

Why We Cannot Forgive Ourselves

Eric Davis

Fictitious Forgiveness

It's heard often in the throes of life. "I just can't forgive myself." "I don't if I'll ever be able to forgive myself for this."

We do something that we never thought we could; a sin against a spouse, child, unborn baby, good friend, or the like. The guilt snowballs. Despair lingers. We can't shake it. It may have been something we did a few days, or decades, ago. And the burden hasn't gone away. "Why can't I forgive myself?"

Dozens of books have been written on the topic of self-forgiveness. Much ink has been spilled, proposing step-by-step guides, in an attempt to walk individuals through forgiving themselves.

Some psychologists say that the battle to forgive oneself is rooted in a struggle to shed shame and blame. The goal becomes feeling better about oneself. Corresponding methods follow. For example, it is said that replaying what you did over and over again in your head isn't going to heal you or the one you hurt. Instead, it only makes you feel bad. And that shouldn't happen. So, if you find yourself meditating on your mistakes, stop, and refocus your attention on something more positive. One such technique is Positive Emotion Refocusing Technique. It's a self-promoting procedure aimed to convince yourself that you are better than past mistakes.

Others advocate dealing with self-forgiveness by fighting off the bad things you've done. Preach to yourself the good things you've done. You should meditate on what an amazing person you are to leverage self-forgiveness.

Still others prescribe a form of self-pampering. Treat yourself to your preferred pleasure. Sure, you made a mistake, but it's toxic to feel bad about yourself. So, drown out the negative with your favorite treat or trinket to self-actualize yourself once more.

We could go on.

But surpassing the crux of self-forgiveness has nothing to do with a secret technique rooted in self-actualization, self-esteem, or self-pampering. In fact, that only pours fuel on the fire. Any approach to this issue which has as its goal making oneself feel better or look better is utterly dangerous. Why? It has two catastrophic things in common; the deifying exaltation of self and the suppressing elimination of God. Self becomes god. God is suppressed. It's the same old trick that got us here in the first place.

There are at least seven problems with the "I-can't-forgive-myself" dilemma which demonstrate that self-forgiveness is a fictitious forgiveness

1. Self-forgiveness clashes with the definition of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a transaction conducted between multiple parties in which a debt is acknowledged by the violator, pardon sincerely requested, and pardon granted by the violated. Thus, forgiveness involves multiple

parties. The issue has nothing to do with me transacting with myself, and everything to do with others; those against whom I sinned.

Therefore, self-forgiveness is rendered fictitious simply by the definition of forgiveness.

2. A struggle with self-forgiveness may actually be an unwillingness to accept the depth of my sinful nature.

We've all done terrible things. It's inescapably human. Then the dilemma comes: "I don't know if I'll ever be able to forgive myself." But what we really mean is, "I still can't believe I did that." "That's just not me. I'm not that kind of person."

But, as hard as it may be, we need to believe it. We *are* that kind of person. In part, this is the crux of the issue. If we can get here, contrary to many psychologists, we are on the path upward.

Self-forgiveness is often simply an avoidance of healthy self-evaluation. We are not proverbial puppets being unwillingly forced by a conniving puppet master into sin. We are sinners by nature.

"But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire" (Jas. 1:14).

"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? I the Lord search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds" (Jer. 17:9-10).

"None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one" (Rom. 3:10-12).

We really are that bad. And this is key to the problem. If we are unwilling to go here, then we will never escape the actual toxicity of the self-forgiveness issue. We shouldn't stay here (see #7), but we need to get here.

3. Fueling the battle with self-forgiveness could be severe self-righteousness.

Similar to a failure to accurately embrace our depravity, we may be stewing in extreme narcissism. We perceive inability to forgive ourselves. However, we really have a high view of self. We cannot believe that we sinned in some way because we, if unspokenly, esteem ourselves as far greater than we really are. Our self-esteem has rotted our soul into the delusion of self-forgiveness.

The real problem is quite simple, however. We are proud, self-worshipping egotists. Thus, we refuse to come down from the mythical cloud upon which we esteem ourselves. This always compounds the problem.

4. Self-forgiveness could be despair over failing to meet an idolatrous desire.

As theologian Mick Jagger once said, "You can't always get what you want."

Perhaps we were ruled by a certain desire. It may have even been a good desire. But it became a god-desire. And we didn't get it.

“I can’t forgive myself,” may really mean, “I needed this thing for security, safety, and significance. And I failed to get it. I’m not sure how I will continue, now.”

So, these self-forgiveness battles may be opportune time to have idolatrous desires exposed and eradicated, by the grace of God.

5. A struggle with self-forgiveness may be a struggle with self-righteous standards.

In this case, “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.”

We have created our own standard of righteousness. Perhaps we over-estimated ourselves. Or, we so worshiped the approval of others, that we lived life perpetually attempting to solicit that applause.

We failed. It was devastating. So, the battle with self-forgiveness arises from failure to measure up to our own standards of performance; our own image of how good we hoped that we were. And now, we are deceived into thinking that we cannot forgive ourselves. In reality, we need to confess our sin of creating a self-righteous standard or worshipping the god of people-applause.

6. A battle to forgive ourselves may arise from seeing ourselves as the judge.

The person 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 verdict upon himself, and now believes that he must grant the needed pardon. That’s the source of the problem. But, this is akin to an individual who commits a murder serving as his own prosecutor, jury, and judge. He convenes the court. He adjudicates himself for himself. But it doesn’t work this way. This is all rooted in a high view of self.

And this tactic will not solve the problem. Man is hard-wired to know that he is not the Absolute. The [Bible](#) teaches that God alone is Judge (Psa. 7:11, Psa. 50:4-6). Moral violations are first and foremost against him (cf. Ps. 51:4). Thus, the self-forgiveness dilemma is one of fictitious forgiveness. The real problem is a failure to embrace God as Judge.

Forget needing to forgive ourselves. Far more importantly, we need to be forgiven by the God and Judge of the universe.

7. A battle with self-forgiveness could be an unwillingness to embrace the one provision which objectively removes human guilt and provides forgiveness.

This is probably the greatest issue with fictitious self-forgiveness.

The psychological techniques are missing something huge. It’s the absolute key to unlocking the problem of fictitious forgiveness.

Guilt is not something that *we* can actually do away with. We can only suppress it. But doing so is soul-suicide. Guilt can only be removed by *something* outside of ourselves. Why? Because the things we do wrong are first and foremost against *Someone* outside of ourselves.

Human beings are culpable to God. He created us. He is our Judge. Therefore, the things we do wrong—last week or last century—are first a violation against him. He is personally violated with every sin we commit, large or small (Psa. 51:4). Sin rejects his rule, disdains his holiness, robs his glory, disrespects his majesty, and scorns his goodness. It's no small thing.

Time does not heal our violations. The water under the bridge hasn't gone anywhere. There is no bridge. Every sin is recorded in the courtroom of [heaven](#). It's only right. God is a God of infinite goodness and justice (Psa. 33:4-5). It would be wrong and evil of him to overlook sin.

But that creates an immense problem for us all: "If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?" (Psa. 130:3).

We are all guilty before God. One sin renders us comprehensively in the wrong (Jas. 2:10). And we can no more scrub away our guilt than the leopard can his spots.

So, an apparent battle to forgive ourselves arises here. We know we are guilty. Guilt has two aspects. First, and most important, our objective guilt before God. Our standing is guilty—whether perceived or not—in light of our violations against God. Second, we have subjective guilt. In his kindness, God has wired us all with a conscience. It's that soul-alarm which sounds in response to sin. This kind of guilt can be a gift, then. Feeling bad about ourselves over undealt with offenses is God's objective expression of love, not a feeling to be drowned out by self-actualization and self-pampering.

But this is why a diagnosis of "I can't forgive myself" is so dangerous. It fails to rightly understand God, self, and the nature of guilt. And it fails to rightly receive God's provision for human guilt.

There is great news for those in the rut of fictitious self-forgiveness. God has provided the Solution to our guilt. His Son, Jesus Christ, exited heaven and became a man. He lived the perfect, sinless life that we never could; never needing forgiveness; never incurring guilt. Then, he went to the cross to do something extraordinary; serve the sentence for our sin. That is what happened when he suffered and died on the cross. Since the punishment for our sin is served, then the corresponding guilt is cancelled by God! When Christ resurrected bodily from the dead, he demonstrated that his life was sinless, thus, our guilt before God erased, and forgiveness provided.

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace" (Eph. 1:7).

"And you, when you were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross" (Col. 2:13-14).

So, the solution to fictitious self-forgiveness is the sinless life, substitutionary death, and vindicating resurrection of Jesus Christ. We must flee any and every notion that we need to forgive ourselves, and instead look outside of self and to the risen Christ.

Perhaps at the root is disbelief that God, the one Judge, will forgive our sin. This scenario is a dreadful one. The reasons for the disbelief could be an innocent battle with doubt or a wretched rebellion against truth. In either case, confess it to the Judge of all the Earth. And look to his gracious provision of his Son whose death alone removes our guilt and provides forgiveness.

Over 300 years ago, Puritan John Bunyan wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in which the main character, Christian, would have been diagnosed by many today as someone struggling to forgive themselves. Christian carried around an enormous pack on his back called his "burden." A portion of the story deals with the dilemma of removing his burden. He attempts various self-focused, self-actualizing techniques. He tries to sleep it off. That doesn't work. He meets a precarious fellow named, "Mr. Worldly Wiseman." He counsels Christian to consult two individuals, Legality and Civility who supposedly have skill in helping men out of their wits with their burden. Their methods involve doing good for oneself. However, Legality and Civility are shams who propose destructive man-made solutions. Eventually, he enters through the narrow gate and proceeds down the path called Salvation. He comes to a small hill upon which stood a cross, with an empty tomb at the bottom. Simply by looking at the cross, it finally happens: Christian's burden falls from his back, and quite easily. And it not only falls, but tumbles into the empty tomb, never to be seen again.

For additional reading, see Robert Jones, [Forgiveness: I Just Can't Forgive Myself](#).

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