

# I'll Never Forgive Myself!

by Lynda Allison Doty

I would like to talk to you, straight from my heart to yours. This is something that can change your life if you will let it. You, or someone you love.

There are some people who just cannot seem to “get well.” These are hurting people. The same problems surface over and over again. Just as they begin to make progress, they fall back. They seem to live under a generalized feeling of condemnation. Their past does not remain past. It seems to pop up, unbidden, at the oddest times. A pastor may have done all he knows to do and it still has not “worked.”

Eventually, we refer many of them out to a psychological counselor. Even though we might experience a twinge of guilt, we feel we've done all we can. We breathe a sigh of relief and await the good report of healing. But it never seems to come.

The underpinning of psychology and the self-help industry is an emphasis on self—such as *self-esteem*, *self-worth*, and *self-love*. This preoccupation of the counselor with self is not biblical. For example, on the issue of self-esteem, the Bible's teaching is to esteem others better than ourselves, and yet our psychological goals revolve around improving the way we feel about ourselves. One specific area where much damage has been done is the injunction to “forgive oneself.”

They try so hard. They say, “I just can't forgive myself.” And so they (once again) fall into condemnation, and (once again) lapse into a major depression, and the cycle starts over again. As we work with these unfortunate people, we are tempted to follow the pop psychologists' advice and lead them into the forgiving of self. “God has forgiven you,” we say, “and so you must forgive yourself.” If they can ever get past the point of self-recrimination, we think, they'll finally have it behind them. And so we assign a misdiagnosis, if you will, that can be more hurtful than helpful. We wonder where we went wrong, when all the time we were swimming against the tide of biblical truths—working so hard to do something God never intended for us to do.

Robert Jones says in *The Journal of Pastoral Practice* (10.4): “But has [the client] identified her real problem? Or has she become stuck in one particularly unpleasant symptom of an as-yet-unidentified root problem? Is self-forgiveness the solution? Or is there a deeper solution to a deeper problem?” He goes on to point out that the Bible speaks not one word about forgiving oneself. It speaks of vertical forgiveness (God forgiving us), and horizontal forgiveness (when we forgive another). But we are nowhere instructed in internal forgiveness.

It is particularly difficult for me to say all this because I used to believe it myself; and I was wrong. I am so sorry that I once taught this to hurting souls, because I realize now that I probably did more harm than good. And so I have had to repent, make amends where I could, and go on from there. I now understand that trying to lead someone down

the road toward the forgiving of self is like placing a life sentence upon a person without the possibility of parole.

Women, in particular, have been trying for years to forgive ourselves, especially of past sexual abuse, and continually fail. We are failing because we are attempting the impossible. No wonder we experience repeated failure.

The bottom line is that we fail to accept and apply God's forgiveness to our own lives. Eventually, because of this false belief, and trying to accomplish the impossible, we can just give up. We become discouraged, feeling we have tried everything and have failed.

I know this aching kind of helplessness first-hand. For years I personally sought to forgive myself for the way I raised my children. As an alcoholic single mother, one can only imagine the hurt I must have inflicted upon my little ones. Long after coming into the truth of God's wonderful plan of salvation, I still wept into my pillow for them. One night, something happened in the prayer room that nearly destroyed me. I was crying out to God with heartbreaking sobs, when a brother came alongside to try to help. He told me these words that night: "Sister, you've got to forgive yourself, or you'll never make it."

It was like a death sentence! He meant well. That's the problem—we all mean well. But think for a moment what that brother's words meant to a hopeless, broken heart. That was the night I almost gave up. But the Lord is faithful, and He led me to the truth that I was a sinner saved by His grace. He forgave my past. He forgave the things I did to my children. And for me to stand up and say, "I can't forgive myself!" only brought disappointment to a loving God who had cared enough to die for me!

As I reviewed the Bible biographies of very wicked individuals who were recipients of the grace of God, I began to understand and receive His forgiveness for my own wicked life. As this happened, I came to realize the problem had never been an inability to forgive myself—it was an inability to accept the fact that God had forgiven me! So often it is easy to believe that God can forgive everyone else—except us!

When we repent, He is faithful, not only to forgive us, but also to cleanse us (I John 1:9). We are *clean!* Our job is to believe this for ourselves, and then lead others into this understanding. Then we will begin to see true and lasting healing in those people we had almost given up on.

Do you see yourself in any of this? Maybe someone you care about? Let's stop trying so hard. Let's relax in His arms and allow Him free access to all our secret rooms. Only God can do this work. Let Him!

*Lord Jesus, help us today to believe and to receive the awesome forgiveness You have extended to us. This was the reason behind the cross where You died.*