

PRINCIPLE #1: LEARN TO LIVE GUILT-FREE



“What 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 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 been perfect parents, we couldn’t guarantee a child’s godliness.

In Jesus’ Parable of the Prodigal Son, what sins do we see the father commit? How do we see him alienate his son and drive him away from home? We don’t. It’s simply not in the story. He was as good a parent as we can find. Still, his son chose to reject his father’s company in pursuit of other, less



beneficial, options.

The Bible provides several examples of people who made bad choices even after they enjoyed a good environment. Jesus spent three years with His twelve disciples. He never sinned, and He always showed them perfect love, yet Judas betrayed Him for 30 pieces of silver, and the rest of the disciples ran at His moment of greatest need.

Adam and Eve lived in the perfection of the Garden. They had everything they could possibly want, but they chose to sin against God because they were promised even more power to “be like God, knowing good and evil.” They got their wish. Before that day, they had never known evil, but from that day on, evil has shadowed every moment for them and their descendents.

The children of Israel were rescued from slavery in Egypt. Miracles marked the beginning of their journey, and miracles sustained them day after day. But they grumbled and complained so often that God let that first generation die in the desert instead of allowing them to enter the Promised Land.

In the early church, Paul discipled a man named Demas. At first, he was a faithful follower who ministered alongside Paul and Luke. In his short letter to Philemon, Paul referred to Demas as “my fellow worker” (Philemon 24). In Paul’s eyes, Demas was a valued friend and co-laborer in the cause of Christ, at the same level as Mark, the gospel writer. But in a later letter to Timothy, Paul reported sadly, “For Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed for Thessalonica” (II Tim 4:10). Demas enjoyed the encouragement and the example of the apostle Paul, one of the greatest Christians in all of history, yet he chose to become a prodigal and leave Paul because he longed for comfort and wealth.

Each of these examples depicts someone who was loved