

IS THERE A PLACE FOR GUILT? - Part 1

Our Religious Editor requested my response to this question: “Is there a place for guilt?” I appreciate the way the question is phrased. Ours is a subjective, feelings oriented generation and ‘guilt’ is often defined as a mere subjective feeling. But, our question is commendably phrased. There is a ‘place’, an objectivity to the fact, not the mere feeling, of human guilt.

I hope you can appreciate that the importance of this question warrants a substantive answer. Such an answer cannot be given in the limitations of an editorial. Nevertheless, I hope, over the course of four consecutive articles, to identify seven points of reference by which we can approach the question of our guilt. If this topic interests to you, I would suggest that you save this and the ensuing articles so as to be able to read them together as an entire essay. Here are the first two points of reference which are the foundation for our brief study.

Our guilt has the fact of God as its first objective reference point. Scripture begins with the assertion of the fact of God: “In the beginning God...”. God is the Creator. Throughout His creation activity, He also reveals Himself to be the Judge of creation. As the work of creation progresses, He pauses at significant junctures and judges the world. In Genesis 1 we read the repeated refrain: “And God saw that it was good.” Creation does not function in a moral vacuum of ethical neutrality. It is constituted with positive ethical significance: ‘it was good’. The prevalent contemporary reluctance to accept the fact of creation has more to do with a rejection of God as Judge than of God as Creator. Our aversion to God is not because He created us, but because He judges us. Our aversion to being judged by God is itself evidence of our guilt.

Our guilt has the fact of our accountability to God as the second reference point. Ethical accountability is inherent in our very being. Man (a gender inclusive term) is created as “image of God”. This is Biblical language describing a relationship of sonship. As children replicate their parents, so too Man was made to glorify God by imaging the Creator-Father. What is ‘good’ for ‘the image of God’ is defined by what theologians call the ‘Creation Mandate’ and the ‘Creation Ordinances’. The couple images God as they fill and subdue the earth by their labor and procreation within the ordinances of marriage and worship (Sabbath observance). They would thus produce a God-glorifying culture. Man is accountable to God for his stewardship of the earth and the fulfillment of the Creator-Father’s purposes. Man was designed to image God as a child who, motivated by filial love, obeys the will of the father. It is this loving Creator-Father who is not only our Creator and Judge, but also our Lawgiver. In Genesis 2:17 Adam is given a specific law concerning the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil”. His obedience to the command not to eat of this tree would evidence a childlike love, the love of a son to a father. God gives men laws as a loving Father and desires our obedience to be that of loving children. We are accountable to love God by accurately imaging Him with an obedience born of filial trust.

As a sailor navigates by positioning himself in relation to the stars, we too need to align ourselves with the objective truth of who we are as image bearers created to glorify God. The Westminster Shorter Catechism’s first question is: “What is the chief end (ultimate purpose) of man?” Answer: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” God made us to live in relation to Him. Our defining point of reference is not the myth of evolutionary ancestry, nor the dynamics of biology or chemistry, nor astrological charts, nor impersonal fate, nor a pantheon of idols made in the image of man. Our defining point of reference is the one true, living, triune, transcendent, and holy God. We are created with the obligation to love Him and accurately image and glorify Him. Here is our dignity. Here is our supreme fulfillment and

sublime delight: to live for the glory of God. Human guilt emerges with the next point of reference: the Fall. But we will not perceive the tragedy of the Fall unless we perceive the glory of what God made us to be. We are creatures accountable to image God accurately in creation. The extent of our guilt is the extent to which we disfigure God's glory in us as His image-bearers and fail to enjoy Him as our God. That failure will be the focus of our next article.