
“I Just Can’t Forgive Myself”: A Biblical Alternative to Self-Forgiveness

by Robert D. Jones

Sally’s and Carl’s marriage of thirteen months was shaky at best.¹ One day Sally discovered she was pregnant. Not wanting to interrupt her new law career and greatly fearing motherhood, she secretly got an abortion. When Carl found out a year later, he exploded and walked out. They were eventually divorced.

You meet Sally five years later. She has become a believer in Christ, but she continues to struggle with one major roadblock. “I know the Lord has forgiven me for killing my child,” she reveals, “but I just can’t forgive myself.” How do you minister to her?

The Popular Notion

The concept of “forgiving yourself” has become common in our day. There are many Sallys, people stuck on a treadmill of “I just can’t forgive myself.” Pop psychology stresses the importance of forgiving yourself. Many Christians embrace this same idea.

But has Sally 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?

The biblical Christian, the serious follower of Jesus and His Word, is never content to drift in the wind and waves of the world’s notions (that mirror the flesh’s notions). The Christian hungers to know what God says about this and every other matter. Nothing less satisfies.

What does the Bible say about forgiving yourself? Surprisingly, nothing! You may study the Word of God from cover to cover, but you’ll not find self-for-

giveness, either by example or precept. The Bible speaks of vertical forgiveness (God forgiving a person) and horizontal forgiveness (one person forgiving another). Ephesians 4:32, for example, declares that God in Christ forgave us and exhorts us to forgive others. But the Bible says nothing of internal forgiveness (a person forgiving himself). It’s simply not taught in Scripture.

This runs counter to the claims of many so-called Christian teachers and counselors. One teaching organization’s newsletter builds a case to support this theory with a string of fourteen Bible verses.² Another teacher refers to Matthew 5:7 and 18:21-35.³ A popular book on depression lists Psalm 103:12,14 in support.⁴ But none of these texts, examined in context, say anything about “self-forgiveness.” They speak of vertical and horizontal forgiveness.

This observation is revealing. It suggests that this notion did not arise from serious, prayerful study of Scripture but from some other source (i.e., secular psychology and the felt needs of counselees). The notion was then made palatable to Christians by “supporting” it with Bible verses. The self-forgiveness idea also did not arise from careful, biblical exploration of what is really going on with people like Sally. It takes Sally’s experience at face value—“I can’t forgive myself”—rather than exploring *why* she says that.

But what about Sally? Are we powerless to help her unless we get her to forgive herself? No! Must she flounder forever in chronic pursuit of an unbiblical notion? Not at all! Must we ignore her most pressing symptom? Not at all! Sally’s struggle with self-recrimination is a real problem. We must deal with her compassionately. But we will never help her by misdiagnosing her problem as an inability to forgive herself. Mislabeled your broken arm as a viral infection will do you no good! The Bible cuts deeper than Sally’s instinctive self-diagnosis.

The Bible speaks to the thoughts, feelings, and

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¹Fictional names, reflecting a composite of various people.

²Ray Felten, “Advice for Today: Forgiving Myself,” in Radio Bible Class’s newsletter, date unknown. Texts listed are Romans 8:1; 1 John 3:20; John 8:36; Psalm 32:1,2; Matthew 6:14; 18:21,22; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13; 1 Peter 5:7; Isaiah 43:18; and Philippians 3:13,14.

³Rev. Hal Helms, taped lecture, “Learning to Forgive Yourself,” Lesson 2, Level 2, of “3-D: Diet, Discipline and Discipleship” study course (Orleans, MA: 3-D, 1984).

⁴Frank B. Minirth and Paul D. Meier, *Happiness is a Choice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), page 157.

experiences of Sally and the thousands like her who seek self-forgiveness. The Bible gives Sally a different way of understanding her problems. It alone is able to diagnose properly and deal with forgiveness problems. The Bible alone is our practical, powerful, and sufficient source of problem-solving truth!⁵

Towards a Biblical Alternative

How does God's Word address the issues misdiagnosed as an inability to forgive oneself? Let me suggest five possible ways. In any individual counseling case any or all of these may underlie the experience of "I just can't forgive myself."

1. The counselee who says "I just can't forgive myself" may be expressing an inability or unwillingness to grasp and receive God's forgiveness.

This seems to be the most common explanation behind "self-forgiveness" talk. We say that we can't forgive ourselves because we really doubt that God has forgiven us. Or we don't see our need for forgiveness from God, so we take over the job ourselves. Unsure of a solution to our real or perceived failure, we posit a need for self-forgiveness to satisfy our lingering guilt or to supplement God's insufficient forgiveness.

There are a host of possible points at which a believer (true or merely professing) may experience a breakdown in properly receiving God's forgiveness. Let me give a series of common examples.

Perhaps the counselee has failed to see his sin as a direct offense against God.⁶ His conscience isn't quiet because he has underestimated the heinousness of sin. He euphemizes it as a mere mistake, not a treacherous assault against our Creator and King. Hence, he is not driven to seek God's grace for his sins but instead chews over his mistakes.

Perhaps the counselee has failed to see the holiness and the wrath of God against his sin.⁷ Because he underestimates God's hatred of sin he believes he must judge and then forgive himself. The real God is simply not in the picture.

Perhaps the counselee has not yet gripped the width and depth of God's forgiving grace and power.⁸ He disbelieves the truth that God can forgive even the worst of sinners. With such a limited God, he sees his sin as unforgivable. Or he views God's grace as

"cheap," unable to break the hold of sin.

Perhaps the counselee has never truly entered into God's forgiveness through saving repentance and faith.⁹ He may know the gospel facts but has never come to Christ on His appointed terms. Maybe he holds distorted ideas about repentance and faith.

Perhaps he is not responding properly to the obstacles that hinder assurance and tempt us to doubt, such as Satan the Accuser,¹⁰ human accusers, the unmortified remnants of the same sin, or the ongo-

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ing reminders of past sin (places, relationships, physical scars, audible triggers, etc.). When he succumbs to such temptations, he may think he needs additional self-forgiveness.

Finally, perhaps he has failed to grow in the graces of putting off the particular sin and putting on righteous replacements.¹¹ He doubts God's forgiveness because he repeats the same sin. And he repeats the same sin because, in terms of growth, he is the same person.¹² 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.

The remedy in such cases is to properly understand, believe, and live out the gospel. Grasping God's forgiveness in Christ undercuts these errors and removes the risk of misdiagnosing our true problem (i.e., a need for deliverance from sin's guilt and power) as "self-forgiveness." We must help our counselees turn from their unbelief to the gospel of grace!

Sally, for example, found that several of these points described her. She had underestimated her sin, God's holiness and His grace. She had not seen how the Accuser works. She also had not addressed reminders of her past in order to build new associations. Her current singleness and childlessness, glimpses of the abortion clinic's building, and even her menstrual cycle seemed to curse her. But

⁵2 Timothy 3:16-17; Matthew 4:4; Psalm 1:1-3; 19:7-11; 119; 2 Peter 1:3-4.

⁶Psalm 51:3-4; Genesis 39:9.

⁷Isaiah 6:5.

⁸Philippians 3:13-14; Isaiah 43:18; 59:1; John 6:37-40; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:15-16.

⁹Mark 1:15; Acts 20:21.

¹⁰Revelation 12:10; Zechariah 3:1.

¹¹Ephesians 4:22-24.

¹²See also Jay Adams, *From Forgiven to Forgiving* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989), pages 68-69, and *The Christian Counselor's Manual* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), page 64, footnote 4.

reminders of past sin can become reminders of the amazing love of Christ. As the hymn writer put it, "My sin— O the bliss of this glorious thought!—my sin, not in part but the whole, is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more; praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul."¹³ Through counseling, Sally's "I can't forgive myself" proved to be a door not to self-forgiveness but to deeper knowledge of the real God, of herself, and of the Evil One.

2. The counselee who says, "I just can't forgive myself," may not see or be willing to acknowledge the depth of his depravity.

The expression "I can't forgive myself" often means "I still can't believe I did that!" Interestingly, contrary to some counselors, such thinking is not an evidence of "low self-esteem." It's actually high self-esteem, a form of pride in which we think that we're incapable of such evil deeds.¹⁴ Inability to forgive oneself often expresses an underlying problem of self-righteousness and a lack of realistic self-knowledge.

Consider Sally's case. The reason she "couldn't forgive herself" of her abortion and cover-up is because she couldn't conceive of having done such a terrible thing: other people maybe, but not her! She failed to understand that we, as sinners, are not above the most deceitful and desperately wicked acts.¹⁵

Our ability to do wicked deeds shouldn't surprise us, not if we understand the depth of depravity which reigns in the unbeliever and remains in the believer. James 1:13-15 pictures the power of our corrupt desires to bring us to spiritual ruin. The Puritan theologian John Owen observed that any kind of sin carries within itself the seeds of total apostasy.¹⁶ It should not surprise Sally that she is capable of doing what she did.

3. The counselee who says, "I just can't forgive myself," may be venting his regrets for failing to achieve a certain cherished desire.¹⁷

In essence, such a person says this: "I had an opportunity to get something I really wanted, but I

threw it all away! I can't forgive myself." The particular ruling desire may vary: "I want to get rich," "to be married," "to be approved by my boss," "to have children who respect me," "to see my dying dad find salvation," etc. "But somehow by my sin (real or perceived) I've blown it." "I lost my money in a bad investment." "I embarrassed my girlfriend (i.e.,

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potential fiancée) in the restaurant." "I froze up in Dad's hospital room instead of speaking a good word about Jesus. And now I can't forgive myself for squandering the opportunity to get what I had been longing for." "I had happiness in the palm of my hand and dropped it!"

The person acts as if he could control the world and guarantee getting what he wants. When his desires are thwarted, the result is self-reproach and a haunting case of "if only I had..." He is blind to his underlying urge to control his own happiness.

We see this in Sally and her collapsed desires. She wanted the companionship, status, and security of being a wife and mother. She wanted to hug her baby. She wanted to read Golden Books to her child. She dreamed of evening walks with her husband pushing their baby stroller together. But now, alone, Sally kicks herself for having thrown these things away.

Five years ago Sally's abortion conveniently served her career idol. But now a different set of desires rules. She wants to be a wife and mother and craves for what she forfeited. And so she wallows in guilt and self-recrimination. Worse, these past regrets now intertwine with ongoing self-pity, hopelessness, and jealousy towards mothers of pre-schoolers. These various fruits of an uncrucified desire threaten her relationship with God.

But there is hope for Sally! As she faces herself in new ways her problem becomes redefined and so does the solution. In the mirror of Scripture she beholds the deceptiveness and potency of her ruling desires. Sally begins to confess her idolatry and the various sins it leads to. By repentant faith she finds a forgiving Savior. Her struggle with "I can't forgive myself" recedes as she discovers God's real solutions to the real problems of her heart and life.

¹³Horatio G. Spafford's hymn, "It is Well," stanza 3. The Christian sees "bliss" when he looks at his sin because he sees it in light of the forgiveness purchased by Christ.

¹⁴Instead, the one with truly low self-esteem would freely admit that he's just acting according to his depraved nature.

¹⁵Jeremiah 17:9; 1 Corinthians 10:6-12.

¹⁶John Owen, "The Mortification of Sin in Believers," chapter 2, in William Goold, ed., *The Works of John Owen*, Volume VI, (Great Britain: Banner of Truth, 1981).

¹⁷I am grateful to David A. Powlison for suggesting this third point and for his insightful contributions throughout the entire article.

4. The counselee who says, "I just can't forgive myself," may be trying to establish his own standards of righteousness.

In this case the expression "I can't forgive myself" is equivalent to saying, "I haven't lived up to my own perfect standards" or "I haven't lived up to other people's expectations." 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.

In essence such a person has proudly erected his own law or fearfully embraced someone else's law. He's pursuing not only "a righteousness of [his] own" (Philippians 3:7-9) but a righteousness of his own against a standard of his own. But the Bible tells us that God is the only One we must please; that His law must be our sole standard of self-measurement.

Advocates of "self-forgiveness" rightly observe our tendency to criticize ourselves and the fact that this is a problem.¹⁸ But the answer is not self-forgiveness; rather it's to stop our God-playing propensity to erect and obey our own laws.

For example, the man who can't forgive himself when he makes a job mistake has erected an unbiblical standard: "I must be a perfect worker." He is playing God by rejecting God's law and establishing his own. The woman who can't forgive herself because, in her words, "If only I had persuaded my husband to go to the doctor, he wouldn't have died," is likewise assuming God's role.¹⁹

5. The counselee who says, "I just can't forgive myself," may have ascended to the throne of judgment and declared himself to be his own judge.

In this case the expression "I can't forgive myself" is equivalent to saying, "I'm in the role of Judge and will dispense forgiveness as I decide." Such a person has convened the court, rendered a guilty verdict upon himself and now believes that he must grant the needed pardon! But the Bible declares that God alone is both judge and forgiver²⁰ as well as penalty-bearer for those in Christ!

This role issue is important. What is the person

actually saying when he speaks of forgiving himself? Has "he" sinned against his "self" or has his "self" sinned against "him"? Who is the "he" who forgives his "self"? And who is the judge who determines that guilt even exists? The self-forgiveness notion strangely posits the one person as the offender, the judge and the forgiver! Jesus Christ can stand in all three places. But when, for example, Sally does it, she plays God.

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It is vital 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!

Conclusion

What shall we say to Sally when she says, "I just can't forgive myself"? We should recognize that she has a true problem of guilt. We should take her statement seriously and respond to her compassionately. In exploring her life we should be conscious of the above options. And at a key point in the counseling process we should help her see how she has mislabeled her problem and how the Bible provides "the only" accurate, helpful diagnosis and solution.

What a rich ray of grace this is for Sally! Her experience of self-recrimination, self-accusation and brooding, which she and others label "I can't forgive myself," provides a marvelous window into a deeper perception of her (and our) subtle sinfulness. Sally has never seen the extent to which she acts as if she were the "righteous lawgiver and judge as well as sacrifice for sins"! Such deepened self-knowledge opens the door for Sally to know the love of God in Christ Jesus with fresh relevancy and power!

Is this "self-forgiveness" theory merely an imprecise, harmless, neutral notion? No! Any thinking that clouds God's forgiveness is never harmless. And we who teach and counsel with Scripture have no excuse for perpetuating this myth. May God enable us to correct such error. May God enable us to lovingly and faithfully minister the rich grace of God to our guilty and struggling counselees!

¹⁸e.g., Minirth and Meier, *op. cit.*, page 157.

¹⁹By the way, this fourth possibility must be differentiated from the guilt felt by the one who violates his weak conscience out of ignorance of some aspect of God's truth that would otherwise liberate him (Romans 14:14-15). Such a person doesn't need self-forgiveness but God's forgiveness because he has sinned against what he knew to be right (Romans 14:22-23). The gospel is more powerful than an accusing conscience (1 John 3:20).

²⁰1 Corinthians 4:3-5; James 4:11-12.