

When You Can't Forgive Yourself

First Corinthians 13, the great love chapter of the Bible, is a perfect demonstration of the cause and effect of total forgiveness. The apex of this wonderful passage is the phrase found in verse 5: Love “keeps no record of wrongs” (NIV).

The Greek word that is translated as *no record* is *logizomai*, which means “not to reckon or impute.” The word is important to Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith.

For the person who believes, his faith is “credited” to him as righteousness (Rom. 4:5). This is the same word used in 1 Corinthians 13:5.

Therefore, not to reckon, impute or “count” the wrongs of a loved one is to do for that person what God does for us, namely, choose not to recognize his sin.

In the same way, forgiving oneself means to experience the love that keeps no record of our own wrongs. It is one thing to have this breakthrough regarding others; it is quite another to experience the greater breakthrough—total forgiveness of ourselves.

So many Christians say, “I can forgive others, but how can I ever forget what I have done? I know God forgives me, but I can’t forgive myself.”

We must remember that forgiving ourselves is a lifelong commitment. In precisely the same way that I must forgive others every single day, I must also forgive myself (Luke 6:37).

The Process of Forgiving

We must renew our commitment to forgive others each and every

day for the wrongs done to us. Forgiving ourselves is also a daily process.

We may wake up each day with the awareness of past failures. We may have feelings of guilt—or pseudo-guilt, if our sins have been placed under the blood of Christ.

But forgiving yourself may bring about the breakthrough you have been looking for. It could set you free in ways you have never before experienced.

Sometimes we are afraid to forgive ourselves. We cling to fear as if it were a thing of value. The truth is, the very breath of Satan is behind the fear of forgiving ourselves.

Jesus knows that many of us have this problem. This is a further reason Jesus turned up unexpectedly after His Resurrection in the room where the disciples were assembled both in terror and in guilt.

Jesus wanted them to know they were totally forgiven; He also wanted them to forgive themselves. He spoke to them as if nothing had happened (John 20:21). This gave them dignity and showed them that nothing had occurred that would change Jesus' plans and strategy for them.

I remember one Sunday just before I was to preach at the 11 a.m. service. I had an argument with my wife, Louise, and stormed out of the house, slamming the door in her face.

Before I knew it, I was bowing my head on the upper platform at Westminster Chapel before several hundred people. I was thinking, *I should not be here. I have no right to be here. Lord, how on earth could You use me today? I am not fit to be in this pulpit.*

There was no way to resolve the situation at that time. I could only ask God for mercy and try my best to forgive myself. Never in my life had I felt so unworthy.

But when I stood up to preach, God simply undergirded me and enabled me to preach as well as I ever had. When we are emptied of all self-righteousness and pride, we enable God to move in and through us.

Why We Can't Forgive Ourselves

At the end of the day, I believe there are several causes for our inability to forgive ourselves.

Anger. We may be angry with ourselves. Look at the Old Testament story of Joseph. As a type of Christ, Joseph said to his brothers, "And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you" (Gen. 45:5).

These brothers were beginning to get the message that Joseph had forgiven them; he didn't want them to be angry with themselves. That is the way God forgives. Jesus does not want us to be angry with ourselves for our sins.

Not forgiving ourselves is self-hatred. Joseph's brothers had hated themselves for selling Joseph into slavery. They could not take back what they had done.

Some Christians who can't forgive themselves are, underneath it all, angry with themselves. But God can begin today to cause all that happened to fit into a pattern for good.

God will take the wasted years and restore them to good before it is all over. It is just as Joel promised: "I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten" (Joel 2:25).

In some cases it is fear more than anger that is a barrier to our forgiving ourselves. Regret leads to guilt, and guilt can lead to fear: the fear of missing "what might have been" or the fear that what has happened cannot possibly turn out for good.

True guilt and pseudo-guilt. There are two kinds of guilt most of us will struggle with: true guilt (a result of our sin against God) and pseudo-guilt (when there is no sin in our lives). When we have sinned, we must confess it to God (1 John 1:9). The blood of Jesus takes care of true guilt by doing two basic things:

1. It washes away our sin—as though it never had existed.
2. It perfectly satisfies God's eternal justice.

Whereas discipline is necessary because we are sinners, sin that has been confessed to God is totally forgiven by Him. Any guilt we feel after that is pseudo-guilt.

There are two kinds of false guilt:

1. The kind that comes when sin was never involved in the first place.
2. The kind that comes when sin has been forgiven by God.

Pseudo-guilt—though it is false—is also very real; we feel keenly guilty. But there is no good reason for the sense of guilt.

Take, for example, a person who is driving a car when a child runs out into the street at the last second and is struck down. The guilt can be overwhelming, but there was no sin. It doesn't need to be confessed to God.

The other kind of pseudo-guilt comes when you have confessed your sins but you don't feel forgiven. Once we have acknowledged our sin, we should accept our forgiveness and leave the rest in God's hands.

During the years I have developed a sense of failure as a father. I wish I had given more time to T.R. and Melissa in my early years at Westminster Chapel.

I now understand that putting them first—rather than my church

or sermon preparation—would have allowed the Chapel to carry on just as well. Of course, I can't change the past.

But for me to continue to feel guilty over this is not pleasing to God because He has already totally forgiven me. If I let myself dwell on my failure, I am giving in to pseudo-guilt and sinning as I do because I am dignifying unbelief. I must keep destroying the record of my wrongs—every day.

Not forgiving ourselves is a subtle way of competing with Christ's atonement. God has already punished Jesus for what we did (2 Cor. 5:17). Instead of accepting Jesus' sacrifice, I want to punish myself for my failures. This competes with Christ's finest hour.

Fear. Fear is one of the main reasons we do not forgive ourselves. The person who fears has not been made perfect in love, and fear "has to do with punishment" (1 John 4:18).

Recognizing that fear—and punishing ourselves for our mistakes—displeases God should result in an ever-increasing sadness for this self-loathing spirit. We are required to walk away from our past folly and not look back.

My wife was greatly blessed by the music ministry of Janny Grein and her song "Movin' On" at a Rodney Howard-Browne meeting. Louise remembers Janny shouting out the words, "Let the past be past—at last." God speaks those words to us.

Let the past be past at last. Forgive yourself as well as those who have damaged you.

Pride, self-righteousness and self-pity. Our unforgiveness of ourselves may be traceable to pride. We, in our arrogance, cannot bear having the Lord do everything for us so graciously, so we think we must help Him out a bit.

Our pride must be eclipsed by humility. We must let God be God and the blood of Christ do what it in fact did: remove our

guilt and satisfy God's sense of justice.

Just as fear and pride are like identical twins, so are self-righteousness and self-pity. We feel sorry for ourselves and show it by not forgiving ourselves.

Pseudo-guilt can develop into very real guilt before God. It is false guilt, since God says, "You're not guilty." We make it into real guilt when we in effect reply, "Yes, I am."

The bottom line is this: Not forgiving ourselves is wrong and dishonoring to God. But God will use the sorrow we feel over what we've done to draw us to Himself.

Guilt and Grace

The initial work of the Holy Spirit is that He convicts of sin. When we walk in the light we know the blood cleanses us of sin, but walking in the light also reveals sin in us that we may not have seen before (1 John 1:7-8).

The sense of guilt God instigates is temporary. God uses guilt only to get our attention. When we say, "I'm sorry," and mean it, that's enough for God.

He doesn't beat us black and blue and require us to go on a 30-day fast to supplement Christ's atonement. He convicts us of sin to get our attention, but having done that, He wants us to move forward.

The ability to forgive ourselves therefore extends from an understanding of grace. Grace is undeserved favor.

Mercy is not getting what we do deserve (justice). Grace is accepting what we don't deserve (total forgiveness).

It may seem unfair when we have been so horrible. We have let God down; we have let others down.

But it is fair (1 John 1:9). The blood of Jesus did a wonderful job. God is not looking for further satisfaction.

All accusations regarding confessed sin come from the devil, who works either as a roaring lion to scare or an angel of light to deceive—or both (1 Pet. 5:8; 2 Cor. 11:14). Never forget, perfect love drives out fear (1 John 4:18).

Let The Past be Past

The sweet consequence of not keeping a record of all wrongs is that we let go of the past and its effect on the present. We cast our care on God and rely on Him to restore the wasted years and to cause everything to turn out for good.

We find ourselves accepting ourselves as we are with all our failures (just as God does), knowing all the while our potential to make more mistakes. God never becomes disillusioned with us; He loves us and knows us inside out.

Moses, David, Jonah, Peter—all these men in the Bible had to forgive themselves before they could move into the ministry God had planned for them. It's time for you to follow their example.

That is exactly what God wants of you and me. Let the past be past—at last.

Read a companion devotional.

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