

The Ick Of Guilt

On Sunday we continued our new sermon series on the book of Leviticus, tackling the subject of sin and guilt, and the Old Testament system of animal sacrifice.

1. Warm up question: On Sunday, Jeff told a story about a little boy who killed his Grandma's favorite duck, then desperately tried to hide his guilt. What childhood experience of yours does that story remind you of?
2. Guilt is one of our most primal and painful human emotions. At one level or another, we've all struggled with it.
 - a. How big of a role has guilt played in your life? When have you felt most consumed by guilt?
 - b. Suppose an alien from outer space were to ask you to explain how guilt feels. How would you describe it?
 - c. Jeff told how a couple weeks ago, he got really angry with his dog Lucy. First she refused to go out into the rain to poop, then she refused to come in because she was afraid to run through the water gushing over the side of the gutters. Jeff ended up yelling at Lucy and kicking an empty cooler. Afterward, he said he felt like he had ick all over him and just wanted to get it off him – kind of like when a spider crawls on you. When in recent weeks have you done something that made you feel icky and guilty? What happened?
 - d. Is guilt a healthy emotion?
3. Throughout most of the ancient world, animal sacrifice became the “go to” way for ridding oneself of guilt and restoring communion with God. The Israelites were no exception; they developed an elaborate system of regulations for animal sacrifice. Almost half the book of Leviticus is filled with detailed regulations for making sacrifices. Read Leviticus 1:1-9.
 - a. When you read passages like this what emotions, thoughts, or questions arise within you?
 - b. Theologian Nathaniel Micklem suggests that ancient animal sacrifice is not something that arose from a conscious process of theological logic. It arose, he says, from the gut – from a deep sense that our sin offends God and that, to show our remorse and restore communion with God, we must sacrifice something that is both emotionally and financially costly. Micklem invites us to empathetically imagine the emotional experience of selecting our best sheep, a sheep we probably called by name and felt affection for, then taking that sheep to the priest, placing our hands firmly on its head (to symbolically transfer our sins), then cutting its throat and burning it on the altar (symbolically destroying our sins). If

you had been alive back then, do you think you could and would have participated in animal sacrifices? Why or why not?

- c. What emotions do you think you would have felt as you moved through the process of animal sacrifice? When it was over, how do you think you would have felt?
 - d. Why do you think animal sacrifice became such a pervasive practice in the ancient world?
4. Some believe God gave ancient people the system of animal sacrifice because cosmic justice demands a penalty for sin. In this view, if God (or we humans) were to let people off without a significant penalty when they harm others, that would be unfair to the victim and victim's family and disrespect the pain they experienced. Others would say the ancient system of animal sacrifice was not necessary in an absolute sense, but was invented by God (or humans) as an accommodation for human weakness – a ritual that allowed humans to find some sense of relief from guilt. How do you see it? Does justice always demand a penalty for sin?
5. However we may see it now, Jesus was born into a world steeped in animal sacrifices based on the notion that sin demands a penalty. Viewed through that lens, Jesus' death had huge significance. He was seen as the best of our human flock, a perfect lamb who was slaughtered by human aggression, anger, violence, and selfishness – the same kinds of impulses that plague us all. So that you could say he died because of our sins, i.e., the same kinds of sins we commit. For an example of this view of things, read Hebrews 10:1-22.
- a. According to this passage, were animal sacrifices ever effective? Did they accomplish their purpose?
 - b. According to this passage, what was the meaning or purpose of Jesus' death?
 - c. How do you feel about this perspective? Is it meaningful to you? Why or why not?
6. Read Psalm 51:16-17 and I John 1:8-9.
- a. Suppose a friend of yours was struggling with guilt for something he/she has done. Suppose your friend asked you, "How can I get rid of all this guilt?" Based on what we've talked about, and how you see things, how would you answer?
 - b. Suppose someone has genuinely confessed something wrong he/she did, but still can't get rid of the guilt. What would you suggest? What are some practical ways we can get better at releasing guilt?