



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

7643 Huron River Drive

Dexter, MI 48130

734-426-8480

“The Gateway of Guilt”

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Dr. Matthew J. Hook

Romans 1 – 3

I remember how guilty I felt. The car wouldn't start in a part of the neighborhood I had no business being in, at an hour I had no business being out in, and my girlfriend and I had to walk back to her house, and I had to call my dad to come get the car from the dark street.

There were other times I felt guilty. Like when I drank all the homemade lemonade my sisters had made for Dad, who was out working, and I just chugged it, not even drinking it slow enough to taste and enjoy it the way it deserved.

Guilt. Sometimes it's a willful choice to do wrong. Sometimes it overwhelms us because we failed at something. Either way, it lingers...

Guilt. Guilt runs our society. Is there any emotion more common than guilt? Sometimes it's rooted in specific acts. You're married but acting like you're not. You've neglected your relationship with your son or daughter. You're lying to your parents about where you're going. You blew your stack last week. You've been plowing over people's feelings and emotions. You cheated on your taxes.

Have you ever felt guilty because you've come to realize you've become aware that you can't cope with life? We fall short over and over again, and somehow we must be to blame.

When the guilt loads up on us, we try to break free. Here are some ways I thought about how we deal with guilt:

- We *deny it*. We're simply not guilty. Our feelings of guilt come from the hang-ups of other people. We say everyone has a right to do what they want. Do your own thing. What works for you, works for you. Don't impose it on me.
- Another way is we *explain it*. We rationalize it. "I couldn't help myself. It was my childhood. We made bad choices because we had to." Basically, we deny our personal responsibility. (Seems to me there's not much talk about personal responsibility on the national level regarding personal responsibility). Another way we rationalize it is we think about how the guilt makes us want to do really good for awhile, to "make up for" the guilt we feel.
- So we become *perfectionists*. We feel guilty in one area of our lives, so we go overboard in other areas. Husbands and dads struggle against neglecting our families, but when the guilt builds enough, we come home and love on everybody and do everything for everyone, and it almost can give you this sick energy to be really good. The problem is it never lasts, and we're still carrying around this load of guilt.
- Another way is we *punish ourselves*. We feel "bad," so we drink, or fail at our work or our marriage, to make ourselves suffer. Somehow we believe that if we face enough junk, we won't feel guilty; even though failing actually deepens our sense of guilt and worthlessness.
- Another approach to guilt is we make a *substitute list* of do's and don'ts that we CAN live up to. Then we reassure ourselves of our goodness by keeping the watered down rules we construct. If we still feel guilty, we compare ourselves with others who don't live up to our standards, and remind

ourselves of how much better we are than they. This is a great one for those of us who grew up in the church!

- Of course, there's the last approach: *Just enjoy the sin!* If you stick with it long enough, allow yourself to get addicted and the early pain you get from your conscience will recede if you throw yourself into it enough.

The only problem then is the emptiness you live with, and the empty shell you become... fearful and alone. For *some* people living in guilt, God is nothing more than that inner voice that says "That's not quite good enough." We live in a perpetual penance of regret.

GUILT causes some Christians to break away. They were once active, serving, and fully engaged, but have broken away. Because they've tried to live up to a false image of God as never satisfied, they just got tired of the guilt and broke away.

GUILT causes others to break down. The load is too heavy to bear. And they end up feeling like a burden to everyone, because they can't function in the ways God gifted them.

This sort of guilt damages us badly. And some of that damage isn't affected by normal repentance and prayer. Guilt is a huge thing for us. It is felt so intensely by so many, **it's hard to believe the Bible doesn't talk about guilty feelings much.**

So what does the Bible speak of? Just this: **REAL GUILT: responsibility for acts of sin.** And the crazy thing is, the whole world falls into this, whether they've heard of Jesus or not: Listen to Romans 1:20 *For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. 21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.*

25 They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

All people have evidence of God by the creation. The basic reality of God is plain enough. Open your eyes and there it is! By taking a long and thoughtful look at what God has created, people have always been able to see what their eyes as such can't see: eternal power, for instance, and the mystery of his divine being. So nobody has a good excuse. People knew God, but refused to treat Him as God. Paul follows the progression: first people reject God; next, they make up their own ideas of what a god should be and do; then they fall into sin; which knowingly or unknowingly creates the guilty feels by which we run our lives.

Romans 2:14 *(Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, 15 since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.)*

Paul is answering a common question today: What about people who don't believe in God? How can they be guilty of anything? And Paul is saying every culture has standards of right and wrong, and every person fails to live up to what he himself believes is right.

C.S. Lewis said it well: "My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?"

Romans 3:10 *As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; 11 there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. 12 All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."* Okay, Paul, we've got it! But look what he begins to open up to us in vs. 21:

21 But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the

Prophets testify. 22 This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified freely by God's grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25 God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate His justice..."

Although we need to think about our fallen condition and sin, God seems far more interested in speaking to us of forgiveness than of guilt!

Forgiveness comes from the root meaning "to send away". In every case, what is sent away is not our *feelings of guilt* around the sin, but the sin itself. It is the sin that is forgiven and sent away.

The act of God in forgiving us through Jesus is the source of a new freedom for us. God's forgiveness is so complete that our sins are no longer remembered.

So what of the guilt? Because our sins are dealt with sent away, we are no longer guilty! We stand uncondemned before God! Justified by faith, we now "*have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*" (Romans 5:1).

Probably the 3rd most well-known Methodist hymn written by Charles Wesley, the brother of John, who together began the movement called Methodism in the 1700s, right after "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" and "Christ the Lord is Risen Today" is "**O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing**". In the 4th verse of the old Methodist hymn, there is a verse we plow through that I think we need to stop and applaud:

"He breaks the power of cancelled sin, he sets the prisoner free, his blood can make the foulest clean, his blood availed for me." When you let guilt rule you consciously or subconsciously, you are living under the power of canceled sin! God has forgiven you, the sin is gone; won't you let go of the perpetuated guilt that is unattached to anything? The sin that is powerless to keep you from heaven because of Jesus is running and ruining your life! You must turn to Jesus, the wounded healer, to break the power of cancelled sin! Don't you want to be set free?

God's Interest in Guilt?—None. Except to help us get past it, by eliminating the sin that causes it. May you remember how many people are walking around, loaded with guilt—or their coping mechanisms, and offer them the freedom you've found in Christ.

STUDY GUIDE for Romans 4 – 8

Monday: Read Romans 4. Justification by Faith. Paul shows how the even the Old Testament shows that the faith principle has always operated this way. Abraham's faith was credited as righteousness. David too. It's already there! Abraham faced the facts that he and Sarah were over 90, but Abraham also took into account the "fact" of God! He was fully persuaded that God had power to do what He had promised. Who are some other Biblical characters you relate to? What Christians today are a model for you in living out your faith? Where are you being stretched to trust God's promises?

Tuesday: Read Romans 5. Justification for All. Joyful Confidence (1-11). Memorize 5:8. Based on your salvation, what are you experiencing? What 3 words best describe your life before becoming a Christ-follower? How about now? Death Through Adam, Life Through Christ (12-21). All humanity has been affected by Adam's rebellion. Paul shows how all humanity is now affected by Christ. Have you thought of yourself as 'dead' before? How has turning to Christ made you more alive?

Wednesday: Read Romans 6. Dead to Sin, Alive in Christ. (1-14). Paul opens against the idea of sinning more, knowing that God will grant His grace. So why do we continue to sin? Old habits? Ignorance? What will you do this week to count yourself dead to sin and alive in Christ? Slaves to Righteousness (15-23). Try this exercise: name a sin. Now project it out to its 'nth' degree. How does it lead to death? Memorize 5:23. What a gift!

Thursday: Read Romans 7. Marriage Illustration (1-6). Do you feel more 'married' to the living Christ, or to some religious code? Explain. Share with someone how you were delivered from one of your 'old ways.' Struggling with Sin (7-25). Read this one twice. If that doesn't describe your life, how would you put it? When have you experienced a sense of Jesus rescuing you from sins or situations too big for you to handle?

How does Jesus help you now?

Friday: Read Romans 8. The Spirit's Power. Memorize this chapter! New Life (1-17). You are an heir of the greatest power in the universe! No condemnation...putting to death sin... There is more grace from God in each day for you than there is sin. How is this less about "trying" and more about "trusting?" Future Glory (18-27). Sufferings compared to the glory to be revealed... the whole creation groaning... the Spirit helping in our weakness... Who searches our minds and hearts... What frustrates you most about living in a fallen world? What is the difference between hope and wishful thinking? How has your hope aided you this week? More Than Conquerors (28-39). These concepts are so powerful, we read them at funerals. How have you overcome an enemy? What does the confidence enable you to do this week?