



“Forgiving yourself” & “Forgetting your sins”

REJECTING POPULAR UNTRUTHS

Recommendation: Have your Bible available to look up verses as they are presented in this study. Or, you can print the verses that follow this study and consult them as they are referenced.

INTRODUCTION

Two of the most popular, unscriptural concepts accepted by many believers are the need to “forgive yourself” and the importance of “forgetting your sins.” Many Christian leaders continue to propagate these unbiblical ideas, and best-selling books have spread these untruths throughout the Body of Christ.

As a result, these two fallacies enjoy almost unquestioned acceptance by many believers. For example, a noted Christian psychologist and pastor stated the following on a denominationally sponsored radio broadcast: “There are many people I counsel who cannot forget their sins. I ask them to consider this: If the blood of Christ has been adequate to blot their sins from God’s presence and satisfy the holy nature of God, then surely they should be able to forgive themselves.”

In spite of the assertion by this well-meaning counselor that believers “should be able to forgive themselves,” this concept originates from worldly wisdom and has *no* biblical support. In addition, the implication that believers are to “forget their sins” is also unsubstantiated by Scripture and is contrary to teaching in God’s Word.

FORGIVING YOURSELF

The purported need “to forgive yourself” is one of the results of the prolific “self” emphasis that has overrun the Church in the last fifty years. As a result, “forgiving yourself” is emphasized as much, and sometimes more, than receiving God’s forgiveness. Yet, if it is necessary for a believer to “forgive self” in addition to receiving God’s forgiveness, then a believer is actually saying that God’s plan for forgiveness is insufficient. Here is why:

1. Receiving God’s forgiveness is not a matter of “feeling forgiven,” rather, it is a matter of trusting God and His promises (Romans 5:1-2, Colossians 1:21-23).
2. Since God says there is no condemnation (no guilt, but complete forgiveness) for one who is in Christ, then believers should not trust personal feelings (Romans 8:1). Instead, they should trust God’s Word. Forgiveness from God is a matter of faith, not feelings (Hebrews 11:6).
3. When God says that He forgives a believer and

provides cleansing from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9), what more could a mere mortal do to complete His work?

The “need” to “forgive yourself” typically indicates that one has a sense of guilt over past sins. Feeling remorse over past sins is not necessarily detrimental, especially if it reminds a person of the consequences of sin and helps one not to repeat previous mistakes. However, dwelling on personal failures or being controlled by feelings of guilt over previous sins are contrary to God’s plan for a believer to face and deal with past sins.

God’s plan for a believer to be an overcomer in Christ involves a confession of one’s sins to Him (1 John 1:9) and, if necessary, a confession of sin(s) at an appropriate time to others (based on Proverbs 15:23, 25:11; Matthew 7:12; James 5:16). Inherent to authentic confession is repentance (Proverbs 28:13, 2 Corinthians 7:9-10), which is a turning away from sin to follow Christ. In following Christ, a believer will put off old ways of thinking, speaking, and acting in order to put on Christ-likeness in every dimension (Ephesians 4:22-24), all of which contribute to an on-going renewal of one’s mind (Romans 12:2).

Instead of a believer thinking that it is necessary to “forgive self” to augment God’s forgiveness, God’s Word instructs a believer to forget what lies behind (*this does not mean to “have a blank mind” about the past but, instead, to not allow past situations to control the present*), to reach forward to what lies ahead, and to press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:13-14). The admonition to “fix” one’s eyes on Jesus (Hebrews 12:1-4) and to set one’s mind on things above instead of earthly things (Colossians 3:2) will help to relieve any unbiblical ideas of “forgiving self.”

“Forgiving self” is an expression of natural wisdom and is an outgrowth of humanistic philosophy. God’s Word has only two perspectives on forgiveness:

1. A person can and needs to be forgiven by God (Colossians 1:13-14, 1 John 1:9).
2. A believer is to forgive others, following the example of God’s forgiveness in Christ Jesus (Matthew 18:32-33, Ephesians 4:32, Colossians 3:12-13).

The bottom line is this: Any professing believer who teaches that “forgiving one’s self” is necessary for a vibrant walk in Jesus is falling short of biblical truth. Christian teachers should be diligent to search the Scriptures as the basis for all they present (James 3:1). Believers who are being taught also have the responsibility to “test the spirit” of the teachings presented to them as being in accordance with God’s Word (Acts 17:11, 1 John 4:1).

To illustrate the untenable and biblically unsupported position of “forgiving self,” imagine that a person was guilty of a specific crime yet, in spite of his judicial guilt, the highest court in the land granted that person a pardon. If this person did not “feel forgiven” after receiving such a merciful verdict, would that person then petition a lower court to grant him an additional pardon because of uncomfortable feelings?

Similarly, would we encourage a pardoned believer to appeal to a lower court (one’s self) after God Almighty had granted full pardon through the sacrifice of His Son? Instead of encouraging believers to search for the nebulous and irrational concept of “forgiving self” after receiving God’s forgiveness through the Cross, believers should be encouraged to trust God’s promise of complete forgiveness while, simultaneously, concentrating on their daily walk in Christ.

Also, if it was actually possible to “forgive yourself,” what aspect of “self” forgives the sin of another part of “self”? The concept of “forgiving self” either has to assume there is a part of “self” that corresponds to a “judge” that is untouched and above the part of “self” that sinned; OR that, somehow, atonement is granted when the “sinning self” forgives the “sinning self.” This may sound confusing, but the teaching of “forgiving self” demands this type of convoluted, unbiblical “logic.”

Before accepting the theory of the need to “forgive self,” a believer should consider the following: If the theory of “forgiving self” is biblically correct, there should be *at least one verse* in the Bible that supports it... there is not!

FORGETTING YOUR SINS

What does Scripture teach with regard to “forgetting your sins”? Does God’s Word teach that a believer is “to forget these sins” with the meaning of “not being able to recall personal sins” or “not having a remembrance of those sins”? One will look in vain to find biblical support for the necessity of “being unable to recall” or “to lose remembrance” of one’s own sins in order to grow in Christ. In fact, the memory of certain sins, even though forgiven by God, is often important for training in righteousness and frequently helps to remind a believer

not to repeat sin in this way.

BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF “FORGETTING”

On the other hand, there IS a biblical definition of “forgetting” that should be understood and practiced by every maturing believer in Christ. Basically, Scripture uses the term “not to remember” as meaning “not to mention or bring to mind” or “not to keep an account.” For instance, David requested the Lord “not to remember” (literally, “not to mention”) the previous sins of his youth (Psalm 25:7).

In a similar perspective, Scripture uses “forget” in the sense of “escaping notice.” Case in point – the Apostle Paul could remember (bring to mind) his earlier sins (1 Timothy 1:12-15), yet he confidently proclaimed “to forget” (not take notice) of those things that were behind in order to press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:13-14).

Instead of looking to his past, the Apostle Paul concentrated on Christ and what was ahead. Paul listed many of his past sins, but these significant failures did not inhibit his present growth in Christ. On the other hand, if a believer remembers past sins but is expected and taught to have a blank memory about these failures, a needless tension results that can inhibit one from growing in Christ. A believer can needlessly question, “Why can’t I forget my past sins?” and, without knowing it, can place undue attention on past sinfulness at the expense of cooperating with Christ’s present work in his or her life. A believer is burdened with an unnecessary prerequisite for spiritual development if required to “have a blank memory” about past sins.

There is no question that past sins can be shameful and painful. However, any past sin does not have to thwart a believer’s on-going growth in Christ. As in all challenges, the key to being an overcomer is to fix our eyes on Jesus, to rely on God’s empowering Holy Spirit, and to follow Scripture with regard to daily living. Instead of having a goal of “being unable to recall” past sins, a believer would find lasting benefit and relief by diligently learning more about the power of the Cross and its effect on daily living.

If there was any person whose past sins could have thwarted on-going spiritual progress, it was the Apostle Paul. Yet, he triumphantly proclaimed, “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2) and “for me to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). The Apostle Paul’s perspective refutes the need to “be unable to recall past sins.”

There is no question that sin’s consequences often last a lifetime; but there is no act of sin with enough power to

overcome the work of Christ and the power of the Cross in a believer's life. Additionally, trying to achieve a blank memory about one's own sins is not only counter-productive to one's growth in Christ, but it also is unnecessary. Instead, a believer is "to forget" (not take notice) of things behind, both good and bad, in order to press onward toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

This does not mean that a believer is not to take responsibility for past sins, nor does it mean that restitution for past sins should not be undertaken. A believer who deals responsibly with the consequences of his or her past sins will NOT be able to "forget" past sins, in the sense of not being able to recall them. Often, the on-going magnitude of sin's consequences will not allow a believer to have a blank memory of past sins (for example, financial support for a child born out of wedlock, or the loss of a marriage due to adultery, or a person injured due to drunk driving). Nevertheless, a believer can still be an overwhelming conqueror in Christ, as Romans chapter 8 clearly proclaims.

In the final analysis, the issue is not a believer's memory of the past that determines effective Christian living and witness. The issue is a believer's commitment to rely on the power of God through His Son, His Word, and His Spirit while concentrating on his or her daily walk in Christ through prayer and meditation, Bible study, obedience to Scripture, and fellowship with other believers. Both concepts of "forgiving yourself" and "forgetting your sins" draw attention back to the past, keeping the focus on self rather than Christ. A believer who focuses on the past has taken attention away from the present, the time frame in which authentic, spiritual growth takes place.

CONCLUSION

Since Scripture does not mention these so-called prerequisites for spiritual growth ("forgiving self" and "forgetting one's sins"), believers would be wise to redirect their attention to the provisions for spiritual growth as found in God's Word. Popular concepts, no matter how appealing they may sound, must be tested against the timeless truth of the Bible. Believers must continually rely on the truthfulness of Scripture, with its Christ-centered focus for their spiritual growth, instead of natural, worldly wisdom that lends itself to errors and self-centered perspectives – the antithesis to a Christian walk that is focused on Jesus.

REFERENCED VERSES

Romans 5:1-2, Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

Colossians 1:21-23, And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Romans 8:1, There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Hebrews 11:6, And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

1 John 1:9, If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Proverbs 15:23, To make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season, how good it is!

Proverbs 25:11, A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.

Matthew 7:12, So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

James 5:16, Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

Proverbs 28:13, Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.

2 Corinthians 7:9-10, As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

Ephesians 4:22-24, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Romans 12:2, Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Philippians 3:13-14, Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Hebrews 12:1-4, Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

Colossians 3:2, Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

Colossians 1:13-14, He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Matthew 18:32-33, Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?'

Ephesians 4:32, Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Colossians 3:12-13, 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.

James 3:1, Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

Acts 17:11, Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

1 John 4:1, Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

Psalms 25:7, Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O LORD!

1 Timothy 1:12-15, I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

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