

The Cost of Self-Forgiveness

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This article is presented to show the fallacy of the belief that it is necessary, or even possible, for human beings to forgive themselves.

A FUNDAMENTAL ENERGY OF PSYCHOLOGY and the self-help industry is the emphasis on *self*, and this preoccupation is not biblical. For example, the Scriptures teach that we are to esteem others better than ourselves; yet most psychological goals revolve around improving the way we look at ourselves. This training of the human being to search within himself for happiness and fulfillment has ushered in tremendous pain and regret. One specific example is the psychological industry's injunction to "forgive oneself."

Some people just cannot seem to "get well." These are hurting people, and their pain is often apparent in all that they do. The same problems surface over and over again. Just as they begin to make progress, they fall back again. Working with these people can be a frustrating and helpless experience. They seem to live under some generalized sense of guilt. Their past will not remain past. In numerous cases like this we hear them saying, "I just can't forgive myself." And so they (once again) fall into condemnation, and (once again) lapse into a major depression, and the cycle starts over again. As we work with these unfortunate and hurting people, we try to lead them into the forgiving of self. "God has forgiven you," we cry, "and so you must forgive yourself." If they can ever get past the point of self-recrimination, we think, they'll finally have it behind them. And so we assign a misdiagnosis, if you will, that can be more hurtful than helpful.

Many of these hapless souls are eventually referred out to the friendly, neighborhood psychologist. I mean, after all, we really want the best for our people; so even though we experience a pang of guilt, we know we've done all we can. We breathe a sigh of relief and await the good report of healing. But, alas, it does not arrive, and soon we are hearing again the old refrain, "But I just can't forgive myself!"

We wonder where we go wrong, when all the time we are swimming against the tide of biblical truths—truths that teach us that if we seek to save our life we will lose it, but if we lose our life for His sake, we save it. To the psychologically minded, this is "mumbo-jumbo." Indeed.

Robert Jones says in *The Journal of Pastoral Practice*: “But has [the client] identified her real problem? Or has she become stuck in one particularly unpleasant symptom of an as-yet-unidentified root problem? Is self-forgiveness the solution? Or is there a deeper solution to a deeper problem?” He goes on to point out that the Bible speaks not one word about forgiving oneself. It speaks of vertical forgiveness (God forgiving us), and horizontal forgiveness (when we forgive another). But nowhere are we instructed in internal forgiveness.

A Personal Revelation

This particular article is difficult to write, because I once believed all of this myself, and I was wrong. I shudder to think back to the days when I imparted this erroneous teaching to hurting souls, because I realize now that I might have done more harm than good. And so I have had to repent and go on from there, with thankfulness that God had given me understanding. It is all right to be wrong; it is not all right to continue in wrongdoing when God reveals the truth.

I have come to realize that trying to lead someone down the road towards the forgiving of self is like placing a sentence upon a person without the possibility of parole. It is as productive as comparing cabbage and lemons. And it can set a soul upon a path of pursuing a nonexistent goal that is impossible to realize.

Women, especially, often try for years to forgive themselves, particularly of past sexual abuse, and continually fail. They fail because they are attempting the impossible. Forgiving oneself is not a biblical principle. They are trying to do something God has never asked them to do.

What really happens is that, often, these people somehow short circuit and fail to accept and apply God's forgiveness to their own lives. Eventually, because of this false instruction, and trying to accomplish the impossible, they just give up. They become discouraged, feeling they have tried everything and have failed. They no longer seek healing, but resign themselves to a fictional version of “bearing their cross.”

Bearing the Cross?

It is true that Jesus instructed us to take up our cross and follow Him, but He spoke this in the same breath with “deny [yourself]” (Matthew 16:24). A focus upon oneself, therefore, cannot constitute the bearing of one's cross. The gist of the problem rests in the modern concept of victimization. As a society, we have bought into the victim mentality hook, line, and sinker. No one is guilty of anything anymore, because everyone is a victim of someone, or something else,

so therefore they cannot help what they do. The wife abuser is not guilty—not really—because he learned the behavior from his father. The teenager who shoots and kills three of his classmates did not mean to do it—not really—it’s just that he has been so mistreated. Even the terrorist bomber finds sympathy, because he “never had the opportunity to develop socially and emotionally (no mention of spiritually).”

So along comes that friendly, neighborhood psychologist who tells us the victim must save himself—an impossible goal. The Bible tells us that man is guilty, and cannot possibly save himself!

I personally sought for many years to forgive myself for the way I raised my children. As an alcoholic single mother, one can only imagine some of the hurt I must have inflicted upon my little ones. Many were the nights I wept into my pillow, remembering the harm I must have caused. Long after coming into the truth of God’s wonderful plan of salvation, I still wept for them. How well I recall one particular night in the prayer room when I was praying, I thought, all alone. I was crying out to God with heartbreaking sobs, when a brother came alongside to try to help. He told me these words that night: “Sister, you’ve got to forgive yourself. If you don’t, you’ll never make it.”

He meant well. That’s the problem—we all mean well. We truly care about the hurting and long to reach out with healing balm. But repeating psychobabble is not the way to help. If you doubt this, think of what that brother’s words meant to a hopeless, broken heart.

I am not asking for sympathy for my plight. The Lord is faithful to those who love Him, and led me to the liberating truth that I was only a sinner saved by His grace. Nothing more. Nothing less. He forgave my past. He forgave the things I did to my children. But for me to stand up and say, “I can’t forgive myself!” only brought disappointment to a caring, giving God.

As I began to pore over the Bible biographies of very wicked men who were recipients of the grace of God, I began to understand and receive His forgiveness for my own wicked life. As this happened, I came to realize the problem had never been an inability to forgive myself—it was an inability to accept the fact that God had truly cared enough to forgive me. I have later learned this is the most common reason for the failure to “forgive oneself.”

Again going to *The Journal of Pastoral Practice*, we learn there are a host of possible points at which a believer may experience a breakdown in properly receiving God’s forgiveness. Perhaps the person has failed to see his sin as a direct offense against God. David, in his memorable Psalm of repentance, cried out, “Against thee, thee only, have I sinned... (51:4). This is a very common condition in today’s world where sin is no longer called sin. After all, why should

one confess a “disease” and repent of it? And, of course, where there is no repentance there is no forgiveness.

Too often, we view God as someone to pal around with on Sunday morning. This kind of God, we reason, does not actually see us as grievous sinners, but as kids who have been abused and mistreated and so He “understands” why we do the things we do—so why the need to confess and repent? Again, no repentance, no forgiveness.

Another view of God is that of a small, very limited God. We have placed Him in a box, therefore, we fail to grasp just how big He really is. Only a big God can forgive the worst kinds of sinners (and on a deep level, we know that’s us, even though we use all the euphemisms to cover it up). Since He’s not big enough to forgive the worst, we do not ask for and receive forgiveness.

We must not forget that we can believe God has not forgiven us because we continue in the same old sins. When we do not grow spiritually but remain weak and carnal, it will not be long before we resort to the old sins of which we were forgiven. J. R. Ensey explains, “He repeats the same sin because, in terms of growth, he is the same person. His stunted sanctification results in repeated defeat at the hands of this besetting sin. And his ongoing ‘inability to forgive himself’ is a veiled surrender to its binding power.”

So we sin, and at first we seek forgiveness. But after we have been forgiven time and time again for the same sin, we are soon too ashamed to go back to our loving Father. We turn our faces away, much like Adam and Eve did when they heard God calling in the cool of the day.

Perfectionists are often among the last to learn “self-forgiveness.” Perfectionists are demanding of themselves, often placing strict and rigid demands on their time and work and lifestyle that God Himself does not require. The result is that they fail to live up to their own standards of perfection. Robert Jones says, “His longing for self-forgiveness arises from his failure to measure up to his own standards of performance, his own image of how good he is or ought to be.”

We can begin to see how keeping the focus upon self and continually looking within will dwarf our vision and twist our thinking. The failure to “forgive oneself” is, as a result of this self-centeredness, actually rooted in pride. Martin and Deidre Bobgan state, “Confessing our sin to God and to one another and then receiving forgiveness from God and one another should result in humility and gratitude. Not receiving and believing God’s forgiveness, either by not confessing sin or by holding onto a self-righteousness that says, ‘I can’t forgive myself,’ is prideful and ungrateful. It places one’s own evaluation over God’s...” We learn to view our own sins as bigger than God and His grace.

To lead one, therefore, to seek self-forgiveness not only pilots them toward an unobtainable goal, it fortifies them in the sin of pride. Proverbs 16:5 warns, “Every one that is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord: though hand join in hand, he shall not be unpunished.

Endnotes:

Bobgan, Martin and Deidre, “James Dobson Believes in Forgiving Self, But...”
www.psychohersey-aware.org.

J. R. Ensey, *Christian Counseling from Scripture*.

Robert D. Jones, *The Journal of Pastoral Practice*, 10.4.

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