

## TRANSCRIPT

An Undeceptions podcast.

John Dickson:

Just a content warning before we begin. This episode might make you feel guilty. Clive White was one of the most celebrated anglers in Britain in the 1990s. He made the cover of Trout Fisherman Magazine seven times. And appeared in the record books as the man who reeled in the biggest rainbow trout ever landed in Britain. And then he wrote this letter.

Yannick Lowery:

Dear Mr. Rowe.

John Dickson:

Mr. Rowe was the secretary of the British Fish Record Committee.

Yannick Lowery:

I would like to take this opportunity to withdraw my claim to the BFRC in connection with the record rainbow trout caught. The record in question was the current British record rainbow trout caught at Dever Springs Trout Fishery on the 4th of April, 1995, weighing 36 pounds, 14 ounces. That's 16.74 kilograms.

Yannick Lowery:

I did not catch the fish. It was all set up so there would be a new British record. The fish was not even stocked into the lake. It was actually placed in a bag next to the lake all ready for me to claim.

Yannick Lowery:

I am very sorry and deeply regret what I have done, but I cannot live a lie any more, as it has destroyed my marriage and it very nearly destroyed me. As a result I have now given up fishing altogether. I know a lot of people will take a dim view of what I have done, but now I can sleep at night knowing that I have nothing to hide. I feel sorry for the people that I have cheated out of a genuine record claim. I only hope people will respect me for coming clean and telling the truth.

Yannick Lowery:

Yours sincerely, Clive White.

John Dickson:

White wrote that letter in 2003, eight years after he had claimed the record. A quick shout out to voiceover artist and friend of the pod, Yannick Lowery, for reading that letter for us. So it turns out Clive

White didn't catch the biggest rainbow trout ever. He cheated. White says he found the trout dead in waters near his home, and put it in a bag which he took with him on the 4th of April, throwing it into the water, and then pretending he'd caught it.

John Dickson:

White's letter made headlines across the UK at the time. The story even made it out here to Australia. Some of Clive's words really stuck out to me. "I just feel so much better about myself now. It's like a weight's been lifted off me." Clive was weighed down by guilt. Like so many of us who have done something wrong and kept it secret, the guilt ate away at him.

John Dickson:

Guilt is a big topic. There is so much to say. And just like the feeling of guilt itself, it is multilayered. We deal with guilt on an individual level and on a societal level. Guilt is a religious problem, which interests theologians; a social problem, which interests sociologists; a psychological problem, which interests psychologists. I didn't write that line. It's a quote from psychotherapist and theologian Paul Tournier in his book, *Guilt and Grace*, and producer Kaley found it.

John Dickson:

People sometimes speak of religious guilt or Catholic guilt or whatever. And it's almost always used negatively. The assumption is that if you are religious, especially those Catholics, you're dealing with much more guilt than the regular person does and it's not healthy. But maybe guilt is actually good. And maybe religion, Christianity in particular, is the maestro of listening to, directing, and silencing the guilt we experience in our lives.

John Dickson:

I'm John Dickson. And this is Undeceptions.

John Dickson:

Undeceptions is brought to you by Zondervan's new book, *Bullies and Saints*, an honest look at the good and evil of Christian history, by me. Every episode here at Undeceptions, we'll be exploring some aspect of life, faith, history, culture, or ethics that's either much misunderstood or mostly forgotten. With the help of people who know what they're talking about, we'll be trying to undeceive ourselves and let the truth out.

John Dickson:

Guilt is a strange topic of interest. Are you a glutton for punishment or something else?

Rob Waller:

Well, it's one of those topics that sort of put itself under my nose because as a Christian and a psychiatrist, I find it comes at me from two directions, you know. So...

John Dickson:

That's Rob Waller, a consultant psychiatrist based in Scotland, and honorary senior clinical lecturer in the Division of Psychiatry at the University of Edinburgh. He wrote a book a while back called The Guilt Book with Pastor Will van de Hart, who is currently working as a pastoral chaplain at Holy Trinity Brompton in London.

Rob Waller:

So if you look up the diagnostic criteria of depression, one of the words you see there is the word guilt. And then if you look at a sort of understanding of the gospel, guilt and forgiveness of there as well,

Speaker 4:

Others are dying one after the other, Matthew.

Speaker 5:

What are you looking for?

Speaker 4:

Forgiveness.

Speaker 5:

For what?

Speaker 4:

Oh, not doing more.

Speaker 5:

You just said you did everything you could. You're the man. I understand you to be I'm sure that's true.

Speaker 4:

And why do I still feel guilty?

Speaker 5:

Guilt can be a good thing. It's a soul's called to action. The indication that something is wrong, the only way to rid your heart of it is to correct your mistakes and keep going until amends are made. I don't know what you didn't do or what you should have done, but the guilt, the guilt means your work is not yet finished.

Speaker 4:

Thank you.

John Dickson:

That's a grab from the Netflix series, Daredevil, a Marvel character who's been described by the screenwriter Steven McKnight, as one of the more religious characters in the Marvel universe, Daredevil is Catholic and guilt, it seems is a key driver of his often violent vigilante justice. Rob Waller says guilt usually does drive us towards something though hopefully not violence.

Rob Waller:

You know, if you steal an apple, you ought to feel guilty. That's the way that human societies work. And to say that guilt is just a neurosis is unhelpful, but guilt can also be a neurosis. And actually you haven't done anything wrong. Or if you did, do, you know, some, some people who feel guilty, there's little things like, you know, they... I met a lady once who went to the supermarket, she bought 19 of the 20 things on her supermarket on her shopping list. And she got home and she'd forgotten the cheese. And she felt so crass and guilty and stupid because she'd forgotten the cheese. And it's just like, well, that's not a problem that you run to God to ask for forgiveness for that is something that requires a psychological approach. So there is a time for psychologizing as well.

John Dickson:

So there's good guilt and bad guilt. Good guilt, or as Rob says, true, guilt will depend on your moral framework, but arises when you know, you've done something wrong. False guilt comes from stuff we think we've done wrong. Like when we worry we may have upset someone without any real reason to think we've done so. Or feeling guilty about things outside of our responsibility or control.

John Dickson:

What are some of the symptoms that one would be able to observe if you were struggling with guilt, if you, if you had a negative guilt problem? And I want to ask this from the perspective of someone who isn't a believer as much as someone who is.

Rob Waller:

Yeah, definitely. So, so I think there's full range of right, the way through, from serious psychiatric illness through to what I guess you might call low self-esteem, if that makes sense. So, you know, at one end, you can have this as, as part of a full blown depressive episode where you're losing weight, you're not sleeping, you're unable to enjoy anything. Your cognition is so bad that you can't even follow an episode of your favourite soap opera on television, on television, you can't read a book, you can barely read a magazine, all of these things that are part of a depressive episode. I mean, this to a psychiatrist would suggest that, you know, you're probably actually beyond the therapy level at this point, you probably need medication. So it can be part of that. And part of that is feeling guilty.

Rob Waller:

And actually in my work as a psychiatrist, I've even seen it go, go further beyond that, where people actually have delusions of guilt, where they actually believe at a sort of delusional, psychotic level that they have, have done, you know, ridiculous things wrong. You know, that they've blown up part of

Sydney or something like this. You know, it's something that clearly is not true, but they believe that at delusional level. So you can see it as part of that. You can also see it. I think in some of the more, more chronic conditions, you know, and I'll talk about things like, like low self-esteem or perhaps a milder, but quite grumbling eating disorder, where there is that sort of chronic feeling that you probably have done something wrong and it's probably your fault and it's probably up to you to fix it. It's that very sort of internalizing, "I'm responsible for everything" type of psychology. You're still functioning, unlike the person who's depressed, but it's actually in some ways more pervasive to every bit of your life because you're, you're living alongside this thing.

John Dickson:

Christianity famously thinks that we are not good through and through. That there is a fallenness in every human being, indeed my prayer book here on my desk, instructs me each day to say, I have left undone what I ought to have done. And I have done what I ought not to have done. And there is no health in us. So is Christianity really to blame for a guilt and shame problem in Western society because of its emphasis on the fallenness of the human?

Rob Waller:

I think, I think it depends where you stay, doesn't it? And this depends slightly, which, which school of theology or which type of church that you've been being brought up in. And, you know, there is this sort of extreme sort of ultra Calvinist. I am a worm. There is nothing I can do to help myself, but the...

John Dickson:

Hey, a quick apology to my ultra Calvinist friends. I know exactly what you'd say in reply. Sure. I'm totally depraved, but I'm also totally forgiven. So it's all pretty sweet. Yeah, I get that, Waller's point of course, is that some folks can emphasize human depravity at the expense of the good stuff.

Rob Waller:

Don't forget, that should immediately be followed by the fact that God has reached out to me and saved me, you know? So it should be a driving force towards a positive identity in Christ. And if it leaves you in that worm state for something wrong with how it's being, being put across, and there are other parts of the church that do similar, but slightly different errors. So, you know, for example, one of the, one of the phrases I think you have to use when you're talking about guilt, is that phrase, you know, no one does guilt like a Catholic, but you often see them in fictional programs and so on, you know, someone who's in their forties or fifties and left the Catholic church a long time ago, but talks about that sort of Catholic guilt that hangs over them and...

John Dickson:

Here's one example from Tina Fey's TV show 30 Rock with Alec Baldwin.

Tracey:

Hey, do you hear the good news JD? I'm Irish Catholic now like you, Regis and the Pope.

Alec Baldwin:

Oh no, you're not. The church already has enough lawsuits.

Tracey:

See, I could screw up now and then just go to confession. No longer do I have to throw my parties in international waters.

Alec Baldwin:

That's not how it works, Tracy, even though there is the whole confession thing, that's no free pass. Because there was a crushing guilt that comes with being a Catholic, whether things are good or bad, you're simply eating tacos in the park. There is always the crushing guilt.

Tracey:

I don't think I want that. I'm out.

Rob Waller:

And there's obviously fantastic parts of the Catholic church, but there's some parts of it clearly that seem to sort of generate that lingering feeling of guilt where you haven't moved from guilt into repentance to forgiveness into, into identity.

John Dickson:

That crushing guilt isn't just for television. One of the most insightful essays I've read in the last 10 years was in the Hedgehog Review. It's called the Strange Persistence of Guilt by Wilfred McClay, "Bill". And it's a kind of history of the concept of guilt. McClay is a history professor at the University of Oklahoma. And ever since I read his long essay, I've wanted to track him down and talk to him. I love that this podcast gives me that excuse. Anyway, it turns out Professor McClay started his research into the history of guilt after seeing a huge bus advertisement for being an atheist.

Professor Wilfred McClay:

And I came across this campaign in the UK that Richard Dawkins the sort of famous atheist public intellectual scientist of sorts. It was really behind, it's this thing called the atheist bus campaign. And, and they had a slogan that just really struck me on the sides of buses that these, these, these placards or billboards that sort of saying the following, "There's probably no God, now stop worrying and enjoy your life." And the more I thought about that slogan, which seems to me an incredibly lame slogan, I mean, how it's a, I didn't write about this in the Hedgehog article, but it was something that prompted me. And it got me to thinking about why would anyone think that belief in God is a source of worrying, that is a source of an inability to enjoy your life? What, what, where does that come from, that assumption? And that's what made me start digging back into Nietzsche and...

John Dickson:

Well, that's where I want to, that's where I want to take you...

John Dickson:

Let me just interrupt myself, interrupting Bill to say that Friedrich Nietzsche was a 19th century German philosopher famous for his uncompromising criticism of Christianity and the European morality that emerged from that among many other things. Nietzsche tried to identify what guilt looked like before God entered the picture, you know, before we made him up.

Professor Wilfred McClay:

Well, you know, it, the, he, he wrote... This is particularly in this book, the Genealogy of Morality, that the morality had a genealogy. It had a sequence by which it had aris, these sort of compulsions and reflexes that make up our, our moral, our moral systems. And ultimately it had to do with the... A kind of call of the ancestors that religion cultivated a reverence for the ancestors, a fear of the ancestors, a sense of needing to be approved of the ancestors. And then over time, Nietzsche argued this, the, this coalesced, this, this crystallized into greater and greater and more and more exalted conceptions of the deity of a divine supervisory power.

Professor Wilfred McClay:

And that the Christian God, the God of the, of the Bible was the ultimate of this, the most powerful and that all of our sense of unworthiness and guilt and the need to expedite the guilt through, you know, the Christian gospel is traceable back to this misconception about our, our sort of place in the universe, our place in things. And that it would be, it would be necessary to overthrow that notion of a, of a supervisory God, and then guilt would disappear. We would be, we would be, as you say, it would be a second innocence, a new Eden, a thorn again. You can use all of the Christian tropes, but apply it to this nontheistic outcome. And of course that hasn't happened.

John Dickson:

To put it simply Nietzsche argued that if you get rid of God, you get rid of guilt, objectively speaking. Then there's Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychology generation after Nietzsche. He too was no fan of religion, but he thought that getting rid of guilt, at least the subjective feelings of guilt was not as easy as pointing out that God probably doesn't exist. In his book Civilization and its Discontents, "Das Unbehagen in der Kultur", literally discomfort in the culture, Freud declared guilt to be, "the most important problem in the development of civilization." He said, again, "the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt."

Professor Wilfred McClay:

Freud, Sigmund Freud in his book, Civilization and its Discontents, he says that the problem of guilt, the problem of ever growing, ever accumulating and undischageable guilt, because without any sort of notion of forgiveness, of a structure of expiation, how do you, how can you ever be rid of guilt?

John Dickson:

Freud offered a therapeutic way out of guilt, psychoanalysis.

Professor Wilfred McClay:

Guilt, it was reducible to a kind of emotion. It, it was, as you said, you used the term objective guilt. It, the question of whether or not you are guilty in a forensic sense. You know, I shot the sheriff, you know, that's that doesn't really enter into psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is all about health. Do you, are you burdened by feelings of guilt? So the emotional component of guilt rather than the forensic culpability factor is really what's foremost for the therapeutic worldview. It's really, if you feel, if you, if you feel all right, if you feel at peace with the world, then guilt is not a problem, irrespective of what you've done. And that of course is an inadequate way to think about our moral responsibility in the world, our nature as morally responsible beings.

John Dickson:

Why is it inadequate? Because there's much to feel guilty about.

Professor Wilfred McClay:

Guilt arises out of a sense of responsibility that something has happened because we did it. We, we were the agent of it's happening and we live in a world in which we are because of the advance of technology, because of the advance of our scientific knowledge of the antecedence of events. We can theoretically address ourselves to almost any human problem that people of to 300 years ago would first of all, have not even been aware of because of the lack of communications and would've thought, well, this is just the way things are, the poor or the poor, disease is disease. There's, there's nothing to be done about it. Now, it seems to me that we see ourselves as potentially responsible for almost anything.

John Dickson:

We've mentioned the television show, the Good Place on the podcast before. Producer Kaley and director Mark both loved it. I watched it on their recommendation and got all the way up to episode five. I'm pretty sure apparently the good bit is still to come. Anyway, if you plan to watch the show, I'm supposed to give you a spoiler alert here. So maybe just skip the next 30 seconds. In the show, the main character Eleanor is welcomed into the Good Place after her death. The Good Place is a Heaven like utopia designed by the afterlife architect, Michael. The Good Place is ostensibly a reward for Eleanor's righteous life, but she thinks she's there by mistake, some flaw in the system. And she tries to hide the fact that her life was far from perfect. Turns out, there is a flaw in the afterlife system.

Speaker 9:

Your honor, I once stood in front of you and said, I thought there was something wrong with the point system. I finally know what it is. Life now is so complicated. It's impossible for anyone to be good enough for the Good Place. I know you don't like to learn too much about life on earth to remain impartial, but these days just buying a tomato at a grocery store means that you are unwittingly supporting toxic pesticides, exploiting labour, contributing to global warming. Humans think that they're making one choice, but they're actually making dozens of choices they don't even know they're making.

Speaker 10:

Your big revelation is life is complicated. That's not a revelation. That's a divorced woman's throw pillow. I mean, this guy chose this tomato. Those are the consequences. You don't want the consequences? Do the research, buy another tomato.

John Dickson:

The world is more complicated now, and we're told more secular. We've moved on or grown out of such juvenile notions as sin and therefore the need for forgiveness. The problem is that even if something is dead, its influence can remain for a very long time. In his essay, McClay asserts that we've lost the ability to make conscious use of the concept of sin. We don't call it sin unless you still go to church. But we still know that stealing that apple as Rob talked about earlier is wrong.

John Dickson:

What makes the situation dangerous for us? McClay writes is not only the fact that we have lost the ability to make conscious use of the concept of sin, but that we have also lost any semblance of a coherent idea of redemption. The idea that has always been required to accompany the concept of sin in the past and tame its harsh and punitive potential, the presence of vast amounts of unacknowledged sin in a culture, a culture full to the brim with its own hubristic sense of world conquering power and agency, but lacking any effectual means of achieving redemption for all the unacknowledged sin that accompany such power. This is surely a moral crisis in the making. It's powerful stuff.

Professor Wilfred McClay:

What happens when that metaphysical framework, when the notion that we live in a world in which we have a dignity that comes from a source beyond ourselves, and that this source is also a forgiving source, a source to which we can bring in honesty, our faults and the ways in which we fall, have fallen short in which way, in which we've done things that are very difficult to forgive within an earthly framework. What do we do when that's gone? I think part of what we see is there is no forgiveness. It's, it's a terrible thing to live in a moral universe in which there is no, there is no forgiveness. There's no reliable forgiveness. There is no statute of limitations. There's no erasure.

John Dickson:

One thing that happens when we don't have a place to go for redemption is we go searching for other ways to make us feel less guilty. And some of the secular strategies for managing guilt are fascinating. More on that after the break.

John Dickson:

Today's Undeceptions is brought to you by Zondervan's new book, Bullies and Saints, an honest look at the good and evil of Christian history by John Dickson. It's a little awkward doing an ad for my own book, but I'll have a crack at it. Bullies and Saints is by far the biggest book I've ever written except perhaps for my PhD. And it's also one that I reckon most listeners of this podcast will really enjoy. Especially if you're into those history focused episodes of the pod and let's face it, who isn't? I'll be frank, if you feel that Christian history is mainly a story of charity and wisdom, this book might annoy you. On the other hand,

if you think Christian history is basically a long nightmare of ignorance and hypocrisy, the evidence I amass here might annoy you too. But if you're looking for my best attempt to give a century by century account of the bullies and saints of church history, I think this might hit the spot.

John Dickson:

The experience of writing this book has I think, crushed any lingering Christian triumphalism I might have once had, but it's also given me fresh inspiration for what the original message of Christ can do in a culture. Whether in 2nd century Rome, 6th century France, 12th century England, or even 21st century America, you can pre-order the book now on Amazon or Booktopia. In fact, I'm told if you do pre-order it, it does something magical to the online algorithms for the book. So you'll be doing me a favour. Bullies and Saints by Dickson. There's a link in our show notes, or just head to [zondervan.com](http://zondervan.com)

John Dickson:

Right now, 2.2 billion people can't access water that is safe to drink. It's an extraordinary figure. And Anglican Aid, the overseas relief agency of the Anglican church is working hard to change that these are people I deeply trust and their waterworks campaign is funding local organizations in 17 countries to provide wells, boreholes, rainwater tanks, micro flush toilets, and hygiene education, all of which decreases waterborne diseases and raises living standards exponentially. And you can help make this happen in more places, head to [waterworks.org.au](http://waterworks.org.au), to learn more about the waterworks campaign. And please donate today. You can also find a link in the show notes

Professor Wilfred McClay:

Over the past summer in, especially in America in the United States. But so there, there was the good deal of it around the world, in the great campaign to destroy the statues of honoured figures for the past. And certainly the American past. It started out with Confederate generals, you know, Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, Nathan Bedford Forrest, figures like that. There's some kind of a raging need to tear these things down. And I think it, this may be an example of the craftiness of guilt that it empowers people to demonstrate their innocence by tearing down that which by either tacitly or explicitly associating themselves with it, associates themselves with the guilt inherent therein.

Rob Waller:

You know, we've seen similar things, people wanting to tear down statues of people who made money out of slave trading. I mean...

John Dickson:

That's Rob Waller again.

Rob Waller:

I mean, in the middle of Edinburgh where I live, there's a big statue in the middle of St Andrews Square. I mean, quite a lot of the big, beautiful buildings that make Edinburgh, the beautiful city it is were funded by the slave trade. And what, what do we do with that? Do we tear these statues down? Do we try to

rewrite history? Now there's a historian might have a particular view on whether or not we should try and rewrite history and white wash over what happened and pretend it didn't happen. And of course, certain countries in the world tried to do that with their history after, after world wars and after revolutions and things like that. And we don't particularly want to go down that route, but I think, I think where guilt comes in, what we like to do is we like to sort of say, well, everyone kind of bumbles along the middle.

Rob Waller:

And over here, there's some people who are like Mother Teresa, and there's some people who are like Adolf Hitler. And actually we all bumble along in the middle and we're all kind of nice people. And humanity essentially is a force for good. And science is a force for progress and so on. And we're going to, we're going to march along in the middle. And what we need to make that work is we need some Adolf Hitlers. And sometimes I think what we're doing is we're saying, you know, you are like an Adolf Hitler. And that allows me to stay in the middle of ground.

Rob Waller:

I know I'm not particularly amazing, like Mother Teresa. And of course, I'm actually deliberately choosing the example of Mother Teresa, because first of all, she is someone who a lot of people thinks absolutely fantastic, but she's also been someone who's been a victim of cancel culture and perhaps some of her attitudes and this kind of thing have come out in the wash a bit later on. So even your angels end up falling. And when you put people on a pedestal, so a thing all people are doing is they're, they're looking to say, ah, that person over there they're really guilty. And that means that I'm not particularly guilty. I don't need to look too hard at myself.

John Dickson:

You might like to go and have a listen to the Undeceptions single we recorded with Dr. Laurel Moffitt on the felling of Confederate statues in the US. We'll put a link in the show notes. This is not the time to go over the arguments about whether Confederate statues or any other statues should be pulled down. McClay's point here is broader than that. He's using the statues as an example of our growing interest at this time in finding ways to exonerate ourselves, which leads us to perhaps another rather fraught suggestion from McClay, what he sees as our modern tendency towards victimhood.

Professor Wilfred McClay:

Well, if, if part of the problem of guilt is our ever expanding range of responsibility, you know, in a technologically advanced, scientifically advanced culture, it becomes very difficult to find a way to certify your innocence, especially if there's nowhere to go to confess your sins, to kind of have that washed away. But one way of doing it is if you can be a victim, if you can identify with victims, if you can somehow see yourself as a victim, then your moral status is insured. You are, you are, you are innocent by virtue of being a victim. A victim is not an agent. The victim is the acted upon. So you're... It's a funny kind of way of cleansing yourself.

John Dickson:

It's important to emphasize that McClay is talking about those of us who adopt victimhood rather than those who have experienced genuine victimization. Though, I guess the problem is that more and more people feel that they have experienced genuine victimization. He's not the only academic to have observed this. In an article that got a lot of attention back in 2014, sociologists Campbell and Manning argue that we've moved into a victimhood culture. Though, they acknowledge that label victimhood has a lot of baggage, they argue that society has moved on from an honor culture where one might fight it out or challenge someone to a duel who's offended you to a dignity culture in the 19th and 20th century. An example would be teaching your kids that sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me. These authors argue though that we are moving into a new moral culture. Here's what they say.

Speaker 11:

A culture of victimhood is one characterized by concern with status and sensitivity to slight combined with a heavy reliance on third parties. People are intolerant of insults, even if unintentional and react by bringing them to the attention of authorities or to the public at large. People increasingly demand help from others and advertise their oppression as evidence that they deserve, respect and assistance. This only increases the incentive to publicize grievances, and it means a grieved parties are especially likely to highlight their identity as victims emphasizing their own suffering and innocence.

John Dickson:

There's a key idea, emphasize innocence. To get back to McClay's point, he writes in his essay that what we're seeing from the microaggressions on college campuses to rituals of scapegoating, public humiliation, and shaming, of multiplying, morally impermissible, utterances, and sentiments, and punishing them with disproportionate severity are visibly on the increase in modern life. It's a sign, he reckons, of a broken moral economy. We have all this stuff, all this guilt and nowhere to go for absolution. We have a huge debt, but there's no way to pay. So in other words, we have three secular strategies, one an obsession with therapeutic measures. We assuage guilt through counselling and self-improvement books and courses. Two, a growing severity in mob shaming.

John Dickson:

We cope with our own guilt by ferociously projecting worse guilt onto worse people. And thirdly, a desire to identify with or as victims because true victims we feel are the only truly innocent people among us. So if we ourselves are victims or we at least are the friends of victims, we must be the righteous. At the root of all these strategies, according to McClay is the fact that forgiveness isn't what it used to be.

John Dickson:

You say that, you know, really now forgiveness is just this random act of kindness whose chief value lies in the sense of personal relief. It gives to me the forgiver. Tell me about that.

Professor Wilfred McClay:

Yes, it's remarkable. It's remarkable. If you go to your local bookstore and look at the self-help aisle, you'll see all sorts of books on forgiveness and they all come from the perspective that John, that you've described that forgiveness is for me. You don't forgive people as an act of sort of supreme sacrifice. You know, I mean, literally forgiveness. It comes from a monetary transaction. If I forgive your debt to me, that means I have a right to that money. I loaned you a hundred dollars and I have a right to get it back or with interest, you know, and if I decide to forgive that, it means I let go of any legitimate claim I have. I treat you in a way that goes beyond justice. Because justice would require that I, that I get what my, my just deserts, but I'm, I'm suspending justice. And, and instead relying on the realm of mercy and kind of love and respect for you as a human being over and above the claims of justice.

Professor Wilfred McClay:

So it's a sacrifice, it's a sacrifice to forgive, you know, to forgive somebody, you know, you think of people growing up in Belfast during the worst of the Irish struggles, you know, Americans would say, why can't those people just forgive one another? It's hard to forgive the people who murdered your brothers. You know, it's hard to, it's a huge thing to ask of someone to let go of their righteous anger. But instead, you know, come back to your question, John, it is that... The notion is it's such a waste of energy to hate people to hold things against them. So you forgive not because you want to kind of set the moral balance right.

Professor Wilfred McClay:

Not because you want to adjust the scales of justice, but because you want to feel happy, happier, and you're happier if you just let go of things. I forgive, forgive, forget, let it go. Chill out. And that I think trivializes the weight of the claims that are being let go. That forgiveness involves, you know, giving up something to which you were entitled by the standards of justice. So I think we've trivialized it as we have so many things, but particularly forgiveness it's I think a easy, you know... Dietrich Bonhoeffer had this term 'cheap grace.' It's an example of cheap grace to yeah... And the in, let me just say this one thing in the Jewish and Christian tradition, guilt is something. Sin is something that has to be paid. You, you have to pay in some way.

Professor Wilfred McClay:

And then of course, in the earliest understanding it's a blood sacrifice, but in the Christian understanding that comes transmuted into, through the person of Jesus Christ, but same idea that the same fundamental idea that sin must be paid. And to simply say, oh, go ahead. You know, we're... I won't charge you for that one. That's trivializing the weight of the moral weight of what, what you're carrying around. And my view is that we're carrying it around whether we want to admit it to ourselves or not. The therapeutic approach doesn't ultimately work. We come face to face with our responsibility in the world.

John Dickson:

Let's press pause. I've got a five minute Jesus for you. I know it's not everyone's cup of tea, but one of my favourite prayers in the traditional prayer book, a prayer my wife and I say almost every day together,

brings together the Christian promise of release from objective guilt and relief from subjective shame. The prayer goes like this, Merciful Lord grant to your faithful people, pardon and peace that they may be cleansed from all their sins and serve you with a quiet mind, pardon and peace, cleanse from sins and living with a quiet mind. This captures the removal of objective guilt and rest from psychological shame. And Jesus did teach something similar. There's a little noticed phrase where he brings together both this objective and subjective elements of forgiveness. It's in the account of Jesus interaction with a sinful woman at the home of Simon the Pharisee.

John Dickson:

It is one of my favourite accounts of Jesus life in all his biography. Basically Jesus is invited to the home of a Pharisee, a religious conservative, no doubt the house is filled with other religious conservatives and a sinful woman, that's how she's described, walks into the house. And, you know, she's gate crashing the party and she weeps behind Jesus. Wets his feet with her tears and then wipes his feet with her hair and kisses them and pours perfume on them. It's really dramatic. And of course the Pharisee is outraged and thinks that, you know, Jesus can't be a prophet if he's letting this woman touch him. And then Jesus sort of turns on his host and defends the woman by telling a parable. And basically the parable is that there's two people who owed a money lender different amounts, one owes 500 silver coins, the other 50 silver coins and the money lender mercifully forgives the debt of both.

John Dickson:

And then Jesus says to Simon, you know, who do you reckon is going to love the money lender more? And Simon gets it right, Simon says, yeah, of course the person who's had the bigger debt forgiven. Now so far, it seems like a story of relief from objective guilt. And that is surely the principle message, the most important part of the Christian message. I mean, it'd be no use to us to feel relief from shame and still actually be guilty before God. And yet it would still be a great benefit to us to be objectively forgiven by God, even if we couldn't find subjective relief from shame, but this story moves on to speak of this woman's psychological state. She has profound joy and love as a result of the notion that she might be forgiven. See what Jesus does is he turns to his host and says, when I came in, you didn't greet me with a kiss.

John Dickson:

You didn't, you know, wash my feet or anything like that. You didn't put oil on my, on my head, but this woman has been doing all those things for me ever since I walked in here. And, and so you can see that her many sins have been forgiven because she feels such great love. So there's this real sense in the story that the joy and love of relief that comes with forgiveness is a key part of what Jesus wanted the woman to experience. And then the text says, Jesus said to her, your sins are forgiven. He gives her this sort of dramatic statement of objective forgiveness. The other guests began to, you know, say amongst themselves, who is this who forgives sins? You know, they know that only God can forgive sins and here is Jesus claiming to forgive sins. And that is, you know, first and foremost, what the account is about, Jesus' extraordinary authority to forgive people's sins, something only God could do, but the woman's joy and relief is definitely part of the story.

John Dickson:

And so part of the promise, because the whole thing ends with Jesus saying to the woman, your faith has saved you, now go in peace. So here is in the climax of the story, both objective and subjective elements in the Christian faith, his parting words, your faith has saved you, that's the objective element, but also go in peace, that's the subjective element. I suppose it's possible to interpret the word peace to mean objective reconciliation with the almighty. But I think that's a mistake. This woman has experienced shame, a public shame. Even at this dinner party, she was a scandal, but Jesus wants to send her on her way, assured of both objective mercy from God, the relief from a debt she couldn't pay, but also the blessing of peace, a sense of relief from shame, which produces joy and love. Go in peace. So I think my prayer book gets it right. The message of Christ provides pardon and peace cleansing from sins, and a quiet mind. You can press play now.

Professor Wilfred McClay:

How can we exist? How can we exist with this ever mounting weight of sin? And that actually is a question that Freud asks. He sees civilization, you know, his whole view of civilization is that it's very uneasy thing in which repression of our instinctual desires is absolutely necessary. And that repression and the persistence of this instinctual desires mean that we're constantly shoving things down. We're creating new sources of guilt individually, civilizationally and he says, that's one of the big problems is how are we going to deal with this? Of course, for Freud, the return to religion was a return to childhood not to be thinkable. One must, one must push on. And the analytic attitude as Philip Rieff calls it, is inescapable for, for Freud. Well, I'm, I'm not so sure that we can bear the weight of all this sort of no exit guilt that we've taken on, we're taking on ourselves. And the worst part is we don't even recognize it as such. We don't, we no longer have the categories to describe, to call things by their real names.

Professor Wilfred McClay:

And I think it's very important to recover that, whether that means a full fledged return to the sort of christened them of 500 years ago or, or whatever. I, you know, that's not for me to say, I'm a historian. I'm certainly not a prophet, but I think there's some way in which the enlightenment story, the Enlightenment Project is Alasdair MacIntyre calls it, has clearly hit a barrier that it can't surmount and something else, some return to an understanding of our culpability, of our need for forgiveness to come back to your question, our perpetual need for forgiveness and the humility that we ought to have in the face of that as a sort of fundamental fact of our makeup, that's something I think we can't get away from. We have to contend with somehow or other. And, you know, for those, those of you who are sceptics, you know, the religions of the past had their faults, but they at least took a fair account of the nature of sin.

John Dickson:

Earlier, we spoke to Rob Waller about the difference between true guilt and false guilt. True guilt is when we say steal an apple, right? We've actually done something wrong and we know it. Just like Pinocchio, who wants to become a real boy and is given Jiminy Cricket to be his conscience. Freud saw guilt as a sign that we're taking responsibility for ourselves and our actions. The feeling of guilt helps us recognize that

we haven't lived up to our own standards, whatever those standards might be. And that's a good thing. A world without guilt would be like living without Jiminy Cricket, that little voice that tells us we've gone the wrong way. What religion does, if nothing else is to take those natural feelings of guilt and dispense with them. We don't have to live with them. We have somewhere to go to erase them. Christianity teaches the importance of asking forgiveness, forgiveness from those we've wronged and forgiveness from God. The one to whom we are all ultimately responsible.

John Dickson:

I want to ask you about forgiveness as a public health issue. This is something that you have claimed I want to hear about it.

Tyler VanderWeele:

Yeah. So now over the last 30 years or so researchers, many of whom come from clinical psychology, have tried to empirically study forgiveness, the consequences of forgiveness, the consequences of lack of forgiveness, and how to promote forgiveness. And...

John Dickson:

That's Tyler VanderWeele. We met him in the last episode when we explored mental health. Tyler is an epidemiologist and statistician at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. He's been doing some really interesting research into whether religion can actually have a positive impact on both mental and physical health. Go back and have a listen to what he had to say on how religious service attendance can protect against depression and suicide. Seriously.

Tyler VanderWeele:

The evidence has increased over the years that forgiveness is certainly contributes to mental health, that it lowers depression, that it lowers anxiety. It promotes hope. And, and some indication though evidence is less clear that it also contributes to physical health and models of forgiveness to promote forgiveness have, have been developed.

John Dickson:

Now, McClay argues that we've cheapened forgiveness. His concern about the therapeutic approach to forgiveness is that it becomes more about the forgiver and their power and wellbeing. But what if we tried to get back to more of what forgiveness is really about? What if modern day forgiveness wasn't so cheap? Tyler is trying to figure out whether forgiveness can really make you healthier.

Tyler VanderWeele:

The one prominent model that we've looked at is the REACH model where each letter of reach stands for part of the process. R: recall the hurt. E: empathize with the offender, try to understand the offender's perspective without justifying their action or denying, you know, your feelings, but understand the offender. A: altruistic gift, realizing that forgiveness is something you can give or, or withhold. C: commit, make a decision to forgive if possible, do so publicly and H: hold on to that forgiveness, realizing that, you

know, the emotions are going to come and go. And, and these, these models have been developed into clinical interventions to help people who to forgive, who are struggling with forgiveness. They've been tested in randomized trials and have been found in randomized trials to be effective at reducing depression and anxiety and improving hope in addition to promoting forgiveness.

Tyler VanderWeele:

And right now, where we're actually testing a workbook intervention of, you know, this, this REACH approach to forgiveness in five different countries with several thousand participants to see if, you know, if even reducing these principles into a do-it yourself workbook, to help people to forgive who want to forgive and are struggling to do so might have similar effects. And if, if this is successful and I think there are profound public health implications to the work. Being wronged is an incredibly common experience, struggles with anger are, are very common and that rumination over the hurt or the suppression of it, trying to ignore it or pretend it didn't happen, that has really negative long term mental health consequences. And, and forgiveness is a way to become free of that. It's not excusing the wrong, it's not giving up justice.

Tyler VanderWeele:

One can forgive and pursue a just outcome. Forgiveness really is just replacing ill will towards the offender with good will and strong evidence now that when that's done, the victim's freed, they've got better mental health and possibly better physical health as well. So, because the experience of being wronged is so common and because we think we've found an intervention that can, you know, help relieve these feelings of anger and can promote mental health, can reduce depression and anxiety. If this workbook is successful, then I think we have an intervention that can be disseminated widely to address questions, not just of forgiveness and reconciliation within relationships, but also mental health. And so in that regard, I think an argument can be made that forgiveness is in fact, a public health issue.

John Dickson:

Thanks for listening today. I hope we haven't made you feel too guilty unless of course you need to. Without adding to the guilt, can I just say that if you like what we're doing here at Undeceptions, please consider supporting the project. Researching, writing, and speaking to let the truth out. Any amount is appreciated. Just in the last few days, individuals have gone to the undeceptions.com website, clicked the big donate button, and they've sent us seriously \$48. One person sent \$43. There's \$600, yikes, \$18 and \$30. You know who you are. And I'm really grateful. While you're at the website, send us a question and we'll try and answer it in a later episode. And if you're interested in other good podcasts, check out Salt, conversations with Jenny Salt, part of the Eternity Podcast Network. Next episode, a topic I have a real interest in, religious freedom. See ya.

John Dickson:

Undeceptions is hosted by me, John Dickson produced by Kaley Payne and directed by Mark Hadley. And this is where I'd admit my guilt for the way I treat you if I was somewhere else. Editing by Nathaniel Schumack. Special thanks to our series sponsor Zondervan for making this Undeception possible.

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Speaker 13:

Brought to you by the Eternity Podcast Network.

Speaker 14:

Episode 39.

John Dickson:

Fay? Tim Fay? Tina Fey,

Speaker 14:

Tina Fey. Episode 39, chime four in three, two...

John Dickson:

Here's one example from Tina Fey's TV show 30 Rock. Really? That's what it's called? 30 Rock?

Speaker 14:

30 Rock.

John Dickson:

Okay.

Speaker 16:

Oh boy.

Speaker 14:

I know.

Speaker 16:

Really.

Speaker 14:

Okay. Tina Fey threw me. Okay, here we go again. Take two in three, two. Ah, does that sound. Episode 39 chime four, take two in three, two

John Dickson:

Here's one example from Tina Fey's well known TV show 30 Rock with Alec. Is that bold one?

Speaker 14:

Oh God.

John Dickson:

Okay. One more, one more time. Here we go.

John Dickson:

Here's one example from Tina Fey's...