

How Do I Forgive Myself?

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Today we turn our attention to a very tough subject: self-forgiveness. Learning to forgive ourselves can be a monumental struggle.

You will hear a lot of sermons on accepting God's forgiveness and learning to forgive others, but you won't hear many sermons on self-forgiveness. The sermons you do hear on self-forgiveness are not usually helpful, and that's unfortunate. Many of us are torn apart by regret and shame. We find it easier to forgive others than ourselves.

When doing research for this sermon I was quite surprised at how some people in the Christian church handle self-forgiveness. Some say the Bible does not teach us to forgive ourselves. We just need to repent, accept God's forgiveness and move on. If only it were that simple, right? Others say self-forgiveness is just another way of saying that we don't have to own our sins and mistakes. Well that is not my experience.

Like many of you, I have struggled with forgiving myself for things I have done. I have sinned, made mistakes, disappointed people, and said things I should not have said. Yes, your pastor is not perfect. I know you are shocked. And there are times when I have a tough time getting over my regrets. They linger and steal my joy. I play my mistakes repeatedly in my head. "I can't believe I said that. I can't believe I did that. What was I thinking? I knew better than that."

I have confessed to God and accepted God's forgiveness, and I am grateful. But sometimes I struggle with forgiving myself. My problem is not that I can't own my mistakes; my problem is that sometimes my mistakes own me.

I suspect I am not the only one here who struggles with this problem. You can't seem to get over that terrible mistake. You can't forget that awful thing you said to the person you love. You obsess over that sin you committed that hurt people. You replay the pain you inflicted on another person. You may go to church and pray for forgiveness and accept God's forgiveness, and the person you hurt may have even forgiven you. But you find it hard to forgive yourself. Your pain and regret hold you hostage in life. You don't allow yourself to experience pleasure or joy because you think you don't deserve it. You beat yourself up and put yourself down. You drag your regret around like a ball and chain and you are exhausted. It takes a lot of energy to carry around shame, guilt and regret.

If you or someone you know struggles with shame and self-forgiveness this message contains the key to freedom, healing and joy. I want to share some things that have helped me to let go of my regrets and find freedom. I believe they will be helpful to you if you face the same struggle. It's time to reclaim the life God wants

us to have. Today is the day you can walk out of here free from the weight and pain of guilt and shame.

I recall a friend of mine giving me tough love about a mistake I kept reliving. He said, “How many times are you going to beat yourself up before you forgive yourself? It’s not making you better. It’s making you worse.”

So, I ask you the same question: How many times are you going to beat yourself up over the things you regret? Hear this verse from Proverbs:

**Look straight ahead with honest confidence; don't hang your head in shame.
-Proverbs 4:25 TEV**

The Bible tells us that we don’t have to hang our head in shame, regretting the things we have done. You know Why? The Apostle Paul says:

Yes, all have sinned; all fall short of God’s glorious ideal; yet now God declares us ‘not guilty’ of offending him if we trust in Jesus Christ, who in his kindness freely takes away our sins.” -Romans 3:23-24 TLB

Did you see that? God has forgiven all your sins! This includes your past, present and future sins. All of them! Accept and trust it. Rick Warren puts it this way: “Just imagine a giant blackboard with all of your sins written across it and God comes along with a giant eraser and erases it all. It’s like an Etch A Sketch: You turn it upside down and shake it, then turn it back up, and the slate is clean.” That’s how God’s love and grace work.

Remember Jesus’ last words on the cross were “It is finished.” What was finished? You ever having to feel regret and shame again. That is finished. We are off the hook. Jesus has paid the price for us. Jesus underscored this:

“If the Son sets you free, you will be really free.” –John 8:36

In other words, this is not a joke. You are truly free! If God forgives us, shouldn’t we be willing to forgive ourselves? When we don’t forgive ourselves, we think we know better than God! It means we think what Jesus did on the cross was not enough. We are basically saying, “Lord, you may have forgiven me, but my own standards for forgiveness are higher than yours.” See how ridiculous that sounds? God wants us to put our defeats behind us and move forward with hope and life.

Beating yourself up over your past mistakes will not make you a better person or Christian. The biggest cause of our personal and social problems today is

the lack of self-worth. So many people make a big deal out of conceit and pride. While those things are unhealthy, I don't believe they are the primary cause of our problems in this world. As a pastor who has dealt with a lot of human misery and pain, I have concluded that at the root of much of human suffering is self-hate. Talk to any counselor or law enforcement officer and they will tell you that most of the troubled people they come across don't like themselves very much. Perhaps this is one of the reasons Jesus told us to love our neighbors *as ourselves*. We can't love our neighbors until we learn to love ourselves. Nothing can happen through us until it happens to us.

It is time to love yourself and move forward with God's purpose for your life! Remember what Paul wrote in Philippians 3:13-14:

Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

But maybe hearing this is not enough for you. You think, "I know the Bible says all of that. I have heard it before and know it's true intellectually, but I still don't feel worthy of forgiveness. I have heard all the Bible verses and explanations, but I can't get passed what I did. It is tearing me up inside. What do I do? How do I overcome my shame and regret?"

I am going to share how to do it. The following two directives work wonders for me. I am confident they will do the same for you if you apply them.

Don't Believe Everything You Think!

I believe in counseling. I believe everyone should have a counselor. I counsel people as a pastor. I go to a counselor from time to time. The old adage is true, "A counselor without a counselor has a fool for a client." How can I be an effective counselor for you unless I am also being counseled?

If I had to summarize everything I have learned by counseling others and being counseled in one sentence it would be: Don't believe everything you think! Not every thought that pops into your head is worthy of your time and energy. All of your thoughts do not hold the same value. Some are myths and lies. We can't stop thoughts from entering our minds, but we can choose which thoughts we will focus on. Question your thoughts and choose to focus on the thoughts that are healthy, happy and true.

Folks *we become what we think about*. Our thoughts determine our beliefs and our beliefs determine our actions. We live off the fruit of our thoughts!

Therefore, if you want to live a happy life you must change the way you think and what you think!

Jesus said we can't put new wine into old wineskins. What was he saying? Wineskins were made from leather. When they got old, they became crusty, hard and stiff, and wouldn't expand. Sounds like some people I know! If you put new wine in them they would burst. One of the truths of this text is *you can't have a new life with old thinking*.

If you want a new life filled with happiness and joy, you can't do it with old thinking – "I don't deserve forgiveness. I am a terrible person. I am not worthy of love." You can't go around thinking this way. It will seep into your life and reap the kind of life you do not want. Limited thinking will cause you to live a limited life. Negative thinking will cause you to live a negative life. But positive thinking will lead to a positive life. If you want to change your life you have to change your thoughts.

Don't Believe Everything You Hear

Here's one for you? What do Albert Einstein, Oprah Winfrey, Walt Disney, Steve Jobs, Michael Jordan and the Beatles have in common? They are started off with people telling them they were complete failures but chose not to see themselves as failures:

-Einstein could not speak until he was four years old and his teachers said he wouldn't amount to much.

-Walt Disney was fired from his newspaper for lacking imagination and having no original ideas.

-Oprah Winfrey was demoted from her job as news anchor because they said she wasn't fit for television.

-Michael Jordan was cut from his high school basketball team and locked himself in his room and cried.

-Steve Jobs, at 30 was left dejected and depressed after being removed from the company that he started.

-The Beatles were rejected by Decca Recording Studios because they didn't like their sound and felt they had no future in show business.

I share this list to inspire you and to remind you that what may be causing you to live in shame are the criticisms of other people. We let other people pull us down by labeling us by something we regret. We listen to their negativity and criticism and put a higher value on that they say about us than we do what God says about us. Hear this: People who criticize you either don't like themselves or they envy you, or both! Don't listen to them. Don't give them free rent in your brain. Just because they are miserable does not mean you have to be miserable! Live your dreams! Live the abundant life God wants for you!

I heard an interesting story about a 6-year-old boy who was given an assignment at school. He and his classmates had to write down what they wanted to be when they grew up. He had seen a man on television that was very funny. That was his dream as a little boy. He knew he wanted to be on television making people laugh so he wrote it down. He came from a low-income family, wore hand-me-down clothes, plus he had a problem with stuttering.

The teacher started calling out the kids' names out loud and reading what they had written down. But, when she came to his, she stopped and said, "Stevie, will you please come up here?" He walked to the front of the class so proud, thinking that she was going to encourage him, cheer him on. It was just the opposite.

She said, "Stevie, what did you write down?" He said, "I wrote down that I want to be on television making people laugh." She said, "Now Stevie do you know anybody on television?" He said, "No ma'am." She said, "Stevie has anyone in your family ever been on television?" He said, "No ma'am." She said, "Then you need to take this back and write down something more realistic."

As a 6-year-old boy, he was confused. Up to that point, nobody had ever told him what he couldn't become. That night Stevie told his father what had happened. He showed him the paper where he had written down he wanted to be on television. His father said, "Stevie put this in your top drawer. Every morning before you go to school, every night before you go to bed, you get this paper out and read it and thank God that one day you will be on television."

He did that, day after day and year after year after year. So today, all these years later, Steve Harvey is on television 7 days a week making people laugh. He is the host of Family Feud and does other numerous things in show business making people laugh.

You are not what people say you can or cannot become. You are what God says you can become. What if Moses, Abraham, David, Paul, and Peter had listened to and believed their detractors? What if Jesus had listened to and believed his detractors? Don't believe everything you hear!

So, I hand you the key to forgiving yourself. Saint Bernard. Not the dog. The Saint! He gave us the key to self-love and forgiveness. Saint Bernard said there are

four stages of spiritual growth: 1) Love of self for self's sake; 2) Love of God for self's sake; 3) Love of God for God's sake; 4) Love of self for God's sake, or to love myself the way God loves me. The final stage of spiritual growth is to love yourself the way God loves you.

So how do we learn to love and forgive ourselves? **When you begin to love yourself as God loves you, you will learn to forgive yourself as God forgives you.** You see, everything begins with God's love – accepting it, embracing it and experiencing it. Once we experience God's love for us we can then begin to love ourselves. Once we love ourselves then we can love others. That's the way it works. Your worth comes from the fact that you are a child of God! God loves you, so you are worth loving! Who are you to argue with God?"

So, I want each of you to say this out loud. **I will not believe everything I think. I will not believe everything I hear. I am a child of God! I am one for whom Christ has died!**

How many of you have seen the Broadway musical Godspell? There is a powerful scene at the end where Jesus is with his disciples in The Upper Room. Each disciple has a clown face. Jesus takes a bucket of water, a rag, and a mirror, and washes away their clown faces. Then he holds the mirror up in front of them and hugs them. Jesus was trying to communicate that they didn't have to hide who they really were. They didn't have to hide their inadequacies. Jesus was setting them free to be the people God made them to be.

God made you, loves you, and forgives you, so be you! Besides, everyone else is taken. No matter where you are, no matter what you have done, Jesus can free you from whatever is holding you prisoner today. He can set you free from what is keeping you from forgiving yourself. Accept his love. Embrace his love. Experience his love. He loves and forgives you. Really! He does. Be set free.