

F O R G I V I N G S E L F

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“I just don’t know if can forgive myself.” These words are uttered countless times in a counseling context. Adultery, abortion, violence, lying, and neglect...the list of sins precipitating the desire for self-forgiveness are innumerable.

How does a believer make sense of and respond to this strong sense of guilt in a manner that brings peace? What words need to be spoken? What penance needs to be done? How do you get to the point that you can put the past in the past?

We must begin by understanding the meaning of forgiveness. The dictionary defines forgiving as “the act of giving up resentment or claim of requit.” This means that forgiveness is an action not an emotion. It is something we do; not a feeling we must try to generate.

This frees us from the common obstacle of hypocrisy. It is no more hypocritical to forgive before the emotions “feel right” than it is to get out of bed before having first cup of coffee. Hypocrisy would entail saying you enjoyed getting out of bed; that forgiveness was easy or pleasant

What is this hard commitment called forgiveness? Ken Sande, in his book *The Peacemaker*, summarizes forgiveness in four promises:

- I will not think about this incident;
- I will not use this incident against you;
- I will not talk about this incident to others;
- I will not allow this incident to hinder our personal relationship.

These promises make forgiveness tangible. They are commitments out of which the emotions of warmth, trust, and intimacy can emerge. Each is rooted in the example of Christ’s forgiveness for us (Ephesians 4:32). God promises to “remember our sin no more” (Jeremiah 31:34). No record is kept of our sin (Psalm 130:3-4; I Corinthians 13:5). Our sin is not held over our head as an intimidation tactic (Psalm 103:12).

While concrete, these promises are not necessarily easy to keep. Forgiveness is always an act of grace — it can never be earned or coerced. This is why it stretches us so, because it is never “fair.” We are never more like Christ than when we forgive.

This is how we forgive. The basic principles of forgiveness are always the same. The goal is not to generate an emotion, but to appropriate the promises of God. While freedom from guilt and a clean conscience is often our goal, living in light of these promises is the means to that end.

APPLYING GOD’S FORGIVENESS

There are many times that we do not utilize what God provides. Like a drowning man too panicked to notice the life preserver floating a few feet away, we drown in the flood of guilt while the cleansing power of the cross rests in the out-stretched hand of a loving Father.

The primary questions regarding forgiveness are: (1) who has been offended?; and, (2) whose standard of restitution will be enforced? Answering these questions will help us determine whether we need self-forgiveness or something else altogether.

Question #1: Who has been offended by our sin?

Psalm 51:3-4 reads, “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.”

David’s sin was “ever before him,” on his mind, plaguing his conscience. He was suffering greatly because of his sin with Bathsheba. But who does he say he sinned against? “God and God only.” David’s sin was not a violation of his own holiness — he had no holiness of his own. It was not a violation of his will — his will was sinful from the moment he was conceived in his mother’s womb (Psalm 51:5).

Is there any danger in believing that I need to forgive myself? Yes, when we believe we need to forgive ourselves we are building off the frustrating presupposition that our nature — the flesh (I Peter 2:11) — is capable of being pure. Often when people say “I just can’t forgive myself” what they mean is “I don’t want to admit that I am the kind of person who could do what I did.”

Understanding that we will be engaged in a life-long battle to put to death our sinful flesh (Romans 7:15-20; 8:12-13) prevents this escalating frustration. The desire to forgive oneself is often an indicator of a type of pride. A pride of believing I can please God in my own strength.

Question #2: Whose standard of restitution will we enforce?

Another way of saying this is, what action must I take to cleanse my conscience? We all know instinctively that when we sin something needs to be done to make it right (Romans 1:18-32).

Paul clearly teaches, “And you, who were dead in your trespasses...God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Colossians 2:13-14).

The reason for the cross was to cancel the debt of sin we owed but were incapable of paying. The desire to forgive oneself is the desire to not fully lean on God’s grace. By our desire we are saying, “God, you should not have to pay for this one. I knew better; it was stupid. I’ll clean up this mess.”

What is the danger in this type of thinking? It generates a hierarchy of sin. It divides sin into the categories of “needs *God’s* forgiveness” and “needs *my* forgiveness.” This type of thinking reinforces one of the foundational elements of sin — a desire to be independent of God — that I can acquire satisfying forgiveness apart from Christ and the cross. A.W. Tozer said, “That part of our life we rescue from the cross is that part of our life that plagues us.”

WHAT CAN I DO THEN?

Am I powerless against my plaguing guilt? Must I passively wait until God gets around to cleansing my conscience? Is my only hope that moral pain slowly numbs itself? Yes, no, no. We are powerless with reference to our guilt, but we need not be passive with God's power over our guilt.

Let's return to the four promises. These promises not only summarize what it means to forgive but they also summarize what it means to be forgiven. We must actively claim and act in light of these promises of forgiveness.

Promise 1 Applied: *God will not think about this sin.*

We are called to have the "mind of Christ" (Philippians 2:5). This means thinking God's thoughts. If God has promised to forget our sin, it is wrong for us to remember it. According to Romans 12:2, we must "take every thought captive." When the memory attacks our mind we should respond by saying, "I chose to see myself as God sees me —forgiven. I will ponder the great grace that makes this possible."

Promise 2 Applied: *God will not use this sin against you.*

After repentance, the eternal penalty of our sin is cancelled. Part of what people want when they speak of self-forgiveness is to stop beating themselves up over their sin. If the Great Judge has granted pardon, are you not a greater judge to enforce your own punishment? Allowing God to be Lord is allowing Him to have the final word in all aspects of your life — even your guilt.

Promise 3 Applied: *God will not bring this sin up to others.*

There is no vicious gossip within the Trinity or among the angels. An extension of not dwelling on our sin is to not abuse ourselves in conversation with others. "You wouldn't think I am a good Christian if you really knew me," we say recalling our sin. This is a violation of applying God's forgiveness. We are to be humble out of worship for God's grace.

Promise 4 Applied: *God will not allow this sin to hinder His personal relationship with you.*

Do you allow your sin to be an obstacle in your relationship with God or others? Do you avoid meeting new people because of this sin? Do you resist a certain ministry opportunity because you feel unworthy? Quit reinforcing the idea that God allows sin to inhibit his relationship with you. Act forgiven based on the confidence that God keeps His promises.

Do not beat yourself up because you wanted to forgive yourself. Let this be the first thing to which you commit to apply God's forgiveness. The appropriate response to God's great forgiveness is worship (Luke 7:36-50, *especially v.47*). That is the beauty of God's grace. It transforms the disgust we feel about our sin into adoration of a loving Heavenly Father.