

## Lingering Guilt

[John 21:15-19](#)

Lingering in the Shadows of Easter

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle

Sunday, April 24, 2005

Worship at 8:30, 10, and 11:30 a.m.

*Let us pray. Now Great Shepherd of your sheep, may you feed us with the word that you've have spoken to us in your love, may you touch our lives so that we live in forgiveness and not guilt. We pray this through the power of your spirit to speak to us, in Jesus. Amen.*

We continue in the post-resurrection events in the gospel of John. The resurrection has happened but there are a number of things that continue to linger, of rather disturbing quality. The gospel of John recognizes that life goes on and life does not always embrace the resurrection immediately.

We come today with a profound sense in our own lives that even though we are in the presence of the love of God in Jesus Christ, we bring our sin and our guilt with us; it lingers. Even though we affirm the power of the resurrection we continue to have those remembrances and regrets. Sometimes the things that we have done wrong, however, contribute to the possibility of healing and mission for the future.

A story was given to me just this past week about a pastor and his cat. The kitten was in the backyard and had climbed up a small tree but was afraid to come down. The tree was too small for the pastor to go up; I relate to that. And so they were in a dilemma— the cat would not come down — the pastor could not go up. The pastor began to think carefully about how to get the cat down. An idea came to him that he could come and get his car, tie a rope to the tree, tie the other end of the rope to the car and begin to pull the tree down and bend it. So bit-by-bit he began to do that, and almost came to the place where he could reach up and take the cat. He just needed to go a little further. So he got back in the car and pulled it; and that moment the rope broke. Like a bow and arrow, the cat went flying through the air somewhere out in the neighborhood.

The pastor felt terrible, carrying around guilt when he was going through the neighborhood asking to see if anybody had discovered the cat. No one had seen the cat. So finally the pastor decided to pray and said, "Lord, I commit this cat into your presence." A few days later at a grocery store, the pastor noticed one of the members of the church — someone who was a cat hater. She had cat food in her grocery cart. Bewildered he said to the woman, "I thought you didn't like cats?" And she said "I don't; however, let me tell you an interesting story. My daughter has been begging me for a little cat and she refuses to let go of this. She just day after day has asked me to please have a cat and I've said 'No, we do not have cats in this house.' She finally wore me down to the place where I said, 'If God gives you a cat, you can keep it.' My daughter, taking this seriously, went out in the middle of the backyard and knelt down and prayed, asking God to give her cat. At that moment a cat came flying through the air and landed right in front of her. Even I couldn't turn that down."

You never know when the mistake you make and the guilt you carry may have even a mission- positive effect upon other peoples' lives by the grace of God.

There is a difference between carrying guilt and carrying shame. This past week I received an email as well as a telephone call from two different people complaining about a certain member of our church whom I will not name. Basically they both said I should be ashamed to be the pastor of the church where this person is a part of the congregation.

I find it very interesting that we use the 'shame' word when we're really upset and we want to stick it to somebody else because we're so angry. Lewis Smedes in his book, *Guilt: Dealing with Shame and Grace*, talks about the difference between carrying guilt and carrying shame. Guilt, he points out, is about doing the wrong thing and feeling the regret and pain of doing that thing that was not right. Shame, however, is

not so much about what we do, but how we see ourselves. We begin to believe that we are not good—we are not capable of good. And we become so covered with the doubt of our own quality that we literally cannot live without the shame.

Let me make no mistake about this passage: Peter has guilt because he has denied Jesus three times. But Peter is not ashamed of himself, or of Jesus.

Lewis Smedes tells the story in that book about the nuanced difference between those two in his life. When he was sixteen years old living in Minneapolis, Minnesota, he worked at a fountain where they made hamburgers and milkshakes for people who were coming in to eat. In the middle of one evening while they were feeding a number of families and individuals at those counters and tables, an African American couple came in with their little child and sat down to eat. They all turned to serve the owner, who shook his head “No.” Even at that point in time, Lewis Smedes, as a sixteen year old, knew that that was not the right thing to do. But being afraid for his job and afraid for his safety he went along with that moment in time. The couple and the child sat there for two hours waiting to be served and finally got up and walked out.

Lewis Smedes tells the story later on in his life as he still feels guilt about that. But he also began to discover that, because of events like that, he began to believe that he wasn’t worth much as a human being. He began to feel shame. He recognized that shame pretty much permeated his family pattern. He nuances the difference between: Yes, you will carry guilt because of past mistakes, but you should not carry shame because you believe you are a bad person without redemptive possibilities.

Peter carries guilt because he has denied Jesus three times. Jesus anticipated that he would when Peter said, “Lord, I’m going to give up everything to follow you and I’ll even lay down my life, I’ll die for you.” Jesus said, “Peter, you’re going to deny me three times.” Later on while Jesus is in the process of his trial, Peter is approached by three different people to ask if he is a part of Jesus’ disciple group and Peter says “No” three times. He hears the rooster crow in the background which affirms that is the moment of recognition that what Jesus had anticipated had come true. In Matthew’s Gospel, it says that Peter went out and wept bitterly because of his refusal to acknowledge Jesus. There’s no doubt in Peter’s life he’s carrying a tremendous sense of guilt because of his denial of his friend and Lord, Jesus Christ.

In the Presbyterian pattern of life in our reformed tradition we make no hesitation to declare that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We call that universal experience of sin among all people “total depravity.” Each one of us carries the capacity to make mistakes and to forget to do the right thing or refuse to do right thing. Whether it’s stealing—coveting—lying--or sexualizing—hurting—killing--breaking trust-- ignoring people--refusing to serve certain people—‘being God’ and condemning and being judge and jury--making Gods out of things and people—intimidating-- threatening or shaming, we sin. All have sinned. Peter’s pattern of sin is unique to him just as your pattern of sin is unique to you and mine is to me, as well.

This text shows us carefully what it means for Jesus to redeem and to rehabilitate Peter in the midst of his ongoing recognition of guilt because of his denial. It points out clearly that even apostles can be sinners. Pastors are sinners; leaders are sinners; all are capable of doing devastating things.

Peter’s particular pattern, it seems in Scripture, is a certain self-aggrandisement. He is so self- interested that when he gets to the points of pressure, he gives in to the pressure to protect himself. So when there is threat of his life and the people say, “Are you a disciple?” Peter says, “Oh no.” A certain instinct for self-preservation and self-affirmation: Peter maybe the first one to affirm some things and the first one to back out of them when things get tough. Jesus, when he hears Peter’s call for self-sacrifice, “Lord, I will lay down my life for you,” says, “Peter you’re going to deny me.” That pattern is picked up here in the interchange between Jesus and Peter. This is not just something that happens in Peter’s past; it also happens in Peter’s future. For in Galatians, chapter 2, we see that Peter continues to have this problem when he’s under pressure: he protects himself at all costs. There is the moment in Galatians, chapter 2, where Paul confronts Peter and says, “Peter you know the certain point in time in Galatia, when you should have been in support of a Gentile people, you ran off to be with the Jewish people and declared yourself a safe haven when you could have stood up for Gentiles?” Peter continues to wrestle with that

lingering guilt and pattern of sin in his life even as an apostle.

Dallas Willard, in his book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, points out that the ministry of the gospel is the ministry of sin management. Jesus is leading Peter to the place where his sin is not out of control, but his sin is literally under the umbrella of Jesus' love, so that Peter begins to control that pattern that's hurtful to other people. Dallas Willard talks about turning away from sin and turning toward the love of God and being able to have the power of God to change our negative habits. How does Jesus do this? He has a face-to-face meeting with Peter. How does God confront us with our sins? God has a face-to-face meeting with us and confronts us with our sin.

The meeting is after breakfast. Jesus picks an appropriate time when Peter has been doing the thing that he loves: to go fishing. They've had his favorite meal of fish and bread. And it's in that context that Jesus says, "Let's talk Peter." Even in the midst of all the disciples, Jesus takes time out to focus on Peter and his pattern of life. "Do you love me more than all these things, Peter?" Do you love me more than your fishing boat and the fish and the barbecue that we've just had together? Do you love me more than life—and do you love me more than hanging out with your friends in the fishing town? Do you love me more than everything else that you were doing in life, and that you have? Peter's response is, "I love you Lord, of course I love you." You'll notice that Jesus does not take this as an opportunity to condemn Peter. He could have; he could have said, "Peter, I told you so. I told you were going to condemn me and you did. You see, you're really a miserable person. You have no respectability, you have no value." Jesus gives no hint at all of the denial here. Isn't that an amazing thing? Jesus could have taken the time to really nail Peter but he doesn't even talk about the denial. Peter knows; Jesus knows. There is no mention of it, there is no statement, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Peter." Jesus never sticks the screws to the people that he loves.

The key question is what it is all about: "Peter do you love me?" Not just asked once, but asked three times, and asked in a way that even shows Peter's hesitant response. You cannot see it here in the English but in the Greek the word 'love' is really two different words. "Peter, do you love me the way God loves you?" "Yes, Lord, I love you as a friend." "Peter, do you love me the way that God loves you?" "Yes, Lord, I love you as a friend." Jesus, understanding that Peter is not capable of going that far, comes back and says, "Peter do you love me as a friend?" Peter is hurt: "Lord you know I love you as a friend."

We can't measure up and meet God on God's terms. God meets us on our terms and love. If you think you can measure up and become the kind of person who loves the way God loves, that's not possible. But God meets us here—in our own limitations, our own sin, and addresses us with the kind of love we can understand.

Three times Peter denied Jesus and three times Jesus asked the question, "Do you love me?" This is the key question for you and me today. If you are carrying guilt from past mistakes, there is only one question you need to answer to Jesus: Do you love him? Jesus is not here to nail you and condemn you—to beat up on you—to shame you. Jesus is here simply here to ask you the question, "Do you love me?" If you can answer that question: "Yes Lord, I love you in my own limited way. I wish I could love you more but I'm loving you the best way I can right now." That's what Jesus needs to hear. Not to condemn you and not to heap more guilt upon you, but to help you to live a life that will relieve your guilt and the pain that you carry because of past mistakes.

Jesus doesn't leave it there, he goes on to tell Peter three times: feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep. When we're living in the love of God even though we're carrying past regrets, Jesus always send us on a mission for service.

One of the healing patterns in dealing with our guilt is that our guilt becomes one of the motivating factors that takes us into serving other human beings. So the guilt doesn't rip out the possibility of our service, but guilt becomes part of the way God's love drives us toward a positive investment in other human beings, to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

From moving from fish to sheep...from being a fisher to a shepherd... from moving from things he has been preoccupied with, to people that Jesus loves. Jesus wants to move us out of our vocations in the

things that we do that are good, to things that are even better in the service of humanity. Jesus is saying here: “If you love me then do something of significance and service with your life. Feed the human beings that I love. Give yourself to serve people.” And finally Jesus says, “If you really love me, that love will take you ultimately to a place of self-sacrifice” This was the toughest place for Peter to go because Peter was trying to self-preserve. Even though he wanted to lay down his life for Jesus, he couldn’t bring himself to. But Jesus says, “Peter at some point in the future people will take you and bind up your hands and put them on a cross and tie them on that cross, and you will carry the cross the way I carried it. You’ll have no control over your life at that point; other people are going to crucify you.” And as it happened, Peter had that kind of ending in his life where he finally learned self-sacrifice. He felt so much in service to Jesus that he would not be crucified the way Jesus was crucified; he asked to be crucified upside down. Peter’s temptation to self-preservation became Peter’s willingness to die a death on a cross like Jesus.

But finally Jesus notes that if Peter loves him he can continue to follow him. So the last phrase that Jesus utters to Peter is, “Follow me.” If you love me, then continue to walk with me. If you love me, then continue to listen to my voice. If you love me, continue to do the things I ask you to do.

How do we deal with guilt? We listen to the key question—Do you love me? And we respond with as much faith as we can: “Yes, Lord, I love you.” Jesus is not here to condemn us. Jesus is not here to keep holding our mistakes in front of us. Jesus is not here to keep attacking us or shaming us. Jesus is simply here to ask you one question today: Do you love him? If you bring your guilt and your mistakes with you, that’s the key question you must answer. All of our guilt and sin is wrapped up and taken by the love of Jesus and put on the cross with Jesus. Jesus laying down his life and love for us shows us that we don’t have to live in guilt. Yes, guilt lingers. We will continue to make mistakes and we will make the same mistakes over and over again; but we do not have to be controlled or shamed by that.

In his most recent book, Mitch Albom, gives the illustration of Eddie who lives a rather mundane life in an amusement park taking care of the rides for families and children. He makes sure they’re safe. He dies in a moment where he realizes a child is in danger. He gets to heaven and he hasn’t faced some things in his life about his guilt and his past. What heavens becomes is a place for him to face his guilt and to believe that there is the love of God.

C.S. Lewis picks up that same theme in *The Great Divorce*, that heaven is the place where we really finally discover the love of God. I’m not sure what heaven really does for us, but I can say this that Jesus is here right now, as the son of God, as the one who rules in heaven. And Jesus right here and now is asking us: Do we love Him? Our answer to that question will help us carry our guilt and our sin in a way that doesn’t cut us off from God.

Yes, you will have lingering guilt. But it should not debilitate you and hold you back from service – a life of service to a God who loves you in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ your sins are forgiven. Jesus has only one question for you: Do you love me?

*Let’s pray. Gracious God we are thankful for your love in Jesus Christ. We ask that you would meet us now, face-to-face and you would heal the sin and the guilt that holds us back from loving you more fully. We pray this through Jesus, the Christ who loves us. Amen.*