



Stephen N. Johnson

FORGIVING FOR GOOD (Part 2 of 3)

FORGIVING YOURSELF

One of the greatest difficulties I face in life is forgiving myself of past sins. I know that God has forgiven me—of that I am sure. But to forgive myself of some pretty ugly stuff is so hard.

Some of God's greatest saints lived with the memories and burdens of their past sins. I am amazed at how many times the psalmists agonized over past sins either asking God to deliver their souls from Sheol or the pit or thanking Him that He had (Psalm 6, 13, 25, 30, 88, and many more).

David never forgot his sins: "My sin is ever before me" (Psalm 51:3). Do you think that Paul ever forgot his persecution of the church and participation in the death of Stephen? He did not. "I am the least of all the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (I Corinthians 15:9).

Paul not only struggled with the past sins of persecution; he also struggled with current sins. Using the present tense he writes in 1 Timothy 1:15 "It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom *I am* [not "was"] foremost of all." In an intensely honest autobiographical confession in Romans 7:15-23 read the ongoing struggles he had with sin. He ends this confession with this somber evaluation: "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" (Romans 7:24). Paul never forgot his own struggles with sin. He was too sincere and an honest follower of Jesus.

All of God's people have to live with the ignobility of the past. None are without shame. Dr. Dennis

Kinlaw former president of Asbury College used to say, "None come nobly." And none do.

I heard Dr. Craig Rikard, current pastor of Mulberry United Methodist Church in Macon quote author Jerry West: "Living in the past is a kind of death above ground." And it is. Not forgiving ourselves is like living in a tomb—living in a hemmed in agony. The psalmist wrote of "the terror by night or the arrows that fly by day; of the pestilence that stalks in darkness or the destruction that lays waste at noon" (Psalm 91:5-6).

I have been there; have you? I have laid down to sleep and the terror of past memories steal my sleep, only to get up to the gashing arrows of those same memories. My past stalks me as a plague in daylight and darkness.

Is there any deliverance from this living death? There is!

The Gospel is that God forgives us all of all our sins! Paul answers the above question of Romans 7:24 with this victorious acclamation, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (verse 25).

I have found three things that help me forgive myself of past sins.

The Gospel

Martin Luther used to say "Preach the Gospel to yourself every day." He knew if we didn't, we would forget it. Remind yourself every day of the Gospel of God's love and forgiveness. In spite of his past sins Paul could write, "Finally, brethren,



whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things” (Philippians 4:8).

When we are assaulted by the memories of past sins and struggle to forgive ourselves, instead of rehearsing our failures—which can only lead to renewed guilt and condemnation—Paul tells us to think about the gospel.

Think about what is true. The truth is that you are loved and have been forgiven.

Think about what is honorable. You are an heir of the King of kings; honorable indeed!

Think about what is right. Believe God, His Gospel, and all they say about you.

Think about what is pure. You are, because you are redeemed. He has no record of your sins. (See the previous study on forgiveness.)

Think about what is lovely. You have a sweet (the meaning of “lovely”) relationship with your Abba, Father.

Think about what is of good repute. God is supremely fond of you.

Instead of listening to the condemning voices reminding you of your sins, listen to the voice of God—in Scripture; you can begin with the Psalms I mention above—telling you how loved and forgiven you are. Paul said, “Let your mind continually dwell on *these things*.”

A Good Friend

Step 5 in the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous is, “Admitted to God, to ourselves, *and to another human being* the exact nature of our wrongs.”

I can tell you that there is tremendous release and freedom that comes from confessing our sins to another person and hearing them pronounce to us the forgiveness of God. We can know that we are forgiven; but it does something to us emotionally, mentally, and spiritually to hear someone verbalize it and personalize it. It is life-giving and liberating. Larry Crabb has written, “I know of little else so powerful as confessing wretched failure and having a friend look on you with great delight.”

James knew what he was talking about when he told us, James 5:16, “Confess your sins to one another. . . so that you may be healed.” The Roman Catholics have Protestants beat on this matter. Where in the schedule or programming life of any evangelical church is there a time for confession? God never intended us to bear the burdens of our sins alone. Confession to another person brings catharsis (Greek: “cleansing”) and enormous relief.

As difficult as it may be, do it. Confess your faults to a loving, trustworthy Christian friend. To delay only prolongs your misery.

God

I quoted earlier Paul’s statement in I Corinthians 15:9 about not being fit to be called an apostle. Yet he finds rest in the next verse, “But by the grace of God I am what I am.” When Paul’s memory assaulted him and he couldn’t forget, he turned to God and His grace. He had no other claim to apostleship, no other hope for forgiveness, mercy, and salvation.



My practical, working definition of grace is this:

- God loves you unconditionally; there are no strings attached.
- God has forgiven you of all your sins; God resolved His issues with our sins on the cross.
- God accepts you right where you are, no matter where that is.

Grace is our only hope.

Charles Wesley wrote:

*Thou, O Christ, art all I want;
More than all in Thee I find:
Raise the fallen, cheer the faint,
Heal the sick, and lead the blind:
Just and holy is Thy name,
I am all unrighteousness;
False and full of sin I am,
Thou art full of truth and grace.*

Depend on God’s truth and grace. The truth is that you are an honorable, righteous, pure, lovely, child of God—a God who is extremely fond of you. Grace means you are loved, forgiven, and accepted. It is all ours by faith. And faith is simply believing what God says is so.

Don’t call unclean—including yourself--what God has cleansed by redemption.

Forgiving ourselves is not about forgetting. Remembering has its benefits. Dr. Rikard says, remembering the pain of our sin reminds us that we never want to go there again. Also, remembering makes us more compassionate toward others who have fallen. He says, “Be informed by the past, but don’t be entangled by the past.”

Paul concluded the passage in Philippians, “. . . *practice these things*” (Philippians 4:9). We are to practice (“continually and repeatedly”) reminding ourselves of what God has done for us and what He says about us. With practice we will come to believe the truth of God’s account of our life rather than the lies of a guilt-laden conscience and an accusing memory.

This puts us on the road (it’s a journey) to freedom.

*Grace be with you,
Steve Johnson*

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