

“Good and Bad Guilt”

Text: John 9:1-7,13-16,39-41

God grant us the wisdom to be able to distinguish between good and bad guilt, and the grace to know what to do with each. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

Few human experiences are as powerful as guilt. Guilt can weigh on the heart like an impossibly heavy burden. It can rob us of sleep, prevent intimacy, and cloud or even destroy our joy. It can compel us to hide, not just from friends and family but from God himself.

But God's Word reveals an important truth: not all guilt is the same. Some guilt is destructive and crippling. Other guilt is a gift from God that leads to healing and transformation. In our text for this morning, Jesus heals a man who was born blind, and through this miracle he exposes not only two kinds of spiritual blindness but two kinds of guilt. One kind leads to Jesus, and therefore also to freedom, joy, and eternal life, the other leads to despair and ever deeper darkness. Since guilt affects all, all are threatened, and therefore all would do well to pay attention.

Our text for this morning will reveal to us the difference between bad guilt that condemns when it should not and good guilt where God the Holy Spirit works to lead us to Christ. We will also learn that good guilt has an expiration date. The text that will guide us in this study is found in John's Gospel, the Ninth Chapter:

ESV **John 9:1-7,13-16,39-41** *As he passed by, he (Jesus) saw a man blind from birth. ² And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³ Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. ⁴ We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. ⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." ⁶ Having said these things, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud ⁷ and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing. ¹³ ¶ They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴ Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵ So the Pharisees again asked him how he had received his sight. And he said to them, "He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and I see." ¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others*

said, "How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?" And there was a division among them... ³⁹ Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind." ⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, "Are we also blind?" ⁴¹ Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains.

This is God's Word. With complete confidence that these are in fact the verbally inspired words of our God, and confident that he will bless us with added understanding and comfort through the study of his Word this morning, so we pray: **“Sanctify us in the truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.”** Amen.

If you find that you are troubled by guilt, know that you are not alone. With the exception of psychopaths and certain sociopaths, every human being is troubled by guilt – both Christian and non-Christian. The reason ought to be obvious: we've all done bad things – things of which we are ashamed. That's why the lessons we are taught in our text for this morning have universal application. That's also why it is important that all come to recognize the difference between good and bad guilt. We begin with some basic truths about good and bad guilt.

The first characteristic of bad guilt is that it always looks for someone to blame.

Our text begins with a question from Jesus' disciples: ***"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"*** (John 9:2) Their assumption reveals a common human instinct or misconception: when something is wrong, someone must be blamed. Jesus' disciples believed this man's blindness must be the punishment for a specific sin. Since the man was *born* blind, and since they believed that someone was always to blame, their logical conclusion was that either the man himself sinned before birth (a truly strange idea), or his parents sinned and he was being forced to suffer the consequences. Jesus obviously rejects their basic assumption. ***"It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him."*** (John 9:3) Jesus was not saying the man was sinless, he was saying the blindness was not the direct punishment for a particular sin. The disciples were trying to assign bad guilt, which always seeks to assign blame.

People still do this today, including also Christians. When hardship comes, they often assume:

- “God must be punishing me.”
- “This suffering proves I’ve failed spiritually.”
- “I must have done something terrible to cause this.”

But Jesus demonstrates in our text that suffering cannot always be tied to a specific sin. Sometimes it can, of course, as when my liver is destroyed as a result of my prolonged abuse of alcohol, my mind is addled by illegal drug use, or the loneliness I brought on myself through a lifetime of being nasty and disagreeable. Yet not all is cause and effect. In fact God often reveals his power and grace through our circumstances. Sometimes, as in our text, he uses *our* hardship to help *others*. The first mistake Christians often make is therefore when we allow bad guilt to trap us in shame and false accusations. Jesus came to bring truth and freedom, not shame and condemnation: **“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”** ^{ESV}(John 3:17) It is a mistake therefore not only to imagine that there is always a connection between what we have done and what is happening to us, but to imagine that we can ever have a full and complete understanding of why things happen in this world as they do. Only God can know that.

Good Guilt Leads Us Toward Christ

Note that when Jesus performed his miracle in our text, he required the blind man to do something. Jesus spit on the ground, made clay, and placed it on the man’s eyes, but then he told the blind man to go wash in the Pool of Siloam. Have you ever wondered why Jesus did that – why he didn’t just heal the man without involving the man by requiring him to do something? Jesus certainly could have healed the man instantly, but he didn’t. He gave the man a task to complete the miracle. Why? Though we aren’t specifically told, it could well have been because God knows that faith is strengthened through responding to his instruction. God, for example, could just miraculously provide us with perfect knowledge and Godly wisdom, but he instead tells us to go to his Word to gain such gifts.

Good guilt works in a similar way. When the Holy Spirit convicts someone of sin, the intent is not to crush or discourage but to lead that individual to obedience and healing. The intended outcome is always positive, never negative. Good guilt points us to the place where cleansing happens. Just as the blind man washed and received sight,

good guilt leads us to Christ, where we too find cleansing and forgiveness

Bad Guilt Rejects Jesus and His work of Redemption

Jesus had just performed an amazing goodness that could be explained in no other way than as a divine miracle. And yet, burdened as they were with the bad kind of guilt, Jesus’ enemies were blind to that most obvious truth: *Jesus was exactly who he said he was*. Make no mistake. Though Jesus’ enemies pretended to be confident in their own righteousness apart from Jesus, these were drowning men struggling pathetically under the weight of their guilt. That bad guilt did nothing to help them. Quite the opposite – it blinded them, crippled them, disoriented them. It made fools of them. As drowning men will do, they desperately groped for any bit of floating debris they could lay their hands on, any nonsense explanation they could find. You heard in our text what they came up with: **“This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.”**

That’s how bad guilt works. Instead of leading people to repentance, it causes them to defend themselves, to shift blame, to adopt ridiculous, nonsensical explanations. Anything but turn to Jesus in repentance and faith.

When questioned by the Pharisees the second time, the man who was healed replied: **“One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”** Note the contrast. The Pharisees had knowledge but lacked humility.

The healed man had limited knowledge but genuine humility and openness to truth. Bad guilt makes people defensive and self-righteous. Good guilt makes people honest and humble.

Yet knowing that there is both good and bad guilt can still leave the child of God with uncertainties. It can all be sort of academic and theoretical if we do not plug ourselves into these good and bad guilt descriptions. In other words, if I am occasionally (or even often) tormented by guilt, is that good or bad guilt?

Every individual Christian will have to work through that question on their own. Though we talk about good and bad guilt, it’s really not the guilt itself that is the problem. It’s what each individual does with that guilt. It is our own personal reaction that makes it what it is, whether good or bad. Suppose, for example, that you commit some terrible

sin, or were caught up in an ongoing sin, and it fills you with guilt. It is where you allow that guilt to lead you that determines if it is good or bad. Do you blame others for your sin? Do you try to pay the debt that that guilt seems to demand by doing good or being good? Do you try to stamp out that fire by trying to convince yourself it's no big deal? Bad guilt.

Especially for the unrepentant sinner, guilt is actually a most precious gift from God, as long as it is used as directed. Guilt comes from the conscience, which is the remnant of the law that God wrote on our hearts at creation. That "natural law" provides us with a basic understanding that certain thoughts and actions are wrong. It's God's *gift* because he does not want sinners to go quietly into the night of eternal torment. We should expect that a truly loving God would allow whatever is necessary *during our time of grace on earth* to awaken us to the terrible danger of our spiritual condition. The goal is to allow guilt to do what it is supposed to, which is to drive us where God wants us to be driven – first to repentance and then to the cross. As it is supposed to, guilt reminds us of the evil of sin, as well as the terrible consequences our sin demands. That's where the cross comes in, because that's where God's plan for guilt reaches its intended goal, its expiration date – the recognition that in carrying every one of our sins to the cross and there paying for all, Jesus also there bore our guilt and shame. Guilt is always attached to sin, and by removing our sin, our Savior has also taken our guilt.

Yet even knowing this as we do, even knowing that Christ paid the full penalty for every single sin, certain sins often still trouble us. The residual effect of some of the bad things we've done lingers. It can gnaw at us. We can be tortured with guilt when we never seem to overcome sin, when bad feelings linger even after we've told ourselves that we've forgiven someone who wronged us. That guilt can leave us with a certain level of uncertainty, and if that uncertainty remains for any length of time it invariably leads to doubt, and doubt to fear. Doubt and fear are enemies of God's children. They are unwelcome squatters in the Christian heart.

Clearly then guilt is something that we must not only come to understand but dominate and drive from our hearts when it has done its work. The expiration date of guilt is Good Friday. Carrying guilt that has passed its expiration date is not a Christian virtue, it is an insult to our Savior God. Guilt has fulfilled its mission the instant we look in repentance to Christ's cross and there recognize Jesus' sacrifice as payment in full. To continue to cling to guilt is then to disparage Jesus' payment as insufficient. It is to cast doubt on Jesus' work and on God the Father's

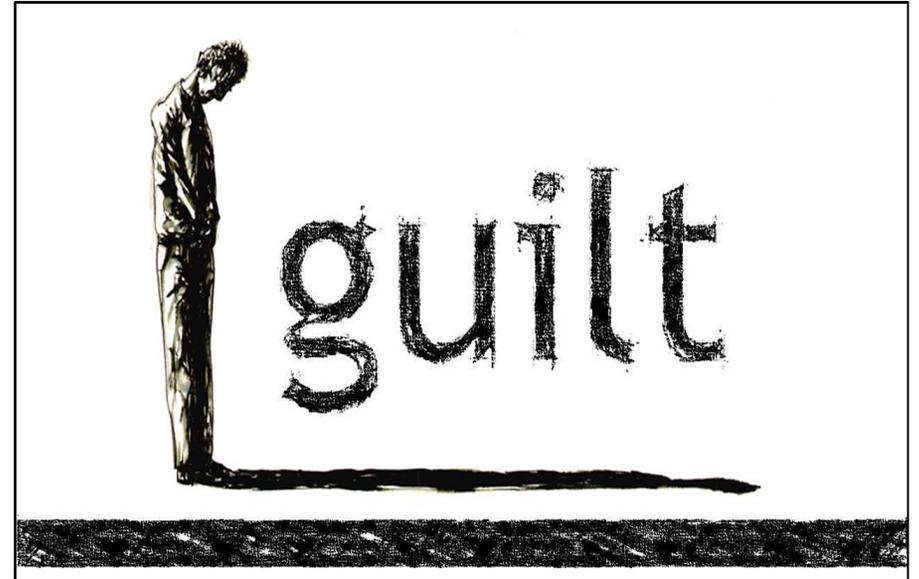
promise that he remembers our sin no more. Guilt must be thrown out when it has reached its divinely appointed expiration date.

That's often easier said than done. The key is to focus not on our own sinfulness but on Christ's goodness. Concentrate not on how imperfect you are but on how perfect our Savior was. Focus on the fact that he was good enough to pay for *every single sin*. More than that, he came to earth not just to pay for our sins, but to carry also our guilt to the cross. As he took the one (our sin) so he also carried the other (our guilt). Through faith we truly are clean, perfect, holy in his sight. Through faith in Jesus Christ, no residue of sin clings to us. Do we have regrets? Of course. As God's children of course we wish we had acted differently. But we didn't, and we can't fix that. The good news is that Jesus already has. What is now appropriate is not clinging to guilt over the past but a renewed appreciation and joy for all that your Lord has done for you. Your past, your present, your future – all has been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb. Amen.

ESV **Isaiah 42:14-21** For a long time I have held my peace; I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor; I will gasp and pant. ¹⁵ I will lay waste mountains and hills, and dry up all their vegetation; I will turn the rivers into islands, and dry up the pools. ¹⁶ And I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I do, and I do not forsake them. ¹⁷ They are turned back and utterly put to shame, who trust in carved idols, who say to metal images, "You are our gods." ¹⁸ Hear, you deaf, and look, you blind, that you may see! ¹⁹ Who is blind but my servant, or deaf as my messenger whom I send? Who is blind as my dedicated one, or blind as the servant of the LORD? ²⁰ He sees many things, but does not observe them; his ears are open, but he does not hear. ²¹ The LORD was pleased, for his righteousness' sake, to magnify his law and make it glorious.

ESV **Ephesians 5:8-14** For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light ⁹ (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), ¹⁰ and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. ¹¹ Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. ¹² For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. ¹³ But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, ¹⁴ for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

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The Fourth Sunday in Lent – March 15, 2026

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 178 (*Stanzas 1-2,5*)

"O Worship the King"

The Order of Service – Hymnal page 1ff. (*Blue Hymnal*)

The Scripture Lessons: (*Printed on the back page of this bulletin*)

The First Lesson: (Isaiah 42:14-21) This reading is a lament for the fallen people of Israel. It is best read as the Lord himself is speaking in verses 14-18 and Isaiah speaking in verses 18-21. We are here taught that although both the message and the promise that were given to the Jews were good and right, they themselves rejected that message, and Isaiah describes the result as utter tragedy.

The Psalm of the Day – Psalm 73 (Page 82)

The New Testament Lesson: (Ephesians 5:8-14) In our second reading we are once again reminded of just what it was from which we were rescued by our merciful God, which was slavery to sin and Satan. By God's grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, we have now been freed from that tyranny, washed clean, and declared to be heirs of eternal life. We must still, for a time, remain in the world, but now we are to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed (*Blue Hymnal page 5*)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 296

"In Silent Pain the Eternal Son"

The Sermon – Text: John 9:1-7, 13-16, 39-41 (*Printed on the back page of this bulletin*)

"Good and Bad Guilt"

The Offertory – (Blue Hymnal page 7)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 436

"Now What My Hands Have Done"

The Prayers of the Day, Followed by the Lord's Prayer

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 193

"Almighty God, Your Word Is Cast"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States and around the world. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again.

Attendance – Sunday (38) Average (38) Wednesday (25)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
Wednesday	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Lenten Service
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service with Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour

CLC News – Dr. Daniel Sullivan has accepted the call to serve on the faculty of Immanuel Lutheran College. Pastor Jonathan Schnose has returned the call to Messiah of Eau Claire. Pastor Thomas Naumann has returned the call to Holy Cross of Phoenix, AZ and has accepted the call to Grace of Fridley, MN. Pastor Stefan Sonnenfeld has returned the call to Living Hope of Appleton, WI.

Looking Ahead – Both the Church Council and the Women's Fellowship are scheduled to meet during the fellowship hour on Sunday, March 29th. The 29th is also Palm Sunday, which is the beginning of Holy Week, with services at 7pm on both April 2nd (Maundy Thursday) and April 3rd (Good Friday).

Lenten Season – A reminder that we have entered the season of Lent, with midweek services each Wednesday through Easter. Please feed your souls with the blessings of these special midweek services.

ILC Visitors Day – Immanuel Lutheran High School in Eau Claire, WI will host their annual High School Visitors Day on Friday, May 1, 2026 for students grades 7 and up. An invitation letter, schedule of events, and online registration can be found at www.ilc.edu. Please register students and chaperones by Friday, April 24.

Voting Membership Application – Mark Freadhoff has applied for voting membership at St Paul.