

Forgiving Yourself

Central Idea: When we refuse to forgive ourselves, even though God has forgiven us, we are denying God, punishing ourselves, and probably making others miserable also.

Aim: To get us to say to ourselves, without deception, "You are forgiven."

Introduction: Forgetfulness is usually bad. Forgetting an appointment or forgetting where we put our keys can cause us some difficulties. In some cases, what we call bad memories, might be just "*selective memories*." But here is one area when forgetfulness is good: forgetting the past. Read **Philippians 3:13 – 14**.

*Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it.
But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead,
I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God
has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*

We are sometimes harder on ourselves than on any one else. Most of us wonder if we're worthy of forgiveness, and we have a hard time forgetting our past.

I. Are we supposed to forget our past or remember it?

In the Scripture quoted above, Paul talked about how he was trying to forget what was behind so that he could focus on what was ahead. But when you read the stories of Paul's preaching in the book of Acts (for instance Acts 22:4 – 5 and 26:9 – 11), and read so much of what he wrote in his letters about his past sins (such as 1 Timothy 1:12 – 17), it is clear that he often referred to his past life of sin when he was giving his testimony of God's grace in his life.

We can also imagine from those examples, that it wasn't easy for Paul to forget what he did and forgive himself. But he learned to do it, and so can we with God's help.

So, one conclusion to this question of whether we should forget or remember our past is: Never forget your testimony of how much God has forgiven you, but get God's help to forgive yourself the way he has forgiven you. Remember the grace more than you remember the guilt and the shame.

If you completely forget how much God has forgiven you, then you might be much more tempted to look down on others when they sin and have a harder time forgiving them. On the other hand, if all you remember is how bad you were, then you may never find the peaceful confidence that comes from standing in God's grace (Romans 5:1 – 2 and 8:1). ¹

Agree or Disagree? *I remember the guilt and the shame of my past, but I remember more that I am forgiven.*

II. Some reasons we give for not forgiving ourselves

A. There can be a true or valid reason for feeling guilty and not forgiving yourself.

➤ Because of unrepented, and unforgiven sin.

If you know you haven't repented and God hasn't forgiven you, then you won't and you shouldn't forgive yourself either.

Look at another of Paul's insights, this one from **1 Corinthians 4:4**.

*My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent.
It is the Lord who judges me.*

We know the harmful effects of a guilty conscience when there should be an acceptance of grace and forgiveness, but the fact is, some people are guilty and don't know it. Their conscience may be clear, but that doesn't make them innocent.

➤ The Holy-Spirit-sensitive conscience

Read **2 Corinthians 7:8 – 13**. You may be familiar with that passage, but read it again slowly. Or if you are not familiar with it, read it a couple of times.

The Holy-Spirit-sensitive conscience gives us what this passage calls "*godly sorrow*." Godly sorrow focuses, among other things, on the sorrow that our sins bring to our Father in heaven. When you first experienced that godly sorrow, it was definitely leading you in the right direction. It is what psychologists refer to as *constructive sorrow*.² It is *constructive* because of all that it produces (verse 11). But at that moment you were not forgiven and shouldn't forgive yourself – YET.

Don't overcomplicate it, but don't try to bypass it either: Have you repented of your sins? Has God forgiven you?

If not, then there is a valid reason for not forgiving yourself. But that would be the only valid reason.

B. There can also be many wrong reasons for feeling guilty and not forgiving yourself, which is called in the passage referred to above as "*worldly sorrow*."

Worldly sorrow focuses solely on the sorrow that our sins bring to ourselves. We should be aware of the horrible consequences of our sin on our own lives (see *Jeremiah 7:19*, for instance), and that does make us sorry. But worldly sorrow causes us to worry more about how our sins inconvenienced us than on how they harmed others and grieved God. It can make us be mostly sorry that we got caught or lead us to dwell on self-pity and self-loathing. Unlike the motivation that godly sorrow gives us (again, verse 11), worldly sorrow paralyzes us and produces little or no lasting changes in our character and life. It certainly doesn't motivate us to correctly forgive ourselves.

Some causes of that relentless, persistent living in guilt and an inability to forgive self:

➤ Unrealistic personal expectations³

We may have been influenced by an environment that we perceived (correctly or incorrectly) communicated to us that we can never do enough to be accepted. If we allow that to be our standard, we can never think that we are worthy of forgiveness.

It's easy to confuse failure in a project or opportunity with failure as a person. Instead of "*I made a mistake and need to correct it*," it becomes "*I am a mistake and will never change*."

Our self-esteem works according to what Dr. James Dobson calls the "*weakest link*" principle.⁴ We may have many positive qualities except for one area that bothers us, and we will focus on that one area as if it is the most important characteristic of a worthy individual.

It's hard to forgive ourselves if we dwell in these kinds of unrealistic expectations.

➤ Inferiority and social pressure ⁵

Being surrounded by people that frequently criticize us can feed on the insecurity that we already have. We feel guilty because we feel inferior, and we feel inferior because we feel guilty.

Not everyone responds to criticism in a negative way, but it is probably a rare person who can forgive himself or herself who lives in this kind of environment.

➤ Preferring self-pity to forgiveness

We may read all of the Scriptures about God's love for us, his acceptance of us, his forgiveness of our sins, and his promise of a hopeful and joyful life. But unless we choose to believe and apply those truths, they will not help us. As strange as it may seem, we may actually prefer self-pity to forgiveness.

That personal preference will certainly not be conducive to self-forgiveness.

➤ The devil

He is the accuser (*Revelation 12:10*), and often he accuses us falsely. We have to admit that some accusations are right. But those are usually the promptings of the Holy Spirit to convict us of sin and help us move in the right direction. Satan's accusations are usually either wrong or they are about things in the past that are forgiven and that God wants us to forget (again forget the guilt, not the testimony).

Believing Satan is doubting God. You can never forgive yourself if you believe Satan and doubt God.

III. Wrong ways to handle this guilt ("*Worldly sorrow leads to death.*")

It is clear from Scripture that the question is **not** whether or not we have legitimate guilt. God is clear on that: we are all sinners (*Romans 3:23*) and, therefore, guilty. The question we are dealing with is how to avoid unnecessary guilt, and that comes down to trusting God's way of dealing with true guilt.

As is true with most topics, we may try to deal with this one in wrong ways. Such as:

A. Trying to ignore it (hide) or defend it (blame others)

This is not new. It was Adam and Eve's way of dealing with the original sin (*Genesis 3*). They tried to hide from God, as if that made any sense to them. And they blamed others – Adam blamed Eve and, by implication, actually blamed God for making her; Eve blamed the devil.

We can probably see that we have tried both of those also. And we know how well it worked. It didn't give us any real peace, because it did not produce the assurance of being forgiven by God and, therefore, feeling free to forgive our self.

B. Block out the guilt with noise, activity, or self-medication.

Of course, all that does is postpone the guilty feeling until later, and then it is compounded with other reasons for feeling guilty.

But doing that long enough can produce what God calls the *seared conscience* (1 Timothy 4:2). That is certainly not a true solution, but it is one that is often chosen over the real solution found in God.

C. Severe self-punishment

Unwilling to forgive self can lead to severe depression, alienation, and loneliness.

That's why *James 5:19* connects confessing with healing. It is spiritual, mental, and physical health.

All of these extremes ignore God's plan of confession, repentance, and acceptance of forgiveness. God wants us to understand the healthy reality of forgiveness and repentance. We deceive ourselves if we focus on forgiveness without repentance. But we frustrate ourselves if we focus on repentance and not accept forgiveness.

III. Steps to forgiving self

As you may have noticed by now, God does not actually tell us anywhere in his Bible to forgive ourselves. Instead, there is a huge emphasis on his forgiveness. It may be that the main key to forgiving ourselves is to understand and believe that God has forgiven us.

A. So, a first step to forgive self is to understand the Biblical truths about God's forgiveness.

Read the following Scriptures. You may have read them before, but pray for God to help you understand and believe them on a personal and practical level. Write your thoughts about each one.

- When God forgives, he forgets (*Jeremiah 31:34* quoted in *Hebrews 8:12* and *10:17*).
- Distinguish between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow (*2 Corinthians 7:8 – 13*).
- Jesus can clear the conscience (*Hebrews 9:14; 10:22*).
- Confession, repentance, acceptance bring healing (*James 5:19*).
- Baptism washes away the past (*1 Peter 3:21* – the pledge of a good conscience).
- I am washed, sanctified, and justified (*1 Corinthians 5:9 – 11*).⁶

Can you say: "God, I truly believe everything you say about your forgiveness, and I will live my life with the joy and security of someone who believes it"?

B. Then, once you are sure God has forgiven you, forgive yourself.

- Don't spend the rest of your life hating yourself for one mistake (or even many mistakes), no matter how terrible it was (or they were).
- You might want to write a letter to yourself, forgiving yourself.

Can you say: "Forgiveness is a part of my testimony. I will never forget how God forgave and delivered me. But, God help me, I will forget the guilt"?

Conclusion: Gloria and Bill Gaither wrote a great song called "*I am loved.*" that summarizes a lot of what we've studied. Here are some of the words:

*Forgiven, I repeat it, I am forgiven
Clean before my Lord, I freely stand.
Forgiven, I can dare forgive my brother.
Forgiven, I reach out to take your hand.

I am loved, I am loved.
I can risk loving you,
For the One who knows me best
Loves me most.*

And one more insight from the apostle Paul, who seemed to have a clear view of all of this. In *1 Timothy 1:19*, Paul encouraged his young friend Timothy, and us, to live life "*holding on to faith and a clear conscience.*" Take some time to summarize how studying these Scriptures has helped you to make the decision to hold on to faith and a clear conscience:

When we can honestly say to ourselves, without being deceived, "*God has forgiven me,*" then we can go about the business of worshipping God with a clear conscience, quit punishing ourselves, and develop positive relationships with others.

Forget the guilt of the past, go on with the present and the future.

John Sullivan
First written in September 1984
Edited and expanded October 2025

Footnotes:

- ¹ For another Scripture about the right way to remember our past, look at *2 Peter 1:8 – 14*. Right after Peter's inspirational description of the divine nature that we are allowed to participate in (verses 3 & 4) and the challenge to grow in the godly virtues (verses 5 – 7), he gives this warning to never forget that we have been cleansed from our past sins. Recall also *1 John 1:5 – 10* which shows that balance of always admitting our sin (both present and past) but always believing that God is purifying us from all sin (both past and present). Paul, Peter, John – they all knew the importance of this balanced way of looking at our past, and God inspired them to write this down so we could learn from it too.
- ² Dr. Gary Collins wrote an extensive book in 1980 called *Christian Counseling*, published by Word Books. Chapter 9 of that book entitled "*Guilt*" is worth the price of the whole book. He quotes other psychologists who say that guilt is the place where religion and psychology most often meet. He speaks from the perspective of the Bible as being the true source for freedom from guilt and how we can be delivered from the destructive patterns of an unforgiven spirit.
- ³ From Dr. Collins' book cited above.
- ⁴ From *Hide or Seek – How to Build Self-Esteem in Your Child*, by Dr. James Dobson, published by Revell in 1974.
- ⁵ Also from Dr. Collins' book cited above.
- ⁶ See the devotional study "*Washed, Sanctified, Justified*" available from d4yp.com.