

God has forgiven me, But I can't forgive myself

By Bob Van Domelen

The question of self-forgiveness is both simple and complicated because we are, by nature, both simple and complicated. Our hearts want to set aside our sins and to believe in the forgiveness we know we have from the Lord. But sin is proof of imperfection—the more grievous the sin, the greater the imperfection.

I have written on many occasions that we learn forgiveness in the manner in which we have experienced it as children. Caught for some infraction, a child will say “I’m sorry” and will receive some kind of affirmation from the one hearing the words. If both the infraction and the apology are repeated a number of times, the response might eventually sound like this: “No, you’re not sorry, because if you were *really* sorry, you wouldn’t have done it again.” It doesn’t take long before apology is in conflict due to the tendency of all of us to repeat behaviors we think are appropriate solutions to our needs. And this kind of conflict increases when applied to our relationship with God.

God, unlike our parents when we were kids, does not keep track of the number of times we sin. His forgiveness is as fresh and powerful after the most recent sin as it was after our first. Somehow, we come to believe that as long as we see imperfection within ourselves, we are unworthy of being in God’s presence—much less in His circle of close friends. Personally, I think this attitude saddens God because He knows it keeps us from receiving the full measure of grace He wants to share with us each and every day.

Brother Lawrence, a 17th century monk, wrote in *The Practice of the Presence of God* that when he sinned, he got on his knees and asked forgiveness. He then got up believing that whatever God wanted to do to him as a consequence for that sin was God’s decision and not his. Brother Lawrence shared that in the end, he had to rely on God’s mercy and not on his own ability to find some level of perfection.

I doubt that we will ever feel completely comfortable with our past sins or even those which still plague our lives. I have read that failure to forgive one’s self is the height of arrogance because we somehow manage to delegate God’s forgiveness to some position of lower importance. I don’t believe we consciously think or tell God that we will surrender our lives once we have self-forgiveness, but it is not difficult to understand how that logic might exist.

People enter the true presence of God wearing the rags of their brokenness, their heads bowed, lips murmuring “Lord, forgive me a sinner.” Knowing their hearts, God robes them in the peace that surpasses all understanding, the joy of His infinite love. God, through the death of Jesus on the cross, also erases the eternal consequences of even the most heinous of sins. He reminds us that He will never leave us or forsake us whether we struggle though daily life in a prison cell or an office cubicle.

Separation from God is *never* God’s design for we are *all* called into His presence. Even though it is hard to forgive self, we are offered the grace to do so each and every day. Don’t worry if the *feeling* of forgiveness escapes you or if daily temptation makes you feel that the eternal banquet is not for the likes of you. A place has been set for you and God takes great joy in your company! □