

Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders: make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

According to sociologist Ronald Knapp, co-author of *Motherhood and Mourning*, "When an infant dies, parents look for causes. In the case of S.I.D.S., often they have no cause and so they frequently look for neglect in themselves." Thus the counselor must be aware that guilt feelings will be a powerful and dominant part of S.I.D.S. grief. Knapp tells such parents, "Know that you are going to experience great remorse, hostility and guilt." (Quoted in *Family Weekly*, November 15, 1981)

Guilt counseling will be an important subject to be prepared to deal with as a counselor. Our counselors not only touch on guilt in connection with S.I.D.S., but also in counseling women who have had an abortion, who have been taking drugs and face the possibility or reality of birth defects, who have lied to or deceived boyfriends or family, and those whose babies were conceived without marriage. We need to deal with the spiritual minefield that guilt can be.

GUILT IN TWO VARIETIES:

The first thing to realize is that there is such a thing as false guilt. These are guilty feelings which are not founded upon actual guilt, but could be classified as shame or embarrassment for not measuring up to a perceived expectation of someone else. For example, if someone insists that you should have called them and offered to help them in their time of need, you might feel guilty, even if you weren't aware that they needed help! Such is not true guilt, but feelings that stem from someone else's expectations of you. In the even of S.I.D.S. deaths, even conscientious parents may feel guilty, not for a specific sin, but because the baby died. Somehow they feel that they have failed.

False guilt should be dealt with by pointing out the reality of the situation and the nature of S.I.D.S. deaths. Then, in the face of continued guilty feelings, we ought to console by entrusting ourselves to the God of grace ["This is how we'll know we're born of the truth and will reassure ourselves before Him: Whenever our conscience condemns us, God is greater than our conscience and knows everything." 1 John 3:19-20 (Beck's *An American Translation* -- for this passage Beck or the KJV does a better job than the NIV).]

But the counselor should pay attention to statements of REAL guilt. Real guilt is the consequence of sins committed which the client may confess to you. Of course, these sins will most likely not be the cause of the child's death! But if you fail to help the client to deal with real guilt, a barrier will exist between the client and the Lord. How can a person trust in the Lord, or draw comfort from his Word if she has reason to believe that the Lord is angry over sins committed?

As we noted in the first of this series of Bible studies, feelings of guilt call for the full application of the gospel. I would suggest that counselors first of all assure the client that the particular sin is not the direct cause of the child's death, but because it troubles the client's conscience it is something that you would like to help them deal with, so that it will not add to their grief. If it is not already clear to you, ask the person if they are sorry for the particular sin and want to overcome it. When you feel that they are repentant, ask them if they have asked the Lord for forgiveness (assure them that he gladly forgives sins). If they have not yet asked the Lord for forgiveness, encourage them to do so. Depending on what feels comfortable and will accomplish a sincere prayer, you might:

1. Invite them to silently pray for forgiveness.
2. Use the confession of sins from the Sunday service (have them read it as a prayer).

3. Invite them to pray with you (as you offer the prayer on their behalf).

4. Invite them to compose their own prayer.

To every repentant sinner with a troubled conscience, the following passages and many others can be quoted:

Psalm 32:5 - Then I acknowledge my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"--and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Psalm 51:17 - The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Psalm 103:8-13 - The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.

Psalm 130:3-4 - If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.

1 John 1:7,9; 2:1-2 - But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense--Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

1 Timothy 1:15 - Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst.