

**How to Deal with the Guilt of Sexual Failure for the Glory of Christ and His Global Cause  
by John Piper ~ Passion Conference ~ January 4, 2007**

The closest I have ever come to being fired from my position as a pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in the last twenty-six years was in the mid-eighties when I wrote an article for our church newsletter titled “Missions and Masturbation.”

The article didn’t come out of nowhere, and my mentioning here is not mainly to get your attention, but because it has to do with the core issue of what you have been looking at in Colossians 1-3 and what my global dreams for you are in the Passion movement.

I wrote the article after returning from a missions conference in Washington, D. C. with George Verwer, the head of Operation Mobilization.

**A Dream That Faded**

Verwer’s burden in that conference was the tragic number of young people (like many of you) who at one point in their lives dreamed of radical obedience to Jesus and were joyfully willing to lay down their lives and sacrifice anything to make Jesus known among the nations, but then faded away into useless, American prosperity because of a gnawing sense of unworthiness and guilt over sexual failure that gradually gave way to spiritual powerlessness and the dead-end dream of the middle class security and comfort.

In other words, what seemed so tragic to George Verwer—as it does to me—is that so many young people were being lost in the cause of Christ’s mission because they were not taught how to deal with the guilt of sexual failure.

Note carefully how I am saying it: They were not taught how to deal with the guilt of sexual failure. The problem is not just how to not to fail. The problem is how to deal with failure so that it doesn’t sweep you away into a whole life of wasted middle-class mediocrity with no impact for Christ.

**The Main Tragedy**

The great tragedy is not mainly masturbation or fornication or acting like a peeping Tom (or curious Cathy) on the internet. The tragedy is that Satan uses the guilt of these failures to strip you of every radical dream you ever had, or might have, and in its place give you a happy, safe, secure, American life of superficial pleasures until you die in your lakeside rocking chair, wrinkled and useless, leaving a big fat inheritance to your middle-aged children to confirm them in their worldliness. That’s the main tragedy.

I have not come to Atlanta to waste your time or mine. I have come with a passion that you not waste your life. My aim is not mainly to cure you of sexual misconduct. I would like that to happen. O, God let it happen! But mainly I want to take out of the devil’s hand the weapon that exploits the sin of your life to destroy your valiant dreams, and make your whole life a wasted worldly success.

Do you know the real, deeper meaning of Passion's "Do Something Now" campaign?

- 20,000 towels for Atlanta shelters,
- 11 wells for fresh water in Africa,
- college education for 20 international Compassion students,
- the New Testament translated for the Dela people of Indonesia,
- a freedom center for the Kurds in Northern Iraq,
- life-changing surgery for kids in South America,
- Bibles for families in East Asia,
- liberation for those enslaved in sex trafficking.

### **The Point: Your Life**

What's the point of all that? The point is not this is what you do with your loose change. The point is: This is what you do with your life. You don't want always be sitting high in your SUV dropping nickels into other people's dreams. Satan wants that for you. But you don't! You want to dream your own dream for the glory of Christ. Why am I on this planet? What has God put me here for?

What broke George Verwer's heart back in the eighties, and breaks mine today, is not mainly that you have sinned sexually, but that this morning Satan took your 2 AM encounter in the hotel room—whether on TV or in bed—and told you: "See, you're a loser. You may as well not even go to worship. No way are you going to make any serious commitment of your life to Jesus Christ! You may as well go back to school and get a good practical education, and then a good job so you can buy yourself a big wide screen and watch sex till you drop."

I want to take that weapon out of his hand. Yes, I want you to have the joyful courage not to even do the channel surfing. But sooner or later, whether it's that sin or another, you are going to fall. I have come to Atlanta to help you deal with the guilt of that failure so that Satan does not use it to produce another wasted life.

### **Two Headings**

So here is where we are going: First, we will link up with where many of you have been in Colossians in your Community Groups. And second, we will go to the prophet Micah to see what victory looks like the morning after failure.

If it will help to have two headings, here they are:

1. Theology can conquer biology. Or another way to say it more specifically: Justification can conquer fornication.
2. Trust Christ to the hilt with gutsy guilt.

## 1. Theology Can Conquer Biology

The backdrop of all the teaching in Colossians 1-3 is Colossians 3:6, “On account of these the wrath of God is coming.” Hanging over the whole world is the holy, just, unimpeachable anger of God at sin and rebellion. His wrath is coming and the salvation spoken of in Colossians 1-3 is rescue from that. No one wants to meet the wrath of “the Lamb” when it comes (Revelation 6:16). So God, in his mercy makes a way out.

And what is distinctively Christian about the teachings of these chapters is that our rescue was most decisively accomplished for us by another and was done outside of us. In other words, Christ did something in history before we existed that obtained and guaranteed our rescue and the transformation of all who would come to trust in him. The distinctive and crucial thing about Christian salvation is that Christ accomplished it decisively for us and outside of us and without our help. And when we put our faith in him we do not add to the sufficiency of what he accomplished in covering our sins and achieving the righteousness that counts as ours.

### For You and Outside of You

The clearest verses on this point are Colossians 2:13-14, “And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.”

Those last words are the most crucial. This—this record of debt that stood against us—God set aside, nailing it to the cross. When did that happen? Two thousand years ago. It did not happen in you, and it did not happen with any help from you. God did that for you and outside of you.

Make sure you see this most glorious of all truths: God took the record of all your sins—all your sexual failures—that made you a debtor to wrath, and instead of holding them up in front of your face and using them as the warrant to send you to hell, he put them in the palm of his Son’s hand and nailed them to the cross.

### Substitutionary Atonement

Whose sins were nailed to the cross—or more precisely, whose sins were punished on the cross? My sins and yours—the sins of all who despair of saving themselves and trust in Christ alone. Whose hands were nailed to the cross—or more precisely, who was punished on the cross? Jesus was. There is a beautiful name for this. It’s called a substitution.

Paul wrote in Romans 8:3, “By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh.” He condemned sin in the flesh. Whose sin? Ours. Jesus had none (it was the likeness of sinful flesh, not sinful flesh). He condemned our sin in the flesh. Whose flesh? Jesus’ flesh, not ours.

Have you ever wondered what the next verse in Colossians 2:15 means? Right after saying that God nailed the record of our debt to the cross, Paul says, “[God] disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.” This is a reference to the devil and all his demonic hosts. How are they disarmed? How are they defeated? Don’t they prowl around like a roaring lion today (1 Peter 5:8)?

The answer is: They have many weapons. They can do much damage. But they are disarmed of the one weapon that can damn us. The weapon of unforgiven sin. Be sure you see the connection between Colossians 2:14 and 15. In 2:14, it says God nailed the record of our debt to the cross. It’s punished. It’s finished. And in the next breath he says that God disarmed the rulers and authorities. He triumphed over them. Sure, they can beat us up. They can make us see weird things on the walls of our rooms. They can shake your house and cause lying signs and wonders. They accuse you and call you a loser, but they cannot damn you. That weapon is out of their hands. Only unforgiven sin damns. And that was nailed to the cross for everyone of you who despairs of saving yourself and trusts in Jesus.

### **A License to Sin?**

I know that there are hundreds in this room right now who see so little of the beauty of Christ in this salvation that it simply sounds to them like a license to go on sinning. If all my sins are nailed to the cross, then let’s all sin that grace may abound (Romans 6:1). Paul confronted that blindness in his own day and said, “Their condemnation is just” (Romans 3:8). The reason they will be condemned is that we are saved by grace through faith. That’s plain in Colossians 2:12, “You were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God.” This faith connects you with Jesus so that his death counts for your death and his righteousness counts for your righteousness (compare Romans 5:1, “by faith” and 8:1 “in Christ”). And this faith receives Christ. It’s not a performing. It’s not an adding to what Christ has done. It is a receiving. Saving faith receives Jesus as Savior and Lord and Treasure of your life.

And this faith will fight anything that gets between it and Christ. The distinguishing mark of saving faith is not perfection. The mark of faith is not that I never sin sexually. The mark of faith is that I fight. I fight anything that dims my sight of Jesus as my glorious Savior. I fight anything that diminishes the fullness of the lordship of Jesus in my life. I fight anything that threatens to replace Jesus as the supreme Treasure of my life. Anything that stands between me and receiving Jesus faith fights—not with fists or knives or guns or bombs, but with the truth of Christ.

So if all you can see in the cross of Jesus is a license to go on sinning, you don’t have saving faith. And you need to fall on your face and plead that God would open your eyes to see the compelling glory of Jesus Christ.

### **Justification Can Conquer Fornication**

Now I said that one heading over this first point would be theology can conquer biology. Another way to put it I said was justification can conquer fornication. I haven’t spoken about justification, but it is very closely related to the work of God in nailing our sins to the cross in Christ Jesus.

Justification is the act by which God declares us not only forgiven because of the work of Christ, but also righteous because of the work of Christ. God requires two things for our right standing before him: 1) our sins must be punished and 2) our lives must be righteous. But we cannot bear our own punishment (Psalm 49:7-8), and we cannot provide our own righteousness. None is righteous; no, not one (Romans 3:10).

Therefore, God, out of his immeasurable love for us, provided his own Son to do both. Christ bears our punishment and performs our righteousness. And when we receive Christ as the Savior and Lord and Treasure of our lives, all of his punishment and all of his righteousness is counted as ours (Romans 4:4-6; 5:19; 5:1; 8:1; 10:4; Philippians 3:8-9; 2 Corinthians 5:21).

### **The Ballast of Knowing Christ**

When I say theology can conquer biology and justification can conquer fornication I mean that a deep and growing biblical knowledge of God and Christ and the cross and salvation and faith and how God does it all for the glory of Christ can give such ballast to the boat of your life that the wind of temptation will not be able to tip it over so easily. The reason this is not a popular remedy for temptation today is because it is not a quick fix. It's the work of a lifetime.

The prophet cries out, "Let us know; let us press on to know the Lord;" "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hosea 6:3; 4:6). Our people are laid waste with sexual temptation and failure and guilt because their soul and their mind have shriveled down to the size of a TV sitcom.

And of course someone will say to me when this talk is over: "You think theology conquers biology? I know a Ph.D. in theology who ran off with the department secretary." Of course theology by itself won't keep you out of bed with your boyfriend or girlfriend. I am not replacing passion for Jesus with theology. I am saying that the human soul was made to be strong in the rich, deep, powerful knowledge of Colossians 1-3. For too long we have belittled theology in favor of passion, or belittled passion in favor of theology. We were created to know much about God, and we were created to feel much for God.

Knowing how your punishment for sin has already happened in Christ and knowing how your perfect righteousness before God has already been achieved in Christ, and holding fast to these truths with heartfelt passion, is a tremendous weapon against the devil, when he rises to tell you that your sexual failures rule you out of Christ's mission and condemn you to a life of meaningless, middle-class, American prosperity.

With this passionately embraced theology—with the magnificent doctrines of substitutionary atonement and justification by faith (even if you don't remember the names), you can conquer the devil tomorrow morning when he lies to you about your hopelessness.

### **2. Trust Christ to the Hilt with Gutsy Guilt**

And what will you say to him? I conclude with my second point, Trusting Christ to the hilt with gutsy guilt. Micah 7:8-9 is a picture of what you say to your enemy when he scoffs at your defeat. Here is what

you say. My summary of these words is to call them gutsy guilt. I call it that because the believer admits that he has done wrong and that God is dealing roughly with him. But even in a condition of darkness and discipline, he will not surrender his hold on the truth that God is on his side. Listen to these amazing words. Mark them. Memorize them. Use them whenever Satan tempts you to throw away your life on trifles because that's all you're good for.

Rejoice not over me, O my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me. I will bear the indignation of the Lord because I have sinned against him, until he pleads my cause and executes judgment for me. He will bring me out to the light; I shall look upon his vindication. (Micah 7:8-9)

This is what victory looks like the morning after failure. Meditate on it long and hard when I am gone. Learn to take your theology and speak like this to the devil or anyone else who tells you that Christ is not capable of using you mightily for his global cause. Here is what you say:

“Rejoice not over me, O my enemy.” You make merry over my failure? You think you will draw me into your deception? Think again.

“When I fall, I shall rise.” Yes, I have fallen. And I hate what I have done. I grieve at the dishonor I have brought on my king. But hear this, O my enemy, I will rise. I will rise.

“When I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me.” Yes, I am sitting in darkness. I feel miserable. I feel guilty. I am guilty. But that is not all that is true about me and my God. The same God who makes my darkness is a sustaining light to me in this very darkness. He will not forsake me.

“I will bear the indignation of the Lord because I have sinned against him, until he pleads my cause and executes judgment for me.” O yes, my enemy, this much truth you say, I have sinned. I am bearing the indignation of the Lord. But that is where your truth stops and my theology begins: He—the very one who is indignant with me—he will plead my cause. You say he is against me and that I have no future with him because of my failure. That's what Job's friends said. That is a lie. And you are a liar. My God, whose Son's life is my righteousness and whose Son's death is my punishment, will execute judgment for me. For me! FOR me! And not against me.

“He will bring me out to the light; I shall look upon his vindication.” This misery that I now feel because of my failure, I will bear as long as my dear God ordains. And this I know for sure—as sure as Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is my punishment and my righteousness—God will bring me out to the light, and I will look upon his righteousness, my Lord and my God.

### **The Increasing Preciousness of Christ**

O my brothers and sisters, when you learn to deal with the guilt of sexual failure with this kind brokenhearted boldness, this kind of theology, this kind of justification by faith, this kind substitutionary atonement, this kind of gutsy guilt, this kind of unshakable position that you have in the crucified, risen, invincible king Jesus Christ—when you learn to deal with the guilt of sexual failure this way, you will fall less often. Because Christ will become increasingly precious to you.

And best of all, Satan will not be able to destroy your dream of a life of radical obedience to Christ. George Verwer will not have preached in vain. I will not have written my “Missions and Masturbation” article in vain, I will not have come to Atlanta in vain, and the Passion movement will not exist in vain because by this Christ-exalting gutsy guilt thousands of you—thousands of you—will give your lives to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ. Lord, may it be so.