

In a famous short story by Edgar Allen Poe a valuable letter becomes lost even though prominently displayed in a card rack beneath the middle of the mantelpiece. The police spent a week exploring minutely the nooks and crannies of each room in the house thought to contain the lost document. Even a powerful microscope was employed but to no avail. The hero of the tale tells the prefect of the Parisian police "Perhaps the mystery is a little too plain, too self-evident." Later he muses "The intellect suffers to pass unnoticed those considerations which are too obtrusively and too palpably self-evident."

Now all of this is a parable of life itself. The clues to the meaning of existence are so prominent that few people see them. Just as we use eyes and brain, hardly aware that we do so, and gaze through windows at objects outside without perceiving the glass panes which make such perceptions possible, so some aspects of our nature and experience that give pungency and character to all the rest, escape our notice. For example, think of the universal phenomenon of guilt. For normal people at least, it is a universal phenomenon. It's the seasoning of all living for all of us. Have you ever thought that in the little word ought lies both our greatness and our misery?

According to psychiatrists and physicians, a major cause of breakdown is a burdened conscience. Certain it is that guilt continually attends our failures with time, money, personal relationships and opportunity in general. All human beings experience outrageous impulses, nonsensical inhibitions, temptations, complexes, obscene images and vague fears. Even the best of men and women acknowledge that they continually betray themselves, their aspirations, convictions and values.

Living, my friends, means choosing. But the choices are too often those that seem the fruit not of conviction but of convenience, pressure and selfishness. And as a result, all of us spend much time in rationalization, self-justification, as well as in criticism of others that strangely brings in its train a perverted sense of self-worth. These things in turn produce the reflex of a more subtle guilt and thus the vicious circle whirls unceasingly.

Even those moderns who jeer at oughts and guilt find themselves asserting that people ought not to be intolerant and judgmental. Man can no more dodge the reality of moral absolutes than he can lose his own shadow. And that, my friends, is a clue to the meaning of existence.

Socrates of old and Toynbee<sup>12</sup> in modern times asserted that the most urgent business on mankind's agenda is to close the morality gap, to establish firmly in national, international and personal affairs the supreme importance of distinguishing right from wrong. To end the concealment of sin under various euphemistic disguises and to confess it and desist from it. These are our great needs.

So long as a person lives under the shadow of real, unacknowledged and unexpiated guilt, he will continue to hate himself and to suffer the inevitable consequences of such self-hatred. But the moment such a person begins to accept his or her guilt and sinfulness, the possibility of a radical reform opens up and a new freedom of self-respect and peace at the same time.

The human conscience is like a policeman. It may be eluded, stifled, drugged or bribed but not without cost. Conscience convicts all (except

psychotics) of selfishness. This is our greatest problem. This human egocentricity from which we all suffer. All the great historic philosophies and religions of the world have been concerned first and foremost with the overcoming of selfishness. But there's also the problem of inadequacy which as surely as selfishness, also brings guilt. This sense of inadequacy is well-nigh universal. I hardly need tell you about it, for it's a very common experience to feel threatened or overwhelmed and that continually. Look at the roots of this problem. We all have too many things to remember, too many things to do, too many other people to please. The unceasing necessity of getting through the day or the week without getting into a frightful mess that saps our emotional energy and destroys our self-confidence - this is our problem. In a world that's increasingly more complex and increasingly competitive, individuals attempt to push themselves too close to the limits of their abilities.

For example, a person can cope with a difficult job if the home life is stable and peaceable. Or manage a turbulent family so long as he or she is not overtaxed at work. But as soon as there's trouble in both situations, war on both fronts, then collapse is inevitable. Have you ever experienced it, my friend?

Guilt besieges all normal parents. There are no successful fathers or mothers. Every day in a multitude of ways they feel they are letting the children down. Children tell of other parents who give more pocket money let them stay up later, let them watch more TV, take them out more often, live in newer homes, have more time to spare for their offspring, go better places for their holidays and are altogether nicer people to know. Then, if you read psychology, you become convinced you're too strict, too lax, too inconsistent. You ought, for example, to spend at least 25 hours a day playing with the children, reading to them, supervising their activities, talking to them and generally stimulating them; simultaneously allowing them more time to themselves so that they can develop and express their own personalities. One must not harm them, force one's own ideas, make them fit one's own mold. But nevertheless, give them sound guidance and a sound set of standards and principles to live by... You've been through it, my friend. Who's sufficient for these things?

Then there's the guilt that comes from failures in loving. We're often not good at expressing our emotions. Does he or she understand? we wonder. Are we sexually adequate? Or even sexually normal? It's normal to ask those questions.

Then there's ambition. That's another problem. We all begin with big ideas of what we might do and what we might become. But our adult life consists of a process of coming to terms with reality. The big ideas of youth are cut down to size. We live in a rat race in a competitive world where only the man at the top is a total success. Everyone else is a comparative failure. Indeed, a competitive system feeds on failure, even fosters it! A world in which the winner takes all is a world in which bitterness and disillusionment inevitably abound. What about the fear of redundancy? To be redundant means to be unwanted and to be unwanted means for the heart to be unloved. No wonder frustration is well-nigh universal. "The majority of people lead lives of quiet desperation." said Thoreau.

Have you ever heard of resistentialism? It's the philosophy which says the universe is against us anyway. For example, according to this philosophy if you take twenty slices of bread and cover one side of each with butter and honey and then throw them in the air in your living room, far more than half will land on your carpet honey side down! The world of things seem

in league against mankind. Even atheists like Albert Camus stress the problems of human depravity and guilt. The message of his book THE FALL is that if we wish to understand what man is, we must see him first of all as guilty. William Golding, and Franz Kafka tell the same story. Thus, guilt's not an invention of Christianity, it's something recognized as a condition of human existence by perceptive people in every age including our own. Guilt follows us around like our own shadow. It exists because there's such a thing as moral responsibility. This is common ground among all civilized and uncivilized people. Now some of this guilt, I admit, is false guilt springing merely from childhood experiences such as the disapproval of others because we have not conformed to custom or culture. That's false guilt. But there is genuine guilt which none of us can avoid. It emerges from the dread tension of "I want" and "I ought".

Mankind has unrivalled powers of adaptation but he's now changing his environment at such a pace that he tends to outstrip these powers. New problems and new situations keep arising. We barely have time to adjust ourselves to them before the next round of changes is on its way. This too, is a great source of tension and feelings of inadequacy, hence, guilt.

And so today we are asking "Is there a solution to this unavoidable problem? Could it be that the solution is the explanation of the centrality of the cross in Christianity?"

Let me refer to a clue from common experience. In the long run, life is only possible if there's someone or some people who accept us just as we are. Much modern therapy for depressives, alcoholics, drug addicts and delinquents depends on this fact. If a personality is disintegrating, its only when that soul finds people who do not criticize his behavior that he can find the strength to do something about it. This remedy is much to be preferred to sucking the mental dummy of fantasy or the putting on of chloroform masks of abnormal indulgence in pleasure, sex, drunkenness, money-making, power-seeking - you know the masks that we're all tempted to wear.

Occasionally we meet young men and women who suddenly are transformed by the experience of human love. They become radiant, full of joy and of hope. It seems that they could cross the world in new, gigantic boots. What's happened? They have found temporary rest from guilt in the complete acceptance extended to them by another human being. For a short time, guilt subsides and such a person inhabits a paradise bubble. But the pricking of that bubble is as certain as the sunset that follows sunrise.

To know our disease is half-way towards finding the remedy and being cured. And it's everyone's disease. You there by the radio, it's yours. And I who speak to you, it's mine. I want you to notice that literature, the mirror to life, focuses with fidelity on this characteristic human symptom of guilt as a key to life.

Take the murderous Lady MacBeth for example. Shakespeare puts into her mouth these words: "Out, damned spot, out I say. One, two." By then 'tis time to do it. Hell is murky. Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him. Here's the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, Oh, Oh." Her husband questions the physician like this; "Can'st thou not minister to a mind diseased? Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow? 'Rase out the written troubles of the brain and with some sweet oblivious antidote cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff which weighs upon the

heart?" The melancholy answer is that no remedy for guilt is known to man.

But here Shakespeare was wrong. The real clue to life's mystery and sorrow demonstrates Edgar Allen Poe's contention in the story we mentioned at the beginning. Not the microscopic search of DNA or the atomic realm will yield us the secret. The telltale element is much more conspicuous than anything like that. He who admits his own continual burden of guilt will recognize that Public Enemy No. 1 is none of the scapegoats selected by man. It's not the government, the weather or the faulty educational system primarily that plagues us. Not ignorance or stupidity but that ancient disease of the Bible called sin. That thing which blights homes, breaks hearts and digs graves. It insulted God, killed the prophets, robbed Heaven and made hell the high capital of the universe. The giants which stalk us are Sin, Sorrow and Death. And they must be killed in that order. To be an ethical animal in a non-ethical universe is agony to the mind and heart. And, as Carlyle asserted, "The ultimate question posed by life is "Wilt thou be a hero or a coward?" The coward endeavours to flee from the pressures of "oughts" and inevitable guilt by pursuing such escapes as sex, alcohol, tranquilizers, the hard drugs or the respectable meccas of wealth, power and possessions. But, my friends, as we've already said, the best of these are only a chloroform mask, a substitute for living. They're not the answer.

Another common approach is one which is pseudo-intellectual and therefore fashionable and acceptable. One can deny the reality of right and wrong and thus attempt to quieten guilt. This can be done only at the price of destroying all values. Human love becomes a mere biological sensation and all hope a deception. It becomes impossible to use the words Good, Better, Best as we no longer have a justifiable scheme of values. Life becomes nonsensical and with the death of hope comes the hope for death.

Well, what will we do? Should one assert that "eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die?" No, my friends, that sham prescription has often been exposed. It's Achilles' heel is the fact that usually tomorrow finds us alive and with a dreadful hangover. We find that he who seeks kicks experiences repeatedly a kick back. Omar Khayyam voiced the supposed cure to life's concerns when he said "Ah, fill the cup. What profits it to repeat how time is slipping underneath our feet. Unborn tomorrow and dead yesterday, why fret about them, if ~~the~~ today be sweet?"

But Robert Browning in his Rabbi Ben Ezra<sup>†</sup> gave an answer:

"Thou to whom fools propound, when the wine makes its round  
Since life fleets, all is changed;  
The past gone. Seize today.  
Fool, all it is at all lasts ever, past recall.  
Earth changes but thy soul and God stand sure."

I think Browning's right. And in the light of the fact of Christ, our guilt takes on even cosmic proportions. The Scripture says, quoting our Lord "If you believe not I am He, you shall die in your sins."

So there's a vital question to all of us. How can a man be reconciled to God? What is the cure for guilt's alienation and sin's compulsion? The good news for today, my friends, the good news unlimited is that the confession of the real problem can result in an immediate discovery of healing. Every needy person can be surprised by joy. The burden of the New Testament is that man's Maker, aware of the human dilemma, has already intervened to solve it. This is the meaning of the cross. The

Scriptures declare to guilty men that He Who is both Lawgiver and Judge has lived their life, except for sinning, and died their death in order that by way of exchange we might be credited with His life and His righteousness. William Tyndale, the translator of much of the King James Version (its basis) said that these truths about the cross constitute "the good, glad and merry tidings that make a man's heart to sing and his feet to dance for joy." The Scripture says One has died for all, therefore, all have died. And if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation for the old has passed away and behold the new is come. All this is from God Who through Christ reconciled us to Himself. For our sake, He (God) made Him (Christ) to be sin Who knew no sin so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Cor. 5:21. This verse answers the question "Why the cross?" It answers the issue about guilt. For if One died for all, all died. We died. You and I died. At 3 o'clock that black Friday two thousand years ago. We were ruined ages before without our personal participation by the first Adam, our first representative. At Calvary, again without our personal participation, we were redeemed by the second Adam. As Adam represented the race in Eden, so Christ, the second Adam, represented humanity at the cross.

That was the judgment of the world. In Him all men have legally died and paid the price for their sins and now whosoever will may come. It sounds too good to be true, my friends, but it's more true than anything else we know. "That all manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men", that God now, because of the cross, can be faithful and just to forgive us -you and me- our sins because the claims of the righteous eternal law have been met and we have died in our Substitute and Representative, Christ. God won't ask us to pay the price a second time if we abide in Him. He tells us "Ye are complete in Him;" "accepted in the Beloved;" and "there is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus." Christ was made what He was not that you and I might be made what we are not.

Therefore despite a million sermons to the contrary, the Gospel is not good advice - we've had enough of that. It's good news. Good news unlimited. Advice is about something I should do but news concerns something already done and done by Someone else. The gospel is the good news that in God's sight sin - my sin, your sin - has been made an end of and everlasting righteousness has been brought in for you, for me. All that God requires of me for time and eternity has already been achieved by Himself in the person of His Son. That achievement is credited to anyone, however vile, who believes the news and accepts it. Despite my sin and selfishness, there's no need for me to try and reconcile God. He's already reconciled and He urges us "Be ye reconciled."

God is offering something, not demanding something. You and I need not be anxious about what God thinks of us, but only of what God thinks of Christ, our Substitute. I must not blaspheme His grace by thinking that I must be free from sin before trusting His power to save. I must come to Him just as I am, sinful, helpless, dependent. The Divine plan involves our complete rescue from sin and guilt, sorrow and death. Our acceptance of Calvary brings freedom from sin's guilt. Our dependence upon the living, interceding Christ, brings freedom from sin's power and His return will bring freedom from sin's very presence. The work is His, though received by our simple trust. Objectively, Christ is all. Subjectively, faith is all.

To illustrate. Consider the story of the adulteress recorded in John 8. She is the cowering centre of a jabbering, accusing crowd. How she longs for an enveloping earthquake or destructive lightning but better than either

to her is the healing presence of Christ. Would you notice the instructive comments on the situation by Paul Tournier in GUILT AND GRACE, page 111: "This woman symbolises all the despised people of the world. All those whom we see daily crushed by judgments which weigh heavily upon them; by a thousand and one arbitrary or unjust prejudices. But also by fair judgments placed on the very healthiest morality and the most authentic divine law. She symbolises all psychological, social and spiritual inferiority and her accusers symbolise the whole of judging, condemnatory contemptuous humanity. Its as if the presence of Christ brought about the strangest of inversions. He wipes out the guilt in the woman who was crushed by it and arouses guilt in those who felt none. The scene is the world in miniature with ourselves at the heart of it. Ourselves and Him. The light that shows us our sins becomes the light that heals. Christ is that Light. Confronted with Him, we learn that sin is not merely the transgression of the law, it's the rejection of God Himself. Salvation also is not an abstract idea, it too is a Person. That same Person. Now we see that the purpose of the universal phenomenon of guilt is not to condemn and to destroy, but to save."

"Neither do I condemn thee" says Christ, "go and sin no more." Let it be carefully noted from this story that the woman was not the only one with a problem. Christ too seemed in a dilemma. He claimed to be both the Friend of publicans and sinners and the Upholder of the divine law. How could these be reconciled? It would seem that in this situation, He must choose one role or the other. It mirrors God's eternal problem before His universe. How could He maintain His law of justice and right and yet save the transgressors of that law?

Not how Christ dealt with the situation of the adulteress. With His finger He wrote in the dust. Only once in the New Testament do we read of Christ writing. Only once in the Old Testament do we read of writing done by the finger of God. It is as if Christ said to the woman's accusers "You talk of the law's requirements to Me; don't you know I wrote that original law?" But the same law required that the witnesses of evil assist in the carrying out of the death sentence for its violation (See Deut. 17:7). So this implied that the witnesses were themselves innocent of such transgressions and Christ admonishes the cruel crowd therefore "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." The record declares they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one.

My friends, on what grounds could Christ forgive the woman? That law, the ten commandments, which had been written by the finger of God, resided in the sanctuary under the mercy seat which once a year was sprinkled with the blood of sacrifice. Above the mercy seat the glorious Shekinah, the One Who was both Lawgiver and Redeemer, could look with compassion at that broken law through the mercy seat because of the sprinkled blood. That blood was a symbol of a sacrifice of eternal value. The sacrifice of the divine Son of God, equivalent to the death of all the world. God can be both just and the Justifier of the penitent sinner because He has exacted the penalty, your penalty; the penalty of the violated law. He not only required it but He provided it.

And so my dear friends, we close where we began. The solution to your problem and mine is not obscure. It gives the answer to the reason for the cross of Christ. We need not climb up to heaven or down to hell to find the solution we need. We do not need some great I.Q. The most well-known words in the world contain all that we seek. Hear them again but not only hear, receive, believe. Though the news seems too good to be true, believe it, my friends, that "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that you by believing in Him should never perish but have everlasting life." Believe it, my friends, its good news, its true news and its for you.