

“How Do I Get Over False Guilt About Watching Profanity on TV?”

Byron Barlowe

I had/have a conviction to not listen to TV profanity. So I bought a TV Guardian (a device which blocks out all of TV profanity). I was so happy, problem solved. However, I still sense a somewhat deep sense of guilt. I believe I am struggling with false guilt, because I am feeling guilty for doing something (using a TV Guardian) which I know to be godly and just. Is this a fair assessment? If so, how do I cure false guilt?

I applaud your desire not to expose yourself to profane language. That's commendable. Further, you took steps to ensure. That desire is for holiness and let me affirm that.

The fact that you feel guilty about it is difficult for me to assess without knowing precisely what it is you feel guilty about, or why. Answering these questions will help you determine whether your guilt is in fact false guilt, as you put it, or just good old fashioned conviction from the Holy Spirit.

Probe's president Kerby Anderson wrote an article on [False Guilt](#) which explores these very issues and can help you answer just such questions. Check it out. I pray it will bless you. I hope this is helpful ☐

Praying for you,

Paul Rutherford

Thank you. Somebody else pointed out to me that maybe the problem is that I am remembering a little of the profanity. You see, I used to watch some of the same shows with no filter. God convicted me so I bought a TV Guardian. However, since I had already watched the shows without the

Guardian I can still remember some of the curse words. What should I do?

Hi _____,

Allow me to “jump in” here and try to help you a bit. I think Paul did a good job of counseling you.

After reading your follow up to his response, I sense an uneasy pattern may be at work in you: a need to perform holiness for God and not mess up. This could be the root of the problem you are having—not understanding very fully the [grace](#) God offers.

Rather than focus on the curse words that you recall (or that fact that you recall them, which is no surprise, since God’s forgiveness does not mean He gives us a lobotomy), it would be more fruitful to concentrate on the enabling of God’s Holy Spirit for any believer to experience and live out holiness in our lives. It’s a subtle shift to talk about, but profoundly different in effect.

How might this look in your situation? Try applying some biblical principles to your thinking:

- *Make your mind up to fill it (your mind) with Scripture—the holy words of life. Read Scripture daily like your life depends on it (your spiritual life and health DO depend on it), but it’s not to get favor with God. That’s already yours if you put your faith in Him—Jesus took care of our relationship with His Father.*
- *John 15:3-5 says, “Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” So, if you have believed in Jesus to forgive your sin and keep you from everlasting punishment that we all deserve, you are clean. He said so. Act like you believe it and move*

on.

- *Abide in Christ (live, breathe, think about, aim your life at and depend on Him for everything). This doesn't mean you lay down and expect Him to do your living out of faith for you, but it means you have no confidence in yourself to either care about sin or defeat it. It's He who works in you to make you holy. (Notice those two verses linked to above are back-to-back in the same thought. You cooperate with God's work in your life by letting Him work and doing your part.) Your job is to let him, to yield, to put to death (stop feeding) the flesh. Getting TV Guardian seems like a great step—but it's Christ who has to work out the memories, etc. for believers.*

- *Speaking of memories of images (sexual or otherwise), curses / cuss words, violence, ungodly things, here is something that is effective for me: give them to God to bury them, to take them off your mental screen or from your mental "hearing." I base this on the verse: "We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). This applies a general principle to our own rebellious, fleshly thoughts that have gotten corrupted by things like bad language.*

- *Most of all, don't worry about it. "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done." (Philippians 4:6, NLT)*

You seem to be obsessed with "doing it right" and "not messing up" (as I would put it). This is not trust, so it's not God-centered or God-honoring—and it won't work. Ephesians 1 says, "It was for freedom that Christ set you free." You neither have to live in bondage to sin (like cursing) OR to having to keep the Law (keeping from cursing or thinking about those words). You're free to rise above all

of that by living a genuinely Spirit-led holy life—believe it and learn to live it. It takes practice and you *will* fail! Go back to God, ask forgiveness for this particular failure (you’ve already been saved from the penalty of sin if you believe Him for that) and start all over.

Ultimately, if you cannot get past this any other way, are you willing to give up the movies—even if your TV Guardian goes unused and you miss those fave movies? Giving them up could, for you, be part of putting the deeds of the flesh to death and picking up your cross to follow Him (“Then, calling the crowd to join His disciples, He said, ‘If any of you wants to be My follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow Me.’” —Mark 8:34)

Believe me as one who’s been asked to give up various things enough times in my 35 years of walking with Christ, when the Lord leads you to give something up, it’s well worth it.

I hope this provides some guidance. It goes deep. Read it and the Scripture passages many times, praying that the Lord will make things clear to you and apply them with others holding you accountable—share with mature Christians, your pastor, etc.

Praying with Paul for you, _____. Thanks for writing.

Byron Barlowe

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False Guilt - Refusing Christ's Atonement

Kerby Anderson

Kerby Anderson provides an insightful look at the important topic of false guilt. He helps us look at the sources of false guilt, its consequences and the cure in Jesus Christ. If we refuse to fully accept Christ's atonement we can be trapped in false guilt, instead we should embrace His atonement and accept what He did on the cross for us.

Introduction

Have you ever felt guilty? Of course you have, usually because you were indeed guilty. But what about those times when you have feelings of guilt even when you didn't do anything wrong? We would call this false guilt, and that is the subject of this essay.

False guilt usually comes from an overactive conscience. It's that badgering pushing voice that runs you and your self-image into the ground. It nags: "You call this acceptable? You think this is enough? Look at all you've not yet done! Look at all you have done that's not acceptable! Get going!"

You probably know the feeling. You start the day feeling like you are in a hole. You feel like you can never do enough. You have this overactive sense of duty and can never seem to rest. One person said he "felt more like a human doing than a human being." Your behavior is driven by a sense of guilt. That is what we will be talking about in these pages.

Much of the material for this discussion is taken from the book entitled *False Guilt* by Steve Shores. His goal is to help you determine if you (1) have an overactive conscience and (2) are driven by false guilt. If these are problem areas

for you, he provides practical solutions so you can break the cycle of false guilt. I recommend his book especially if you can recognize yourself in some of the material we cover in this essay.

In his book, Steve Shores poses three sets of questions, each with some explanation. An affirmative answer to any or all of these questions may indicate that you struggle with false guilt and an overactive conscience.

1. Do you ever feel like this: “Something is wrong with me. There is some stain on me, or something badly flawed that I can neither scrub out nor repair”? Does this feeling persist even though you have become a Christian?

2. Is Thanksgiving sort of a difficult time of year for you? Do you find it hard to muster up the Norman Rockwell spirit—you know... Mom and Dad and grandparents and kids all seated around mounds of food? Dad is carving the turkey with a sure and gentle expression on his face, and everyone looks so...well, so thankful? Do you find yourself, at any time of the year, dutifully thanking or praising God without much passion?

3. How big is your dance floor? What I mean is, How much freedom do you have? Do you feel confined by Christianity? To you, is it mainly a set of restrictions? Is it primarily a source of limits: don't do this, and don't do that? Does your Christianity have more to do with walls than with windows? Is it a place of narrowness or a place where light and air and liberty pour in?

Usually a person driven by false guilt is afraid of freedom because in every act of freedom is the possibility of offending someone. Offending someone is unacceptable. Other people are seen as pipelines of approval. If they're offended, the pipeline shuts down.

False guilt, along with an overactive conscience, is a hard master. As we turn now to look at the causes and the cures for false guilt, we hope to explain how to break down the confining walls and tiresome chains that may have kept you or a loved

one in bondage to false guilt.

The Source of False Guilt

Next, I would like to focus on the source of false guilt: an overactive conscience. What is an overactive conscience? How does it function? Steve Shores says, "The mission of a person's overactive conscience is to attract the expectations of others."

Imagine a light bulb glowing brightly on a warm summer's night. What do you see in your mind's eye? Bugs. Bugs of every variety are attracted to that light. The light bulb serves as a magnet for these insects. Imagine that light is an overactive conscience. The expectations of others are the "bugs" that are attracted to the "light" of an overactive conscience.

Now imagine a light bulb burning inside a screened porch. The bugs are still attracted, but they bounce off the screen. The overactive conscience has no screen. But it is more than that. The overactive conscience doesn't want a screen. The more "bugs" the better. Why? Because the whole purpose is to meet expectations in order to gain approval and fill up the emptiness of the soul. This is an overactive conscience, a light bulb with lots of bugs and no screen.

A key to understanding the overactive conscience is the word "active." Someone with false guilt has a conscience that is always on the go. False guilt makes a person restless, continually looking for a rule to be kept, a scruple to observe, an expectation to be fulfilled, or a way to be an asset to a person or a group.

The idea of being an asset is a crucial point. When I am an asset, then I am a "good" person and life works pretty well. When I fear I've let someone down, then I am a liability. My life falls apart, and I will work hard to win my way back into the favor of others.

So an overactive conscience is like a magnet for expectations. These expectations

come from oneself, parents (whether alive or not), friends, bosses, peers, God, or distorted images of God. False guilt makes the overactive conscience voracious for expectations. False guilt is always looking for people to please and rules to be kept.

An overactive conscience is also seeking to keep the “carrot” of acceptance just out of reach. This “carrot” includes self- acceptance and acceptance from others and from God. The guilt- ridden conscience continually says, “Your efforts are not good enough. You must keep trying because, even if your attempts don’t measure up, the trying itself counts as something.”

For that reason, an overactive conscience is not happy at rest. Though rest is the birthright of the Christian, relaxing is just too dangerous, i.e., relaxing might bring down my guard, and I might miss signs of rejection. Besides, acceptance is conditional, and I must continually prove my worthiness to others. I can never be a liability if I am to expect acceptance to continue. It is hard to relax because I must be ever fearful of letting someone down and must constantly work to gain acceptance.

In summary, a person with false guilt and an overactive conscience spends much of his or her life worn out. Unrelenting efforts to meet the expectations of others can have some very negative consequences.

The Consequences of False Guilt

Now I would like to focus on the consequences of false guilt. An overactive conscience can keep you in a state of constant uncertainty. You never know if you measure up. You never know if you have arrived or not. You are always on the alert. According to Steve Shores there are a number of major consequences of false guilt.

The first consequence he calls “striving without arriving.” In essence, there is no hope in the system set up by the overactive conscience. You must always try

harder, but you never cross the finish line. You seem to merely go in circles. Or perhaps it would be better to say you go in a spiral, as in a downward spiral. Life is a perpetual treadmill. You work hard and strive, but you never arrive. Life is hard work and frustration with little or no satisfaction.

The second consequence is “constant vigilance.” The overactive conscience produces constant self-monitoring. You are constantly asking if you are being an asset to other people and to God. You are constantly evaluating and even doubting your performance. And you never allow yourself to be a liability to the group or to any particular individual.

A third consequence is “taking the pack mule approach to life.” An overactive conscience involves a lifelong ordeal in which you attempt to pass a demanding test and thus reveal your worth. The test consists of accumulating enough evidences of goodness to escape the accusation that you are worthless. For the guilt-ridden person, this test involves taking on more duties, more responsibilities, more roles. As the burdens pile higher and higher, you become a beast of burden, a “pack mule” who takes on more responsibility than is healthy or necessary.

Just as there is no forward progress (e.g., “striving without arriving”), so there is also an ever-increasing sense of burden. Each day demands a fresh validation of worthiness. There is never a time when you can honestly say, “that’s enough.”

Finally, the most devastating consequence of false guilt is its effect not just on individuals but the body of Christ. Christians who struggle with an overactive conscience can produce weak, hollow, compliant believers in the church. They are long on conformity and short on passion and substance. They go to church not because they crave fellowship, but because they want to display compliance. They study God’s word not so much out of a desire to grow spiritually, but because that is what good Christians are supposed to do. We do what we do in order to “fit in” or comply with the rules of Christianity.

Steve Shores says that the central question of church becomes, “Do I look and act enough like those around me to fit in and be accepted?” Instead we should be asking, “Regardless of how I look and act, am I passionately worshiping God, deeply thirsting for Him, and allowing Him to change my relationships so that I love others in a way that reflects the disruptive sacrifice of Christ?”

The Continuation of False Guilt

Next, I would like to talk about why people continue to feel false guilt even though they know they are forgiven. After all, if Christ paid the penalty for our sins, why do some Christians still have an overactive conscience and continue to feel guilt so acutely? Part of the compulsion comes from feeling the noose of false guilt tighten around our necks so that we panic and fail to think rationally about our situation.

Steve Shores uses the example of a death-row inmate who has just learned of an eleventh-hour stay of execution. He has just been pardoned, but his body and emotions don't feel like it. He has been “sitting in the electric chair, sweaty-palmed and nauseated, when the wall phone rings with the news of the reprieve.” He may feel relief, but the feeling of relief is not total. He is only off the hook for awhile. He will still return to his cell.

The person with a overactive conscience lives in that death-row cell. The reprieve comes from responding to that guilt-driven voice in his conscience. For Bill it manifested itself in a compulsive need to serve others. If he were asked to teach AWANA or to teach a Sunday school class, he would have great difficulty saying “No.” He had to say “Yes” or else he would feel the noose of false guilt tighten around his neck.

Bill's comments were sad but illuminating. He said: “I felt as though not teaching the class would confirm that I am a liability. The disappointment...would inflict shame I felt as a boy. Disappointing others always meant that there would be

some sort of trial to decide whether I really belonged in the family.”

He went on to tell of the time he made a “C” on his report card (the rest of the grades were “A’s” and “B’s”). His father lectured him unmercifully. At one point, his father declared that “it was Communist to bring home such a bad grade.” Bill didn’t know what a Communist was or what Communism had to do with bad grades. But he did understand that if he didn’t bring home good grades he was unworthy.

Bill even remembered the six agonizing weeks until the next report card. When it arrived he received five “A’s” and one “B.” What was his father’s response? Was it delight? Was it an apology for his previous comments? Not at all. His father merely said, “That’s more like it.” The reprieve was halfhearted and temporary.

In essence, false guilt is a stern warden that may give a temporary reprieve but is always ready to call upon you to prove your worthiness once again. We may know that Christ died for our sins. We may know that our sins are forgiven. We may know that we have value and dignity because we are created in God’s image. But we may feel unworthy and feel as if we must prove ourselves at a moment’s notice.

The key, as we will see in the next section, is to embrace Christ’s atonement rather than our own. We must not only know that we are forgiven through Jesus Christ, but act upon that reality so that we live a life through grace rather than legalism.

A Cure for False Guilt

Finally, I would like to conclude by talking about Christ’s atonement for us. If we are to break the chain of false guilt, then we must embrace Christ’s atonement rather than our own. Although that statement may seem obvious, it is difficult for someone with an overactive conscience to truly embrace emotionally. For such a person, perfection is the means of achieving salvation. If I can be perfect, then I

will no longer feel shame, and I will no longer feel guilt. This is the personal atonement that someone with false guilt often is seeking.

The Bible clearly teaches that Christ's atonement was for our sins. Sin is "any attitude, belief, or action that constitutes rebellion against or transgression of God's character." Clearly sinful man is incapable of making restitution because our best works are as filthy rags before a holy and omnipotent God (Isaiah 64:6). Our atonement must be made by someone with clean hands and a sinless life. Christ, of course, fulfilled that requirement and died in our place for our sins.

Nevertheless, someone with false guilt seeks a form of self- atonement. Why? Well, there are at least two reasons: indiscriminate shame and doubt about the character of God. The first is indiscriminate shame. We should feel guilty and we should feel shame for sinful behavior. The problem comes when we feel guilt and shame even when a sinful action or attitude is not present. Steve Shores believes that the "weeds of shame" can begin to sprout even when we have a legitimate need. We then tend to use the machete of false guilt to trim these weeds back. We say, "If I can do enough things right, I can control this and no one will know how bad and weak I am." This performance-oriented lifestyle is a way of hacking at the weeds that grow in the soil of illegitimate shame.

The second reason for false guilt is a stubborn propensity to doubt the character of God. Many Christian psychologists and counselors have argued that the reason we may question our Heavenly Father's character is because we question our earthly father's character. And for those who have been abused or neglected by their fathers, this is an adequate explanation. But we even see in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve doubting God and they did not even have earthly fathers. So I believe it is more accurate to say that our sin nature (not our family of origin) has a lot to do with our tendency to doubt God's character.

This is manifested by two tendencies: blaming and hiding. When we feel false guilt, we tend to want to blame others or blame ourselves. If we blame others, we



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manifest a critical spirit. If we blame ourselves, we feel unworthy and don't want others to see us as we are and we hide emotionally from others. The solution is for us to embrace Christ's atonement and accept what He did on the cross for us. Christ died once for all (Romans 6:10) that we might have everlasting life and freedom from guilt and the bondage to sin.

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