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## A BETTER WAY

## It All Served to Benefit the World

## A Way Out of Guilt Over Our Past Mistakes

by Greg Mackie

Virtually all of us have experienced nagging guilt over something we did in the past that hurt someone else. Perhaps it was an outright attack that was *meant* to hurt at the time, but is now regretted. Perhaps it was a well-intentioned mistake that turned out to have unintended painful consequences. But whatever the details of the particular situation, the guilt over the pain we caused can be debilitating. I know from personal experience what a burden it can be.

What can we do to lift this burden of guilt? The entire program of *A Course in Miracles* gives us the ultimate remedy, of course. It offers many practices to help us forgive others and ourselves. But here, I'd like to focus on a particular passage from the Manual that has helped me recently in my efforts to let go of lingering guilt over a past mistake in my life.

Here is the passage, which is from the description of patience, the eighth characteristic of God's teachers:

The past...held no mistakes; nothing that did not serve to benefit the world, as well as him to whom it seemed to happen. Perhaps it was not understood at the time. Even so, the teacher of God is willing to reconsider all his past decisions, if they are causing pain to anyone. (M-4.VIII.1:6-8)

Now, I'll go over each key phrase over this passage, drawing out its meaning and applying it to our guilt over our mistakes of the past. I hope you will find this as helpful as I have.

**"The past...held no mistakes"**

This brief phrase, all by itself, can bring a lot of relief. We feel guilty about a past mistake — a mistake that, because we can see the harm it caused, feels more like an unforgivable *sin* in our eyes, whether we use the word "sin" or not. But here we are told that the past held *no* mistakes. The mistake we are so distraught over isn't even there. Thank God!

But a problem arises here if we've been reading our Course carefully. How do we reconcile this idea that the past held no mistakes with all those lines which tell us that, while we've never sinned, we've made *plenty* of mistakes? If we believe the Course is consistent — and I do — how do we harmonize the "no mistakes" idea with lines like these?

In time, the Holy Spirit clearly sees the Son of God can make mistakes. (T-19.III.5:1)

That you have made mistakes is obvious. (W-pI.93.2:2)

We acknowledge our mistakes. (W-pI.168.5:3)

Indeed, the entire Course came to us to correct our "original error" (C-In.1:4) of separating from God, an error we repeat whenever we engage in egoic behavior of any kind. How, then, can the past hold no mistakes? It seems to hold not

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## WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT SAYS

*A Course in Miracles* is a spiritual path.

Its purpose is to train us to work miracles—to accept and extend to others the shifts in perception that awaken us to God. It consists of three volumes, which signify the three aspects of its program:

- ◆ Text : Through studying the teaching, the Course's thought system first enters our minds.
- ◆ Workbook for Students: Through doing the practice, the Course's thought system penetrates more and more deeply into our minds.
- ◆ Manual for Teachers: Through extending our healed perception to others, the Course's thought system receives its final reinforcement and becomes the only thing in our minds.

The Course's message is that the source of our suffering is not the world's mistreatment of us, but rather our egocentric attack on the world. This attack convinces us that we have defiled our nature beyond repair, that we are irredeemably guilty. Yet the Course says true reality cannot be defiled; it is a realm of pure, changeless, unified spirit. This realization allows us to forgive the world's apparent mistreatment of us by recognizing that it did not actually occur. And as we see this forgiveness come forth from us—see that we are capable of something genuinely loving and egoless—we gradually realize that we never defiled ourselves. Thus we awaken to the untouched innocence of our true nature.

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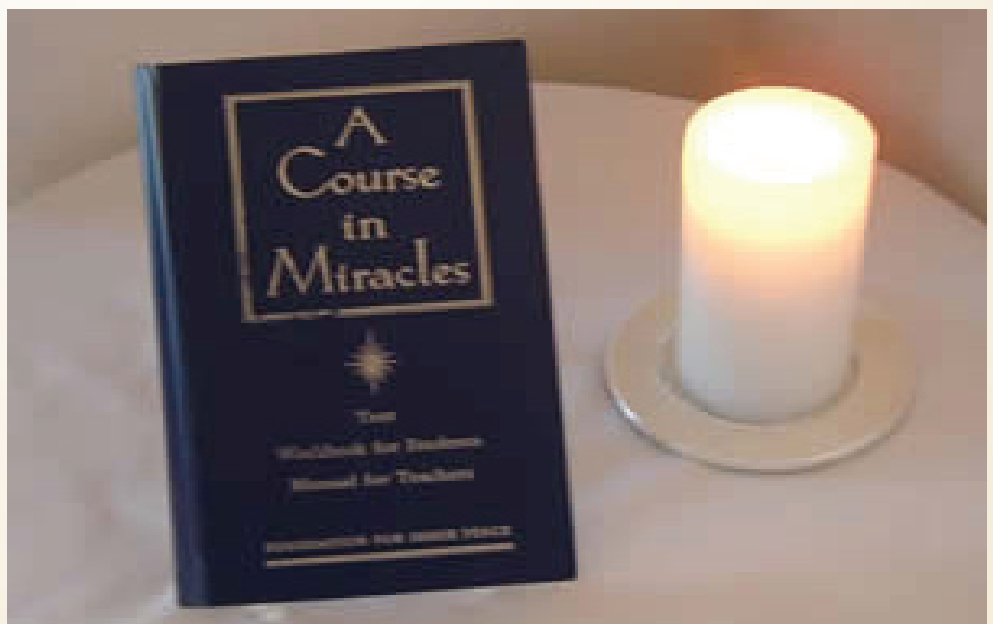
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only all the particular mistakes we've made, but the mother of all mistakes.

I think these two ideas are reconciled in a teaching that the Course repeats many times in many ways: the Holy Spirit has taken the mistakes we've made and transformed them into a means of serving His plan for salvation. Once He's worked His alchemy on our mistakes, for all practical purposes they aren't mistakes any more, but have now become perfect vehicles for His healing purpose. He has undone their painful effects, and only their healing effects remain.

I'll expand upon this in the next section of this article. But for the moment, if you're struggling with guilt over a past mistake, bring that mistake to mind and just let the good news sink in: The past held no mistakes — including *your* past. That mistake you feel so guilty about not only isn't a sin, but it's not even a mistake any more. Oh, it may have been a mistake when you did it, and it may still have lingering painful effects on a worldly level, but the Holy Spirit has transformed it into a vehicle for good. Say to yourself: "I do not feel guilty, because the Holy Spirit has already undone all the consequences of my wrong decision" (based on T-5.VII.6:10). He has bathed it in His light, and any pain it may have caused is really gone in truth, even if the current appearance is otherwise.

### **"Nothing that did not serve to benefit the world, as well as him to whom it seemed to happen"**

This phrase reinforces and strengthens the idea that the Holy Spirit has transformed all of our past mistakes into vehicles for good. We see this idea throughout the Course:

All things work together for good. There are no exceptions except in the ego's judgment. (T-4.V.1:1-2)

All things, events, encounters and circumstances are helpful. (M-4.I(A).4:5)

How can you who are so holy suffer? All your past except its beauty is gone, and nothing is left but a blessing. I have saved all your kindnesses and every loving thought you ever had. I have purified them of the errors that hid their light, and kept them for you in their own perfect radiance. They are beyond destruction and beyond guilt. They came from the Holy Spirit within you, and we know what God creates is eternal. (T-5.IV.8:1-6)

This last passage, especially, emphasizes the idea that the Holy Spirit (through Jesus here) has taken our past thoughts, words, and actions, "purified them of the errors that hid their light," and left only a blessing.

True, this last passage refers specifically to Jesus cleansing *loving* thoughts of the mistakes that sullied their purity. But other passages speak of the Holy Spirit doing this with *all* thoughts. For instance, Lesson 151 speaks of how the Holy Spirit can reinterpret both our own "sins" and all the painful things that seem to happen to us, converting all of them into bringers of good:

What could convince Him that your sins are real? Let Him be Judge as well of everything that seems to happen to you in this world. His lessons will enable you to bridge the gap between illusions and the truth.

He will remove all faith that you have placed in pain, disaster, suffering and loss. He gives you vision which can look beyond these grim appearances, and can behold the gentle face of Christ in all of them. You will no longer doubt that only good can come to you who are beloved of God, for He will judge all happenings, and teach the single lesson that they all contain.

He will select the elements in them which represent the truth, and disregard those aspects which reflect but idle dreams. And He will reinterpret all you see, and all occurrences, each circumstance, and every happening that seems to touch on you in any way from His one frame of reference, wholly unified and sure. And you will see the love beyond the hate, the constancy in change, the pure in sin, and only Heaven's blessing on the world. (W-pI.151.9:5-11:3)

This lesson goes on to give us an actual practice, in which we offer all our thoughts to the Holy Spirit and let Him return them to us, purified of their mistakes:

Let Him evaluate each thought that comes to mind, remove the elements of dreams, and give them back again as clean ideas that do not contradict the Will of God.

Give Him your thoughts, and He will give them back as miracles which joyously proclaim the wholeness and the happiness God wills His Son, as proof of His eternal Love. (W-pI.151.13:4-14:1)

So now, let's do this with that past mistake and the guilt that comes with it. Bring your thought about that mistake to mind, offer it to the Holy Spirit, and let Him show you how everything that happened in that situation — *everything* —

has, through His miracles, been transformed into a means for good. Not only has your former mistake served to benefit the world, but it even somehow has served to benefit the person to whom it seemed to happen. He or she may still be hurting; the benefit might not be apparent at this time. But it is there. Let the Holy Spirit show you the purified form of your mistake: “the love beyond the hate, the constancy in change, the pure in sin, and only Heaven’s blessing on the world.” If your mistake has been purified, if only good can come out of it in the long run, what reason do you have to feel guilty?

### **“Perhaps it was not understood at the time”**

This is quite an understatement. Often when painful things happen, we just plain *don’t* understand them. They seem inexplicable, random, and cruel. When we make a mistake that hurts another person and realize just how much pain we’ve caused, we find it very difficult to see how it could possibly benefit the world, and especially difficult to see how it could benefit the person we have hurt.

The Course tells us in a number of places that our pain comes from lack of understanding; if we really understood the true nature of things, all we would feel would be joy. We see this idea, for instance, in this passage from the Workbook:

God’s world is happy. Those who look on it can only add their joy to it, and bless it as a cause of further joy in them. We wept because we did not understand. But we have learned the world we saw was false, and we will look upon God’s world today. (W-pII.301.2:1-4)

In the passage we’re examining in this article, our lack of understanding keeps us from seeing how all things in the past, even our past mistakes, serve to benefit everyone concerned. But if our lack of understanding keeps us from seeing the benefit, what kind of understanding will *enable* us to see the benefit?

Often when people speak of “understanding” a situation in hindsight, they focus on earthly explanations that serve to rationalize what happened: “Well, you know, I was doing my best. I was just afraid, and I lashed out because I felt vulnerable. My buttons got pushed. And I can see that even though what I did to him was not very skillful, it gave him such an opportunity to see how codependent he was, and how much he needed to work on his self-esteem...” You get the idea.

But I think the understanding Jesus is suggesting here is something quite different. If you’ll recall, in that passage from Lesson 151 about the Holy Spirit transforming all of our thoughts and everything that happens to us into good, it speaks of how He will “teach the single lesson that they all contain.” What is that single lesson? Workbook Lesson 193, “All things are lessons God would have me learn,” tells us that the one lesson all painful events teach is the lesson of *forgiveness*:

*Forgive, and you will see this differently.*

These are the words the Holy Spirit speaks in all your tribulations, all your pain, all suffering regardless of its form. (W-pI.193.5:1-2)

This is the lesson God would have you learn: There is a way to look on everything that lets it be to you another step to Him, and to salvation of the world. To all that speaks of terror, answer thus:

*I will forgive, and this will disappear.*

To every apprehension, every care and every form of suffering, repeat these selfsame words. And then you hold the key that opens Heaven’s gate, and brings the Love of God the Father down to earth at last, to raise it up to Heaven. (W-pI.193.13:1-5)

This is the primary way in which the Holy Spirit transforms our mistakes into blessings that benefit the world: He turns them into lessons in forgiveness. This is the primary understanding that will help us see the benefit: the understanding that not only have our mistakes been transformed into a benefit to the world, but that the whole world in which these mistakes occur is an illusion with no effect on the fact that we are innocent Sons of God in Heaven. For forgiveness is ultimately the recognition that, as the above passage about “God’s world” says, “The world we saw was false.” Forgiveness proclaims the good news that “*the separation never occurred*” (T-6.II.10:7), and therefore, “You have not lost your innocence” (W-pI.182.1:1). We remain as God created us, still abiding in His eternal loving embrace.

So, bring to mind again the mistake you made that hurt someone. It may be difficult to understand how this mistake could possibly benefit the world and the person to whom it seemed to happen. But just open your mind to the possibility of a new understanding. Is there, perhaps, a way to look on this that lets it be to you another step to God and to salvation of the



world?

Open your mind to the Holy Spirit and hear Him saying to you, “Forgive, and you will see this differently.” Say to yourself, “I will forgive, and all the painful effects of my mistake will disappear.” Let forgiveness wash over you, forgiveness both for the other person and for yourself. Accept into your mind the wonderful news that, whatever seems to have happened, nothing has changed the glorious fact that everyone involved is still an innocent Son of God, abiding in the Father’s gentle Smile. Let your guilt over your past mistake melt away in the recognition that it has been cleansed of its painful effects, and nothing is left but a blessing. It *has* become another step to God and to salvation of the world.

**“Even so, the teacher of God is willing to reconsider all his past decisions, if they are causing pain to anyone.”**

I love this last line, because it beautifully counters a way in which we could seriously distort the teaching I’ve been talking about in this article. We’ve seen that our mistakes, even the things we’ve done to hurt people, can be transformed by the Holy Spirit into vehicles for good, pathways to God. Well, it would be so easy for the ego to get a hold of this teaching and use it to rationalize its attacks: “Hey, this says I didn’t make a mistake when I did that to you. In fact, it served to benefit you. It was just part of God’s plan. Besides, the Course says you’ve caused all of your own pain, so don’t blame me. Get with the program.”

With this last line, it’s as if Jesus anticipated this sneaky move on the ego’s part. He says, “Not so fast. Even though the past holds no mistakes because the Holy Spirit has purified your mistakes, you should still reconsider anything you’ve thought, said, or done that’s currently hurting someone. And your thoughts, words, and actions *do* hurt people — the Course’s metaphysics do not give you a license to kill.”

But what of the Course’s metaphysics? Isn’t it true that we can’t really cause pain to anyone, that each of us causes our own pain? Strictly speaking, yes. However, the Course speaks again and again about how our decisions *influence* others. It says, in fact, that the influence of the Sons of God upon each other “is without limit, and must be used for their joint salvation” (T-6.I.18:2). Our errors can’t force others to make errors, but our errors *can* “imprison them...to the extent to which [we] reinforce errors they have already made” (T-1.III.5:9), just as our decision to give miracles to others “undoes their distortions and frees them from prison” (T-1.III.5:11). The choice before us is succinctly express in this passage from the Workbook:

Even the mad idea of separation had to be shared before it could form the basis of the world I see....As my thoughts of separation call to the separation thoughts of others, so my real thoughts awaken the real thoughts in them. (W-pI.54.3:3, 6)

Because our decisions influence others, for all practical purposes we really *can* hurt them. The choice we always have before us is the choice to hold onto separation thoughts, which will hurt others by reinforcing their own separation thoughts, or to turn to our real thoughts, which will heal others by awakening the real thoughts in them. In less metaphysical terms, we always have the choice of whether to attack others or love them, and their well-being *is* impacted by our decision. This is obvious if we honestly look at the effects our decisions have on others. What we think, say, and do can wound, and it can heal.

So, there is no bailing ourselves out with metaphysics by saying, “There are no ultimate mistakes, and besides, you did it to yourself.” If we are to be true teachers of God, we have to say, “Yes, the Holy Spirit cleaned up my mistake. He even turned it onto something that benefitted the person I hurt. But *even so*, if I’m continuing to do things that hurt that person, I want to stop doing those things. Because I don’t want to hurt people; I want to love them, heal them, and set them free.”

It strikes me that this message as a whole is an especially potent antidote for guilt, because it relieves our guilt in two ways. First, it relieves the guilt stemming from our past mistakes by showing us that the Holy Spirit has undone their painful effects and transformed them into beneficial lessons in forgiveness. Second, it relieves the guilt stemming from our present temptation to *hold onto* our past mistakes and thus *continue* to cause pain to our brothers. We thus not only undo the guilt of past decisions, but also prevent the accumulation of more guilt that would come from keeping those past decisions in force.

What might this reconsideration of our past hurtful decisions look like? It might take the form of an internal cleansing process like some of the practices we’ve discussed. And it might also take the form of taking action on a form level, guided by the Holy Spirit, to undo the damage done by a past mistake: apologizing to the other person, making amends, doing things differently from now on, etc. The form of our reconsideration is up to the Holy Spirit.

So, bring to mind one more time that past mistake of yours that hurt someone. Now, say to the Holy Spirit, “I realize

that You have transformed this mistake into something that benefits all concerned. I realize that it has become a lesson in forgiveness. I realized that everyone is still in Heaven and no real harm has been done. But even so, I am willing to reconsider this past decision if it is still causing pain to this brother, or to anyone. How, specifically, would You have me reconsider this decision? How would You have me think, speak, or act differently?" Then, whatever instructions He asks you to carry out, do as He asks, and see what happens.

The Manual passage we've discussed in this article has had a powerful healing effect on the guilt I have carried for my past mistakes. Through applying these lines to particular hurtful mistakes, I have felt a lifting of that awful burden. I hope this passage and this article have the same effect on you as you contemplate your own hurtful mistakes. May we all experience the freedom that comes from laying down the burden of guilt and realizing the glorious truth that God's Son is guiltless, and always will be.



E-mail your comments to the author at: [greg@circleofa.org](mailto:greg@circleofa.org)

Greg Mackie has been a student of *A Course in Miracles* since 1991, and a teacher for the Circle of Atonement since 1999. He writes Course Q & A's and "Course Meets World" articles for the Circle of Atonement's website, and is one of the co-leaders of the Circle Course Community. He sees his primary function as helping to develop a tradition of Course scholarship.

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## CIRCLE MAILBOX

*Here is some of the feedback we received from Robert Perry's article in last months A Better Way "The Religion of the Ego."*

I have been promising myself since I read this article the first time, just after you posted it, that I would comment. And I have read it about three times and scanned through it as well.

It is an unpleasant article. When I read about this god which requires sacrifice and pain, I remembered falling in line with this too many times, and I wanted to stop reading. But I wanted to respond. And so I had to read all those unpleasant things about the special relationship, and remember doing that, and become aware that I still do minor versions of that. And I had to look at that horrible description of sacrificing myself to snatch a better self. (Definitely not conscious of that!) Enough!

However there was something enjoyable in your article. I really appreciated learning about the value of Workbook practice in calling a break in my ego enslavement. I have been getting more value than ever from my Workbook practice and I am glad to see that, by its interrupting my ego worship, I am getting double value. It is helping me reduce my begging off of practice because I am now too tired.

I am not surprised that you wrote this article because of your guidance. How else could you have gotten yourself to do it?

And I am determined to be helped by it.

— *Barb Hembling*