

Why Can't We Forgive Ourselves?

Have you ever forgiven someone who has offended you? If you did, then you were following the Lord's instructions as recorded in Mark 11:25-26. Forgiving others can be relatively easy at times, especially when we consider the bigger picture in which we find the Lord forgiving us for the offenses we have committed against Him.

Here's a more difficult type of forgiveness though. It's forgiveness of oneself whenever WE make a mistake or sin or offend someone. For some reason forgiving oneself can be a million times more difficult than forgiving someone else. Have you ever thought about why this is?

One reason we might have trouble forgiving ourselves is because of our perfectionism. We don't want to sin. We don't want to make mistakes. We want to be "perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." (Matthew 5:48). We don't want to commit the slightest error, lest someone think badly of us or we harm our influence or we hurt someone else or even risk losing our souls. The fact of the matter is that none of us is God and none of us is going to become God. That seems self-evident, but it's worth reading again as a reminder. Actually, a better understanding of the word translated "perfect" would help here. We are going to sin even after we become Christians (I John 1:8). Are we striving to be perfect in the sense that we are seeking to never sin again? If we are, we have set an unrealistic goal. The Greek word for "perfect" can also be translated, "full grown, mature." God is "full grown," as it were, but He is also sinless. We can strive to be full grown in the faith, and the more we grow the more we strive to overcome temptation, but we are still going to sin. We are also going to make mistakes (not all mistakes are sins, by the way). Maybe we should stop trying to be perfect in the sense that we never do anything wrong. Maybe we should start maturing in the faith in the sense that we quickly and penitently turn to God for forgiveness whenever we do wrong.

Another possible reason for one not being able to forgive himself is a soft and sensitive heart. This is not a bad trait to have. Hard-hearted people couldn't care less about doing what's right. Soft-hearted individuals are touched deeply by their own shortcomings. The bad part of that is that they tend to dwell on their mistakes. They replay them over and over in their minds, thinking about what could have been done or said differently. It can be torturous. The good part of soft-heartedness is that those who are this way realize when they have done wrong and they repent of it, an act that must be taken if sin is to be forgiven by God (Luke 13:3). Sometimes it's tough to have a soft, sensitive heart. It's easy for it to get broken. Then again, the heart MUST be broken by conviction of one's sins in order to be saved (Acts 2:37). So even though the soft heart can be broken, let's be thankful that it's soft enough to be broken by the conviction of our sins.

Here's what I consider the most difficult situation that leads to an inability to forgive oneself. It's the situation in which you make a mistake or commit a sin and then don't have the chance to make up for it. The penitent person wants to make amends for his errors. But what about those times when this is not possible? So many times grieving spouses torment themselves after the death of their loved ones. What's behind this torment? It's the feeling that he or she could have done more to save the husband or the wife. Sadly, once the loved one has passed on, there is no more opportunity for the surviving spouse to make it up to the one they lost to death. This doesn't just occur in cases of death. There are many situations where we mess up and don't get an opportunity to make it right. We keep hoping, but the opportunity doesn't come. It hurts deeply. In those situations, all we can really do is be sure that we have sought God's forgiveness if what we have done is sinful as well as seek the forgiveness of the one or ones we have offended. God will forgive. It's up to those we offended if they wish to forgive us. We cannot control their feelings. We must go on and learn from our mistakes and try not to duplicate them.

God can truly forgive us. Those we offend can truly forgive us. The inability to forgive oneself might be one of the most painful feelings a person can experience. It's gut-wrenching, it's wasted energy and it's all so unnecessary. Only when we learn to forgive ourselves will we truly be free from the heartache that accompanies a lack of forgiveness.