

CHAPTER 3

Principle #1: Learn to Live Guilt-Free

“**W**hat did I do wrong?” This haunting question is echoed hundreds of times in conversations I have with parents. It is human nature for us to assign blame. Determining responsibility can be helpful if it leads to forgiveness and healing, but if condemnation is the only outcome, our analysis is destructive.

Some parents are motivated by compassion as they seek a solution and try to help the one they love. If they can unmask the problem, they can address it forcefully and clearly. But far too many parents are consumed with guilt rather than compassion. They believe the long, bony finger of blame points back at them, and they are disillusioned under the tremendous weight of responsibility they feel for their child’s problems. Let’s look at some truths from God’s Word that will help us escape this crushing weight of guilt.

All Have Sinned

Paul told the Roman believers, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). Theologians speak of “the depravity of man.” This means that we are fallen, sinful people from birth. We don’t have to teach people to sin; they do it naturally. We also know from Scripture that we each have freedom of choice.

The Bible is full of instructions and admonitions to guide our choices. Paul typically uses half of each of his letters to the churches to describe the glorious truths about our identity in Christ, and he uses the other half to instruct us how that identity should be expressed in our choices. For example, in his letter to the Ephesians, he first describes how God calls us: we are chosen by God, adopted, loved, and forgiven. Then he turns to application of those truths. “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called” (Eph 4:1). After this transition to the

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second half of the letter, he encourages us to follow commands such as: don’t lie, but speak the truth; don’t steal, but give to those in need; don’t be bitter, but forgive; don’t destroy people with your words, but speak words that build people up. Obviously, he provides these clear commands because we have such a tendency to lie, steal, harbor bitterness, and use our words to hurt people. We have a propensity to sin, yet we have other choices as well.

Your prodigal has choices, too. When a person becomes an adult, he is responsible for his own behavior: his choices, his attitudes, and his actions. He may act like a selfish, spoiled child, but God will hold him accountable as an adult. He may have suffered terribly as a child, and his life may be colored by many tragic experiences, but he is still accountable for his own choices. We are often quick to

excuse our prodigals’ behavior and blame ourselves when they act badly, but even if we had you’ll write the church a check to cover what he stole.” The father did just that. He had to take a second mortgage on his home in order to pay the full amount. The father had no moral or religious obligations to repay the debt, but he didn’t want the church to be hurt. And too, he wanted desperately to stop the accusations that were focused on his son and on himself and his wife. Paying for his son’s sin was this father’s way of trying to deal with his embarrassment.

I talked with a woman whose son was convicted of murder, and he was executed for his crime. Through the long years of trials, appeals, trips to the prison to visit her son, and finally, that awful day when he was put to death, it seemed that everyone’s compassion was focused on the victim’s family. That is understandable, but it was very painful to this grieving mother. They lost someone they treasured, but she was losing her own beloved son. She told me through her tears, “In all those years, I don’t remember anyone who came to me and told me, ‘I’m praying for you. I know you’re hurting.’” Instead, people looked at her with the attitude, “You’re son is getting exactly what he deserves.” Yes, that’s right. There’s no question that his crime had to be punished, but it hurt her terribly, both to know he had committed such a crime and to know he would lose his life as justice was meted out.

Almost every type of addiction and most kinds of crimes produce an embarrassing prodigal. I have talked to grieving parents who won’t talk to their friends, but they feel safe telling me about a son or daughter who is addicted to drugs, sex, or gambling. We are not quite as ashamed of those family members who are workaholics, because they at least have something to show for their pathology, pay raises and promotions, with ruined family