

“When Guilt is Good”

Matthew 4: 1-11

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted there by the devil. 2 For forty days and forty nights He fasted and became very hungry.

3 During that time the evil came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread.” 4 But Jesus told Him, “No! the Scriptures say, ‘People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

5 Then the devil took Him to the holy city, Jerusalem, to the highest point of the Temple, 6 and said, “If you are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say, ‘He will order His angels to protect you. And they will hold you up with their hands so you won’t even hurt your foot on a stone.’”

7 Jesus responded, “the Scriptures also say, ‘You must not test the Lord your God.’”

8 Next the devil took him to the peak of a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. 9 “I will give it to all of you,” he said, “if you will kneel down and worship me.” 10 “Get out of here, Satan,” Jesus told him. “For the Scriptures say, ‘You must worship the Lord your God and serve only Him.’”

11 Then the devil went away, and angels came and took care of Jesus!

Guilt gets a bad wrap. There are times when a little proactive guilt can help us make the right choice. But what is guilt? **[NOTE 1]**

Guilt is a distressing emotion. No one wants to experience it. It causes feelings of regret and responsibility, and can result in sadness, disappointment or a sense of personal moral failure.

But guilt has benefits, according to recent research. Will Bynum, associate professor of family medicine at the Duke University School of Medicine, says, “We now have a new concept of guilt as a potential source for growth. It can point us toward actions we can take to improve our lives.” Guilt may distress us, but it makes us aware of what we could or should have done. It reminds us that we have a conscience. In so many ways, guilt can be good.

Writing in *The Washington Post*, a 72-year-old named Bob Brody says, “My lifelong guilt trip has evolved into a guilty pleasure of sorts. Guilt fuels me with fresh incentive to do and be better. It forces me to recognize my mistakes, fulfill my obligations and apologize to those I’ve wronged. My guilt insistently steers me toward virtue.” I think Brody is on to something. Guilt helps us to do better, fulfill our obligations, and align our actions with God’s desires. Or rather, guilt can, (it has the potential) to do that.

Almost everyone at some point — except, say, psychopaths and sociopaths — feels the pang of guilt. In the best cases, guilt signals that we've come up short of the standards of behavior that we set for ourselves, as well as those of our culture and society.

“Guilt is a moral emotion,” says June Tangney, a professor of psychology at George Mason University and author of the book “Shame and Guilt.” Her research on guilt is regarded as strongly influential and is widely cited. “Recognizing your guilt can be healthy for your relationships. Your guilt about your behavior focuses you on the person you harmed and directs you toward how you can do better in the future.” —Bob Brody, “Feeling good about feeling bad, or how guilt can make you better,” *The Washington Post*, May 19, 2024, E5.

Do you know how spies who are full of guilt communicate with one another? Remorse code. (sorry, I couldn't help myself) I would like to share with you a story from Max Lucado's book “*God Came Near*.”

Abraham Lincoln once listened to the pleas of the mother of a soldier who had been sentenced to hang for treason. She begged the president to grant a pardon. Lincoln agreed. Yet, he's reported to have left the lady with the following words: “Still, I wish we could teach him a lesson. I wish we could give him just a little bit of hangin'.”

I think I know what the President had in mind. Yesterday, I got a little bit of hangin'. We were having Sunday lunch at the home of a fellow missionary family. It was after the meal, and I was in the kitchen, while my wife Denalyn and our friends, Paul and Debbie, talked in the living room. Their 3 year old daughter Beth Ann was playing with our 2 year old daughter Jenna in the front yard. All of a sudden Beth Ann rushed in with a look of panic on her face. “Jenna is in the pool!”

Paul was the first to arrive poolside. He went straight into the water. Denalyn was next to arrive. By the time I arrived, Paul had lifted her up out of the water to the extended hands of her mother. Jenna was simultaneously choking, crying, and coughing. She vomited a bellyful of water. I held her as she cried. Denalyn began to weep. I began to sweat. For the rest of the day I couldn't hold her enough, nor could we thank little Beth Ann enough (we took her out for ice cream). I still can't thank God enough.

It was only a matter of minutes, maybe seconds. We almost lost her. The thought was numbing and convicting. ...It was a little bit of hangin'. The stool was kicked out from under my feet and the rope jerked around my neck just long enough to remind me of what really matters. It was a divine slap, a gracious knock on the head, a severe mercy or my proverbial 2 x 4 to the forehead. Because of it I came face to face with one of the underground's slyest agents—the agent of familiarity and comfort.

His commission from the black throne of the evil one is clear and fatal: “Take nothing from your victim; cause him only to take everything for granted.” He had been on my trail for years and I never knew it. But I know it now. I've come to recognize his tactics and detect his presence. And I'm doing my best to keep him out. His aim is deadly. His goal is nothing less than to take what is most precious to us and make it appear most common, humdrum, familiar, comfortable!

To say that this agent of familiarity breeds contempt is to let him off easy. Contempt is just one of his offspring. He also sires broken hearts, wasted hours, and an insatiable desire for more. He's an expert in robbing the sparkle and replacing it with the drab. He invented the yawn and put the hum in humdrum. And his strategy is deceptive.

He won't steal your salvation; he'll just make you forget what it was like to be lost. You'll grow accustomed to prayer and thereby not pray. Worship will be come boring and study optional and discipleship just too much work. With the passing of time he will infiltrate your heart with boredom and cover the cross with dust so you will be 'safely' out of reach of change and fervor, zeal and love. Score one for the agent of familiarity and comfort!

Nor will he steal your home from you; he will do something far worse. He'll paint it with a familiar coat of drabness. He'll replace evening gowns with bathrobes, nights on the town with evening in the recliner, and romance with routine. He'll scatter the dust of yesterday over the wedding pictures in the hallway until they become a memory of another couple in another time. He won't take your children, he'll just make you too busy to notice them. His whispers to procrastinate are seductive. There is always next summer to coach the team, next month to go to the lake, and next week to teach Pearce to pray. He'll make you forget that the faces around your table will soon be at tables of their own. Hence, books will go unread, games will go unplayed, hearts will go unnurtured, and opportunities will go ignored. All because of the poison fo the ordinary had deadened your senses to the magic of the moment.

Before you know it, the little face that brought tears to your eyes in the delivery room has become—perish the thought—common. A common kid sitting in the back seat of your van as you whiz down the fast lane of life. Unless something changes, unless someone wakes you up, that common kid will become a common stranger. A little bit of hangin' might do us all a bit of good.

On a shelf above my desk is a picture of two little girls. They're holding hands and standing in front of a swimming pool, the same pool from which the younger of the two had been pulled only minutes before. I put the picture where I would see it daily so I would remember what God doesn't want me to forget. And you can bet this time I'm going to remember. I don't want no more hangin'. Not even a little bit!

In the fourth chapter of Matthew, the devil tempts a hungry Jesus to turn stones into bread. Then he tempts Jesus to put God to the test. Finally, the devil offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. We know these temptations — physical, spiritual and political attractions. We can imagine ourselves giving in to each of them and then feeling guilty about our failures. [NOTE 2]

But what if we get ahead of our guilt and do the right thing, as Jesus did? "Anticipate your guilt," says Roy Baumeister, a professor of psychology in Australia. "If you get an inkling you're about to do wrong [and] will feel guilty about it afterwards, just stop yourself."

That's what Jesus did when he was tempted by the devil. He anticipated his guilt and stopped himself. "The sooner you see the guilt coming," says Baumeister, "the

better prepared you'll be to prevent it." Matthew tells us that "Jesus was led ... by the **Spirit** into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished"(4:1-2)

No food for 40 days and 40 nights. Can you imagine how hungry Jesus was? This was the amount of time that the great flood tested Noah and his family. The time that Moses spent on Mount Sinai, as he was receiving the Ten Commandments. The time we will spend preparing for Easter, as we gather on February 22, for the first Sunday in Lent. Jesus was famished. No doubt about it.

Knowing that Jesus had a physical need for nourishment, the tempter said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread" (v. 3). The devil knew that Jesus was the Son of God and that he had the power to perform such a miracle. After all, God had provided bread from heaven for the Israelites, as they wandered for 40 years in the wilderness. [NOTE 3]

But Jesus anticipated this temptation. He knew that he would feel guilty if he gave in to his hunger and performed a miracle. So, Jesus responded by quoting Scripture and saying, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (v. 4). Jesus knew that there is nothing wrong with bread, and, in fact, we need it for life. But it is not as good as the word of God.

By making this choice, Jesus was showing that he loved God more than he loved the gifts of God. He knew that bread was a good gift of God, but he could do better. He resisted the temptation to turn stones into bread because he wanted to show his allegiance to the Lord. The message for us, writes pastor Timothy Beach-Verhey, is "The kingdom of God is realized in those who, like Jesus, orient their lives toward God and not around the things that God provides."

Think about this when you are offered a gift of God: An educational opportunity, a job, a raise, a house, a dream vacation. Ask yourself the question: Are you focusing more on what God provides or on God himself? If you love the gifts more than the Giver, you are going to end up feeling remorse. Guilt is good when it keeps you focused on God. [NOTE 4]

The devil took Jesus to the holy city of Jerusalem and placed him on the very pinnacle of the temple. He said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone'" (vv. 5-6). Here, the devil is being particularly devilish. He has heard Jesus quoting Scripture, so now he does it himself. He uses words from Psalm 91 to justify Jesus yielding to the temptation of asking for God's protection.

But Jesus knew what the devil was doing, and he anticipated the guilt he would feel if he gave in. Jesus responded to Psalm 91 with a Scripture verse of his own, Deuteronomy 6:16: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (v. 7). Jesus trusted God to work for good in his life, and he knew not to put God to the test. So, he resisted this spiritual temptation and said no to what the devil was putting before him.

We, too, can be tempted to ask God to rescue us when we get in a tough spot. Maybe we fail to study for a test and really need a passing grade. Or we are running late for an appointment and want nothing more than a good parking space. Or, on a more serious level, we receive a cancer diagnosis and are desperate for a cure.

God promises to be with us, but he does not always give us the security and safety we desire. Sometimes we learn and grow by facing logical consequences — discovering that we really do need to study for tests and try to be on time for appointments. Spiritual growth can come from living with cancer and discovering that surprising healings can happen, even when a cure is elusive.

When we fail in this area, we feel guilty. But that is not a bad thing. Guilt reminds us that our primary Christian obligation is to trust God, not put him to the test. [NOTE 5]

In the library of popular worship songs, guilt and shame are often referred to in the same breath — “you took my guilt and shame” — but herein lies a trap, as the Bible does not treat them as interchangeable concepts. The Bible is an Eastern book, and its concept of shame is an Eastern concept. In Biblical terms, shame is closer to embarrassment, to losing face, than it is to guilt. Shame is fundamentally harmful, and in this area, secular agencies, thinkers and counsellors can be way ahead of the Church.

Shame involves turning on ourselves, and when we associate that with reverence for God — needing to feel bad in order to then feel forgiven — we tie a high view of God to a low view of ourselves, creating significant cognitive dissonance. The good news, as I understand it, is that when we talk about biblical shame, we are not talking about guilt. We are talking about embarrassment, exposure and humiliation. ...

God didn't ask Adam and Eve to hide, or to feel anything but self-acceptance about their naked bodies. It was their **self-judgement** that separated them from God. When we embraced judgement we lost innocence, along with the easy connection between creator and creation. Only God can judge, and in elevating ourselves to that level, we embraced shame. Human-kind turned upon itself. ...

In Hebrews 12:2 (NKJV), we see how Jesus responded to shame: “Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” He despised or disregarded or rejected with contempt ... the shame — the humiliation, the exposure, the mockery of Almighty God, reviled and ridiculed by his own creation.

There are many who reject the Christian faith because they can't get their head around this — that God would choose to suffer at the hands of those whose lungs he had filled with the breath of life, but this despising of shame is what makes the Christian message unique. Jesus was willing to go through that, along with the extraordinary agonies of the cross, to draw us to himself.

He chose the joy set before him (the salvation of humanity) and considered shame beneath contempt. Perhaps then, this could be our attitude too. When tempted to turn on ourselves, or to examine every reason we might be rejected, or to measure ourselves against others, we can rise above it, looking to Jesus. When we see others, exposed,

belittled and humiliated, we can be part of God's answer for them. We can stand side by side with Jesus, and despise the shame. —Duncan Edward Pile, "Shame Is Not Guilt," *Patheos.com*, July 10, 2021. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/duncanedwardpile/2021/07/shame-is-not-guilt/>. Retrieved September 5, 2025.

The final temptation of Jesus was political, and it included the offer of unlimited worldly power. The devil took Jesus to a very high mountain, from which they could see all the kingdoms of the world. The tempter said, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me" (v. 9). For a split second, Jesus probably imagined what he could do with all that power: End warfare, eliminate hunger, heal diseases, institute justice in every nation. But then he anticipated the guilt he would feel if he fell down and worshiped the devil.

So, Jesus said to the tempter, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him'" (v. 10). Jesus refused to submit to the devil, preferring to play the role of a servant instead of a king. He knew that he needed to align his actions with God's desires by worshiping and serving only God.

We see it all the time, we know the temptation of political power. A lot of good can be done by our elected officials, but if a person craves the kind of power that the devil offered Jesus, there will be pain and suffering. [NOTE 6]

Goodness comes from worshiping the Lord and serving only him. Jesus knew this, and so did Saint Augustine of Hippo. He made a statement about God in the year 400 that is still true today: "You have made us for Yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you." We will feel regret, sadness and disappointment unless we make the decision to worship and serve God. **We will find no peace until our hearts rest in God.**

The devil left Jesus, reports Matthew, "and suddenly angels came and waited on him" (v. 11). If we can anticipate our guilt and make God-centered choices, the same will be true for us. Our regrets are good when they steer us toward living by the word of God, refusing to put God to the test, and worshiping God instead of the powers of this world. What are you going to do about it? Please don't say to yourself good message and never think about this again?? Write down one thing you will do today, this week, to apply this to your life. Don't accept shame, but receive Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit be forgiven and free to serve the Lord. We can actually improve our lives when we allow our guilt to guide us. Allow it to point you to Jesus. Let your gratitude for what God has done for you through Jesus Christ motivate you to live Jesus' way. The way of love, grace, forgiveness, and discipleship! Let's Pray ... AMEN

—Henry Brinton and Carl Wilton contributed to this material.

Sermon Notes for “When Guilt is Good”

Based On Matthew 4: 1-11 given at Doster Church February 8, 2026

- I. No one seeks out guilt. It is a distressing emotion. But guilt has benefits. It can be a potential source for growth. It makes us aware of our failings and can fuel and push us to improve our lives.
 - II. It is comforting to know that Jesus was tempted, just like we are. We can imagine ourselves giving in to the temptations Jesus resisted. What if we could anticipate guilt and do the right things, like Jesus did?
 - III. Jesus, our example, anticipated this temptation and knew He would feel guilty if He gave in to his hunger, so He responded by quoting Scripture (Bible). There is nothing wrong with bread, but the Word of God is better! We need to love God more than the gifts of God!
 - IV. Guilt is good when it keeps us focused on God. The evil one can quote Scripture. Jesus anticipated the guilt He would feel if He gave in and responded with Deuteronomy 6:16. God promises to be with us, but He does not always give us the security and safety we desire.
 - V. Guilt can remind us that our primary obligation as a Jesus-follower is to trust God, not put Him to the test! Jesus anticipated the guilt He would feel if He bowed down to Satan. We need to, like Jesus, align our actions with God’s desires by worshiping and serving Him only!
 - VI. What are you going to do about it? Our regrets are good when they steer us toward living by the Word of God! Write down how you might anticipate your guilt and let it guide you this week toward Jesus.
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