

The Conscience, the Cross, and Family Forgiveness

By Jay Wegter

“Sin makes cowards of us all”ⁱ

The human condition is such that the law of God continually judges us and finds us wanting. Not one of us can say that we have loved God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength for even an hour. According to the book of Romans, the judgment of the law is internalized in the conscience (Rom 2:14-16). The law operates in the conscience as a principle of self-condemnation. The law judges us as lacking if we are not found capable of perfect obedience.

According to Scripture, our response to this condemnation of conscience is *fear of punishment* – “fear has to do with punishment” (1 Jn 4:18). We will do almost anything to ward off threats of condemnation – we will go to great lengths to defend against judgment. Because our consciences carry a deep sense of moral failure against God’s law, much energy is exerted in seeking to avoid any additional condemnation.

In his book on the present power of the cross, Paul Zahl explains to what degree our lives are involved in attempts to steer clear of judgment. He asks his readers to recall some humiliating event from their childhood. The emotional pain from it has etched it into the memory – we want to avoid further exposure to humiliation at all cost.

Due to our depravity, human nature cannot adequately meet judgment. According to the Bible, it is impossible to work our way out of condemnation. The harder we try to live up to the law, the worse we feel about our failure.ⁱⁱ Our greatest need is personal atonement for guilt. Much of our working and striving involves an attempt to offset or “atone” for our failure. Like an accounting spread sheet, we try to pencil into our consciences more credits than debits! The law makes its overtures to us as we attempt to minister to our fear of judgment. The law beckons us to *return* to the legal principle of justification by works – “I am what I do.” We become stuck in patterns of performance; self-righteousness begins contaminating our works. Our carnal efforts to carry our own worth and relieve our own consciences always fail. The verdict of conscience can only be brought into line with the verdict of heaven by justification by faith through grace. The believer must daily exercise fresh acts of faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.ⁱⁱⁱ

The flesh has strategies to avoid judgment.

The biblical prototype of all subsequent attempts to escape judgment is Adam’s flight from God in Eden: “I heard your voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; so I hid myself” (Gen 3:10). The effort to ward off judgment is expressed in the form of *strategies* that fall under three heads:

The **first strategy** involves the effort to escape condemnation by ESCAPE, or splitting off from reality. Absenting our inner self does not completely quiet the voice of condemnation. Our attempts to “turn off” the conscience by a denial of judgment ultimately fail. We can recall the attempts of a number of biblical characters who used this strategy: Pilate (Mt 27:24); Nabal (1 Sam 25:36-38); and Felix (Acts 24:25).

A **second strategy** that is used to ward off the threat of judgment is OPEN RESISTANCE. This involves an attempt to take on the judgment “head on” with a defense or even with defiance. Biblical figures who employed open resistance or were defiant in the face of judgment were: Pharaoh (Ex 5:2); Job (Jb 23:1-7); king Zedekiah

(Jer 36:23-25); and the Jewish refugees under Jeremiah (Jer 44:15-18.)

A **third strategy** used to ward off judgment is APPEASEMENT. Of the three, this strategy is dealt with in the greatest detail in Scripture. Saul of Tarsus sought to win God's favor by law-keeping. Saul sought to appease God and win His friendship by successfully adhering to the law, and thus avoiding judgment (Phil 3:4-6; Gal 1:14).

The APPEASEMENT strategy recognizes the *superior* force of the judgment that is faced. It is aware of personal vulnerability. "This strategy attempts to negotiate for peace with the hostile powers of condemnation, hoping for the best."^{iv}

Appeasement tragically fails to eliminate the threat of judgment.

The tragic flaw of the appeasement strategy is the resentment that accompanies it. One may use words to negotiate for peace, but the inner man resents the arrangement. In this case, the one using appeasement feels he has too much to lose by standing up to the opposing force and defending himself.^v Each time the appeaser compromises, he becomes more furious on the inside; thus resentment is bred.

Appeasement is an attempt to *take upon oneself the burden of another's judgment and thereby disarm it*. "It means accepting the judgment as correct and bowing to it in the hope of withstanding it. It is undertaken as a means of making friends with it. Unfortunately, this never happens. As soon as we bow to a human being or institution in judgment over us, we are in their power. We will never be good enough to satisfy them."^{vi} Appeasement is degrading because we know that it is only a temporary measure – it forestalls, but does not eliminate the reckoning we fear. "Appeasement will always feel compulsory; it is always accompanied by anger. We can open negotiations, but it is never enough, the judge will not be satisfied by anything we do."^{vii}

Control of others by guilt, or by their fear of judgment, involves an attempt to bind the conscience. The opponents of the Apostle Paul sought to bring the Galatians into bondage by means of the conscience. The Judaizers wanted to *bind* the consciences of the believers in Galatia. The Jewish false teachers were seeking control over others. They made a solicitation to the Galatians that involved accepting a certain criterion for "conscience management." But Paul admonishes his readers to stay free! "Do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal 5:1). Pastor Stephen Olford notes that legalists are not interested in alleviating bondage. They want to keep guilt in place because it is the means by which they control others.^{viii}

Paul makes it clear in Galatians that the person who seeks to bind the consciences of others dishonors the work of the atonement. By contrast, the Holy Spirit "points to the blood of Christ." The Spirit keeps bringing spiritual freedom and liberty because He ministers the blood of Christ to the conscience (Heb 9:14; 10:22). Olford indicates that the Holy Spirit *personalizes* the redemptive work of Christ as we yield moment by moment.^{ix} A person who uses guilt as a major means of manipulation is demonstrating that his or her conscience is not at peace. A lifestyle of blaming and shaming another never vindicates us. We cannot raise ourselves up above condemnation by transferring our fear of judgment to the conscience of another.

Holding others "hostage" by attempting to keep their guilt in place cannot protect us from judgment. Instead it is a very telling symptom that one's conscience is not managed by the blood of Christ. A prominent family counselor makes the following observation.

When we lash the conscience of another person, it is a strategy learned in childhood; it is practiced in order to feel powerful. To abandon the behavior is to feel a loss of power. God's only method for bringing peace to the conscience of the believer is by renewed "views" of our suffering Substitute (Heb 9:14). The justice our conscience cries out for against ourselves and those who have offended us is found only in the atonement of Calvary. Our conscience only comes to a full rest when it sees by faith that justice against our sin was carried out in the bloody death of the Son of God.

The powers of darkness have much to gain by keeping guilt in place in the conscience. As Puritan John Owen states, even one sin circulating within the conscience is enough to discourage us from drawing near to the throne of grace with confidence. Concerning guilt in the conscience, Robert Haldane warns that "No sin can be crucified either in heart or life, unless it be first pardoned in conscience. . ."^x

The atonement of Christ is God's plan to free His people from fear.

Because we live our lives under judgment, our greatest need is personal atonement for guilt. In the counsels of eternity, God planned that our judgment and condemnation would be assumed by Another. Central to the Good News is that the Son of God did a *voluntary* guilt transfer (2 Cor 5:21). The atonement is a "cosmic moral transfer" of infinite worth. The atonement disarms and frees us from the law. Because of my sin, the condemnation of the law was my chief adversary. But now, the empty tomb carries the atonement into the eternal present.^{xi}

Now humanity's designated meeting place with God is the same for every person – it is true fellowship with the Trinity based on true freedom from judgment (Heb 13:10). Our problem as believers is that indwelling sin keeps disturbing the conscience with fear of judgment. We find it difficult to reckon that the full force of our judgment fell upon the Son of God. We are still searching for atonement to answer our fear. We often act out of guilt; seeking to discharge a debt, win approval, appease. The old strategies of *escape*, *open resistance*, and *appeasement* still hold attraction for us. The heart is drawn to self-righteous merit systems – we want to have a part in carrying and proving our worth to ourselves and others.

The Gospel is the only antidote to our hiding, rage, defensiveness, and self-pity. To daily experience its healing grace, we must *consent* to be represented and protected by the Son of God. The Gospel's message of justification teaches us that the righteousness of Christ is put on our account – it is imputed to us. Our worth as believers is upheld by Christ and His work. This is life-transforming, for infinite worth and credit have been assigned to us! For, the believer has been placed 'in Christ' (Col 2:10-15; 3:1-4).

The atonement is freedom from judgment because God's verdict about us in Christ has the power to evaporate all other verdicts (Rom 8:31-34). Verdicts of condemnation come from people, demons, and God's law – only the blood of Christ can silence these. Herein is the success of the atonement to heal our fear. By God's plan we may become as we are regarded. Though we carry feelings of condemnation and worthlessness, God regards us as righteous in Christ and free from condemnation (Rom 8:1).

The Gospel is able to penetrate the most guarded prisons of the heart. All the carnal fortresses we have raised to protect ourselves against judgment harm our relationship with others. What is needed is courage and healing; the Gospel provides both.

The Gospel makes us heroes in our dealings with sin and conscience.

So much of our energy goes into the effort to resist the verdicts of others, we forget to run to the atonement. But, Christ's work is where we find heroism and courage to face our own sinful imperfections.

The great reformer Martin Luther had a problem as a priest. He couldn't understand how a perfectly holy God could accept him when he was so filled with sin and imperfection. At one point Luther protested, "Love God, I feel I hate Him!" When Luther uttered these words, he felt it impossible to be good enough to gain divine acceptance.

In His grace, God showed Luther the biblical doctrine of justification by faith. The world has not been the same since. Luther wrote volumes on the practical value of justification. Here is his formula for heroism and courage in dealing with sin and conscience: *according to the Gospel, the believer is justified, yet a sinner. Therefore, he may be absolutely honest about his sin without jeopardizing his perfect status in Christ.*

The Reformer's point is vital. The imputation of Christ's righteousness draws the blood of Christ into real situations. This is the basis for radical heroism; I can be a very imperfect person who is honest about his transgressions and offenses without losing my perfect standing in Christ. I don't have to prove my worth by the use of carnal strategies because the Gospel proclaims the affirmation of my worth in a most dramatic way. The Gospel literally gives me permission, even urges me, to give up fleshly strategies for personal worth.^{xii}

The sin of self-justification needlessly makes others into adversaries.

Paul Zahl practically X-rays the human heart when he makes the following observations: When I become depressed, it is usually through the gateway of *someone else's perception of me* as I perceive it. I feel my own weakness so heavily, it seems to express the whole truth about my life.

Depression provides a clue to our need for value to be assigned to us. The absence of positive value can incarcerate us in a prison of depression. The only real and lasting cure must fulfill our need of value. Union with Christ decisively answers this need, nothing else can.

Because we are sinners, we carry a sense of condemnation and fear of judgment. Just below the surface, we feel our impotence, fear, weakness and fragility. Because of this, the slightest thing can make us feel diminished. Due to our desperate need of worth, we tend to suspect the worst about ourselves. This colors our interactions with others. Anger is the response to perceived hostile invasions of self. The angry person is likely to interpret exchanges with others as attacks on self. Behind the rage is a most painful insecurity. Because we feel small, weak and vulnerable, we believe we must protect ourselves with all our might, even if relationships are damaged in the process.^{xiii}

If the lion's share of our emotional energy is devoted to fighting a sense of judgment, we won't be able to handle negativity, nor will we be able to risk intimacy. God's answer is the healing power of the Gospel.

The atonement of Christ has healing power.

When we allow others to carry our value instead of depending upon the work of Christ, we are still wed to fleshly strategies for warding off judgment. These flesh

strategies further damage our humanity and our relationships. When we use our pain to hurt others, we are living in sin.^{xiv}

God loves us too much to allow this situation to continue indefinitely in His child. Because of God's fatherly care, He allows our defenses to fail. He does this because He wants our souls and our relationships healed.^{xv}

Our fear of judgment is so strong, we will not repent of our fleshly strategies *until* we believe that the atonement has the power to heal our fear and replace our need of self-protection. That daily *consent* to suffer Another to work for us is the key. Jerry Bridges refers to this as *preaching the Gospel to oneself every day*. Says Bridges, since we sin every day, we need to preach the Gospel to ourselves every day.^{xvi}

The Gospel's healing power comes about through ongoing repentance and mortification of sin.

Since fleshly strategies of managing condemnation further damage our humanity and our relationships, repentance is called for. We are to repent of the destructive fortifications that we have habitually employed. When we hear that our worth is established by God, we are enabled to move from carnal control to liberty, heroism, and realism. There is great power in God regarding us righteous in Christ. We can face negativity without being radically diminished. We can face the worst news about ourselves without our value being threatened.

By contrast, when we are always fighting against negativity and fear, our lives are characterized by a cowardly escape from judgment. The cross leads us out of escape, denial, and blame. The atonement enables us to "assimilate" negativity, processing it with courage and realism. The Psalms provide an ideal model of this processing of negativity. John Calvin referred to the Psalms as a complete anatomy of the human heart.

"God is glorified when we believe with all our hearts that those who trust in Christ can never be condemned. [When we] live in the good of total forgiveness, we are able to turn from old, sinful ways of living and walk in **grace-motivated obedience**."^{xvii}

The imputed righteousness granted in justification gives believers the legal right and responsibility to come out of hiding and deal with sin courageously in ongoing repentance. This always involves forsaking false refuges and strategies designed to defer judgment.

Jesus' righteous regard of the Christian enables him to see himself in truth and to accept the truth about himself. He can admit his bondage, his fear, his failure, his suffering, and his compulsive sin. Justification gives us the courage to admit the suffering our sin has caused in our lives and the lives of others.

A mighty redemption has broken sin's bondage, yet believers still carry the tendency to defend and fight against judgment. We are all too aware of our failures, inadequacy, and guilt. The temptation is to return to the old refuges and strategies for protection from judgment. What is needed is renewed appropriation of the Gospel, for that alone is the source of heroism (1 Jn 1:7). Justification in the Son of God establishes a secure status that produces courage.

The atonement gives us the courage to forgive others.

Nowhere is more courage needed than in the area of relational hurt. Hiding, pretending, attacking, and defending keep short-circuiting any hope of restoration and

intimacy. The courage born of justification enables the believer to deal with the alienation and ache of offenses committed both by him and against him. The truth of justification gives the power to forgive freely and to be freely forgiven (Eph 4:32).

Nothing short of heroism is necessary in order for the Body of Christ to build itself up in love. When believers are self-protective and defensive, they are unable to give and receive admonishment (Rom 15:14). It is the justified man who is wise enough to receive a genuine admonishment born of love. Because he knows *he is justified, yet a sinner*, he can admit when he is wrong without being diminished.

Conclusion:

So much of our self-protection, pretending, and hiding our hearts from God and each other is because we do not understand the present value of the cross. The finished work of Christ is perfectly suited for dealing with every sin and the fruit of every sin. The present value of the cross allows the believer to *process* the most horrendous things about himself. This is because no fact or negative truth can harm the saint's perfect standing in Christ before God.

The cross works across the grain of the flesh. It opposes the self-preservation strategies that turn upon self-sufficiency and self-protection. God calls His people to childlike vulnerability before Him. We must be willing to be searched by God (Ps 139:23-24). The Scriptures join lowliness of mind with contrition (Is 57:15; 66:2).

Guarded dungeons of pain keep us from receiving God's love in new areas of our being. Christ calls His people to make appointments with Him in these dungeons. He wants us to dismiss our 'guards' and give Him the opportunity to apply His grace to these heart prisons. He is perfectly qualified for this. He is the Sympathetic High Priest who empathizes and identifies with all of our weakness and pain (Heb 2:18; 4:14-16).

In His suffering for us, He identified Himself with the sorrows and exigencies of the human condition. His priesthood addresses both the guilt of sin and the effects of sin. He wants us to desist from our schemes of carnal management and call upon Him for new supplies of grace and mercy (Heb 4:15-16).

His priestly mercy is available to us in areas that we are used to controlling. These areas include sin, weakness, failure, fear, rejection, disillusionment, inadequacy, helplessness, pain, and suffering.

Realism before God is a hard-won asset. Strategies to defend our pain and woundedness tend to be habitual and instinctive. The Psalmist was willing to meet God in some very painful places! There are prayers with themes of *despair, despondency, depression, betrayal, disillusionment, resentment, guilt, and injustice*. Agonizing memories and ache of soul are a common theme in these psalms.

When a believer *refuses* to accept appointments with God in these areas of negativity, these same areas become "sealed off" from the full benefit of God's grace. When appointments with Christ in our regions of pain are consistently refused, the heart builds prisons to house these unacceptable negatives.

The result of sealing off the pain is often a host of defenses that manifest themselves in our relationships. Our hearts are no longer tender before God (Heb 3:8,13-15) because we have refused to "pour out our hearts to God" (Ps 62:5-8).

Sealing off pain is a symptom of flight from judgment. It causes us to split off from the very regions of our hearts that are needed for godly passion and Christian empathy

and compassion. Unless our heart prisons of pain are allowed to come in contact with God, it is very unlikely that we will be able to weep with those who weep (Rom 12:15).

The Apostle Paul makes it clear, those who draw abundantly from God's comfort amidst their suffering are best equipped to comfort others (2 Cor 1:3-6).

It is a mercy that God lets our defenses fail. Affliction is sent by God to break up the 'lime scale' of our carnal strategies. Like barnacles on a boat hull, the constant use of carnal defenses builds up layers of protection that inhibit our ability to enjoy intimate contact with God. Only the cross can put these self-life strategies out of business.

When we endure God's chastening, it is unto a 'grace awakening'. During affliction, God empties out our secret coffers of merit. He takes us back to the Publican who has nothing but sin (Lu 18:13-14). He causes our defenses to fail; this can be catastrophic to us, it may feel like God is against us. He orchestrates all of this that He might restore us to a place of child-like reliance and vulnerability before Him. For, only by fresh views of our depravity, including our defenses, will we be able to marvel again at the unfathomable riches of Christ our righteousness (Jer 23:6).

End Notes:

ⁱ Paul Zahl, *Who Will Deliver Us?*

ⁱⁱ Ibid, *Who Will Deliver Us?*, p. 38

ⁱⁱⁱ Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace*, p. 53

^{iv} Zahl, *Who Will Deliver Us?* p. 22

^v Ibid, p. 22

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid, p. 24

^{viii} Stephen Olford, *Anointed Expository Preaching*, p. 35

^{ix} Ibid, p. 37

^x Robert Haldane, *An Exposition of the Book of Romans*, pp. 253-254

^{xi} Zahl, p. 41

^{xii} Ibid, p. 73

^{xiii} Ibid, pp. 13-14

^{xiv} Ibid, p. 45

^{xv} Eli Ashdown, *The Saving Health of the Gospel*, p. 101-108

^{xvi} Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace*, pp. 123-124

^{xvii} C. J. Mahaney, *The Cross Centered Life*, pp. 39-40