

What Does the Bible Say About Forgiving Yourself

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The Bible has a lot to say about forgiveness, but it does not specifically address the concept of forgiving oneself. Usually, we talk about “forgiving yourself” when a person expresses persistent guilt over past sin or remorse over negative consequences caused by an earlier decision. We might personally feel the need to “forgive ourselves” for our mistakes in order to move forward in our lives.

Forgiving yourself ultimately comes from understanding God’s forgiveness. The Bible is clear that every human has sinned against God (Romans 3:23), and that all our wrongdoing is against God (Psalm 51:4; Genesis 39:9). Thus, the essential thing we need is God’s forgiveness, which is available to us through the person and work of Jesus Christ. All who put their faith in Jesus are fully forgiven of their sins. They are counted as righteous before God, eternally justified (Romans 5:1–11; Ephesians 1:13–14; 2:1–10). We do, of course, still struggle with sin, but God is faithful to cleanse us when we confess to Him and restore us to right fellowship with Him (1 John 1:9; 2:1–2). Jesus’ sacrifice was enough for any and all of our sins. Forgiving yourself, then, actually has to do with receiving God’s forgiveness.

It is helpful to compare our forgiveness of others with our forgiveness of ourselves. Matthew 18:21–35 records the parable of the unmerciful servant. In it, a master forgives the exorbitant debt of one of his servants, only for that servant to demand a much smaller amount from a fellow servant. The master said, “Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?” (Matthew 18:33). As we have received forgiveness from God, we are to extend that forgiveness to others. There are no higher standards than God’s. Our sins against one another are sins against God; it is His laws that we have transgressed. There is no way a person, including ourselves, could sin against us more than against God. When we understand that God’s standards are what count and that He has graciously extended forgiveness to us, we can extend that same forgiveness to others—and to ourselves.

While this might be simple to understand in concept, forgiving yourself can be difficult in practice. We regret our bad decisions, and we are remorseful over the ways they have hurt ourselves and others. The enemy continues to accuse us and remind us of our sins. Others in our lives might do the same. There are times we might even think it is repentant or laudable to refuse to forgive ourselves, as if our punishment of ourselves will atone for our sins. But that is not at all the message of the gospel. In fact, the Bible is quite clear that we could never make up for our own sins. We are sinners who are dead in transgression (Romans 3:23; 6:23; Ephesians 2:1–10) and hopeless apart from Christ (John 3:16–18, 36; Romans 5:6–8). The gospel tells us that God’s wrath for our sins has been poured out on Jesus; justice has been served. Living in guilt or self-punishment is a denial of the truth of the gospel.

Oddly enough, forgiving yourself means admitting your own sinfulness. It requires admitting that we are imperfect and unable to become perfect on our own. It means acknowledging the depths of our depravity. It means rejecting the idea that our efforts will ever atone for our wrongdoings. But it also means receiving and walking in the fullness of God’s grace. When we humble ourselves and receive God’s grace, we can let go of our own angst against ourselves for our wrongs. We come to understand that the Creator of the universe loved us so much that He not only made us, but overcame our rebellion against Him.

The wonderful thing about God's forgiveness is that it is not merely transactional; it is relational. When we are saved, we become children of God (John 1:12). We receive the indwelling Holy Spirit who transforms us (Philippians 2:12–13). He is with us forever (John 14:16–17; Ephesians 1:13–14). Our sins do have genuine and often heartbreaking consequences in our lives. But God is faithful to use even that for His glory and our good (Romans 8:28–30; 2 Corinthians 1:3–7). We are not left to wallow in the consequences of our sins. Instead, God helps us endure through them, and we can see His redemptive abilities (James 1:2–5).

Forgiving yourself can be especially difficult when your sin has had a negative impact on someone else. It is important to seek forgiveness from those we have wronged and to reconcile where possible. Again, God is the one who enables this reconciliation. Living in shame will not fix a broken relationship or remove the harm that you have done. But the truth of the gospel can.

Paul, in many ways, set an example of forgiving oneself. He had been a violent persecutor of the church. But rather than live in shame and regret over what he'd done, or think that God could not use him, or constantly remind himself of his sin, he spread the gospel broadly. This was not from penance or trying to make up for his past. Rather, it was out of understanding God's great salvation. Paul writes, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen" (1 Timothy 1:15–17). Paul's sin actually became an avenue by which God was glorified. Rather than refuse to forgive himself, Paul readily received God's forgiveness and rejoiced in it.

In Romans 7–8 we see another example of this. Paul bemoans his continual struggle with his sin nature, a battle common to every believer in Christ. But he doesn't say he'll just try harder or that he'll never forgive himself. Rather, he says, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin. Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 7:24–8:2).

Reminders of past sin can be used as prompts to praise God for His mercy and grace. Current negative consequences from our past sin can be reminders of God's faithfulness in the midst of them. They can be prompts to prayer and reliance on God for endurance, rescue, and transformation. Forgiving yourself is actually just receiving God's forgiveness in its fullness. In that, there is much freedom (Galatians 5:1)!