

TITLE: "Living without Guilt and Shame"

TEXTS: Matthew 6:14-15 (NT p. 6)

Jesus says: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

Introduction -

As I look back on my life, there are things I have done that I am ashamed of.

Some things I said or did in anger that hurt those I love ...and those I didn't.

Some things I did, knowing they were wrong at the time, but not knowing HOW wrong.

Some things I did knowing EXACTLY how wrong they were at the time.

For a long time, I tried to EXCUSE myself. Didn't work. Just when you think you have buried guilt and shame, they pop up again like insidious weeds that spoil your garden. So how DO we get rid of guilt and shame for good? That is what we will explore in this morning's sermon.

1. "You who are evil..."

Let me begin by relating to you the experience of Jean Bell Mosley who wrote this little account of her childhood for *Guideposts* in May of 1988:

I try to remember the details of that long-ago day. They went something like this: Summer was over the land. I was barefoot, maybe seven or eight. The pink Zinnias were in bloom. Mama was baking a special cake, my favorite, with little colored pillows of candy embedded in the icing. But as I look back, the cake was not important, nor the zinnias, nor my freed feet.

Desiring some teenage privacy from the rest of the family, my older sister had made a room for herself in a corner of the big log smokehouse. In a swept-out corner, she had put a chair, a desk and a clumsy wooden-box bookcase. I could not understand this. In there alone with the old smoky hams and strings of onions and hanks of pennyroyal! Why?

If my sister thought she had privacy, I could have told her she didn't, for some plaster had fallen from the chinks between the logs, and if I wanted to, I could see her every move. And from time to time, I wanted to.

One day I didn't draw back quickly enough. My sister's shocked eyes bored into mine, at close range. Due report of my behavior was made, and Mama instructed me never to peek again.

Why do we do things we know are wrong? We CAN blame it on "just being human." Some even blame it on God. Mark Twain said that if God had forbidden the snake instead of the apple, Adam and Eve would have eaten the snake!

But the TRUTH is, God has given each and every person the capacity to choose good or evil. And, according to God, each of us often chooses to do evil. That's why the Bible says: "ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

This is called original sin. I have been told many times, often by an indignant adult who has never had children, that there is no WAY that an innocent child can be guilty of sin. All I can say is that they have never had the long-term care of a child who is battling through the terrible twos.

However, it's still difficult for many Christians, and non-Christians, to face the fact they are evil in God's sight. That's because when we think of an evil person, we think of it from a human perspective, and people like Adolph Hitler or Joseph Stalin, both of whom were responsible for the deaths of millions of innocent people, come to mind.

WE are certainly not like THOSE people! ...Certainly not. But, let's look at the people JESUS called evil. In Luke 11, Jesus says:

⁹"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹²Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

To whom is Jesus speaking? Is it the Roman soldiers? The Pharisees? The Scribes? Is it the crowds of people who often followed? ...No. Jesus is speaking to his disciples. "You who are evil," refers to his closest friends.

I am a disciple of Jesus Christ and accepting that I am evil in God's sight, right along with Peter, James, John and the rest of the disciples, is actually a RELIEF to me. I don't have to pretend, or try to hide the truth or claim to be anyone BUT who I am to God because God loves me at my best and God loves me just as much at my worst.

That is why we read in the Bible, "But God proves His love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). This is the DICHOTMY of Christianity. You and I ARE evil in God's sight, yet God loves us enough to allow the Son of God to die on a cross even if you were the only person on earth.

2. Again and again...

Let's get back to our story. Remember that little Jeannie had been caught spying on her sister and her mother had told to NEVER do it again. Jean writes:

But I did. There was another place the plaster was missing, a place where my sister wouldn't be expecting me to peek. All I could ever see she was doing was reading a book.

This time I was caught, unexpectedly, from the rear, and Mama hauled me off to a place under the big cherry tree. Memory fades here. Was I spanked? Was I scolded? Shamed? Probably.

I do remember that when Mama was through with the "correction," she hugged me and said, "Now let's forget this ever happened." And I also remember the awful sinking feeling I had. I thought Mama would never again love me.

I wandered off to the creek, waded awhile. But it wasn't fun. I went to the haystack, crawled way back into a little cave the cows had made as they ate into it. It was suffocatingly hot, but I stayed for a long time, trying to do some kind of penance, I suppose. I thought about going to an abandoned log cabin about a mile away and staying there the rest of my life. I wished the lump in my throat would go away. I wished it were yesterday or tomorrow. I wished I hadn't disobeyed.

Guilt and shame are tough to live with. Little Jeannie still HAD guilt and shame even AFTER her mother had forgiven her. I have found that is true of God and me. In I John we read:

⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, [God] who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

I can confess my sins, past and present, and I can know in my head that God has forgiven me, but I still do not FEEL forgiven because I cannot forgive myself. So guilt and shame remain. In a moment I will tell you how you can get rid of that guilt and shame, but first I want to mention something about sin.

When God wants to work on one of our sinful behaviors, God will let us know when it is time to knock it off. If we don't, God will allow consequences to play out. Some people imagine that God punishes us for our sins. I don't think so. In fact, until it is time to give a sin, I think God actually prevents some circumstances from befalling us.

But when it is TIME, and we won't give up our sin, look out! I remember reading about a woman who was often in hurry, so she regularly exceeded the speed limit. One day she was bringing her mother to a doctor's appointment and her mother asked her to slow down. She said, "Oh mother, I'm driving and I'm not going that fast!"

A few moments later, she heard a siren and saw flashing lights in her rear view mirror. An officer walked up to her car window, took her information and wrote her a ticket. As the officer drove off, she griped, "He should have just given me a warning!"

Her mother said, "I gave you the warning. HE gave you the ticket."

When God wants us to stop one of our sins, God will give us a warning or two, but, eventually, if we don't stop, God will allow consequences to catch up with us, just as they did with little Jeannie.

3. Getting rid of guilt and shame

How DO we finally get rid of guilt and shame? ...The key is forgiveness. As we forgive those who have hurt us, we begin to be able to forgive ourselves. Why is this so? We have asked God to DO this every time we've prayed the Lord's Prayer.

When we say: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" or "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us," we have asked to BE forgiven, AS WE forgive. And we will not FEEL forgiven, and not be rid of guilt and shame, until we admit that we are just as bad, in God's sight, as the person who hurt us ...and then we forgive her or him.

That is why we find this in Matthew 18:21-22:

Peter came and said to [Jesus], “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

The point is that we are not to keep COUNT of the sins against us. If we DO keep count, we have not forgiven a person at all. Forgiveness has nothing to DO with numbers. God forgives us COUNTless times out of love and we need to forgive others countless times out of love realizing that no matter what they have done, we are just as bad as they are in the eyes of God.

Conclusion – Final forgiveness

Let’s get back to the story. Remember that little Jeannie was suffering from guilt and shame and was thinking of running away so she wouldn’t have to face her mother:

Soon I began to think of that cake Mama had baked. It was high and fluffy, and those little nuggets of sweetness on top! MY cake. I wondered if dinnertime had come and gone. I could imagine the family gathered around the table, Dad saying, “I’ll have another piece of the cake, please,” and no one even missing me. Not even Mama.

I went back the house, looked quickly through the screen door. There was the cake, untouched, in the center of the table. I went around to look in a kitchen window, then another one. Once, I felt sure Mama saw me, but she didn’t say anything. I went again to the screen door and stood, this time long enough to be seen.

“Want to lick the icing bowl?” Mama asked, just like she always did. “Here, there’s a lot left,” she said, handing me the bowl and a spoon. She brushed the hair back out of my eyes. I looked into hers. There was no trace of disappointment, anger or disapproval. “Hurry up,” she said. “It’ll soon be dinnertime. I want you to set the table.”

“But Mama,” I began, feeling hot and sticky and throbbing with the necessity to say something more, to get the hurt out of my throat. “Mama, I won’t do it again.”

“Do what?”

“You know.”

“Whatever you’re talking about, I’ve forgotten.” She busied herself with the potatoes.

THAT is how God forgives us.

And, if we forgive others in the way Mama did, God WILL forgive AND forget our sins, just as Mama did.

And when we do forgive as Mama did, we will be able to let go of the guilt and shame of our sins.

And, it’s nice to know that eventually, we will live without guilt or shame forever and ever and ever.

Amen.