

# Accepting God's Forgiveness

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Believing in God's Love for You

C. John Miller



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**D**o you feel inadequate?  
Are you worried and afraid?  
Does God seem like a dark cloud to you?  
Do your past failures trouble you in the present?  
Are you always trying to do more or be better?

You may not realize it, but your biggest problem is that you don't really believe in God's forgiveness.

A young man named Harry said to me, "When I think about God, he doesn't seem to be my forgiving Father, but rather my condemning Judge. I don't think God's love includes me. I'm twenty-seven years old, and I feel as if my life has been a total waste. How could God love someone like me?"

What was Harry's problem?

Did his self-condemnation stem from a childhood dominated by a remote and authoritarian father? Were his negative feelings made even worse by the strict discipline of the school system he attended? It would be easy to conclude that guilt and failure had been instilled in Harry by the authority figures in his childhood.

But are those the only reasons that he struggled with guilt and a sense of failure? When I talked with him, Harry said, "It isn't just a matter of *feeling* guilty. I think I really *am* guilty. I have made a lot of bad choices and have so many regrets. I feel like my life

has been a waste. Even though I know I should love my parents, I can't stand to be around them. What's wrong with me?"

Harry was asking a psychologically and morally profound question. Instinctively he knew that there is a close connection between behavior and conscience. Like Harry, all of us know what it is to be troubled; to have a restless inner life; to be haunted by the feeling that we were made for something better and have not quite attained to it. Regrets for past mistakes—a betrayal of a friend, an undone task, an angry outburst, a jealous thought, the inability to love someone close to us, all these and more—leave us troubled. What bothers each of us might be different, but we are all troubled by something. For some, their negative feelings are so strong that their entire life seems to be nothing but a profound alienation from God and people. Seneca, the Roman philosopher, knew of this haunting of the conscience. "Sin can be well-guarded," he wrote, "but free from anxiety it cannot be."

### **Why Is the Conscience So Sensitive?**

Many believe that our moral sense is only a product of training and culture. But this view does not adequately explain how the conscience arose in the first

place, why its voice is so compelling, why people in every culture have a sense of right and wrong, and why there is nothing like it among animals. The Bible offers the only viable alternative explanation: our conscience, our innate sense of right and wrong, was given to us by God. Men and women were created “in the image of God,” modeled after God who is perfectly holy and just (Genesis 1:26–27). Each of us has a God-given sense of right and wrong. It is this moral sense or conscience that makes us “like God” and different from the most complex animals.

This wonderful difference, however, also leads to anxiety and fear. You can compromise your conscience by doing things contrary to its standards, but you will find that your conscience will not finally compromise with you. It is God’s point of contact to show us our need for him—it’s the conscience that helps us recognize our sins, take responsibility for them, and remind us that our deepest need is God’s forgiveness. But often we try to quiet our conscience (and the anxieties that come with an uneasy conscience) using our own strategies. These strategies don’t help to take away our fears and sense of not measuring up; instead they complicate our lives. Consider some of the inadequate strategies we use for dealing with our real guilt.

## Inadequate Strategies for Dealing with Real Guilt

### 1. Confession without Faith

This was vividly illustrated for me on a plane trip to Amsterdam. My seatmate was telling me the story of his turbulent life with drinking, drugs, and sex, and at the same time arguing loudly against my quiet suggestion that he was made by God for something better. The conversation went on for most of the flight.

Finally a woman in the seat ahead of him turned, introduced herself to me as Susan, and thanked me for what she had learned from overhearing our conversation. Then she added, "I am a religious person, and I feel compelled to confess my sins to you. By listening to you, I've realized that there are things I have never confessed to anyone and I must do so now." Ignoring my surprised protests, she leaned back and quietly began a long, detailed confession. "Never before have I been able to confess these sins," she concluded. "Now I have a sense of relief that I have never had before."

"I'm glad you feel better," I responded, "but soon, I fear, all your sins will be back bothering you again, many of them the very ones you confessed here."

Now it was Susan's turn to be startled. "The problem is," I continued, "that you seem to have no *faith*

*foundation* for confessing your sins. You really do not seem to believe in the forgiveness of sins. You are very much aware of them, but your awareness is centered more on people and their evaluation of your life and behavior. You are hungry for human approval and relief from a troubled conscience, but are you concerned to get right with God?”

Susan’s approach to handling her guilt reminded me of many in our world—people whose confessions to one another, even public confessions on television talk shows, give them momentary relief, but don’t release them from the real guilt they carry every day. They talk about their failures, but no one repents of real guilt toward God. Like Joseph K. in Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*, people today go about trying to get someone else to assure them that all is well. At the same time their inward moral sense is telling them the opposite: namely, that all is wrong with them. There might be momentary relief in public confession of failure, but real guilt has broken our relationship with God. And it’s our relationship with God that must first be addressed to gain true relief from the burden of guilt and failures we carry.

## **2. Trying Harder**

Some of us cope with our guilt differently. We try to use religious activity and “doing the right thing” to

deal with the sins that trouble us. But we're still left with the nagging sense that we haven't done enough or tried hard enough. So we use attempts to obey the Ten Commandments—or at least the ones we believe in—as a *ladder* to get to heaven. We might acknowledge the need for God to assist us, but we basically trust in our own self-effort and hard work to get us near to God.

We look down on those who, in our opinion, are doing worse at keeping our rules than we are. And we try to quiet our consciences with the assurance that we are better than those around us. But God has made us in his image to be like him—to love him and others perfectly from the heart (Luke 10:27).

The Ten Commandments are simply an expression of love. As God's rules, they show us that human guilt doesn't stem from our upbringing or feelings of low self-esteem. Instead, they show us that we really *are* guilty because we have failed to love God and people as we were made to do. God gave us these rules to teach us what love looks like in all areas of life—and to drive us to seek his forgiving grace as we realize how we fail to love God and people. The truth is, we are not “half-sinners” with a few small failures that can be fixed by trying harder. Instead we are “whole sinners,” and our need for grace is total.

What we have done, in attempting to mute our conscience, is deny our need for God's grace, and hope that the guilt we feel can be relieved by our efforts (perhaps with God's secondary assistance) to balance the record. But our real guilt is not carried away by these strategies. And we are left with an unsettled conscience whose pangs are often intense. Here is how the prophet Isaiah describes us—people haunted by real guilt that shrivels up our inner life:

All of us have become like one who is unclean,  
and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;  
we all shrivel up like a leaf,  
and like the wind our sins sweep us away.  
(Isaiah 64:6)

### **God's Provision for Your Complete Forgiveness**

Despite his atheism, even Freud recognized the limitations of human solutions to the problem of guilt. Writing to Pastor Oskar Pfister, he discussed Christ's "psychologically profound" statement to the sick man of Mark 2—"Your sins are forgiven. . . . Get up, take your mat and go home." Freud wrote, "If the sick man had asked: 'How knowest thou that my sins are forgiven?' the answer could only have been: 'I, the Son of God,

forgive thee.' In other words, a call for unlimited transference. And now, just suppose I said to a patient: 'I, Sigmund Freud, forgive thee they sins.' What a fool I should make of myself."<sup>1</sup>

Freud's reduction of Christ's atoning power to the psychoanalytical process of transference does not diminish for us the truth he mentioned: Christ is the *only* one with power to forgive our sins. Our attempts to absolve ourselves and others of wrongdoing have no lasting value in dealing with a troubled conscience. Harry and Susan needed something better than their own efforts to deal with the anxiety and fear that was the undercurrent to their lives.

As our 747 made the descent to the Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, I said to Susan, "God's answer to a troubled conscience is different than confessing your sins to another human. He establishes permanent peace with himself by the gift of his Son." I went on to explain, "Those who seek a cleansed conscience through their own efforts face a *never-ending* task. We are never as obedient as we think we are. Our confessions can never be complete. And the problem is that our *nervous doing* can never be finished because we are broken by sin and not able to love God and others. Your efforts will never free your conscience from your real guilt.

"God has a better way—his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus lived a perfect life of love for God and people; he died