

SUNDAY ARTICLE

ST DAVID'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ♦ 28 APRIL 2019



Say No to the Gospel of Self-Forgiveness

John Beeson

She sits in my office, tears running down her face. Two years ago her mother died in a hospice while she lay asleep at home. She was trying to get a decent night's rest after days spent at her mother's side. "I just can't forgive myself. I let her die alone. I knew I should have been there, but I was selfish. I can never forgive myself for that."

Dozens have shared similar confessions with me. Does this resonate with you? What guilt do you bear? What burdens are you carrying because you can't forgive yourself? If Christ has forgiven you, do you also have to forgive yourself?

Many are trapped because they can't forgive themselves. My friend isn't alone. And she feels trapped. Because she'll never hear her mother offer her forgiveness, she feels like she can't release herself from guilt.

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What Does Scripture Say?

Why can't you release yourself from your sin? Is it because the weight is too much? Because you know you haven't changed? Because the ripple effects of your sin can't be reversed?

I have good news – such good news. You don't need to forgive yourself, because you can't forgive yourself.

I know, this answer sounds foreign. Our contemporary therapeutic culture tells us that self-forgiveness is not only a category of forgiveness, it's actually the most important of them all.

Writing in *Psychology Today*, psychotherapist Beverly Engel says, "I believe that self-forgiveness is the most powerful step you can take to rid yourself of debilitating shame." But here's the vital question for Christians: Can you point to one example in Scripture of someone forgiving themselves?

There is no category of self-forgiveness in the Bible. And what a freeing truth! Your shame and guilt does not depend on your ability to forgive yourself.

Two Kinds of Forgiveness

There are two – and only two – biblical categories of forgiveness: others' forgiveness and God's forgiveness. Horizontal and vertical.

Horizontal forgiveness marks us as Christians. Seeking the forgiveness of others is not optional. Forgiving one another is not optional. Paul writes:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. (Colossians 3:12-13)

It's not enough to ask forgiveness from God; we must also ask forgiveness from those we've injured.

As important as horizontal forgiveness is, even more fundamental is **vertical forgiveness**, which comes from God alone. After committing the heinous double sin of adultery and murder against Bathsheba and Uriah, David cries out to God: "Against you, you only, have I sinned!" (Psalm 51:4). How can David say this? Is he minimizing his horrifying sins against Uriah and Bathsheba?

Hardly.

David realizes that as awful as his sin is horizontally, it's much worse vertically. He has profoundly offended his Creator – and the Creator of Uriah and Bathsheba – by devaluing one life and snuffing out another. He has offended his righteous, covenant-making God with his wicked, covenant-breaking actions.

Sing! You're Forgiven.

But you know what David never walks through? The process of self-forgiveness. He doesn't entertain for a second that he must forgive himself or that, once he's sought forgiveness from God, he must self-flagellate to fully release himself from his sin. In fact, David would probably shock modern therapeutic sensibilities with how quickly he feels release. He admits that, once forgiven, he will have the audacity to sing: "Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness" (Psalm 51:14).

Have you experienced such freedom? Have you ever felt the complete forgiveness of God so deeply that you had to sing with joy?

Vertical forgiveness allows you to experience the power and release that comes through the cross – and then it sends you back to the horizontal, where you are made right in community.

Dear fellow sinners, does guilt plague you? Seek forgiveness from those whom you have sinned against. Seek forgiveness from God your Rescuer, who has purchased your

salvation through the death of Jesus. And then sing! Celebrate your forgiveness. Enjoy your freedom.

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John Beeson serves as associate teaching pastor at New Life Bible Fellowship in Tucson, Arizona. He attended Gordon College and Princeton Theological Seminary.

Source: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/say-no-gospel-self-forgiveness/>

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