

How Can I Ever Forgive Myself? (Part 1)

We've all been there. We've done something incredibly wrong. We've hurt a friend or family member; we've hurt our relationship with them; we've hurt ourselves; we've hurt God; we've hurt our relationship with Him. Not to mention it isn't one of those seemingly minor errors that we can pay back. It wasn't simply a lost book that we could replace or a broken window that we could pay for. It was a betrayal, a knife in the heart, fired shot that can never be recalled.

We confess our sin to God, and we ask for forgiveness. We may struggle with believing the promise of **I John 1:9**. But we know it is true; we believe it. We continue serving God based on it.

We know the teaching of **Matthew 5:23-24**. Before bringing our gift to the altar, that is, before seeking forgiveness from God, we must reconcile with our brother/sister. So we do that. We go to them, confessing our wrong, seeking forgiveness, and striving to reconcile. They may even accept our pleas and forgive us.

But then we have to go home and look at ourselves in the mirror. We have to face ourselves. And that seems to be the hardest part. I know I have a much easier time forgiving others than I do myself. I have a much easier time forgiving Marita for the times in fights that she has blown up at me and said unkind things than I do forgiving myself for the things I've said to her. I know I have a much easier time forgiving my kids for their acts of rebellion against their mom and me than I do forgiving myself for my ungodly outbursts of wrath and clamoring at them. I have a much easier time forgiving my brethren for their gossip, backbiting, and slanderous statements against me than I do forgiving myself for the times I've engaged in the same behavior. Even today I remember slips and stumbles in years past that I berate, belittle, and punish myself for.

I know I need to learn that if God can forgive me, I can forgive me. But how? Let's take a few articles to deepen our understanding of this.

Before we figure out exactly how to do this, let's deal with some potential objections. Let's first recognize what forgiving ourselves is not.

Forgiving ourselves is not...

1. ...acting like you didn't do anything wrong or "that bad."

I can't possibly forgive myself if I'm saying that I didn't do anything wrong. Claiming that it wasn't that bad is not forgiveness; it's minimizing. It's justification. It's excusing. It's denying. You can't forgive yourself until you look your sins and sinfulness dead in the face and realize how truly awful it is.

2. ...getting away with sin.

Sometimes I don't want to forgive others because I think that means letting them get away with something. It occurs to me that I do the same thing with me. I know I deserve punishment so I want to hang on to the awfulness of what I did. I want to punish myself. I want to berate and belittle myself. This seems logical. After all, sin deserves some punishment, right? The problem is this is really a copout. This is actually an attempt to somehow pay for my sins. Maybe if I punish myself enough I can expiate my sins and earn my way out of them. But that just won't work. Forgiveness is not overlooking sin. Forgiveness is facing sin and dealing with it from the standpoint of love.

3. ...shifting blame or avoiding responsibility for sin.

Adam couldn't forgive himself for eating the fruit because he claimed it wasn't his fault. It was Eve's. Eve couldn't forgive herself, because she claimed it wasn't her fault. It was the serpent's. I'm not forgiving myself when I'm figuring out how it was someone else's fault. I'm not forgiving myself when I'm trying to claim it was really someone else who sinned. Again, that's denial. That is a defense mechanism intended to overlook sin, not deal with it. Forgiveness only begins when I take full responsibility and ownership of my sins.

4. ...avoiding consequences.

Under point 2, I was hoping that if I put enough consequences on myself I could pay for my sins. That doesn't work. What is truly amazing is that at the exact same time I'm trying to punish myself with self-induced consequences, I can be trying to avoid the natural consequences. They are just too much to bear. But forgiveness is not the same as avoiding consequences. One may forgive himself for all his drinking and drunkenness, but his cirrhosis of the liver will not go away. I may forgive myself for those outbursts of wrath at my wife mentioned above. But the scar on the relationship is there and I have to rebuild that trust. Forgiving myself doesn't just take that away. I may forgive

myself for poor financial stewardship, but that doesn't take away the monthly payments or the house that still needs to be sold.

5. ...getting rid of your sorrow and mourning.

Godly sorrow leads to repentance according to **II Corinthians 7:10**. Repentance and forgiveness do not necessarily remove the godly sorrow. That sorrow may continue for a long time. Forgiveness often takes a lot of mourning over the loss of the ideal self. It takes a lot of mourning over losing what you wanted to be, what you should have been, to accept what you are. Forgiving yourself doesn't mean you lose all regrets and sadness about your past actions.

Yes, we need to forgive ourselves. Lack of forgiveness can paralyze us spiritually. But we need to understand what forgiving ourselves is not before we can move on to what it is, which we will do in next week's article.

If you're like me, you have lots to forgive yourself for. Don't beat yourself up too much about that today. Rather, let me commend you. You are doing the right thing today by gathering with God's people and worshiping with them the only one through whom true forgiveness is possible. Thank you for being here to support others who are on this journey of forgiveness with you.

--Edwin L. Crozier.