

How Can I Ever Forgive Myself (Part 4)

We've all blown it sometime. We've sinned, often grievously. Our sins have wreaked havoc in our own lives and in the lives of others. As we've discussed in the past few articles, one of our biggest struggles is to forgive ourselves instead of allowing that sin to just keep wreaking havoc in our lives. In the past three articles, we have defined forgiving ourselves. Now let's get down to brass tacks. What steps can we take to truly enjoy God's forgiveness and be free within it?

I'm going to share 11 steps in all. To explain each step thoroughly will take a few articles.

Steps to Forgiving Yourself

Step #1: Own your sin

It doesn't matter what anyone else did or how angry they made you, you weren't supposed to sin (**Ephesians 4:26**). Stop justifying, minimizing, excusing, rationalizing, blaming, and equivocating; start owning. I know it is painful. I know it is hard. But this is the first and greatest step to forgiving yourself. The best way to do this is to listen for your self-defenses and dismantle them. Listen for your "buts." That is, listen for that little voice that says, "I'm sorry, but..." "I know I was wrong, but..." "I shouldn't have done that, but..." Then define those defenses.

For instance, when you say, "Honey, I'm sorry I yelled at you, but when you look at me that way, I just can't help myself." Now you are justifying. You seem to believe that what someone else does justifies your sin. It doesn't.

Or, when you say, "Son, I know I was wrong for mistreating you that way, but that's just how my father raised me." Now you are blaming. It's not your sin; it's really your dad's. Not hardly. Maybe your father sinned too, but his sin isn't your fault and your sin isn't his fault.

Or when you say, "I shouldn't have lied to you about where I was going, but it's not like I was covering up adultery; it was just a game of golf with the guys." Now you are rationalizing. Because you weren't committing what you think is a bigger sin, you think the "smaller" one should be overlooked.

Dismantle your self-defenses and own your sin. As **Romans 3:23** says, we are all sinners. Your self-defenses are only fooling yourself. We all know you are a sinner. And God knows your specific sins. If you sinned against someone, they'll know it was a sin. Your defenses won't fool them. So just own it.

Certainly, there is a time to address when someone else has also sinned against you. But now is not the time. Don't wait until others admit their sinfulness to own yours. That waiting game won't help you live with yourself at all. It is just a trick of the devil to keep you living under the shadow of your own sins.

Step #2: Own *all* your sinning

Many recognize their need for forgiveness because of some monolithic, humongous, pink-elephant-in-the-room kind of sin. It is too easy to be focused on the "biggies" and forget about everything else. But if you truly want to forgive yourself, you have to own all your sinning. There are very likely "smaller" attitudes and sins that actually lead to the "big one." For instance, when David had to forgive himself for his adultery with Bathsheba, he needed also to think about the lust that initially led to the adultery. If he never dealt with the lust, it would likely lead him to the same "big sin" again even though he had regretted and repented of the adultery. I'm not saying you have to uncover and specifically confess every single sin you've ever committed in order to be forgiven or forgive yourself. I'm dealing with the practical side that says you may own your big sin, but your little ones will keep carrying you back to it if you don't deal with them as well.

The best way to own all your sinning is what folks in 12-step recovery call "a searching and fearless moral inventory." You need to search in the nooks and crannies of your heart and your behavior to see what skeletons are lurking there. Dig them out. Dust them off. Shatter them.

The best way I've ever seen to be honest about this is to do a "resentment" inventory. It is tough and time-consuming. Here's how it works. On a sheet of paper, draw four columns. In the first, list the name of the person, institution, or concept that you are harboring resentment and anger toward. If you are angry at your father for missing your 16th birthday party, list your father. If you are angry at the bank for charging you an overdraft fee, list the bank. If you are angry at God for whatever reason, list Him by name. If you are angry at the IRS, put that down.

In the second column, next to the name of your resentment, list the actual reason for the resentment. You resent your father for missing the birthday party. You resent the bank for the overdraft charge. And so on.

In the third column, list how the event affected you. Does it impact you financially? Did it damage your self-confidence, your sense of worth, your ability to connect with people? Does it negatively impact your plans for the future?

After you have done all of this for every person, institution, or concept on your list then start working in the fourth column. In this column you need to list your part in it. That may mean your part in whatever caused the action in the first place, or it may be your part in hanging on to the resentment. For instance, with the bank and the overdraft charge, you are likely going to list your own action that caused the bank's. Dig deeper than, "I wrote a bad check." Your part may be procrastination on balancing your checkbook. Or it may be dishonesty in writing what you knew was going to be a bad check. It may be an arrogant sense of entitlement that since you are going through a tough time you think the bank ought to give you extra money or at least let you slide on writing a bad check now and then. On the other hand, you probably didn't cause your father to miss your 16th birthday party. But you may need to list that since you are now 45 you should have talked to your father a long time ago about this and brought about reconciliation. What hindered you from talking to him? Pride? Fear? A desire for vengeance? A desire to discount the good advice he gave you by holding a mistake against him?

This inventory will open your eyes to all your sinning in a way you cannot fathom until you've gone through it.

These two steps get you well on your way to forgiving yourself. We'll continue in next week's article.

--Edwin L. Crozier