

OCTOBER 2006—*Release from False Guilt*

Many of us struggle with feelings of guilt. In some cases, it is true guilt for having committed a sin against God or our neighbor. True guilt comes from our God-given conscience and is properly dealt with through repentance and confession, which bring forgiveness and restored fellowship with God. Another source of guilt feelings is false guilt. In this case we feel guilty for having violated a standard we have internalized, even if it is a false one. False guilt often comes from parental or societal values and expectations, and sometimes from a misunderstanding or misapplication of the Bible. Dealing with this kind of guilt requires identifying the faulty beliefs we hold, learning to reject them when they arise, and reframing the issue in the light of God's truth. A mature, Christ-centered friend or counselor can be helpful in this process.

However, there is another type of guilt that comes from the devil. C.S. Lewis understood this well and gives advice on how to deal with it.

(1.) Remember what St. John says, "If our heart condemn us, God is stronger than our heart." The feeling of being, or not being, forgiven and loved, is not what matters. One must come down to brass tacks. If there is a particular sin on your conscience, repent and confess it. If there isn't, tell the despondent devil not to be silly. You can't help hearing his voice (the odious inner radio) but you must treat it merely like a buzzing in your ears or any other irrational nuisance. (2.) Remember the story in the *Imitation*, how the Christ on the crucifix suddenly spoke to the monk who was so anxious about his salvation and said, "If you knew that all was well, what would you, today, do, or stop doing?" When you have found the answer, do it or stop doing it. You see, one must always get back to the practical and definite. What the devil loves is that vague cloud of unspecified guilt feeling or unspecified virtue by which he lures us into despair or presumption. "Details, please?" is the answer.¹

Learning to apply this wise advice will serve us well when the devil is seeking to torment our souls.

Both false guilt and demonic guilt create anxiety and rob us of joy. This can block the very thing we were created for—fellowship with God and witness to others. It can also lead to paralysis in emotional and spiritual life and ultimately plunge us into depression or despair. If we experience vague or persistent guilt feelings that do not arise from a specific sin, we need to discern the source and take appropriate action. As we do, we will regain a sense of God's pleasure with us and be able to live in the joy of the Lord.

*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins
and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

1 JOHN 1:9 (ESV)

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Letters to an American Lady* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1967, 1971, 1998), p. 77.