

# Study Guide and Commentary ACIM<sup>®</sup> Text, Chapter 14, Section III

## The Decision for Guiltlessness Paragraphs 1 to 8

### Legend:

- blue text = Material from ACIM 3rd edition (FIP)
- bold blue text** = words emphasized in all caps in Urtext
- red text = alternate or omitted material from the Urtext
- light blue text = editorial comments
- ~~striketrough blue text~~ = Not in Urtext, in FIP edition

This section continues discussing the happy learner. It identifies happiness with the absence of guilt, and shows that the only way to become free of guilt is to stop giving guilt to others. This entails a fundamental choice *against* guilt, which can only succeed by deferring all our decisions to the Holy Spirit.

(The train of thought switches in paragraph 9, so these first 8 paragraphs are in a way their own section.)

### Paragraph 1

1. [Learning will be commensurate with motivation, and the interference in your motivation for learning, is *exactly* the same as that which interferes with *all* your thinking.] <sup>1</sup>The happy learner **cannot feel guilty about learning**. <sup>2</sup>This is so **essential** to learning that it should never be forgotten. <sup>3</sup>The guiltless learner learns [*so*] easily **because his thoughts are free**. <sup>4</sup>Yet this entails the recognition that **guilt is interference, not salvation, and serves no** useful function at all.

### • Study Question •

1. *What widespread misconception is this paragraph designed to combat?*

The opening, unnumbered line was, for some reason, omitted from publication. “Commensurate” means “equal in size” or “in proportion to.” So this sentence is saying that motivation determines learning; you learn as much as you really want to learn. What interferes with our ability to learn? What undercuts our motivation? Guilt.

The happy learner has learned that guilt interferes with learning and so serves no useful purpose (1:1,4). So many of us feel guilty because we are still in the

learning process and have not yet learned all our lessons. We have an idealistic notion of how we should think and behave, about what it means to transcend our egos, and when we fall short of perfection we beat ourselves up. The point of this paragraph is that when we allow this kind of guilt into our mind it undercuts our motivation to learn. We are supposed to be learning; that's why we are here. But if we feel guilty about being in the learning process, we are going to shy away from it, and that will prevent us from learning!

This is no small lesson or side issue; it is absolutely “essential to learning” (1:2). We should enjoy learning; we should be grateful for it. Instead of being upset when we uncover the machinations of the ego in our minds, we should be happy for the opportunity to learn something. We need to learn to unmask our egos without trepidation, gaily, happily—“Oh, good! Another lesson I can learn!” or “Another chance to learn this familiar lesson!” Unless we can participate in the learning process without guilt over being less than perfect *now*, we are not going to progress very rapidly in our learning (1:3–4).

We somehow suppose that a certain measure of guilt is good. When I uncover some selfishness or pettiness in myself, when I catch myself being less than loving, I imagine that I am *supposed to* feel guilty about it. Perhaps I even think that without guilt I won't learn, that unless I am guilty about it I will not give it up. Nothing could be further from the truth. Being guilty about the ego is what keeps the ego going; it feeds on guilt.

## Paragraph 2

2. <sup>1</sup>Perhaps you are accustomed to using guiltlessness merely to offset the pain of guilt, and do not look upon it as having value **in itself**. <sup>2</sup>You believe that guilt **and** guiltlessness are **both** of value, each representing an **escape** from what the other does **not** offer you. <sup>3</sup>You do **not** want either alone, for without both you do not see **yourself** as whole and therefore happy. <sup>4</sup>Yet you are whole **only** in your guiltlessness, and only in your guiltlessness **can** you be happy. <sup>5</sup>There **is** no conflict here. <sup>6</sup>To wish for guilt in **any** way, in **any** form, will lose appreciation of the value of your guiltlessness, and push it from your sight.

• **Study Question** •

2. *Let's say that you just intentionally hurt someone that you love, by calling her the one thing you knew would wound her the most. What should your response be to your mistake? (Choose one.)*
- A. You should feel guilty, but only briefly, and only to motivate you to change your mind as quickly as possible.*
  - B. You should feel guilty, for then you at least are convinced that you are being honest with yourself. And in that honesty you can feel a sense of guiltlessness.*
  - C. You should consciously challenge your temptation to engage in guilt, knowing that guilt will reinforce the thought system that led to your attack on your loved one.*
  - D. You should not feel guilty, because you are not responsible for the feelings of the other person.*
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Paragraph 2 claims that we see both guilt and guiltlessness as valuable—in our view, each one supplies what the other lacks (2:2). Yet it insists that we are whole only in our guiltlessness (2:4). There can be no admixture, and even the smallest amount of guilt is inadmissible (2:6).

It should be obvious that we cannot be both guiltless and guilty. As C. S. Lewis once said about sin, guilt is like being pregnant. Either you are or you aren't. There is no such thing as being a little pregnant. But we somehow manage to hold on to both sides of such starkly contrasting pairs, with our usual ability at dissociation. We seek some sense of forgiveness “to offset the pain of guilt” (2:1), but we don't want to get rid of guilt *entirely* (2:3). We think that some guilt is good and even necessary to complete our moral fiber<sup>1</sup>. We think that if we had no guilt whatsoever we would be somehow deranged or flawed, missing some essential part of our being.

Our true wholeness, however, consists entirely of our guiltlessness, without a shred of guilt (2:4). One drop of guilt pollutes the entire pot of innocence. If any guilt is present, there can be no guiltlessness. So if we admit even one iota of guilt into our minds we have lost sight of our true nature as the holy Son of God (2:6).

If we are honest, most of us find it hard to accept such a radical concept of *total* innocence. I'm sure this is why the Course spends so much time talking about it.

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<sup>1</sup> “Neurotic guilt feelings are a device of the ego for “atoning” without sharing, and for asking  
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## Paragraph 3

3. <sup>1</sup>There is **no** compromise that you can make with guilt, and escape the pain that **only** guiltlessness allays. <sup>2</sup>Learning is living here, as creating is being in Heaven. <sup>3</sup>Whenever the pain of guilt seems to **attract** you, remember that if you yield to it, you are deciding **against** your happiness, and will **not** learn how to be happy. <sup>4</sup>Say therefore, to yourself, gently, but with the conviction born of the Love of God and of His Son:

<sup>5</sup>*What I experience I will make manifest.*

<sup>6</sup>*If I am guiltless, I have nothing to fear.*

<sup>7</sup>*I choose to testify to my **acceptance** of the Atonement, not to its rejection [not for its rejection].*

<sup>8</sup>*I would accept my guiltlessness by making it manifest and sharing it.*

<sup>9</sup>*Let me bring peace to God's Son from his Father.*

### • Study Question •

3. *Paragraph 3 gives you something to say to yourself, gently but with conviction, whenever you are tempted to feel guilty because of something you have thought, felt, said or done. Please memorize these lines and write them down by memory (it's OK if they are not perfect—the gist is what counts).*

We can't be guilty about learning and still learn, because guiltlessness is what we are supposed to be learning! Guilt *always* brings pain, no matter how we may try to moderate it and tone it down or dress it up in spiritual-sounding terminology. Not all spiritual systems agree with the Course in this regard; I think that is quite obvious. Many spiritual teachers consciously try to induce guilt in their listeners, believing that guilt can motivate people to repent and turn to righteousness. They speak about "good guilt" and "bad guilt." The Course teaches that there is no such thing as good guilt. It is absolutely uncompromising on this point (3:1).

To live in this world means to be in a learning process; that is what this world is about. It is a classroom, and we are here to learn. "Learning is living here" (3:2). What a great line! In my opinion, we should tattoo these words on our foreheads, write them on our mirrors and refrigerators, and put them on wall plaques. We are saints under construction; we are not finished products. We're in rehab; don't expect us to be perfect *yet*. We have to develop this attitude about each other, willingly overlooking the missteps of our brothers and sisters just like we overlook the peccadilloes of small children. Yet even more important, we must develop this attitude toward *ourselves*. We can't learn if we are guilty! We need to react to our ego's flare-ups with patient calmness, and perhaps even laughter. "Silly me! I'm looking for special love again. I'm seeking for wholeness outside myself again. Oh well, what else is new?"

To accept guilt is to accept unhappiness. We are learning exactly the wrong lesson when we do it. We are learning exactly what our ego wants us to learn (3:3).

I strongly encourage all of us to memorize the words given here (3:5–9) and to use them when we find ourselves tempted to feel guilty about something. Jesus is advising us here to be gentle with ourselves when we correct our guilt. Even in acting to correct our temptation to guilt, we don't want to become guilty about feeling guilty! If we teach ourselves the lesson of guilt we will teach it to others as well (3:5). Do we really want to do that?

## Paragraph 4

4. <sup>1</sup>Each day, each hour and minute, even each second, you are deciding between the crucifixion and the resurrection; between the ego and the Holy Spirit. <sup>2</sup>The ego is the choice for guilt; the Holy Spirit the choice for guiltlessness [blamelessness]. <sup>3</sup>The power of decision is all that is yours. <sup>4</sup>What you can decide **between** is fixed, because there are no alternatives **except** truth and illusion. <sup>5</sup>And there is no overlap between them, because they are opposites which **cannot** be reconciled and **cannot** both be true. <sup>6</sup>You are guilty **or** guiltless, bound **or** free, unhappy **or** happy.

### • Study Question •

4. *How is deciding whether to watch the nightly news or a rerun of Gilligan's Island a choice between crucifixion and resurrection?*
- A. *You would rather be crucified than see one more time that episode where the castaways stage that ridiculous musical version of Hamlet.*
  - B. *The news is so depressing (crucifying), whereas Gilligan symbolizes all that is good in man (resurrection).*
  - C. *It is not the TV show, as such, that matters, but the content, or the thought behind your choice. If your choice is motivated by a desire to forgive, or to see things differently, then it symbolizes resurrection.*
  - D. *The choice between forms is inherently meaningless. Thus, this is not a real choice at all.*
  - E. *C and D*
  - F. *A and B*

I think few of us realize how constantly we are choosing guilt instead of guiltlessness. That we do so each day probably seems reasonable to all of us. But “each hour and minute, even each second”? (4:1). That probably seems far-fetched. The point, I think, is that *everything* we think or do is tinged with guilt or saturated with innocence; it is all one or the other. There is nothing that is exempt from these alternatives, and they don't overlap either (4:4–5). When we choose the ego in any form, we are choosing guilt (4:2). When we wash dishes or brush our teeth, our minds are participating in that act either in identification

with the ego, guilty over our separateness and fearful of the consequences, or we are participating as one among many manifestations of God's holy and perfect Son. It isn't *what we are doing* that matters so much as *how we are thinking about it* (4:3).

Right now, are you guilty or guiltless? You must be one or the other. Consider this thought: Have you *ever* felt guiltless? The answer should give you some sense of the extent to which our minds are dominated by our egos. *But don't feel guilty about that!*

The clear implication of sentence 3 is that it is within our power to choose between guilt and guiltlessness: "The power of decision is all that is yours." What we are learning is to choose, and choose, and choose again, every day, every hour, every minute, even every second. Whenever we become aware of guilt—which means we have to be paying attention—we can choose again.

## Paragraph 5

5. <sup>1</sup>The miracle teaches you that you have chosen guiltlessness, freedom and joy. <sup>2</sup>It is not a cause, but an **effect**. <sup>3</sup>It is the natural result of **choosing right**, attesting to your happiness that comes from choosing to be **free** of guilt. <sup>4</sup>Everyone you offer healing **to** returns it. <sup>5</sup>Everyone you attack **keeps** it and cherishes it by holding it **against** you. <sup>6</sup>Whether he **does** this or does it not will make no difference; **you will think he does**. <sup>7</sup>It is impossible to offer **what you do not want** without this penalty. <sup>8</sup>The cost of giving is receiving. <sup>9</sup>Either it is a penalty from which you suffer, or the happy purchase of a treasure to hold dear.

### • Study Question •

5. *According to the Course, if we give forgiveness to another, forgiveness will be returned to us; if we give guilt, we'll get guilt back. What do you make of it when you forgive someone and they continue to attack you, or the reverse situation where you do not forgive, but the other person does not retaliate?*

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Whichever we give, guilt or guiltlessness, we will receive. The key to our own deliverance lies in what we give to others, whether we project guilt or extend guiltlessness. To me, this is the distinguishing message of the Course: we ourselves bring on our own pain or deliver our own healing, *based on what we extend to others*. It isn't enough simply to seek release from our own personal guilt. Such seeking is good, and even necessary, but if we fail to extend forgiveness to the people in our lives, we simply won't find it for ourselves, or if we do find it, we won't hold on to it.

The miracle does not cause guiltlessness or happiness; it is an effect, not a cause, the effect of our choice (5:2). When we choose innocence instead of guilt, and then give guiltlessness to another person (that is, we choose not to condemn him or her), the result is a miracle, a miracle that is the natural outcome of our choice. The miracle happens because we made the choice for innocence; it is the result of our freedom and joy, not its cause (5:2–3). We could not have seen the



other person as innocent if we had not first accepted our own innocence at some level, but we may not yet be conscious of that innocence within us. Because of our forgiveness, the other person awakens to his or her innocence. Their awakening is the evidence that *we* chose freedom from guilt (5:1). The one we give healing to will thus return it (5:4).

But the converse is also true. When we attack him, he will hold it against us. Even if he does not counter-attack, we will *think* he does (5:5–6). I find that to be so true! If I have wronged someone, I live in constant apprehension that he is going to retaliate, even if he shows no evidence of doing so.

The Course is giving both sides of a general principle here. Whether we forgive or we attack, what goes out from us comes back to us. “The cost of giving is receiving” (5:8). Whether it operates in a positive or negative sense, we can’t avoid it (5:9). We may question the absolute nature of this rule. Sometimes when we attack, for instance, the other person lets us off the hook and does not retaliate. Jesus has already dealt with that possible objection, however, by pointing out that it does not matter what the person actually does, because we will respond to him as if he is holding a grievance against us; our mind will supply the missing attack.

But what about the positive side? When we forgive someone, do they *always* return the gift? It certainly does not seem so in the world of time. Jesus refers to our offer of forgiveness as “the happy purchase of a treasure” (5:9), which offers us a convenient analogy: sometimes, the treasure is being purchased on a layaway plan. We make a “payment” but do not collect the “treasure” at that time; it is held for us, and we will receive it later. That’s often how forgiveness works. The person we forgive may not instantly respond. In fact, they may appear to reject our loving give and to continue to attack us. In a deep part of their mind, however, where their true identity lies, they have received the gift, although they have not consciously accepted it. The Holy Spirit puts the treasure we have purchased into layaway for us, and keeps it, waiting for the day the other person is ready to accept their gift. If we continually offer forgiveness, even in the face of apparent rejection, one day it will all come back to us, even as the proverb says in the Bible: “Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again” (Ecclesiastes 11:1, NIV). This refers to the practice, along the Nile River, of sowing grain from boats, casting it on the water, so that when the flood waters receded, the grain would sprout along the banks. John Wesley commented on this verse, “The return may be slow, but it is sure, and will be so much the more plentiful.”

If you forgive someone and seem to get no payback for it, think of it as money in the bank—and earning interest!

## Paragraph 6

6. <sup>1</sup>No penalty is ever asked of God's Son except **by himself and of himself**. <sup>2</sup>Every chance given him to heal [a brother] is another opportunity to replace darkness with light and fear with love. <sup>3</sup>If he refuses it he binds himself **to** darkness, because he did not choose to free his brother and enter light **with** him. <sup>4</sup>By **giving** power to nothing, he throws away the joyous opportunity to learn that nothing **has** no power. <sup>5</sup>And by **not dispelling** darkness, **he** became afraid of darkness **and** of light. <sup>6</sup>The joy of learning that darkness has no power over the Son of God is the happy lesson the Holy Spirit teaches, and would have **you** teach **with** Him. <sup>7</sup>It is **His** joy to teach it, as it will be **yours**.

### • Study Question •

6. *How do we teach the lesson that "darkness has no power over the Son of God"?*

In 5:9, Jesus called the return that comes to us when we attack another a "penalty." Here, in 6:1, he makes it clear that this is not some kind of divine judgment. What we suffer is not God's punishment; it is something *we* have wished upon ourselves (6:1). We can reverse the tide at any time; we simply have to start making the choice to forgive instead of to condemn (6:2). If we choose to free our brothers we will be freed; if we don't, and choose to hold on to our grievance, we are choosing to continue suffering (6:3). As the Workbook lesson says, the sword we hold is over our own heads!<sup>2</sup> (W-pI.192.9:1-7).

If you recall, the previous section spoke a lot about "nothing" and how we try to make it into something real. The nothing spoken of includes our imagined sins. When we condemn another person, we are making *their* nothing into something; we are giving it power (6:4) to hurt us, a power that it inherently does not have. We are buying in to the whole sin-guilt-fear scenario, and missing our opportunity to learn that sin does not exist and has no effects.<sup>3</sup>

That's what "darkness has no power over the Son of God" means: we cannot be separated from God; our supposed sins have no power to drag us down to hell. In short, *we are not guilty*. That is "the happy lesson the Holy Spirit...would have you teach with Him" (6:6). We were recently speaking of the happy learner; now it is the happy lesson. And both times, "happy" means "without guilt." How do we teach this lesson? We teach it by showing that our brothers' "attacks" have had no consequence; they have not injured us. (Jesus will flesh out this idea in the next paragraph.)

Make a note of the mention of the Holy Spirit here. The section is leading up to the last eleven paragraphs, which deal entirely with turning all our decisions over to the Holy Spirit. We teach this lesson only *with Him*; it's His lesson to us,

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<sup>2</sup> "Every time you feel a stab of anger, realize you hold a sword above your head. And it will fall or be averted as you choose to be condemned or free" (W-pI.192.9:4-5).

<sup>3</sup> "There is no sin; it has no consequence" (W-pI.101.6:7).



and teaching it is His will for us, so if we give each situation to Him, we can have a very good idea of the direction in which He will lead us.

## Paragraph 7

7. <sup>1</sup>The way to teach this simple lesson is merely this: Guiltlessness **is** invulnerability. <sup>2</sup>Therefore, make your **invulnerability** manifest to everyone. <sup>3</sup>Teach him that, **whatever** he may try to do to you, your perfect freedom from the belief that you can **be** harmed shows him that **he** is guiltless. <sup>4</sup>He can do **nothing** that can hurt you, and by refusing to allow him to **think he can**, you teach him that the Atonement, which you have accepted for yourself, **is also his**. <sup>5</sup>**There is nothing to forgive**. <sup>6</sup>No one can hurt the Son of God. <sup>7</sup>His guilt is **wholly** without cause, and being without cause, **cannot** exist.

### • Study Question •

7. *How do you show your brother he cannot hurt you? (Choose one.)*
- A. *He may hurt you, but it is your responsibility to heal him by not showing your hurt.*
  - B. *You realize that if you are truly guiltless you deserve no hurt. Thus, you go beyond the experience of hurt. This is what you show to your brother.*
  - C. *You show him your vulnerability, and trust that, once he sees how vulnerable you are, he will not hurt you. Thus, he will have nothing to feel guilty about.*

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Perhaps you wonder, “How can I teach another person that darkness has no power over the Son of God? Do I need to say some particular words? Do I need to act in a certain way? Do I have to tell them that they are forgiven?”

I’ve often felt that when a person simply says, “I forgive you” to another person, it can easily come across wrong. The person doing the forgiving can appear to be self-righteous, taking a morally superior position. They may in fact be doing so, practicing what the Song of Prayer calls “forgiveness-to-destroy” (S-2.II). Speaking the words or verbally communicating the “I forgive you” message *may not* be the most important way you teach forgiveness.

This is an important paragraph. It says that you heal your brother by showing that he cannot hurt you (7:4). If he has not hurt you, he has not really done anything bad and is not guilty (7:5). You teach the lesson that the Son of God cannot be hurt (7:6) by showing that *you* cannot be hurt.

This idea presents many practical problems. Foremost among them is the fact that most of us *do* feel hurt by the people around us, in hundreds of ways, day after day! The Course says we are invulnerable, but we don’t really believe it. If teaching forgiveness means demonstrating how invulnerable we are, we are in big trouble! And if we go to a person saying “I forgive you” while at the same time we are suffering a world of hurt over the situation, we are teaching a double message.

To truly practice Course forgiveness, ironically, we must come to the place where “there is nothing to forgive” is absolutely true for us (7:5). Our perception

of the incident or relationship has to be transformed so that we literally see no guilt in the other person (7:7); we see nothing whatsoever to blame or condemn because we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that they have not harmed us in any way and *cannot* harm us even if they try (7:3).

Getting to that place is no simple matter. That's why the Course is more than a few pages long. The lesson can be stated in few words: Teach your brother that no matter what he does, he cannot hurt you and therefore is not guilty. But teaching us how to do that takes the whole Course, applied through our whole lifetime.

We believe we are being hurt because we identify with and value the wrong things: our bodies, for instance. Jesus had learned that he was not a body, so that when men drove nails into his hands and feet, he didn't perceive them as hurting him. I get angry when someone steps on my toes! This is why we need the Holy Spirit to make our decisions for us; we need to learn to value things as He does, and not as we do. Only as we recognize our invulnerability can we teach forgiveness to others, because it is our invulnerability that teaches them they have not harmed us.

## Paragraph 8

8. <sup>1</sup>God is the **only** Cause, and guilt is **not** of Him. <sup>2</sup>Teach no one he has hurt you, for if you do, you teach **yourself** that what is **not** of God **has power over you**. <sup>3</sup>*The causeless cannot be*. <sup>4</sup>Do not attest to it, and do not foster belief in it in any mind. <sup>5</sup>Remember always that **mind is one**, and **cause is one**. <sup>6</sup>You will learn communication with this oneness **only** when you learn to **deny** the causeless, and accept the Cause of God as **yours**. <sup>7</sup>The power that God has given to His Son *is his*, and nothing else can His Son see or choose to look upon without imposing on **himself** the penalty of guilt, **in place** of all the happy teaching the Holy Spirit would gladly offer him.

### • Study Question •

8. *How do you acknowledge God as Cause, according to this paragraph?*

This paragraph urges us to realize that “God is the only Cause” (8:1), and to not foster belief in the causeless (things contrary to God's Will) in our mind or anyone's mind.

If God did not create guilt, therefore, guilt does not exist (8:1).

If there is nothing that God didn't create, how can sin exist? Surely God did not create it. When I see a brother coming at me in attack, I do not presume that attack is from God; in fact, I may refer to my brother as *ungodly* or even *demonic* in his anger. But if I give out the message that such ungodly activity has hurt me, I'm teaching the wrong lesson (8:2). I'm inventing a cause besides God and saying that this something, operating outside of God, is real enough to have harmed me, and I'm teaching that to myself and to others.

Jesus says the way we get in touch with this invulnerable Self is by consciously denying the reality of what appears to be contrary to God, and deliberately

choosing to acknowledge the reality only of what God has created, both in myself and in other people (8:6).

I think there is a double meaning to “accept the Cause of God as yours” (8:6). I think it means both accepting that God is my sole Cause (and therefore I am not the result of my own making), and that God’s cause (His Will, His program) is also mine. I think this means deciding to accept only what God created as real, and to take up the cause of communicating that truth to everyone so that the Son of God can finally and fully remember who he is.

• **Study Question** •

9. *Please summarize in a short paragraph the main thought that you received from the first 8 paragraphs of this section.*

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## Answer Key

1. That feeling guilty is a useful motivator, prodding you into repenting from your former learning and motivating you to learn faster.
2. C
3. The lines to memorize are T-14.III.3:5–9.
4. E
5. Others will always eventually return our gift of love, although perhaps not in this lifetime. And, even if another does not return our attack when we attack them, we will imagine that he does or plans to, so the effect on us is the same.
6. We teach it by forgiving our brothers and releasing them from their guilt.
7. B
8. We acknowledge God as the Primal Cause when we choose to follow only the Holy Spirit, refuse to foster any belief in guilt, and demonstrate to our brothers that, contrary to what they may believe, they have not hurt us.
9. One summary: Guilt and guiltlessness are opposites. You cannot choose both, but only one. If you give guilt to another you will feel guilty. Instead, prove his guiltlessness by showing he cannot hurt you.