



FORGIVING YOURSELF – AN UNBIBLICAL NOTION

The concept of self-forgiveness is a very common one in our day. There are many people stuck on the treadmill of “I just can’t forgive myself.” What does the Bible have to say about self-forgiveness? NOTHING. Study the Word of God from cover to cover, but you will not find self-forgiveness taught either by precept or by example. What the Bible does address is vertical forgiveness and horizontal forgiveness.

The Bible is not callous when it comes to the thoughts, feelings, and purposes that make up an individual’s experiences in life. The Bible is our practical, powerful, and sufficient source of problem-solving truth. Therefore, when a person truly believes that their main problem is self-forgiveness, it is kind for us to help them see the real answer they seek.

1. People who say “I just can’t forgive myself” may be expressing an inability or unwillingness to grasp and receive God’s forgiveness. Why?
 - A. Perhaps they have failed to see sin as a direct offense against God. If sin is euphemized as a “mistake,” we will continue to bemoan our “mistake” rather than see it as a treacherous assault against our creator and king.
 - B. Perhaps they have failed to see the holiness and wrath of God against sin. If God’s hatred of sin is underestimated, the belief that we must judge and forgive ourselves begins to take root.
 - C. Perhaps they have not yet gripped the width and depth of God’s forgiveness and mercy. With limited forgiveness and mercy come a limited view on what God can do and a greater emphasis on what I must do.
 - D. Perhaps they are allowing Satan to continue to accuse. Remembrances of past sin (places, relationships, physical or emotional scars) can all be triggers that hold us back.
 - E. Finally, perhaps they have failed to grow in the graces of putting on righteous replacements for what was “put off.” This keeps us from growing in sanctification and keeps us bound up in sin.

2. People who says: “I just can’t forgive myself” may not see the depth of their own depravity. “I still can’t believe I did that” sounds like low self-esteem. It is actually a statement of pride. James 1:13-15 pictures the power of our corrupt desires to bring us to spiritual ruin. John Owen observed that any kind of sin carries within it the seeds of spiritual apostasy.

3. People who say “I just can’t forgive myself” may be venting regrets for failing to achieve a certain cherished desire. In other words, this person acts as if they control the world and by the sin they committed, they prevented something from happening or caused something to happen which cannot be reversed. It puts them in a position of authority above God. It totally does away with Romans 8:28.
4. People who say “I just can’t forgive myself” may be trying to establish his/her 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.” The problem here is that he/she is pursuing a “righteousness of his own (Philippians 3:7-9).
5. 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 just can’t forgive myself” is equivalent to saying “I’m in the role of judge and will dispense forgiveness as I decide. 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 that determines that guilt even exists?

Conclusion: Is self-forgiveness an imprecise, harmless, neutral notion? NO! Any thinking that clouds God’s forgiveness is never harmless.