



November 2011 - *Vague Guilt?*

For various reasons, many people find it hard to maintain a consistent prayer life and closeness to God. One cause for this is what C.S. Lewis described as a “vague cloud of unspecified guilt feeling,” which leaves a person feeling unforgiven and distant from God. Below is one of Lewis’s letters of spiritual direction written to an American lady who suffered from this problem:

Dear Mary,

(1.) Remember what St. John says, “If our heart condemns 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 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, to-day, 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. (3.) The sense of dereliction cannot be a bad symptom for Our Lord Himself experienced it in its depths—“Why hast thou forsaken me?”

Of course we will continue to pray for you.

A tripos at Cambridge is an examination: so called for the tripos (compare tripod) or 3-legged stool on which the candidate used to sit when the exam was still, not written work, but a disputation.

Joy and I have just been for a lovely fortnight in Ireland. She, and my brother, are both well. We send out loves and blessings.

Yours,
Jack ¹

Unlike true guilt, which Lewis regarded as healthy and from God, he saw this vague sense of guilt as a scheme of the devil to separate believers from God and plunge them into despair. Lewis insisted on specificity and details because he knew that the Holy Spirit only convicts people of specific sins and with the goal of repentance and restoration of fellowship with God.

Although Lewis does not here address the separate issue of false guilt arising from emotional problems in one’s life, the remedy is still applicable. If you are not guilty of specific instances of sin - violation of God’s law - there is no reason to think your relationship with God is impaired. You should pray as if all is well unless shown otherwise.

*...for whenever our heart condemns us,
God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.
Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God...*
I JOHN 3:20-21 (ESV)

¹ Lyle Dorsett, ed., *The Essential C.S. Lewis* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), p 531.