

Dealing with Guilt
Psalm 51: 1-10, Colossians 2:8-12, 20-23

Friends, if you are a book-worm and you like to read classic literature – like Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Fyodor Dostoyevski, or *Catcher in the Rye*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and that sort of stuff, you are probably familiar with Edgar Allen Poe and his short story – *The Tell-tale Heart*.

If you're not familiar with it, let me give you a brief synopsis of it.

It's a bit of a dark story really – typical of Poe - and it's about a man who for some reason kills his housemate, cuts up the body, and then hides it in under the floor-boards in his house.

Gruesome, I know.

Now I must apologize to those of you who are going off to school this week and meeting your new room-mates - sorry for using this example in my sermon.

I'm sure your new roommates are totally normal people, and you have nothing to worry about – unlike the fellow in the Tell-tale heart.

The morning after this horrible murder is committed; a neighbor contacts the police to report hearing the victim scream during the night.

So the police come around to investigate this report, and they stop by this man's house to inquire about it. Now, he is so confident they will not find any evidence of his horrible deed that he invites them in to show them around.

And when they want to ask him some more questions about the neighbor's report, he gets some chairs and has them sit down in the room where he committed the murder, directly over the spot where he has hidden the body.

However, his arrogance is his undoing – as the interview progresses the man begins to hear a faint sounding thump-

thump - like a heart-beating, coming from underneath the floorboards.

Gradually it grows louder and the man is worried that the police can hear it too.

Finally it gets so loud that he believes it's impossible for the police officers not to hear it – though they give no indication that they do... he can't believe they could simply ignore it.

In fact he is convinced they do hear it and they are not letting on because they now suspect him of murdering his house-mate and they don't want him to know their suspicions.

Driven to the edge of insanity by this sound under the floorboards, the man breaks down and confesses his guilt, and then tears up the floor to reveal the evidence to the police.

You see friends; this classic tale illustrates rather well how guilt affects people, how it functions to convict them, and causes them to confess what they have done wrong.

Now I have to admit that when it comes to reading, my selection tends toward the theological department rather than classic English literature – but sometimes there are common themes between the two – as in this case, the theme of guilt.

And Psalm 51, which we read this morning, also deals with the theme of guilt.

And just in case you didn't pick up on this theme from the content of the psalm - there's a little foot-note right at the beginning, which introduces the Psalm by saying...

“For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.”

If there was any doubt over what this Psalm is about, this settles it. It deals with guilt.

And this footnote got me thinking. Imagine if we introduced our worship songs this way?

We could put a little note up on the PowerPoint that would read something like this; a song by so and so, or better yet - a song for so and so – written about the time he got caught stealing office supplies from work, or when it was discovered she was the person who started those nasty rumors, or when they illegally downloaded things off the internet...

Well you can relax; we're not going to go there.

But we do want to look at dealing with guilt this morning; because many of us wrestle with, and struggle with feeling guilty.

We feel guilty because we're not spending enough time with our kids, we feel guilty for eating too much, guilty because we aren't doing our part to save the environment...

Guilty because we have so much - while others in our world have so little, guilty because we're carrying too much debt, guilty because of that dirty little habit, guilty because we don't read our bible, or pray, or get out to church enough...

We feel guilty, guilty, guilty...

And that feeling of guilt plagues us, it's always there hovering in the background, eating away at our peace of mind, preventing us from enjoying life freely and fully... until eventually we're so tired of feeling guilty we have to do something about it.

So what do we do?

Well for most of us our first inclination is to rationalize why we shouldn't feel guilty.

If we feel that we're not spending enough time with our family because we're working so much, we rationalize away the guilt by saying that we're working hard to provide for our family...

Or that our bad habit isn't so bad, there are other people who do far worse things... and besides nobody is really getting hurt.

Or we might find someone – an expert of some sort, like Oprah or Dr. Phil who will assure us that we don't need to feel guilty about whatever is plaguing us.

Or perhaps we try to do something to work off that guilty feeling. If we've eaten too much – we head out to the gym to exercise a bit more...

Or if we feel guilty that we have so much when other people in this world have so little, we volunteer to do some charity work and do our part to help others, give back... and we feel better.

I will often hear community folks express this sentiment in some way or another when they contact me to inquire about helping out with Inn from the Cold.

The other thing that we can do is just talk to someone to *“get it off our chest.”*

We might find a friend or a confidant and share with them why we're feeling guilty about whatever it might be and in doing that we will feel less guilty about it.

And Friends we are able to deal with our guilty feelings in these ways because that's part of how God created this world to work.

We can justify things, we can distinguish false guilt from true guilt, we can take action – like confession - to alleviate our guilt...

Like James 5:16 says *“confess your sins to one another and you will be healed”*

Confession is good for the soul – and its certainly better that dealing with guilt by drinking or taking prescription meds.

And if you're the kind of person who doesn't feel comfortable doing this with another person because you're too

embarrassed or it feels too awkward – you can relax, because I’ve discovered that there’s an app for that too!

I did some research and I found that someone has created an App for dealing with guilt – so you can use your smart phone to help alleviate those awful feelings and it’s called “The Forgiveness Engine” (as opposed to a “search engine.”)

This app takes you to a web-site where you can go and post an anonymous letter apologizing for something you did to someone else and get it off your chest and it helps you relieve those guilty feelings.

And as I said this is all good to a certain degree – after all guilt can be a debilitating burden and we have to deal with it somehow.

But I wonder if you’ve noticed that most of what I’ve spoken about so far has to do with the fact that we **feel** guilt, and what we do to stop feeling it – as if somehow it’s our feelings that determine if we truly are guilty or not.

You see the truth is that most of us don’t worry whether we are guilty - unless we feel guilty.

Ask yourself - would you confess something you’ve done if you didn’t feel guilty about it?

King David certainly didn’t – even though he committed adultery, got the woman pregnant, and had her husband sent to the front lines to be killed – he didn’t “feel” guilty until the prophet Nathan confronted him about his guilt.

And so it might be good for us to examine ourselves to see how much of our willingness to confess any wrongdoing is just an effort to alleviate our guilty feelings and get back to feeling good, because that would be just another form of selfishness – right?

And the truth is friends, we’d discover that our motivation to deal with guilt is riddled with self-interest.

And so we wonder – once King David felt guilty, was he just confessing to relieve his feelings?

Well, that was certainly part of it – and I think David was aware of that because in vs. 5 he writes *“Surely I was sinful at birth, from the time my mother conceived me”*

In other words if Sin affects us right from our conception, then everything we do is certainly affected by sin, so that even our motivation to confess our guilt is tainted and twisted by it.

We sin in confessing our Sin! How ironic is that...

Let me tell you another short story. About 500 years ago, a German monk named Martin Luther could come to no peace before God because he realized this – and while he may not have been guilty of any visible crime such as adultery, or murder – like King David was... He came to the same conclusion that King David did.

Martin knew he was guilty before God because he was affected by Sin and nothing that He did; no amount of bible study, helping the poor, spending time in prayer or solitude was pure enough, or completely free from self-interest that he could be assured that he had what King David had asked for in vs 10; *“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”*

Instead he experienced vs. 3; where David writes *“For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.”*

Poor Martin Luther, Dr. Phil and Oprah weren't around yet... and he didn't have the internet, he didn't have a smart phone, he couldn't do an online search and download a helpful app like the Forgiveness Engine...

Instead, Martin searched for a solution by being strict with himself, fasting and disciplining his body, refraining from and abstaining from pleasure and joy in an effort to get to a place where his motives would be free from sin.

Martin was doing what the apostle Paul had condemned in his letter to the Colossians...

“why, as though you still belonged to (the world), do you submit to its rules: ²¹“Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? ²²These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. ²³Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.”

And Martin Luther discovered what Paul wrote was true – that even though he did all these things they had no effect on relieving his guilt, or helping him get past his own self-interest in confession.

But in actuality Martin Luther had something which could help him – he had the scriptures, and 500 years ago he discovered that the bible had contained the solution to his guilt all along – he just had missed it up to this point!

One day as he was studying the first chapter in the book of Romans he read verse 17 *“For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”*

Finally he understood – being a Christian, being righteous, overcoming our sin, dealing with the root cause of our guilt isn’t something we can generate from within ourselves!

Instead the good news of the gospel is that right living comes from God, because God sent Jesus to live on our behalf.

So Jesus is now our righteousness and we must trust and believe faith that God looks at his life, his motives, his actions instead of ours – when we confess Christ as our Lord.

This is what it means to have faith, and the good news friends is that faith is God’s gift to us, it’s not something we have to produce.

And God promises to nourish faith in us, when the scriptures are preached to lift up Christ, when we celebrate baptism, each time we eat the Lord's supper - by the power of the Holy Spirit our faith is nourished and we are empowered to more and more to live by faith in Christ

His life is in us and our life is in His.

In Baptism – the symbolism reminds us that we are immersed into Christ's life.

In the Lord's Supper the symbolism is we take Christ's life into us – so inside and outside it is all about Christ's perfect life – and no longer about ours. This is why Paul says “he must increase and I must decrease”

And through the scriptures we are made aware, and assured that faith in Christ is the final word on our sin and guilt.

So Martin Luther had discovered the bible's app for dealing with guilt! You substitute Christ's life for your own through

faith, and then living in gratitude trusting that God accepts what you do – self-interested or not – through Jesus Christ!

So the question is... are we living by faith?

Have we been going to church, been listening to sermons, praying to Jesus, reading the bible all these years and missed this app as well?

Have we been trying to deal with our sin and guilt by being a better Christian through good works and moral living?

Have we neglected to take note of how deep our Sin really goes in our lives - to the point that we even sin in confessing our sin... because of our own self-interest or self-righteousness?

Have we missed the app for dealing with it?

Friends, this is why many of us become frustrated with “being a Christian” why we feel it just doesn’t work – because we’re still wrestling with our sin and guilt.

So we continue to carry around our guilt!

Guilt over not being a good enough Christian, over bad habits and moral failings, about how we act, the desires we might feel, or the things we might enjoy.

Friends, the only way to deal effectively with sin and guilt is put faith in the truth that Christ’s life effectively substitutes for yours.

Then you will have Christ’s clean heart and Christ’s steadfast spirit, you will be washed clean, whiter than snow – so the real guilt in your life is dealt with.

And the truth which Christ brings in his life will set you free from false guilt as well – because false guilt is based on lies, but Jesus Christ is the way and the truth and the life.

You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free!

So friends, do you have a tell-tale heart?

Are you convicted about things you’ve done or left undone, and do you wrestle with guilt? Then don’t delay any longer. Why wait!

Download this app today – and you can deal with your guilt by substituting Christ’s life for yours – through faith which is a gift from God.

Just ask for it!

Amen.