

Been Thinking About: Forgiving Ourselves

Why do we punish ourselves for old regrets long after we believe God has forgiven us? The question stuck in my mind after a conversation with someone I'll call TC. TC described himself as being in recovery for multiple addictions. A couple of times he said, "My problem was forgiving myself. I found it a lot easier to believe God had forgive me than to forgive myself for what I'd done."

In some ways I knew what TC was talking about. Long after believing God had forgive me, I have silently cursed myself for doing things that embarrassed me and hurt others. What unnerved me is that TC seemed more willing than I was to admit that forgiving ourselves is something we need to do.

Is it up to us to forgive ourselves? Although I was willing to beat myself up for past wrongs, offering mercy to myself seemed like playing God. If God wants us to pardon ourselves, I wondered why the Bible doesn't quote Him as saying something like, "Even as I have released you from guilt, so you must now release yourselves."

What surprised me is that TC helped me see that, without realizing it, I was doing the very thing I thought I was trying to avoid. He said, "I have a friend who got on my case for acting like I was greater than God. This friend kept saying, 'Who do you think you are, God Almighty? God forgives you. But you don't. What is this you're telling me? Are you greater than God?'"

The good-natured prodding TC took from his friend helped me. Later, I remembered words of the apostle John who wrote in his first New Testament letter: "This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in His presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and He knows everything" (1 John 3:19-20 NIV).

Why is it important to remember that God is greater than our hearts? John reminded us that when the sin we have already confessed continues to torment us, God sees more clearly than we do. He sees everything. He sees the wrong and the regret we have acknowledged. He sees the price He has paid to release us from that sin. He sees the trust we have put in His Son. He sees the good work He has started in our hearts. And He knows that what He has begun He will finish (Philippians 1:6).

God also sees something else. He sees the people around us who are negatively affected as long as we continue to condemn ourselves. He knows we will never be good at loving others as long as we refuse to let the love and forgiveness of God flush the guilt and shame out of our lives.

Just before raising the problem of self-condemnation, John wrote, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?" (1 John 3:16-17 NIV).

John's question prompts another. How can the love of God flow through us to those around us if we are saying, in effect, "I know You have forgiven me, Lord, but I have higher standards and expectations for myself than You do. I can't walk with You. I can't join in Your mission of love, because I haven't lived up to my own expectations." We may think that's humility. It's probably wounded pride.

What does lingering guilt tell us about ourselves?

We may be expecting too much of ourselves. Whether we are struggling with our own wounded pride or grieving what we have lost, God's thoughts are more reassuring than our own. Psalm 103 says, "He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. As a father pities His children, so the Lord pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust" (vv.10-14).

We may be limiting our ability to be what God wants us to be. Refusing to forgive ourselves as God has forgiven us does nothing but prolong and multiply our sin. Self-condemnation is the opposite of the gratitude that opens our hearts to God.

Open hearts to God and others is what the apostle John had in mind when he went on to write: "Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from Him anything we ask, because we obey His commands and do what pleases Him. And this is His command: to believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as He commanded us. Those who obey His commands live in Him, and He in them. And this is how we know that He lives in us: We know it by the Spirit He gave us" (1 John 3:21-24 NIV).

Every day of self-absorbed self-condemnation is a day spent robbing ourselves of the joy of a grateful heart. Every hour of beating ourselves up is an hour spent robbing others of the good that God wants to do for them through us. By contrast, every day lived in the freedom of forgiveness is a day spent praising God. Every hour lived in gratitude for forgiveness is a day spent loving others on God's behalf.

Father in heaven, in our thoughtful moments we know You are greater than our hearts. You see infinitely more than we do. You see the work You have begun in us, the Spirit You have given us, the forgiveness You have bought for us, and the desire You have given us to live in freedom rather than to hide behind past failures. Please help us to use that freedom to love others as You have first loved us.