be in right standing with God, when we incur guilt over what might seem trivial sins? We must think back to our last lesson and remember that God is perfect. His holiness is perfect. It is pass or fail. There is no room for ‘almost correct.’ We must understand that with sin comes guilt. And that without atonement, or forgiveness of our sin, we stand before God condemned and guilty. Do not lose heart. Although we are all guilty of sin, we know that Jesus died in order to make atonement for our sins. That truth we will learn in more detail in the remaining lessons of this course.

This lesson is **important** because it reveals to us how we incur guilt when we sin. We become guilty by breaking God’s law. The law given by God to Moses and the Israelites was repeated in even stronger terms by Christ in the New Testament. A person who gets angry or abusive toward a brother or a sister becomes guilty before God. It is as if they had murdered the person, according to Jesus’ teaching.

The **main truth** of this lesson is that guilt is a legal condition, which is not based upon emotions or opinion.

Let’s **review** this lesson—

1. How do people incur guilt? [Pause 5 seconds.]
 - A. If you said, “When people sin or break the law, they incur guilt, you are correct.
2. How is guilt different than shame? [Pause 5 seconds.]
 - A. If you said that guilt refers to our legal condition, whereas shame is an emotion, you are correct.
3. What did James say about guilt? [Pause 5 seconds.]

A. If you answered, “James wrote that to stumble in one sin is to become guilty of all,” you answered correctly.

Your **assignment** for this lesson is to watch this lesson at least three more times until you can repeat it in your own words. Listen carefully to the teaching about guilt from both the Old and New Testaments—the words of Moses and of Jesus. Pay special attention to the scriptures that are quoted. Afterwards spend time in prayer and meditation examining your own heart and behaviors.