

Today's bumper sticker doesn't come directly from the Bible. This morning we're discussing a few verses from two different letters in the New Testament that speak to this bumper sticker, if only a little. Today's bumper sticker is different from the others we've covered thus far, as it's seen in a more positive light overall. It's also newer than many of the bumper stickers we've used in this series. According to the internet, it was trademarked for merchandise in 2017. I don't know the origins of this bumper sticker; nonetheless, I've seen it on vehicles and guitar cases as well as in several churches' "about us" section on their websites. Today's bumper sticker is **"Faith is a journey, not a guilt trip."**

I'm often intrigued by the battle between our free will- our choices- and our sense of duty or obligation. Ever had a Christian-flavored guilt trip laid on you? Let me be clear. Christianity doesn't create the guilt and shame. Nor does guilt and shame bring us closer to God; it separates us from God, just as it separates us from one another. Let's face it. Guilt trips never inspire changed lives. They might temporarily bring about a forced action through manipulation but the result is rarely a heart overflowing with love for God and a desire to know God more. Guilt trips usually bring about rebellion which takes us away from God. I don't know about y'all but when someone lays a guilt trip on me, I usually rebel. When I was living in Seattle, WA, a pastor from Greenville called me to tell me that Jesus was calling me to come and work for this pastor. He went on and on about me forgetting where I come from and telling me he was 100% sure Jesus was calling me back to Greenville. I told him that with all due respect, how did he know what Jesus was calling me to do? This approach...this guilt trip manipulation

thing back fires with me. You see, guilt doesn't yield the best results – when I do something out of guilt, it's fulfilling an obligation, not a calling in my heart. Wouldn't you rather live freely, from the heart than be caught in a guilt cycle? Even so, I've been caught in guilt trips, as well as given them. I love the idea of ditching guilt and letting faith lead our actions, even if that is scary. One of my friends told me that a pastor once said to her, "What if you treated your Bible like you treated your cell phone?" I asked her if that pastor knew that one could read their Bible on their cell phone. I wonder what he was trying to accomplish by asking my friend this question. Is a statement like this, asked condescendingly, supposed to inspire? Or just make one feel bad? There is definitely a place for building Christian community and helping one another live better lives but criticizing someone without grace or love is not of God. The apostle Paul, who is most likely the author of Romans, reminds us of God's promise to us in Jesus- a promise that assures us that we don't have to live a life consumed by guilt and condemnation; rather, we can rejoice in our salvation through Christ. And in the Book of Hebrews, the author, who is unknown, has something to say about what faith looks like and even offers examples of people living out their faith. Let's turn to God's word to find out but first, let us pray.

PRAY. READ.

A pastor once commented that our western society, as a whole, tends to be guilt-based while the middle east tends to be shame-based (Tim Keller, talk). Both guilt and shame often evoke similar responses or non-responses. "A guilt trip is any effort made by someone, intentional or not, that aims to change someone else's thoughts, feelings, or behaviors through the use of

guilt. Guilt tripping is a form of emotional manipulation. Since guilt is an uncomfortable emotional experience, those subjected to it will shift their actions to reduce the risk of current or future guilt” ([link](#)).

The author of Hebrews says that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (v.1). I also appreciate another theologian’s saying that “faith goes up the stairs that love built and looks out the window which hope has opened” (Charles Spurgeon). Following the definition of faith comes the examples of some biblical ancestors’ faith- none of which mention guilt. For example, further in Chapter 11, Abraham’s faith story is shared with a brief mention of Sarah sprinkled in there (vv. 8-19). Remember Abram’s call in Genesis 12? Abraham and his wife, Sarah, had a “willingness to answer the call of a God they hardly knew and to follow that God to a new and strange land functions as the paradigm of faith for Judaism, Islam, and Christianity” ([link](#)). The writer of Hebrews wrote centuries later that Abraham and Sarah’s were considered righteous by God because of his (their) faith rather than because of their obedience to God’s laws. “A reading of the stories of Abraham and Sarah reveals the truth of the author of Hebrews: Abraham and Sarah had many faults that the text refuses to hide, yet through one struggle after another they choose to stick it out with God. The story of this faithful couple reveals that God’s criteria for judging a person’s righteousness is based upon a person’s willingness to answer God’s call and begin the journey of faith rather than on their moral superiority” ([link](#)).

Today's bumper sticker reminds us that in our relationship with God, our bad choices can be a life lesson, not a life sentence. The last time I checked Jesus didn't send his disciples out to preach guilt, shame, or hell. He sent them out to preach Good News (the Gospel) and to heal the sick. "He sent them out to preach that the Kingdom of Heaven was near, not to tell people that hell was near. He didn't deny the reality of separation from God, of consequences of sin, of God's anger against those who do evil. But the evil about which Jesus and the prophets spoke most wasn't the sins on which we focus so much, nor was it the failure to obey religious rituals or to follow the rules, but it was exactly the opposite. What enraged Jesus and the prophets most was the use of religious beliefs and practices to exclude people: making religious rituals the only way to God. If you don't do this, if you don't believe that, you're going to hell" ([link](#)). No, the kind of radical love Jesus knows in God creates an awareness that human life is not about appeasing a vengeful God, but about responding in love (Richard Rohr).

For if fear of punishment is the only reason for our faith, how sustainable is our faith? Will it grow our relationship God? Whatever our reason for originally turning to Christ, it needs to grow and develop into a relationship whose outcome is love and delight in the One who loves and forgives us and freely welcomes us into the fold. Christianity is based on a God who, against all human logic, enters into a relationship with us through the person of Jesus Christ and through the gift of the Holy Spirit who offers us faith and creates family out of us. But how do we get this across to a cynical, angry, and hurting world? So how do we talk about our faith? Let's

look to scripture again for different examples from what the writer of Hebrews offered (though I invite you to read his list). In the Book of Acts, Peter has a story of his faith journey to tell, and he tells it on the day of Pentecost. He says, “God has raised this very Jesus from death, **and we are all witnesses to this fact**” (2:32). In John’s Gospel, the woman at the well has a story to tell after Jesus encounters her one day at noon. And she tells the entire village: “Come and see the man who told me everything I have ever done. Could he be the Messiah?” (4:29)

“Each of us, in different ways, has a story to tell. Our faith might be strong and bold, like Peter on the day of Pentecost; it might be weak and guilt-ridden like the woman at the well. We may be full of doubts like Thomas was, or have loads of questions like Nicodemus. But, in spite of all that, Jesus has touched our lives. And, in the middle of our doubts or our certainties, our questions and our guilt, we each have a story tell. When we engage with those who tell us that religion is evil, that it’s just a guilt trip, it’s all a myth which rational people should ignore, we won’t win any arguments; all we have is our story of our faith journey. We don’t have to understand all about God; we don’t have to have answers to the pseudo-scientific questions people will throw at us; we don’t have to know the Bible better than they do. In fact having all these things is sometimes a disadvantage because we think we’re supposed to use them somehow, like ammunition in our ‘encounters with the enemy’” ([link](#)). Catholic theologian, Henri Nouwen writes, “Each human being is unique and original, and nobody has lived what we have lived. Furthermore, what we have lived, we have lived not just for ourselves but for others as well.... We have to trust

that our stories deserve to be told. We may discover that the better we tell our stories the better we will live them” (*Bread for the Journey*, 4/29/97).

Living our faith as a journey requires resources, and the Bible is a wonderful source of wisdom, with endless stories of God’s wild mercy and love towards flawed people. That’s right- flawed people children of God.

Remember Paul’s words from Romans: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (8:1). Here is the gospel truth: God’s grace is both freeing and transforming, and it is a gift: just like faith. We do absolutely nothing to earn God’s grace. And we should not take it for granted or cheapen it, either. God’s gift of grace removes our guilt and shame once and for all, thus we are free to begin our journey to become more like Christ. When we begin following Christ, the Spirit dwells in us, convicting us when we live as if we haven’t been redeemed. What would it mean if we understood God’s desire for us to be a call to a spiritual journey rather than a checklist of morality? “Maybe it means that people who have experienced Christianity only as a tool of guilt and shame could discover a God who loves and welcomes them? Or that we, as the Body of Christ, can free up the energy and space now spent on determining what behavior is moral, righteous, proper, and/or acceptable and devote our time to asking what steps of faith God would have us to take” ([link](#))? I can understand why pastors and church leaders make use of guilt as a cheap way to motivate. Yet, it’s as if we’ve forgotten to trust the work of the Spirit among us. What if, with the Spirit’s help, we can be motivated- not by guilt- but rather by a deep love for God and a sense of excitement about where God is leading us on our journeys of faith. So may our guilt-based, duty-

bound living be transformed into an exciting, passionate, faith-filled journey that frees and leads us deeper into relationship with Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God! Amen.