

Guilt-Trip Preaching

by Zac Poonen

Zac Poonen emphasizes the importance of encouragement in preaching, warning against guilt-trip methods that lead to condemnation and discouragement among believers.

Scripture: Matthew 5:3, Matthew 23:3-4, John 1:14, John 3:17, John 14:15, Romans 15:5, 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, 2 Corinthians 3:7-9, 2 Corinthians 9:7, Hebrews 3:13

Topics: "Freedom in Christ", "Encouragement in Preaching"

Description

Zac Poonen emphasizes that preaching should not induce guilt or condemnation but rather encourage and uplift believers. He highlights that God sent His Son not to condemn but to save, and that true ministry should reflect this spirit of encouragement. Poonen warns against the common practice of guilt-trip preaching, which can lead to discouragement and spiritual bondage, and stresses the importance of distinguishing between the conviction of the Holy Spirit and the condemnation of the law. He calls for preachers to adopt a fatherly approach, fostering a supportive environment rather than one of shame and unrealistic expectations. Ultimately, Poonen urges a return to the grace and truth exemplified by Jesus, promoting a ministry that leads to freedom and joy in serving God.

Transcript

"God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it" John 3:17 -Living)

When we preach God's Word, we must NOT preach it in such a way that we make God's people feel guilty and condemned.

The Bible tells us to "ENCOURAGE one another" - and to do it "DAILY", if we want to save God's people from "being HARDENED through the DECEITFULNESS of sin" (Heb.3:13). That means that EVERY day, in EVERY message we preach we must ENCOURAGE the believers we preach to. Only thus will we be able to save them from sin. But Satan deceives us into thinking that we can make believers more holy and more devoted to God by making them feel guilty through our preaching. That is a lie.

The Holy Spirit does indeed convict God's children through the preaching of the Word. But He encourages them at the same time too. As we just read, God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world. And God did not send His Spirit into the church to condemn believers but to encourage them. God is a God of encouragement. He always lifts up our spirits and gives us HOPE (See Rom.15:5; and 2 Cor.1:3, 4). A ministry of condemnation is "an old covenant ministry" that will only lead

people to spiritual death (See 2 Cor.3:7-9). The new covenant ministry however is a ministry of life that will lead them to godliness.

It is easy to fall into the trap of exposing sin in such a way in our preaching, that believers feel condemned and guilty. Then we have FAILED in our ministry and sent people on a "guilt trip". Such man-induced guilt can become a prison from which people will find it very difficult to extricate themselves.

It is a common technique among preachers (especially when they are young, inexperienced and insecure, or when they feel inferior and want to impress people) that they preach a high, unrealistic standard of holiness and thus make everyone (except themselves!!) feel guilty. The level of life they preach will be something that is impossible to achieve. It will be a level that even Jesus and the apostles did not preach or ask others to live by. These preachers themselves do not live by the standards they preach. But weak-minded believers hear their sermons and feel condemned and guilty - and get discouraged.

Most of the challenges given to believers in Christian circles, to enter into "full-time" Christian service or missionary work are based on this "guilt-trip" method. The need in various parts of the world is stressed by the preacher to such an extent that the listeners feel guilty and some of them end up quitting their jobs in order to go out as missionaries. But Jesus and the apostles never used such techniques to send anyone into the harvest field of the world. Jesus told His apostles to go to every nation in the world and to make disciples. But He did not send them out by making them feel guilty by comparing their comfortable life in Israel with the poverty in other parts of the world. It is because of such "guilt-trip" methods adopted by preachers that there is so much of shallowness among most Christian workers today. Most of them went forth to serve the Lord because they felt guilty about remaining in their secular jobs, after hearing a missionary challenge. God had never called them to His service. But they went forth, propelled by feelings of guilt. Full-time Christian work is such a sacred task that we have no right to engage in it, if God Himself did not call us to it.

Most of the teaching on tithing and giving in Christendom today also follows this guilt-trip method. Believers are made to feel terribly guilty for not giving money for "God's work". Thus they end up giving thousands of rupees of their hard-earned savings to covetous preachers for their "ministry". This is one of the worst evils being perpetrated by preachers today, on poor believers - and it is all being done "in the Name of Christ". We never find Jesus using such high-pressure methods at any time. His word was, "If you love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). He told Peter, "If you love Me more than everything else, then take care of my sheep and feed them" (John 21:15-17). God loves only those who obey Him cheerfully (2 Cor.9:7).

This is God's way in the new covenant - the way of free, voluntary, joyful service, without any soulish pressure being applied by any preacher. We must learn to distinguish between the soulish pressure that clever preachers put upon us and the gentle leading of the Holy Spirit. When demons possess people they take away their freedom of choice and control them totally. The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, never possesses people. He fills them. The difference is that He never takes away their freedom of choice but gives them total freedom, even after He has filled them. The Holy Spirit will never take away our free will, nor will He pressurize us - as Satan and many preachers seek to do.

We must discern "guilt-trip" sermons immediately - and reject them in our minds at once, if we want to walk in the freedom of the Spirit.

In my younger days, when I did not understand what it was to be a new-covenant servant, I too did a lot of legalistic, "guilt-trip" preaching. But I repented of it and gave it up long ago. "When I was a child, I thought like a child and spoke like a child. But when I grew up, I put away childish things" (1 Cor.13:11). The "guilt-trip" method of preaching will only bring people into bondage - whereas Jesus and the Holy Spirit have come to set people free.

Every preacher who adopts the guilt-trip method of preaching is a legalist. But he does not know this. The worst legalists are those who preach from the New Testament Scriptures, in the spirit of the old covenant. They imagine that they are preaching the new covenant, but they have been deceived by Satan to preach the letter of the new covenant without entering into the spirit of the new covenant. The new covenant is not a gospel of the letter but of the spirit. The words that Jesus spoke were "spirit and life" (John 6:63). The ministry of the Spirit is never one of compulsion or condemnation, but always one of encouragement and hope. God is the "lifter of our heads" (Psa.3:3), NOT the "lowerer of our heads". He never tries to shame us into obeying Him. School-teachers may try to shame their students into obedience. But loving fathers will never do that. They get their children to obey them cheerfully, by encouraging them (See 1 Cor.4:14, 15). It is by our attitude to our flock in this area that we can discover whether we are teachers or fathers. Our churches do not need teachers. We need more fathers.

We need to distinguish between the conviction of the Holy Spirit and the condemnation of the Law. Guilt-trip preaching leads people to be discouraged and to condemn themselves. Therefore, they cannot come into a life of freedom in the Spirit and become overcomers.

Whenever a preacher adopts this guilt-trip method, it indicates that he does not really know the Lord, or the ways of the Holy Spirit. It proves that his knowledge of the Bible is poor. And he is also dishonest - for he cannot possibly be living by the standards he preaches. Jesus DID first and THEN taught (Acts 1:1). But these preachers, like the Pharisees of old, "load you with impossible demands that they themselves don't even try to keep" (Matt.23:3, 4-Living).

It is impossible to have genuine fellowship with a guilt-trip preacher, for he is not poor in spirit. "The poor in spirit" are defined in the Amplified Bible as "those who rate themselves as insignificant" (Matt.5:3) . I have met very few preachers in my life who would consider themselves as insignificant. The airs with which most preachers preach proclaims to everyone that they rate themselves as "very, very important people" compared to the ordinary believers in their congregations!! I always switch off inwardly, when listening to such men, for I know that I cannot receive anything of eternal value from such proud people. Such preachers are infected by the spirit of the Accuser and that is why their "guilt-trip" preaching consists mainly of accusing others of not measuring up to God's standards. They imagine themselves to be "prophets", but they lack the compassion of genuine prophets. Such arrogant preachers cannot possess the kingdom of heaven(Matt.5:3). And so they cannot lead others into the freedom of the Spirit (that characterises the kingdom of heaven). Such preachers will never be able to build a brotherhood or a local expression of the Body of Christ anywhere. They will only be able to build congregations of their own "admirers". May God save us all from such a calamity.

I have noticed that it is usually young men who indulge in "guilt-trip preaching". But I have also seen that if such young men do not judge themselves and seek to grow in grace, they will remain unchanged even when they are old men and become elders of churches.

Let us therefore ensure that we NEVER use the "guilt-trip" method in our preaching to try and convict others of their failure to obey God. Let us never allow any preacher to send us on a guilt trip, through his preaching. Let us repent of being legalistic teachers and seek to be fathers instead. The glory of our Lord was seen in the fullness of GRACE and TRUTH that was manifested in His life and in His words - throughout His earthly days (John 1:14). May that glory be manifested through us too. Amen and Amen.

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