When I was in the fifth grade, there was a boy in my class whose mother committed suicide. I can’t begin to imagine how difficult it would be for a child to discover his mother took her own life. Well Max returned to school about a week later, we were on the playground and I noticed him laughing with the other kids and having a good time. Well I thought he should be acting sad, so with the immaturity of a ten-year-old boy, I said to him, “You don’t even care that your mother is dead!” Wow! He immediately burst into tears and ran inside the building. I then felt horrible as I realized I had really hurt this kid. A few minutes later I was called to the principal’s office. Both the principal and my teacher let me know that what I had said to this boy was a horrible thing to say. But they didn’t need to worry because I already felt bad about it. I think that’s my earliest recollection of struggling with feelings of guilt. And yet like most people I’ve had more than my fair share of regret or guilt. When I worked late at night, I felt guilty because I wasn’t at home with the kids. When I was at home, I felt guilty because I wasn’t at work. I felt guilty because I wasn’t a better husband. I felt guilty because I wasn’t a better son. When I was on the treadmill and listening to a novel, I felt guilty because I wasn’t listening to a leadership book. When we would take a family vacation, I felt guilty for spending so much money. I felt guilty that I had clothes in my closet I hadn’t worn in a while. I did all the things a pastor was supposed to do and yet I never thought I prayed enough or read my Bible enough. I never felt like I made enough phone calls or visited enough people in the hospital. I felt guilty that I couldn’t be in two places at the same time. I felt guilty when I worked, and I felt guilty when I relaxed. Honestly… I felt guilty for feeling guilty! Feelings of guilt often come because you don’t think you measure up to your own high standards or because you did something you *shouldn’t* have done or failed to do something you *should* have done. It’s a feeling of shame or regret because of bad conduct, or at least perceived bad conduct. And then you keep yourself in that state of guilt because you think you need to pay for what you did or didn’t do. “I feel bad for not doing that.” “I feel horrible for letting her down.” “I’m mad at myself for not . . .” If it sounds familiar you are probably struggling with guilt. I can relate to David when he wrote Psalms 38:4 NIV. And yet I am happy to say in the last several years I don’t feel like I’m driven by guilt anymore. Because I’ve taken positive steps to let go of this bad habit in my life. Listen to this research I found in the *Harvard Business Review*: (People who are prone to guilt tend to work harder and perform better than people who are not guilt prone. They are also perceived to be more capable leaders.) Francis Flynn, a professor at Stanford University, gave a standard psychological test, which measured the tendency to feel guilt, to 150 workers in the finance department of a Fortune 500 firm. He found that people who were more prone to guilt received higher performance ratings. Related studies also showed that they were more committed to their organizations and were seen as stronger leaders by their peers. So then does that mean that guilt is a good thing?? Well yes… we all need some guilt, if you never experience guilt, it could be a sign that you are a sociopath or have narcissistic personality disorder, making you one of those rare people who are incapable of feeling guilt or regret. Now guys there’s actually two types of guilt. There’s the healthy kind that comes from the Holy Spirit, which is intended to lead us to repentance and a return to God’s plan for our life. Once we respond to the conviction of the Holy Spirit that guilt is gone and replaced by God’s peace and joy. The other type of guilt is often called *false guilt*. That’s when you have feelings of guilt even though you haven’t done anything wrong. Or maybe you *did* something wrong but have already fixed it and asked God to forgive you—and yet you still feel guilty. False guilt can affect *any* area of your life and keep you trapped in an unhealthy place if you don’t do something about it! People driven by false guilt feel they have to do everything perfectly, so they don’t disappoint others. False guilt can also be caused by the feeling that you are responsible to save everyone that crosses your path or asks for help. Psychologists often refer to this as a savior complex. You might sacrifice your own personal needs or overextend yourself to help others because you think you are the only one who can do it. Now there are many other reasons for your false guilt, but the most likely reason is that the devil is accusing you. Revelation talks about how Satan was a fallen angel and thrown out of heaven. Rev. 12:9-10NCV. You see the battle is the mind and since the devil is a spirit, he has the ability to plant thoughts in your head. And Satan always has a one-two punch. First, he hits you with a temptation and then quickly hits you a second time with an accusation. Let’s say he tempts you to cheat on your taxes. You dodged the first swing by resisting the temptation. But Satan then throws a second punch by whispering in your ear, “You are a terrible Christian to have thoughts of cheating on your taxes!” and if you believe that thought… the guilt will eat away at you. Jesus said the devil is a liar and the father of lies. Satan doesn’t want you to experience God’s peace; he wants you to live under the weight of guilt. This type of guilt is self-destructive and abusive. It will do harm to your relationship with God, with others, and with yourself. It puts a heavy burden on you that God never intended for you to carry. 1 Peter 5:7NIV. So then let’s compare the misery from false guilt to the beneficial nature of healthy guilt, or what is often referred to as godly sorrow. It’s that sense of sadness you experience as a result of the sins you have committed. Paul explains 2 Cor. 7:10-11NIV. Healthy guilt is a gatekeeper and boundary-maker. It helps us discover where we shouldn’t go and what we shouldn’t do. And it helps us make amends when we cause others pain or hardship. Guilt helps us find our way back toward what’s right and repair the torn portions of our lives. In the passage we just looked at, Paul said godly sorrow leaves you with no regret. But on the other hand, false guilt leaves you with lots of regrets. Guilt and regret are two words that get tossed together a lot. They are like brothers; they are from the same family and spend a lot of time together, but they are not the same person. In the same way guilt and regret are not exactly the same either, but it’s hard to have one without the other. And these two emotions can cause us to go down the path of “if only.” “If only I had kept my mouth shut.” “If only I had not lost my temper with my kids.” “If only I had finished my degree.” Those two words—*if only*—can crush hopes, steal peace, prevent forgiveness, and trap us in negative patterns of behavior. Some people actually get so overwhelmed with guilt or regret they become physically ill, while others become so overwhelmed, they take their own life. I’ve seen Christians walk away from their faith because they can’t handle the guilt from a mistake or wrong choice they’ve made. Guilt is hard to live with. Since 1811 the US Treasury department has maintained what they call a “conscience fund,” where they keep money that was sent in from Americans who felt guilty over money they felt they had defrauded the government. For instance, in 2008 they took in three million dollars in one year. That was the year the government sent everyone back $2,000. But some people felt guilt over receiving it, so they sent it back. Most of the time the money comes back anonymously, but at times people send along a note of explanation. One person wrote, “Please accept the money for two postage stamps that I reused.” Another talked about tools he had stolen while in the navy. Another confessed to taking metal office dividers, and said that he was extremely sorry for this rotten act. I don’t know if it’s true, but I heard one man sent a check for $100 and said, “I have not been able to sleep, so here is the hundred dollars that I owe you. If I still can’t sleep, I will send you the rest!” Listen regret or guilt can consume you. If you are tired of feeling guilty all the time, why not make a decision to do something about it? Guilt is never a pleasant emotion. However, it’s an emotion you can work through successfully and then, over time, eradicate from your life. So, let’s look at some things we can do to overcome this habit. The first thing you need to do with any bad habit is acknowledge that it’s a problem for you. That’s tough because we don’t like to accept responsibility or admit we struggle with anything. There’s an old story about a governor visiting one of the state prisons. He told the prisoners that he would listen to whatever they had to say. A lot of the prisoners formed a line and one by one they complained of a miscarriage of justice. “I shouldn’t be here. I was framed. I didn’t do the crimes they say I did.” But one guy came up to the governor and said, “Sir, I’m guilty. I did the crime and I’m ashamed of my past. But the years I’ve been here have helped me to become a better person. And one day when I get out, I hope that I can contribute something positive to society.” The governor decided to pardon that prisoner. Why? Because he was the only one willing to accept responsibility for his behavior. James 5:16NIV. So let’s look at 4 steps you can take to break this habit of guilt in your life. Step 1: Accept God’s Forgiveness. Now if you struggle with guilt you probably don’t think you deserve God’s forgiveness. The truth is you don’t… no one does. It’s a gift. And yet if you’re not convinced that God has forgiven you, every time you have feelings of guilt you will think you deserve punishment. “I’m not a good person. I mess up all the time. I deserve God’s punishment!” Guys that’s not how God works. If you are following Christ, your past doesn’t have to dictate your future, Jesus died for your guilt and regrets. 2 Cor. 5:17NIV. The key to overcoming regrets is found in Christ. 1 John 1:9NIV. Not only will he forgive your sins, but he will also *forget* your sins. Psalms 103:12NIV. He offers you a brand-new life. If God is omniscient, or all-knowing, how can he forget our sins? Well it actually means that he puts them behind Him, or in other words He will never bring them up again. There is one thing you will never hear God say. “I remember what you did ten years ago.” *No*. God said it is forgiven, and it is forgotten. Step 2: Forgive Yourself. Charles Stanley said, (“Forgiveness is never complete until, first, we have experienced the forgiveness of God, second, we can forgive others who have wronged us, and third, we are able to forgive ourselves.”) To forgive yourself means to let it go, to stop beating yourself up over things that God has already forgiven and put behind him. Phil. 3:13-14NLT. God has a purpose and plan for your life, so stop the self-punishment and start looking forward to his plan! You can torment yourself by mulling your mistake over and over in your head, but it’s a waste of time because no amount of wallowing can change the past. In 1929 Georgia Tech played the University of California in the Rose Bowl. Just before halftime one of the players, Roy Riegels, recovered a fumble for California. Somehow he became confused and ran 65 yards in the wrong direction. One of his own teammates tackled him at his own two-yard line. When California attempted to punt, Georgia Tech blocked the punt and scored a safety. The team headed off the field and went into the dressing room. Riegels sat in a corner with his face in his hands and cried like a baby. As the second half was about to begin, Coach Price said, “Men the same players that played the first half will start the second.” Riegels looked up with tears in his eyes and said, “Coach, I can’t go back out there. I’ve hurt the team. I’m so embarrassed” Coach Price put his hand on Roy’s shoulder and said, “Roy you need to get up. The game is only half over.” Roy got back in the game and those who were there that day said he played the greatest game of his life the second half. Like Roy Riegels, sometimes we are running in the wrong direction, and we’re not sure if we want to try anymore. Then God puts an arm around us and says, “Come on, you can do this, I will help you, the game is only half over!” Listen guys, we serve a God of second chances. Don’t spend the rest of your life feeling guilty over past or perceived mistakes. I’ve heard it said, (“Though no one can go back and make a new beginning, anyone can start from now and make a brand-new end.”) God has forgiven you, so you need to forgive yourself. Step 3: Change Your Behavior. Instead of wasting time thinking about how terrible you are or what you should have done or not done, focus on what changes you can make in your life today, whether that’s apologizing to someone, or talking to someone, or turning it over to God. Focus on the action items you can do to break this habit of guilt. When you start to have those feelings of guilt, ask yourself if it’s deserved or if you are just simply beating yourself up needlessly because of your own high standards. And then try to figure out what behavior or attitude you need to work on. Maybe you need to learn to say no with a clear conscience. They may be disappointed, and it won’t feel good at first, but eventually it will create healthy boundaries in your life. And the more you establish these healthy boundaries the less you will feel guilt over trying to meet everyone’s expectations. Charles Spurgeon, British Reformed Baptist preacher and author, recognized how important this fact is in a person’s spiritual growth when he told his students, “Learn how to say ‘no.’ It will do you more good than learning Latin.” Another thing you might want to consider is self-talk or encouraging yourself about dealing with this irrational guilt you feel. The guilt might have come from a parent or caretaker who constantly told you, “You will never amount to anthing.” And now as an adult you believe those thoughts to be true, which creates feelings of guilt. But you can change that behavior by refusing to believe those lies. By reminding yourself that you are a child of God, and your guilt was crucified with Christ. Listen friends no matter what the devil tries to accuse you of, not everything that happens is your fault. And even when you do make a mistake, it is forgiven and forgotten. You can also remind yourself that you have set your ideals too high and need to be readjusted. You emotionally punish yourself with feelings of guilt because you don’t think you tried hard enough. And those high standards you judge yourself by have left you with feelings of condemnation. Paul said, Rom. 8:1NIV. Step 4: Learn From Your Experiences. Have you ever said, “I’m going to stop feeling so guilty about everything,” only to find yourself with the same feelings of guilt a short time later? Well you are not alone. Habits are hard to break. But torturing yourself with feelings of false guilt will not make you a better person. And such torment is damaging to you and to the people who are close to you. And I think it helps to reflect on some tough questions: (What could I do to better handle my false guilt? Am I feeling guilty for something I didn’t even do? Am I too worried about upsetting others? Am I using terms like should have or could have? What did I learn from this?) It would be helpful if you would actually write down your responses and keep them in a journal you refer back to. Because unless you understand why you always feel guilty, it’s going to be tough to make the types of changes you need to make. Just imagine how much better your life will be if you don’t have this weight of guilt on your shoulders. Jesus paid for your failures and your sins; he paid for your guilt and your regrets. And the best way to silence the devil’s accusations is by turning to Christ and walking in freedom.