

IS SELF-FORGIVENESS BIBLICAL FORGIVENESS?

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Last fall I caught the end of a program that I usually do not watch. I was curious to see what kind of theology would come out of "Touched By An Angel." In this episode, a pastor had lost his teenage son in a car accident. He was devastated and angry at God for taking his boy. Near the end of the show, he broke down and humbled himself before the Lord. One of the angels said, "God has forgiven you. Now you need to forgive yourself."

The angel's second sentence grabbed my attention. Red flags began going up as I started to compare the concept of self-forgiveness with Scripture. Does the Bible say anything about Christians having to forgive themselves after God already has forgiven them? I also wondered how widespread this doctrine of self-forgiveness has become? To answer these questions, I have divided the following article into three sections: what the world says about self-forgiveness, what some Christian writers are saying about self-forgiveness, what the Word of God says about self-forgiveness.

WHAT THE WORLD SAYS ABOUT SELF-FORGIVENESS

It did not take me long to learn how popular forgiving yourself really is after I went on-line. Barnes & Noble sells three works which contain this very concept in their titles.¹ Nearly two hundred sites popped up when I searched "self-forgiveness" on the web. Many of these sites had additional sites linked to them that discuss this same topic. Self-forgiveness is promoted by psychics, self-healers, psychotherapists, and even some psychologists and medical doctors.

The world recognizes the need for forgiveness. Many voices out there have correctly observed the harm that unresolved guilt has caused in people's lives. Some believe that those who cannot forgive themselves are "seriously wasting energy and bleeding off the vitality of [their] life force."² Others believe that a lack of self-forgiveness leads to a loss of love for oneself, self-destructive behaviors, self-pity, chronic guilt and depression, sarcasm, cynicism, pessimism, fear of failure, fear of rejection, low self-esteem, and low self-worth.³ Some warn that, if people continue to let their past failures bind them (consciously or unconsciously), their bodies will become physically ill.⁴

Many solutions have been proposed to help the hurting forgive themselves so that they can heal the emotional and physical stresses caused by their personal guilt. They can forgive themselves by looking at the love in their hearts, which will guide them in the truth.⁵ "Self-forgiveness is a commitment to love yourself no matter what Self-

¹ *Forgiving Yourself: A Step-by-Step Guide to Making Peace with Your Mistakes and Getting On with Your Life; Beyond Shame & Pain: Forgiving Yourself And Others; Forgiving Yourself and Others: Claiming Emotional Freedom and Unconditional Love*; available from <http://shop.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/results.asp?keyword=forgiving+yourself&match=..>; Internet; accessed 6 December 2000.

² Doc Childre, "Forgiveness—A Real Stress Buster"; available from <http://www.heartmath.com/Library/Articles/forgiveness.html>; Internet; accessed 6 December 2000.

³ J. J. Messina and C. G. Messina, "Growing Down: Tools for Healing the Inner Child"; available from <http://www.coping.org/growdwn/forgive.htm>; Internet; accessed 3 December 2000.

⁴ Brent Boyd, "Alternative Healing: Forgiveness"; available from <http://www.talamasca.org/avatar/alt-healing6.html>; Internet; accessed 6 December 2000.

⁵ "To Forgive Yourself is to Embrace God" (Barry Jones, "Self-Forgiveness: Key to Joy and Happiness [Lesson 3]"); available from <http://www.psychicjournal.com/000103/000103s.htm>; Internet; accessed 6 December 2000).

forgiveness is about beginning with me.”⁶ One needs to imagine (through meditation) how different things were for the younger self. In doing so, he needs to tell his present self that he did the best he could back then when he failed. Now that he has grown, he should not expect his younger self to meet the standards set for his present self. It is simply not fair to hold oneself accountable for something that he was not mature enough to properly handle at the time. In applying this technique, he should “allow [himself] to be both the giver and receiver of forgiveness, letting that love flow through every part of [his] body.”⁷ A psychotherapist has produced a self-forgiveness handbook with seven checkpoints to self-forgiveness:

1. I know that the resolution of my problem lies within my reach.
2. The motivation for solving my problem is solely my responsibility.
3. I can only change myself, and I will take action to do so.
4. I will seek and accept support from others.
5. I will recognize and acknowledge improvement when it occurs.
6. I will use new behavior where familiar behavior has been ineffective.
7. I will do whatever it takes to remain self-compassionate and self-forgiving along the way.⁸

Two psychologists have provided a set of tools for coping with life’s stressors. They say self-forgiveness can be achieved if people trust in their goodness, trust in the goodness and mercy of their Higher Power, let go of their fears, pains and self-destructive behaviors, work out their self-anger, and identify and replace irrational beliefs that block their ability to forgive themselves.⁹ One of their techniques for achieving self-forgiveness is to stand before a mirror for thirty consecutive days and say things like the following:

- * I forgive you for (past event).
- * You are a human being subject to making mistakes and errors.
- * You do not need to be perfect in order for me to love you.
- * You do not need to be so burdened by the pain and hurt you feel because of this (past event).
- * You are a good person. I love you.
- * You deserve my understanding, compassion, and forgiveness.
- * I love seeing you, talking to you, and listening to you.
- * There is nothing you have ever done that cannot be forgiven by me.
- * You did the best you could knowing what you did at the time.
- * You and I are best friends and together we will gain strength by giving all our past hurt, guilt, self-anger, and self hatred over to our Higher Power.
- * I see you holding your head up and standing taller as I forgive you.
- * You deserve a better life than you have been giving yourself.
- * Let go of this (past event) and know that you are forgiven.
- * You are a loveable, capable, special person and I promise to continue to work on letting go of hurt and pain from the past which has been preventing your inner healing and self growth.¹⁰

⁶ Mariah B. Nelson, “The Freedom of Self-Forgiveness”; available from <http://mariahburtonnelson.com/washpot.htm>; Internet; accessed 3 December 2000.

⁷ Arlene F. Harder, “Lightening Your Load of Guilt by Forgiving Yourself”; available from http://www.canceronline.org/mind-body/forgiveness/forgiving_your-self.html; Internet; accessed 3 December 2000.

⁸ Tom Rutledge, “Lessons in Self-Compassion”; available from http://www.webpowers.com/thomrutledge/excerpt_self_forgivness.htm; Internet; accessed 6 December 2000.

⁹ Messina and Messina, “Growing Down.”

¹⁰ Ibid.

The happiness and health that self-forgiveness is supposed to bring justifies its practice by the world. Once individuals have forgiven themselves, they free their energies, allowing “a space for new higher vibration energy to enter. As a result, [they] are more aware of the love, harmony and peace that is all around [them]. [Their] life becomes more fulfilling, more rewarding, more exciting, more loving.”¹¹ From one doctor’s perspective, “self-forgiveness brings [one’s] mental and emotional energy systems back into balance. That’s all. No big deal. It’s not necessarily religious or spiritual, it’s just good ol’ street sense.”¹²

Pop psychology promotes self-forgiveness so that people will feel better about themselves emotionally, spiritually, and physically. Yet it does not matter how good one feels toward oneself, if God does not share the same feelings! The underlying theme in much of this literature is that people need to be easier on themselves.

WHAT SOME CHRISTIAN WRITERS ARE SAYING ABOUT SELF-FORGIVENESS

Most of the information just given from the world’s perspective clearly contradicts Scripture. The writers mentioned below recognize that God has to forgive sins in order for people to be truly forgiven. They believe that Jesus’ substitutionary death on the cross is the only payment that God accepts so He can forgive someone. However, they add another step to the forgiveness process which seems to resonate with the popular psychology mentioned above.

Ron Davis and James Denney write that God will faithfully forgive the sins that have been sincerely confessed to Him. “Then [they] will be free—free to truly live, to truly forgive others, to truly forgive [themselves].”¹³

Minirth and Meier, two widely read Christian psychiatrists, believe that we as Christians “need to forgive ourselves for past mistakes and sins God removes our sins as far as the east is from the west (Ps 103:4). He wants us to do the same and no longer hold our past mistakes against us.”¹⁴

Charles Stanley, the widely known pastor and author from First Baptist of Atlanta, says, “Our difficulty is not one of being unforgiven; it is one of *feeling* unforgiven. ... The only real answer to our dilemma is to accept God’s forgiveness *and* to forgive ourselves.”¹⁵ To support the theology of self-forgiveness, he uses the examples of Peter and Paul. He contends that Peter needed to forgive himself for denying Christ three times, and Paul had to forgive himself for persecuting the infant Church.¹⁶ Yet the Bible never states this to be the case. To infer that these men had to forgive themselves in order to move beyond their failures is to “eisegete” the text.

Bernard Bangley has written an entire book about self-forgiveness. In it he states, “Once we have accepted God’s forgiveness, we *still* need to forgive ourselves It is one thing to intellectually believe God is forgiving. It is entirely different to feel you have received His forgiveness.”¹⁷ He believes that people do not feel forgiven because their self-esteem is damaged, they resent others, or they come out of pietistic and legalistic backgrounds that over-emphasize human sinfulness and under-emphasize divine grace.¹⁸

I do not want to trivialize the motives with which these Christian writers attempt to minister to hurting people. They have correctly recognized that the theology in a person’s head does not always filter down to the heart. Self-forgiveness seems to be one way of bridging this gap. Nevertheless, believers need to ask the following questions: Is this terminology objectively supported anywhere in Scripture? Will using this terminology help or hinder a biblically centered philosophy of life? Is there another approach to bridging the gap between the head and the heart?

¹¹ “Forgiveness of Self”; available from <http://www.horizon.bc.ca/~walmsley/insigt67.htm>; Internet; accessed 3 December 2000.

¹² Childre, “Forgiveness.”

¹³ R. L. Davis and J. D. Denney, *A Forgiving God in an Unforgiving World* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1978), 39.

¹⁴ F. B. Minirth & P. D. Meier, *Happiness is a Choice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 159.

¹⁵ C. F. Stanley, *The Gift of Forgiveness* (Nashville: Nelson, n.d.), 144, 148.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁷ Bernard Bangley, *Forgiving Yourself* (Wheaton IL: Shaw, 1986), 15, 51.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 52-54.

WHAT THE WORD SAYS ABOUT SELF-FORGIVENESS

Since Christian counselors are using the terminology of self-forgiveness in their ministries, one would think that there must be some biblical support for doing so. Yet when all the Greek words used in the New Testament for *forgiveness* are examined in their contexts, there are no passages where this terminology occurs or is even inferred.¹⁹ When Hebrew words are translated “forgive” or “pardon,” in the Old Testament, they never refer to self-forgiveness.²⁰ There are only two major kinds of forgiveness in the Scriptures. The most common one is vertical forgiveness, which comes from God to man. The second kind is horizontal forgiveness, which comes from one human being to another. The Bible is silent when it comes to a person forgiving himself.

So why is there the big push for self-forgiveness today? I believe that it is a sugar-coated form of humanistic, man-centered philosophy that resonates with most people.²¹ Now this may sound a bit harsh at first, but I think many evangelicals are becoming gradually accustomed to this kind of thinking, like the frog that remains in a shallow pail of water which is being heated so slowly that he does not realize what is going on until he cooks.

Self-forgiveness is tied back to the self-love movement. Its proponents justify loving oneself from the often quoted passage about loving a neighbor “as yourself” (Lev 19:34). They contend that, if a man does not love himself properly, then he cannot really love his neighbor. Self-love advocates interpret the “as” in the second greatest commandment to mean “as you should.” However, the context of Scripture interprets “as” to mean “as you do.” In other words, we should love our neighbors as we already do love ourselves. The Apostle Paul wrote, “So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it” (Eph 5:28-29). This passage teaches that people naturally look after themselves.²² In fact, the human race has been doing that since the beginning (Gen 3:1-6), and will continue to do so during the end times, when many will be lovers of themselves (2 Tim 3:1-5).

At this point, it may be argued that not all people love themselves, for some inflict pain upon themselves (mental and/or physical). Though we must be sensitive to the plight of those who do this, we should never substitute what the Scriptures say about human nature to validate someone’s experiences. Some people think too highly about themselves and others, too lowly. In either case, the focus is on self. That is the problem with all this “self” terminology. There are self-forgiveness, self-love, self-hate, self-esteem, self-image, self-worth, self-awareness, self-*ad infinitum*. This self-centered therapy may sound caring, but it is only a Band-Aid that will never cure a deeper spiritual problem. Solid biblical counseling should attempt to get the counselee’s focus off self and on the Savior. The Christian’s focus should be upward and outward, not inward. If our perspective is God-focused and others-focused, we will be keeping the two greatest commandments (Matt 22:37-40). This will satisfy both the Lord and ourselves. We must remember that there are many passages which call the Christian to deny self (Matt 10:37-39; 16:24; Luke 12:22; 14:26; John 15:13; Phil 2:3-4). Christ “died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again” (2 Cor 5:15).

When people cannot forgive themselves, they may not truly understand the grace of God. It would be wise to probe their understanding of salvation at this point. Perhaps they have not genuinely repented. If they are believers, they may have adopted some incorrect theology about God. Those who have a warped view of God will have a

¹⁹ The frequency of the Greek words used for “forgiveness” is as follows: ἀπολύω occurs 66x in NT: 1x - Vertical Forgiveness (V), 2x - Horizontal Forgiveness (H). ἄφεσις occurs 17x in NT: 15x - V. ἀφίημι occurs 143x in NT: 35x - V, 12x - H. πάρεσις occurs 1x in NT: 1x - V. χαρίζομαι occurs 23x in NT: 3x - V, 8x - H. The totals are 55x - V and 22x - H.

²⁰ The frequency of Hebrew words used for forgiveness is as follows: כָּפַר occurs 102x in OT: 4x - V, 0x - H. נָשָׂא occurs 653x in OT: 15x - V, 5x - H. נָחַם occurs 1x in OT: 1x - V. סָלַח occurs 46x in OT: 45x - V, 0x - H. סָלַח occurs 1x in OT: 1x - V. סָלַח occurs 3x in OT: 3x - V. The totals are 69x -V and 5x -H.

²¹ Paul Brownback traces some of the modern roots of self-love to secular psychologists in his book, *The Danger of Self-Love: Re-examining a Popular Myth* (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 71-84.

²² For a quick study about self-love, see W. Trobisch, *Love Yourself* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity, 1976). For a refutation of self-esteem theology, see J. Makujina, “The Second Greatest Commandment and Self-Esteem,” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 8:2 (Fall 1997): 211-25.

warped view of God's forgiveness.²³ Those who do not feel forgiven may not be in the eyes of God. Even if they are forgiven, they lack the faith to accept this. The problem is not forgiving oneself, but accepting God's forgiveness by faith.

Those who cannot seem to forgive themselves need to meditate on the costly price Christ paid to provide access to divine forgiveness. When someone does not accept God's forgiveness as final and complete forgiveness, that says to the Father that His Son's death was not sufficient. Individuals think they still have to atone in some way for what they have done. This is an insult to the entire Trinity.

Those struggling with forgiveness should also reflect on some of the biblical characters who were forgiven by God and moved on with their lives. David was emotionally and spiritually torn with guilt over committing adultery with the wife of one of his loyal soldiers, and then setting up his death (2 Sam 11-12; Ps 32). After David confessed his sin, the burden was lifted. He did not need to forgive himself, for his sin was against God, and God had forgiven it (Ps 51).

Manasseh was one of the most wicked kings who reigned on the throne of David, despite having a godly father (Hezekiah) as a role model. He reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem, rebuilding the pagan altars his father had destroyed, worshipping the host of heaven, sacrificing one of his sons in a fire, setting up idols in the temple, practicing witchcraft, shedding much innocent blood, seducing his people to do more evil than the pagan nations God had removed from the promised land, and setting in motion the eventual Babylonian siege, captivity and deportation of Judah (2 Kgs 21). The writer of Kings does not say one thing positive about this wretched king. This is the picture that most people in the Church today have of Manasseh, if they know anything at all about him. However, the parallel account in 2 Chronicles 33 gives "the rest of the story." Though Manasseh's reign was characterized by decades of decadence, he was brought to the point of repentance when the Assyrians made him a captive in Babylon. The king prayed to God, "and He received his entreaty, heard his supplication, and brought him back to Jerusalem into his kingdom" (33:13).

Now, if the Lord could forgive Manasseh for all the wicked things he had done to himself, his family, his country, and his God, why would He not forgive anything done by anybody coming in for biblical counseling? If God has forgiven a person, that person's sins have been removed as far as the east is from the west (Ps 103:4). There is no need to add an additional step of forgiving oneself. To do so would be playing God. Robert Jones says it best. "It is vital in this instance that we point the guilty counselee away from himself as judge or forgiver to the one and only judge and forgiver, our Lord Jesus Christ!"²⁴

CONCLUSION

The next time an individual says, "I just can't forgive myself," the first thought that should come to mind is, "That's right, you can't!" Then patiently and lovingly instruct him from the word of God so that his focus is on the only One Who can. A proper view of God's forgiveness sensitively taught from the word of God is what a person needs to bridge the gap between knowing he is forgiven and feeling he is forgiven. The facts should precede and supersede the feelings. Self-forgiveness is not biblical terminology. It should not be used in biblical counseling. When someone cannot forgive himself, he is not accepting the forgiveness of God. When God has forgiven, one must accept it and move on, serving Him and others as he goes.

²³ People may not feel forgiven because their image of God is not correct. They may see Him as a "legal God" who cannot wait for them to slip so He can record it. They may see Him as a "Gotcha God" who cannot wait to catch them in the act. They may see Him as a "Philosopher's God" who is too disinterested with the mundane affairs of their lives to really care (D. A. Seamands, *Healing of Memories* [Wheaton IL: Victor, 1985], 95-105).

²⁴ R. D. Jones, "I Just Can't Forgive Myself," *Journal of Pastoral Practice* 10:4 (1992): 8.