

THE PROBLEM OF GUILT

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"THE CHRISTIAN FAITH"

An article in the newspaper a few months ago was entitled 'How to Survive as a Working Mother'. It focused, quite understandably on the subject of guilt. It pointed out that the feeling of guilt is one of the chief causes of anxiety, fatigue, depression, sleeplessness and procrastination. It suggested that the working mother is particularly vulnerable to guilt feelings because other people are prone to blame her for real or imagined wrongs in her house and family. Non-working mothers, grandmothers, half-hearted husbands, doctors, teachers, people in authority, and men in general combine to nag the working mother about her neglect of duty. The article suggested four main areas of guilt.

1. You think the children are suffering.
2. You think your husband is suffering.
3. Your work is suffering.
4. Nobody is actually suffering except you, either because you think somebody ought to be or it's been suggested to you that they are.

Now I'm not going to offer a general comment on all this. It seems to me that each case of a mother working must be examined on its own merits. It would be as foolish to condemn the idea as it would be to commend it. If the motives for going to work are simply that of an attempt to raise an already satisfactory standard of living, it would be hard to justify any neglect of children such as that described by one woman who reported 'Last winter I had to leave the little one vomiting in the sink and it nearly killed me'. Indeed, it's hard to justify that on any grounds. So, too, if the motive is self-fulfilment, it is very selfish and impossible to accept. On the other hand, there can be no doubting the very real need some families have to achieve two incomes, and also the possibilities in some families that children will not in fact suffer.

However the main interest in the discussion for me doesn't lie there. Rather, the chief question is what to do about

guilt. There is no doubt that the feeling of guilt is just as destructive as the writer indicated. The problem is what we should do about it.

In the article, the advice was summed up in one sentence: 'kick guilt under the carpet'. But is this a wise procedure? Can we cope with guilt like this?

In fact, the problem of guilt must be faced squarely. We must have some standard of right and wrong to help us decide what we should feel guilty about. It is perfectly possible for our conscience to give us wrong information here, and for us to feel guilty for something of which we are totally innocent, or which is not wrong at all. We all need to be better informed about God's standards so that we can judge ourselves appropriately and acquit ourselves of imaginary wrongs. Actually the article does help here by giving some information about the effects of working mothers on the intelligence and maturity of children. Whether this information is correct may be disputed, and whether it is relevant, too; but nonetheless it is the sort of information we need to base our decisions on.

But what if our properly informed conscience tells us that we are guilty in fact? Our guilt must not be averted. Action must be taken. We must abandon wrong behaviour, and we must seek to put things right. Most of all we must seek forgiveness from God, for guilt harms our relationship with him. Unfortunately, like Adam and Eve we are more prone to hide our guilt, to 'kick it under the carpet'. This will not rid us of it either within ourselves, or more important with God. 'Guilt can destroy you', as the article said - what action are you taking?

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