

Forgiving Self - Why Is It So Hard?

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | December 2, 2012



Hello, I am from Malawi but live in the UK. I have been following your class for about a year now. I must say I am impressed with how your ministry has grown... you have taught me how to forgive myself. This has set me free indeed... [but my] question is "Why is it so hard to forgive ourselves?"

Can you please help me shed light on this? Thank you and God Bless

TB

Thanks for your feedback and letting us know the positive impact the ministry is making in your life. You have asked a profound question regarding forgiveness, one which troubles many people. Forgiveness can have two basic connotations: legal pardon, or cleansing and restoration. Modern society almost always means the first, whereas the Bible usually means the second.

One of the most common reasons people have a hard time "forgiving" themselves is because they seek to "pardon" themselves without experiencing actual transformation of character. Thus, while a

particular act may be regretted, the consequences unpleasant, and the outcome lamented, the motive of the heart that led to the act, (fear and selfishness) is not replaced with godly motives of love and peace.

In my Book *Could It Be This Simple? A Biblical Model for Healing the Mind* I describe this in the chapter on guilt resolution, under a subtitle "Illegitimate Guilt Type III"

Sarah was distraught from years of unremitting guilt. For seven years the memories of an adulterous relationship had tormented her. Although she knew the affair was wrong, she couldn't seem to resist her attraction to the other man. But immediately after breaking her marital vows, she found herself overcome with guilt and plagued with self-loathing. As a result she confessed her sin to God and to her husband. She repented and her husband forgave her, and she determined never to stray again. Yet during the seven years since the affair she had experienced constant guilt and recurring memories of the incident. Despite repeated hours on her knees confessing to God and begging His forgiveness, her guilt never seemed to go away, and she didn't know why. Soon she wondered whether she was beyond salvation.

If repentance and restoration resolve appropriate guilt, and Sarah had repented and reconciled with her husband, then why didn't the guilt go away? Because, even though she felt sorrow for her affair, the way her mind operated had not changed. The mental process that had led to the affair still lingered in her ways of thinking.

Remember in chapters 2 and 3 we explored the organizational model of the mind. We discovered that *reason* and *conscience* constitute our judgment and are to direct the *will* in making healthy choices. Also we learned that our *feelings* can lead us astray or tempt us. Now consider the mental process of those choosing to commit adultery. Do they use their *reason* and *conscience*, weigh the evidence, pray for wisdom and guidance, and with a clear conscience make an enlightened decision to commit adultery? Or do they experience strong *feelings* of arousal and ignore their *reason* and *conscience*?

Now what happens when the same process occurs on a different issue? One day at the office a coworker asked Sarah to borrow her car. Immediately Sarah reasoned through the facts that her insurance permitted no other drivers and that the person making the request had been in several car accidents recently and concluded, in her judgment, no! But then feelings of fear and insecurity overwhelmed her. *I don't want her to be angry. I want her to like me. I don't want her to start rumors about me. And I hate confrontation.* So based on all her *feelings* she ignored her own judgment and let the coworker borrow the car.

Here we find her mind operating in the exact same way it did when she committed adultery. She feels guilt for not choosing to do what her judgment decided was best. Failing to understand how God designed her mind to work and with the issue of loaning her car not being a moral issue, Sarah was impaired in her ability to identify the source of her guilt. Rather than experience guilt for letting a coworker drive her car, her mind regurgitates the most egregious example of her letting feelings trump judgment and she again re-experiences guilt for the extra-marital affair. Thus for the past seven years each time she allowed feelings to overrule judgment, she again went through guilt for the affair, which caused her to once more repent of it. Because she had not dealt with the way her mind operated, she never experiences peace or a real sense of forgiveness. It is only by putting our minds back in balance that they can heal.

A true heart change is not merely avoiding a specific act or sin, it is actually having a change in motive

such that we do what is right because it is right, and no longer base our decisions on fear and selfishness. If we avoid just an act, but continue to operate upon the same motives, then we often struggle with ongoing guilt because we “know” on some level that something is still “wrong” in our inmost being. But when we experience genuine change of heart motive and orient our faculties to work as God designed then we experience genuine peace with God and with self.

This is perhaps the most common reason, but there are some other reasons explored in my book under illegitimate guilt types I and II.

One final thought that contributes to this problem is the idea one holds regarding God’s character, government and justice. If one believes God is a being who operates like a Roman emperor, imposing laws, sitting in judgment and then punishing disobedience, this idea contributes to ones own values and beliefs about right and wrong. Persons holding such ideas about God will often struggle with self-forgiveness as they feel guilt, and believe they deserve to be punished.

The truth about God is necessary to relieve such guilt. When God is seen as the Creator, who constructed his universe to operate in harmony with his own character of love, then we realize God’s law is not imposed, like human laws, but is the construction protocol life is built to operate upon, and deviations are incompatible with life. We then realize God is not judging to punish, but “diagnosing” in order to heal. And that unremedied sin results in pain suffering and death, and God has been working through Christ to heal and restore. We further realize that we were born with a terminal condition, sin (Ps 51:5) that we didn’t choose. Yet, this condition, if unremedied results in symptoms (sins) and ultimately death. Thus, we realize we don’t need to feel guilty for being sinners, because we didn’t choose to be born with this condition. We need to instead ask, are we partaking of the free remedy made available in Christ.