

to repentance. God seeks to change hearts, so to resolve such **legitimate guilt**, we must repent, accept God's forgiveness, and experience a change of heart motive through trust in Jesus.

Another possibility is that this woman has experienced genuine repentance and has been given a new heart, but she still believes some lie that is generating **illegitimate guilt**. Here is one example:

My sister was good to me and to treat her so badly—I am beyond salvation. I am not worthy. I am too offensive for God to love and forgive.

Such lies generate fear, insecurity, and illegitimate guilt. The only solution for her guilt is to embrace the truth:

1. **I did mistreat my sister, but I cannot change history. I can't undo what I did.**
2. **But God's grace is for people like me. I can experience, by His grace, a change of heart,**

removing my fear and selfishness so that I become a new person who would act differently if I were ever given the opportunity.

Without true conversion of the heart, it is inevitable that we will act selfishly—without God's grace, it is impossible not to. That means you don't need to feel guilt for being born a sinner who has acted selfishly in the past. Recognize that your worth is determined by *who you are*, a child of God, not by *what you have done*.

However, we do need to ask, "Am I taking the steps needed for God to heal me—have I repented? And do I really want a new heart?"

Even when we take these steps, we are often tempted to not forgive ourselves because we know that what we've done is reprehensible. In the case of the woman, she believed the lie that she was capable of not being selfish on her own—that is, without God's grace in her life. It is only when she recognizes the truth, that she was born infected with selfishness and cannot cure herself, that she can go to Christ for true healing and stop feeling guilty for the symptoms of an unhealed heart.

Keep Moving Forward

Are you feeling guilt that you can't shake? Is it legitimate or illegitimate? Take time to examine your past—and recognize that God uses your feelings of legitimate guilt to bring to light any unresolved selfishness still in your heart, leading you to go to Christ for healing and restoration. Be thankful for the experience that helped awaken you, and then thank God that "while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). And if you have already begun to experience Christ's healing, the guilt you're feeling is likely illegitimate. Embrace the promise that "if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" (1 John 2:1) and keep moving forward.

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How to Resolve Your Feelings of Guilt



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Much like physical pain, God designed the conviction of guilt to alert us to danger and to protect us from injury.

If you touch a blazing hot stove and feel pain, the pain is not “bad”—rather, it immediately alerts you that something damaging is happening. The pain is designed to get you to quickly pull away your hand in order to minimize the damage. If you are especially sensitive, you might even feel the heat before you touch the stove and avoid being burned at all.

Likewise, your conscience is sensitive to actions that violate God’s law of love, which results in damage to our minds and characters. Not all feelings of guilt are “bad,” as God designed guilt to keep us from further damaging our hearts. And like healing for a burned hand, God wants to help each of us resolve any guilt and to heal our hearts.

In general, we all face two types of guilt in life:

Legitimate guilt occurs when we have actually done something wrong—selfishly exploiting others, for instance.

Illegitimate guilt happens when no wrong has occurred, yet we still feel the emotion of guilt.

When we selfishly exploit someone—stealing from them, lying to gain the upper hand, etc.—we experience **legitimate guilt**; it’s designed to alert us that something is wrong and motivate us to turn away from such sinful and damaging activity. If our consciences are sensitive enough, we might even be convicted of the wrongfulness before we commit the act, completely avoiding damage to our minds and characters.

How do we resolve legitimate guilt? It is resolved by repentance and, as far as possible, without adding further harm, restoration to the wronged party. However,

repentance is not mere confession; it is an actual change of heart such that the selfish motive that led to the sinful act is replaced with love. This is a supernatural work experienced in union with God through the work of the Holy Spirit. When repentance occurs, our guilt resolves because we experience the transformation of our hearts with new motives: “It is no longer I who lives, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).

Illegitimate guilt feels like legitimate guilt, but it is not resolved by repentance and restoration because there is nothing for which we need to repent nor need to restore. However, because we feel guilty, we often make the mistake of trying to resolve it by repentance and restoration. But this only contributes to more guilt. Why? Because illegitimate guilt always occurs from, in some way, believing a lie; repentance when no wrong has actually been done only reinforces the lie that caused the guilt, worsening the problem. The only way to resolve illegitimate guilt is by application of the truth.

How to Resolve Guilt

Let’s consider the story of one woman whose younger sister died a decade ago from a brain tumor.

Even as her sister was undergoing chemotherapy, the woman often bullied and teased her sister. The meanness continued for years and ended only when her sister died. Today, the woman is consumed with feelings of guilt over her behavior. Unable to forgive herself, she is depressed and distraught.

In this scenario, one of two possibilities is transpiring.

One possibility is that the woman has *confessed* but not *repented*, meaning that while she may feel sorrow for her conduct, she has not experienced a new heart, such that she is a different person who loves others more than herself. If she remains selfish, God will continue using her conscience to convict her with feelings of guilt, trying to lead her