

Collins, Gary

The Biblical Basis of Christian Counseling for People Helpers: Relating the Basic Teachings of
Scripture to People's Problems (Pilgrimage Growth Guide)

12. Guilt and Forgiveness in Counseling

Collins argues that guilt is where psychology and Christian faith most directly meet. He sorts out what guilt actually is—distinguishing the objective fact of guilt from the subjective feeling of it—then shows how a counselor helps people move from guilt to genuine forgiveness through confession, repentance, and restitution.

Key takeaways

- Two kinds of guilt: objective (you **HAVE** broken a standard, whether or not you feel it) and subjective (the inner feelings of remorse). This makes four combinations—guilty and feeling it, not guilty but feeling it, guilty but numb, and neither. Counselors mostly see the first two.
- Objective guilt comes in four overlapping types: theological (disobeying God—which we are **ALL** guilty of), legal (breaking the law of the land), social (mistreating others or breaking cultural rules), and psychological (violating your own conscience).

- The conscience is a God-given inner guide, but it is shaped by upbringing and distorted by sin—so it can be over-sensitive, dull, or wrong. Never push a counselee to act against their conscience, but do help inform and mature it through Scripture.
- Guilt feelings can be appropriate or inappropriate (out of proportion), healthy or unhealthy. Healthy 'godly sorrow' moves a person to confess, repair, and move on. Unhealthy guilt just traps them in self-condemnation.
- Forgiveness has two sides—receiving it and extending it. Distinguish judicial forgiveness (God's once-for-all pardon of the believer) from parental forgiveness (restoring a strained relationship with the Father after a believer sins).
- Receiving parental forgiveness involves three things: confession (honest acknowledgment to God, sometimes to others), repentance (real intent to change, not just relief), and restitution (making things right, as Zacchaeus did—not to buy forgiveness but out of gratitude).
- Refusing to forgive others harms the one who won't forgive. Whether to forgive the unrepentant is genuinely debated among believers; forgiveness can restore both parties even when legal consequences remain.
- Tools like the Twelve Steps and confession can help, but any of these can be distorted into neurotic, repetitive cycles that never lead to real change or received forgiveness.

Passages worth keeping

“While there are obvious similarities, we must be careful also to observe the great difference between judicial and parental forgiveness.”

Jay Adams' distinction that Collins calls crucial for counselors—confusing the two muddles how they help clients find forgiveness.

“Rather than accepting our guilt for misdeeds, we rationalize our way out, blaming 'conditioned' causes.”

Belgum's framing of the modern flight from guilt, which sets up the whole chapter's concern with owning guilt honestly.

How it connects

The chapter grounds its counseling model in David (Psalm 51; 2 Samuel 12) and Peter (Matthew 26:75): both felt real guilt, confessed, repented, and were restored rather than staying trapped in remorse—the pattern Collins wants counselors to help others walk.

Scripture referenced

- **Romans 3:10** -- 'No one is righteous'—all people carry theological guilt
- **Romans 2:15** -- God's law written on the heart—the built-in basis of conscience
- **Matthew 6:12,14-15** -- Lord's Prayer: we must forgive to be forgiven

- **1 John 1:8-9** -- Confession as the path to God's cleansing
- **2 Corinthians 7:10** -- 'Godly sorrow'—healthy guilt that brings repentance
- **Luke 19:1-10** -- Zacchaeus—repentance expressed through restitution