

## **When You Say “I Can’t Forgive Myself”**

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Finding Freedom From Your Past (Forgiveness)

1 John 1:9

One of the saddest stories that I’ve read in any magazine recently was the story in last week’s Sports Illustrated about Mike Coolbaugh. Mike was born in a baseball family. His dad was a high school talent from Binghamton, New York, who turned down an invitation to the Yankees try-out because he knew he just wasn’t good enough. He wanted to make sure his sons never felt that way and so he had his sons practicing baseball from the time they were six-years old. He set up a course for them to run on. And the rule in Mike Coolbaugh’s house was either you practiced your hitting, or you helped dad pull weeds in their enormous yard. So they would take 300-400 cuts a day. Dad had a pitching machine and a batting cage at home.

Mike played high school baseball and then he was drafted by the Toronto Blue Jays in 1990 as a power-hitting third-baseman. He spent 10½ years in the minor league bouncing from one organization to another. He made three minor league all-star teams. He was voted Team MVP; broke a league record for RBIs in a season. But there was always someone ahead of him in the organization and he was never able to quite break into the major league.

In 2001 he finally got his chance. The Milwaukee Brewers called him up from the minor after almost 1200 games in the minors. His wife, Mandy, said that she only saw Mike cry four times in their life together – once on their wedding day; two other times when their two sons were born; and, the day he was called up to the major league. He left a voicemail and between sobs she heard Mike say, “We did it. We finally did it. We’re going to be up there.”

At his first at-bat with the Brewers, he smacked a pinch-hit double. The next day his father and mother and whole family came out to the ballpark. And in his second major league at bat, he drove a pitch into the left field stands and ran around the basis as if it was the most normal thing in the world for him to do. Everyone in the Coolbaugh family was crying in the stands. Just that one at-bat, his wife Mandy said, “We didn’t need anything else.”

Well, the Milwaukee Brewers released Mike at the end of the year. He was traded to the Cardinals organization and sent back to the minors. And on the day he was called up to play for the St. Louis Cardinals, he was hit by a pitch and his hand was broken. End of the season.

There was always something that got in the way of Mike Coolbaugh permanently staying in the big leagues – an all-star that had the position, a broken hand... So, after 17 seasons of bouncing around in the minor leagues, finally Mike Coolbaugh called it

quits. And in order to feed his family, he became a coach for a minor league baseball team in Tulsa, okay. Baseball was what Mike knew.

On the Tulsa team was a 28-year old from Puerto Rico named Tino Sanchez. Tino's career was very much like Mike Coolbaugh's. He never quite made it to the major leagues after years of trying. He was going to quit. But Mike was one of these wonderful men. His wife called him a "perfect husband." He was deeply devoted to her and to their boys. So Mike took Tino Sanchez out to lunch and talked with him and encouraged him. Tino considered Mike his best friend in baseball.

On July 22<sup>nd</sup> of this year, Tino was at the plate. Mike was the first-base coach. There was a player on first and Mike was giving him instructions. Mike was focusing on the lead that the player was taking at first and not on Tino, who was batting. Tino hit a shot that went off his bat like a rocket. The ball struck Mike right behind his left ear. The impact crushed his left vertebral artery which carries blood from the spinal column to the brain against his vertebra and the base of Mike's skull. This artery that was literally squeezed between a rock and a hard place burst. Mike had a severe brain hemorrhage. He fell back and died on the field – the first death in a pro baseball game since 1920. The coroner who did the autopsy said that if the ball had hit Mike in just a hair-breadth in one direction or the other, he wouldn't have died.

Tino ran over to see what had happened to his friend. And when he saw Mike on the ground, his eyes rolled back in his head, Tino dropped to his knees and began wailing, screaming out, "O God, no; O God, no! Please, please..." Tino said that when they buried his friend, Mike, Tino felt like a piece of himself was being buried in the grave with him. He said, "Everybody tells me it wasn't my fault. But even though I know that and I love Mike, I just can't forgive myself."

It is not uncommon for people to say, "I can't forgive myself." I've had folks doing this series that I've been preaching on forgiveness come up to me and say that to me. I just can't forgive myself. Sometimes they vaguely allude to something that they did in the past. A few folks actually told me what they had done. I've talked with women who have said, "I just can't forgive myself. I secretly got an abortion. Now every time abortion is mentioned, or every time I see someone walking with their baby, I feel this overwhelming guilt."

Maybe you are a guy who encouraged your girlfriend or your wife to get an abortion. I've talked with men who told me that they left their wives for another woman a decade ago and every time they think about their lives, they just kick themselves because they realize that they left the best thing that God ever gave them. I remember one man sobbing. He told me, "I was such a fool. I had this great gift and I was too stupid to see it. I threw it away."

I've talked with women who very regretfully said, "He was a great guy, but I was so wrapped up in myself, so wrapped up with my career, that I just didn't see it. Now I'm

alone and he is married. He was the one true love of my life. I understand that God forgives me, but I just can't forgive myself."

Have you ever felt that way? I've been doing a series on forgiveness that I've called "Finding Freedom from Your Past." And today I'm calling this talk, "When You Say, 'I Can't Forgive Myself'". Let's pray.

Is the answer for guilt self-forgiveness?

Everywhere you turn books, therapy, on TV, the popular advice for dealing with crippling guilt is: You just need to forgive yourself. You just need to learn to forgive yourself.

Like Craig Heselton, our executive pastor, or Bill Christensen, our associate pastor, you may find yourself often going to Oprah's website as they do. They read up on beauty and style tips. They check out Oprah's boutique. They get advice about home decorating. And Craig and Bill especially get relational advice in dealing with their relationships.

One of the things you will find on Oprah's website or on her show and certainly on Dr. Phil's show is counsel regarding how to forgive yourself. The therapeutic community, by and large, is in agreement that forgiving yourself is a key for healing your past. As Dr. Phil puts it,

Forgiving yourself is the key to your healing. Forgiving yourself is the key for removing the roadblocks that are blocking your path to reaching your potential and living your best life right now. –Dr. Phil

Of course, if you consider yourself to be a follower of Christ, you probably want to know what God thinks about this idea of you forgiving yourself. And you find out what God thinks about things in the Bible. That is why it is so important for you to develop the habit of daily Bible reading. I know there are quite a number of you who read your Bibles on a daily basis. Some of you may not know where to start. Let me suggest first of all that you go out and purchase a good study Bible. My recommendation of the Bible that I think is the very best study Bible is the *NIV Study Bible*. It is not written with a particularly obvious theological slant. It is not pushing the interpretation of passages into preset molds. And I purchased the *NIV Study Bible* in leather – not a hardback; not bonded leather that shreds after a year – purchase one in real leather that will last for decades.

And along with the *NIV Study Bible*, I would pick up a book called *Search the Scriptures* by Alan Stibbs. Marlene and I used that book for years. It is a book that asks questions on every single passage in the entire Bible. You can do one of those studies every day. Read the passage; answer the questions in a notebook. And you will make your way through the entire Bible in three years. But go to the bookstore and pick up a good study Bible and the book *Search the Scriptures*. They make a great gift for folks.

Now, what does God's Word say about forgiving yourself? This is considered hugely important in contemporary therapy. Well, let's look together at all of the verses in the Bible that command us to forgive ourselves. And after we do that, let's look at all the various Proverbs about the wise man who lives a good life because he forgives himself. And then following the commands and the Proverbs about self-forgiveness, we will look at several Bible stories about a woman who struggled with guilt and who beat herself up with regrets and self-hatred until she learned to forgive herself.

Actually...none of these things exist in the Bible. There is not one verse, there is not one command, and there is not one story or Proverb about forgiving yourself in the whole Bible. I've read through the entire Bible dozens of times. And there is nothing, not one word, not one phrase about forgiving yourself. Nada! Nothing!

You can read the Bible from cover to cover including the maps and the concordance and you will find many verses about God forgiving you. For example, we read in 1 John 1:9 these words:

**1 John 1:9**

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

And you will find verses about our need to forgive each other. So we read in Ephesians 4:32 the following:

**Ephesians 4:32**

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

But there is nothing about self-forgiveness. We see vertical forgiveness in which God forgives us. Concerning horizontal forgiveness in which one person forgives another, there are lots of verses. But internal forgiveness in which you forgive yourself? Not one solitary word. Because forgiveness is a transaction between two persons. It is not something that you give yourself.

But what do we say, then, to a person who is struggling under a huge boulder of guilt? What do we say to a person who says, "I am a Christian. I do believe that Christ died for my sins, but I just can't get past what I've done – something I've said; something I did – I just can't take it back and move on."

Sometimes the thing that we most struggle with is what we failed to do. Maybe you had an opportunity to tell your dad or your mom that you loved them, but you didn't take that opportunity. You were too busy. And now they are dead and it is too late. Or maybe you rejected the opportunity to go to counseling and reconcile with your spouse, but you were too stubborn or too full of pride and now it is too late. You say, "I want to go back and reconcile with my spouse, but he or she is no longer interested. They've shut their

heart to me.” I’ve had people tell me, “I should have seen the signs of their possible suicide and I didn’t. I minimized how depressed and off-balanced they were. I kept thinking they would snap out of it, but they didn’t and they ended up taking their own life. Maybe I could have done something to prevent this, but I didn’t do it.”

How do you get free from guilt, if you don’t practice self-forgiveness? I don’t think we need to be stuck in guilt and regrets ever – whether you’ve been through a divorce, or you failed to communicate love to someone that you should have communicated to, or you’ve experienced the death or suicide of a loved one, or you had a secret affair, or an abortion, or you’ve been dishonest in financial dealings, or you haven’t paid your taxes – I could multiply these examples, there are countless ways that you and I could feel pangs of guilt about something we did or didn’t do.

What do we do with all that guilt? Often people will say, “Well, I’ve done the Christian thing to the best of my ability and I still feel guilty.”

But let me challenge that, if I might. Have you really put into practice all that Christ taught about guilt and forgiveness and you still found it wanting?

Are you sure that the Christian approach to guilt doesn’t work?

Have you really made a concerted effort to do everything Jesus tells you to do? You say, “I think so.” Well, let’s run through this together.

You have a friend who is talking to you, or maybe it is your spouse or someone in your small group. They are beating themselves up over something in the past. Or maybe you are doing that to yourself. Have you tried believing in God’s forgiveness.

Have you tried believing in God’s forgiveness?

We human beings have a tendency to grade sins. This one is really horrible. This one is not so bad. I could believe that God could forgive this sin, but not that sin. Look with me at Galatians 5:19-21,

**Galatians 5:19-21**

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

We have a bunch of things in this list that people would be ashamed of – adultery, fornication, uncleanness, things that we would find shocking – idolatry, sorcery, murder. But then mixed in with all of these are more respectable sins such as contentions, jealousy, selfish ambition – things that no one even knows is going on – not just outward sins, but inward sins. And Paul just puts them altogether in a list. They are all

works of the flesh. They are all activities condemned by God that will keep you out of the kingdom.

And Jesus does the same thing in Mark 7. He says in verses 20-23,

**Mark 7:20-23**

He went on: "What comes out of you is what defiles you. 21 For from within, out of your hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, 22 adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. 23 All these evils come from inside and defile you."

Again, notice that all of these different sins are mixed together without one being graded worse or better than another. There are the things we hold to be terrible like adultery, fornication, murder and theft; and then there are the things we say well everyone does this – covetousness, lie, foolishness. Jesus says that all of these sins come out of our hearts and defiles us.

Why is it that Jesus came? Why did God send his son into this world to be born of a virgin, to live a sinless life, and to die on a cross? Why did Jesus come into this world?

The angel of the Lord told Joseph why Jesus was being born. We read in Matt. 1:21 these words:

**Matthew 1:21**

She [Mary] will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

It doesn't say in this text that Jesus came into the world to save people from certain sins and not from others – from respectable sins, but not from unrespectable sins; from non-violent sins, but not from violent sins; from inward sins, but not from outward sins. He will save his people from their sins without qualifications and without limits. Listen to what the apostle Peter said in 1 Peter 2:24,

**1 Peter 2:24**

"He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed."

Again, there is no qualification or limitation on the promise that our sins were borne by Jesus on the cross – sins of omission, sins of commission, what we should have done, could have done, would have done if we were smarter. Our sins. This is why Jesus came. Listen to what the apostle Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:15-16,

**1 Timothy 1:15-16**

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. 16 But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might

display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.

Messiah Jesus came into the world, Paul says, to save sinners. All sinners, not just some sinners and not others; sinners who didn't know the Word of God – but I know the word of God and I deliberately violated God's Word. I should have known better. The way I was raised, the privilege I had...Paul, in fact, calls himself, "the worst of sinners." What could be worse than hunting down the followers of Jesus Christ, throwing them in jail, and agreeing to the murder of other Christians? What could be worse than persecuting God's own children, his sons and daughters? It says in 1 Tim. 1.16 this:

**1 Timothy 1:16**

But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.

In other words, Paul says the reason why Paul was saved was so that "I could be exhibit A of the extent of God's grace towards human beings." God chose Paul so that anyone who doubts whether God could forgive their particular sin, would know that if God could forgive Paul, God can forgive me and you.

You say that you struggle with guilt over something you've done, or something you failed to do, and your problem is that you haven't forgiven yourself. Let me say this with all affection, your greatest sin and my greatest sin is not the horrible thing we said and that we can't take back. It is not your past adultery or drug use, or your alcoholism, or the child you had out of wedlock, or the fact that you missed God's call on your life and that you've wasted the last 20 years. That is not your greatest failure or mine. Your greatest sin and my greatest sin is the failure to believe the Word of God. God has said in his Word that "if we confess our sins he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

**1 John 1:9**

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

And the great sin that we regularly commit against God is to say, "I don't believe you." I believe my particular sin, the form that it took, is too great for even you to forgive. I don't believe that Christ's death is enough for this sin. Friend, if you want to ask God's forgiveness for something, stop repeating over and over to God the same confession that you've made a hundred times before about what you did or what you failed to do. Instead, if you want to ask God's forgiveness about something, how about asking God's forgiveness for doubting the scope of his mercy. Ask God to forgive you for believing that his heart was too small and his grace too limited to forgive you. If you want to ask God's forgiveness for something, ask God's forgiveness for your unbelief regarding his

Word. That you believe that God keeps a record of your sins when God says, “The record has been blotted out.”

You say you struggle with guilt and you aren’t sure the Christian way of dealing with guilt works? Have you tried really believing in God’s forgiveness?

Have you tried confession?

1 John 1:9 says:

**1 John 1:9**

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

You know, honest confession is the one thing that we human beings avoid at all cost. If you watch any trial on TV or you read about it in the newspaper, or you attend a trial in the courtroom – it doesn’t matter what a person is being tried for – breach of contract, tax evasion, medical malpractice, drunk driving – it doesn’t matter what a person is on trial for, if you follow any trial at the end no matter what the jury found and what the evidence showed, every person who loses denies that they are at fault. The other attorney had a personal relationship with the judge. It was obvious from the beginning that the judge was biased. The other side lied through their teeth. What they said happened, never happened. My attorney was an idiot.

Isiah Thomas, the former all-star pro-basketball player who is now a New York Knicks coach, was accused of sexually harassing an employee in the Knicks organization. This woman was actually a Knicks Vice President. And when she complained of the sexual harassment, the lewd comments that Isiah Thomas made and the continual atmosphere of come-on’s, she was fired. She sued Coach Thomas and the New York Knicks organization. The jury found overwhelming evidence of Isiah Thomas’ guilt and they awarded her \$11.6 million in punitive damages with compensatory damages to be decided later. After the verdict, Thomas’ response was classic. He said,

“I’m innocent, I’m very innocent, and I did not do the things that she’s accused me in this courtroom of doing. I am extremely...I’m extremely disappointed that the jury did not see the facts in this case.”

And so he and the New York Knicks organization are, of course, appealing. The jury didn’t see the facts, so I’m innocent.

Wouldn’t it be refreshing, wouldn’t it be shocking, in fact, if someone who lost a trial walked out of court, stood before reporters, and said, “Well, you heard the jury verdict. I’m guilty. The evidence is overwhelmingly against me. The judge was right. It was a just and correct decision. I am liable.”



Frederick the Great, who was emperor in Germany, once visited a prison in the city of Potsdam. Each prisoner that Frederick met with assured Frederick that he was innocent, that he was a victim of a miscarriage of justice. Only one man that he talked with looked down at the floor and said, "Your Majesty, I am guilty and I deserve this punishment." The emperor called to the warden and said, "Free this rascal and get him out of this prison before he corrupts all of these innocent people who are here in jail."

You listen to the reports coming out of Myanmar now that was formerly Burma where thousands of Buddhist monks in their saffron colored robes along with tens of thousands of citizens of Burma marched in the streets to protest the brutal military dictatorship that has ruled the country for decades. After several days of peaceful protest, the government ruthlessly suppressed the revolt. Reports coming out of Myanmar are sketchy because the government cut all the phone lines and internet connections. But there have been reports of hundreds of deaths and thousands of injuries along with the jailing of thousands of protestors. One BBC report told an eyewitness who saw army troops lining up monks against the stone wall. The troops then systematically went down the line and smashed the heads of these peaceful non-violent Buddhist monks against the wall. One by one, you heard the monks shrieking in agony.

What did the Foreign Minister from Myanmar say about this brutal suppression? Here is his statement:

The situation would not have deteriorated had the initial protest of a small group of activists against the rising fuel prices not been exploited by political opportunists. They sought to turn the situation into a political showdown aided and abetted by some powerful countries. The security personnel exercised utmost restraint, and they did not intervene for nearly a month. However when the mob became unruly and provocative they were compelled to declare a curfew. Subsequently, when protestors ignored their warnings, they had to take action to restore the situation.

It was outside agitators. We use the utmost restraint. Just try to imagine a foreign minister, or a delegate at the UN hearing allegations against their government. Just try to imagine someone standing up at the UN hanging their head and saying, "Our government did what you claimed we did. We acted ruthlessly. We did it. I'm sorry."

We do everything but confess. We deny. We say "I'm innocent." We blame-shift. But look at what my spouse did. Look at the hurt they caused. Look at my background. Look at where I've come from.

The Bible says in 1 John 1:9

**1 John 1:9**

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

The word “confess” in the original Greek is

Confession = Homologeo

Homo means “the same” as in homosexual where one person has a relationship with someone else of the same sex. Logeo means to “say.” Homologeo literally means to say the same thing as another person. In other words, to come into agreement with what God says. We are not confessing unless we name our behavior what God names it. You have to say that same thing that God does about your behavior and your attitudes.

So we are not confessing when we call something a white lie, or a mistake, or a problem, or our coping mechanism, or our response to pain and hurt in the past, or a natural response to the way that we were raised by our mother or father. We are not confessing when we say that we are just being authentic. We are coming out of the closet. We are just being us. You are not confessing until you say the same thing about yourself that God says.

Listen to King David:

**Psalms 51:1**

A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.

He doesn't call his adultery a midlife crisis, or exploring his sexuality. He calls it a transgression. Transgression literally means to revolt, to rebel against God's authority. Have you ever said to yourself, “I know that God forbids this, but I'm going to do it anyway. I'm going to push past the ‘no trespassing’ signs. I'm going to choose to cross the line. I will deal with the consequences later. I want what I want now.”

Or, “I know what God wants, but I don't care. I'm not going to do it.”

When I was in college I got engaged to the woman who is now my wife, Marlene. A couple of months before we were married, her roommate went away for the weekend. I was in Marlene's room late one night and I said to her, “What do you say I spend the night? Your roommate is gone.”

She said, “Well, I don't think that would be right.”

As you can tell from my stories, Marlene has a much better developed conscience than I do. That's really true. So I began to rationalize and said to her, “You know, Marlene, we're going to be married in two months. We're in love.” And then in a very arrogant

way, I said, “Well, let’s see what God says about this.” I picked up a Bible and I stuck my finger into the Bible. And do you know what verse I hit? Galatians 6:7,

**Galatians 6:7-8**

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. 8 The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction;

I thought I was going to have a heart attack. I didn’t tell Marlene what I had read, but I said, “You know, this really isn’t a good idea” and I left.

Transgression. I know what God says, but I’m going to do it anyway. Friend, do you see yourself as a rebel in any area of your life? Is there any place that you keep saying, “I will not submit to God’s authority over this.” Are you at all aware of your self-will rising in defiance and saying to your Creator, “I will not surrender to you?”

David calls his adultery what it is – flat out rebellion. It is revolt. It defies the authority of God.

Have you said about yourself what God says – that you are a rebel? That you are defiant? That concerning your sin, often you know what God says and you do it anyway.

You know, it is a good thing to label yourself with the label God gives us – to call ourselves sinners. In fact, I believe that one way a person can quickly tell whether or not they are a follower of Jesus is if they are willing to hang around their neck the label “sinner.” If you hear someone use a bunch of euphemisms and excuses, “I’m not perfect, nobody is. I know I’ve made mistakes, I know I could have done better” – if you hear someone make lots of excuses, it may very well be that that person has never crossed the line and become a follower of Jesus Christ. Followers of Jesus Christ are willing to hang around their necks the label “sinner,” because we take comfort from what 1 Tim. 1:15 teaches:

**1 Timothy 1:15**

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.

I am a sinner and therefore I am precisely the kind of person that Jesus Christ came into the world to save. If I am not a sinner, then Christ did not come into the world for me. Have you tried confession to God?

You say the Christian way of dealing with guilt doesn’t work?

Have you tried repentance?

Yes, Rich, over and over again I have begged God to forgive me. I have tried to get over my guilt. I’ve gone to counseling, but I just can’t get past the fact that I had the

abortion. I failed to reconcile with my mother or father one time before they died. I hurt someone in an accident. I was so caught up in myself and my own selfishness that I missed my kids growing up. I am responsible for my divorce and now I'm alone. I screwed up my family's finances and now we face crushing debt. I just can't forgive myself. The Christian approach doesn't work.

So, let me ask you a question. Have you tried repentance?

Don't you hear me, Rich? I've tried. I've been beating myself up a hundred times, a thousand times. I no longer do what I used to do. I don't sleep around any more. I am not out partying at night. I wish I could change, but I can't. I've repented.

Again, let me say this with all affection. If you still feel guilty and you can't get past your guilt, perhaps you've not gotten to the root of the problem. Maybe you've misdiagnosed the problem and you thought the remedy was beating yourself up, or trying to feel sorrier, or crawling over broken glass. Try repentance. And like a laser that burns out a tumor, make sure that you aim your repentance right at the cancer. The cancer may not be the past sin that you have confessed and turned away from.

Let me suggest where the cancer might be in your soul. You might have two tumors that need to be lasered out with repentance. Very often when a person says "I can't forgive myself," the root issue is sinful pride. The person might really be saying, "I can't believe that I did that. Someone like me, with my high standards, with who I am and what I know – I can't believe that I did that. I can believe someone else would do that." Often "I can't forgive myself" translates to "I don't believe in the depths of my own depravity. I am shocked by my own sin."

Friends, if you are shocked or surprised by anything that you have ever done, then you are – and I say this with all affection – deceived about who you are. Sin runs down to the very core of our beings according to the scriptures. The Bible says in Jeremiah 17:9 these words:

**Jeremiah 17:9**

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

Your heart, my heart...when we say "I can't believe I did this," we are saying we don't have a realistic understanding of how deceitful our own hearts are.

And there is a second tumor that may need to be burned out by repentance. That is the tumor of trying to usurp God's role as judge. What we may be saying by "I can't forgive myself," is that I am the judge and I will dispense justice and forgiveness as I decide. The court is in session; we are on trial; we climb out of the witness stand and push the judge aside; "Thanks, Judge, I'll take over from here..." - We are sitting in the judge's seat; we have pronounced a guilty verdict on ourselves, and how we think that somehow we need to convince ourselves to give ourselves a pardon.

But the Bible says that God alone is both judge and forgiver. Repent of climbing up on the throne of God the judge and of trying to elbow him out of the way. It doesn't matter what you think of yourself, and it doesn't matter what other people think of what you've done. Listen to the apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 4:3-4,

**1 Corinthians 4:3-4**

I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. 4 My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.

Have you tried repentance? Have you tried to repent of your pride that someone like you couldn't have done something like what you've done? Have you repented of trying to be your own judge and your own savior? Have you repented of usurping the role that only God has?

Have you tried confessing to another person?

You know, confession to another person is one of the most neglected weapons in the Christian arsenal of dealing with guilt. James 5:16 says:

**James 5:16**

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

Jesus underlines this in John 20:23 by saying this:

**John 20:23**

If you forgive the sins of anyone, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who led a secret Christian seminary during the horrible years of Nazi rule in Germany in the 1930's and early 1940's, wrote one of the best books I've ever read on what real church looks like. It is called *Life Together*. It is a brief book and if you've never read it, you need to go to the bookstore and pick it up. Here is what Bonhoeffer said:

"Confess your faults to one another" (James 5.16). He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone. It may be that Christians, notwithstanding corporate worship, common prayer, and all their fellowship and service, may still be left to their loneliness. The final break-through to fellowship does not occur, because, though they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as the un-devout, as sinners. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkable horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the

righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy. The fact is that we are sinners!

The misery of the sinner and the mercy of God this was the truth of the gospel in Jesus Christ. It was this truth that the church was to live. Therefore he gave his followers the authority to hear the confession of sin and to forgive sin in his name.

“If you forgive the sins of anyone, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

Now our brother stands in Christ's place. Before him I no longer need to pretend. Before him alone in the whole world I dare to be the sinner that I am; here the truth of Jesus Christ and his mercy rules. Our brother stands before us as the sign of the truth and the grace of God. He has been given to us to help us. He hears the confession of our sins in Christ's place and he forgives our sins in Christ's name. He keeps the secret of our confession as God keeps it. When I go to my brother to confess, I am going to God.

We do not have to go to a priest or to a pastor to practice confession. The apostle Peter tells us that in the church, we all are royal priests. And it was this glorious truth of the universal priesthood of every believer that was at the heart of the father of the Reformation, Martin Luther's teaching. Most mornings I use the Anglican Book of Common Prayer as a help in my morning prayers. Following the call to self-examination and repentance, the Book of Common Prayer has these encouraging words:

If there be any of you who by this means cannot quiet his own conscience herein, but requires further comfort or counsel, let him come to the pastor or to some other minister of God's Word and open his grief...God has given us brothers and sisters to stand in Christ's place and make God's presence and forgiveness real to us.

And brothers and sisters, the reason why we are having a small group month this month and trying to get as many of you to connect with a small group as possible – a coed group, a women's group, a men's group, a recovery group, a support group – some type of group here in the church; the reason why I urge you week after week to connect with one of our small groups, that is the place of care and community in our church. The reason why you are urged to do this is so that you might experience God's love and God's forgiveness as it comes through a Christian brother or sister. As you develop a relationship of trust with your small group leader or another person in the group, you can grow to a place of authenticity in your life where you just get tired of being a fake.

Is anyone here tired of wearing a church mask? Is there anyone here who is so hungry for healing and for hearing God's Word of forgiveness that you would be willing to overcome your fear of what another person would think, and will go to a Christian who is mature and trustworthy and confess your sins.

You say you've tried the Christian approach to your guilt? Have you tried confessing to another person.

Have you tried making reparations?

You know, we can't repair our relationship with God by anything we do. Everything we have is from God. And so to try to pay God off is like trying to borrow money and then using the borrowed money to pay them back. Reparations, paying back something you owe, does not apply to our relationship with God. Only God can pay God back and that's what happened at the cross.

But reparations can be paid and must be paid, or at least we must attempt to make reparations when we've hurt someone else. Part of being healed of guilt is that to the extent that it is possible, you try to make right what has been done wrong. You can't dodge your responsibility to repair and repay by simply confessing our sins to God. You've stolen something; you need to return it; you need to pay. If you've broken or damaged something, then you need to pay for what you've damaged. If you've spoken unkindly, you need to apologize. If a bridge has been burned between you and another, and you are partly responsible for the bridge burning, then you need to try to repair what you can repair.

There is an excellent biblical command regarding this principle of reparations in Numbers 5:5-7,

**Numbers 5:5-7**

The Lord said to Moses, 6 "Say to the Israelites: 'Any man or woman who wrongs another in any way and so is unfaithful to the Lord is guilty 7 and must confess the sin they have committed. They must make full restitution for the wrong they have done, add a fifth of the value to it and give it all to the person they have wronged.

Alcoholics Anonymous has as part of their 12-Step Recovery Program lists these two steps – Step #8 and Step #9. Step #8 is:

Make a list of all people, persons we have harmed, and become willing to make amends to them all.

Step #9 is:

Make direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

When we know that we have done wrong regarding another person, then the way to deal with the guilt regarding that harm is not to try to forgive yourself. And it is not to try to let bygones be bygones. It may feel like we are making a big deal out of something

that everyone else has forgotten. Maybe the thing that you took or damaged or the unkind word was spoken years ago. Maybe to make amends is going to cost you money. Maybe it is going to cause us to lose face. Maybe the other person won't be happy with us. It may not necessarily be fun. Maybe the other person has hurt us as well.

The issue is how do we deal with our own sin? For God – through confession and repentance. With other people, through confession, repentance and often reparations.

I began with the story of Mike Coolbaugh, the minor league baseball player who was tragically killed by a foul ball hit off the bat of Tino Sanchez. Three weeks after Mike Coolbaugh died, Tino Sanchez returned to play his first game. He struggled all night with memories of his friend, Mike, and what had happened. After the game, someone came up to him and told him that there were two women waiting to talk with him in the stands. One of the women was Mike's sister, Lisa. Another woman was Mike's sister-in-law, Susan.

Tino walked over to those two women and he began to cry. He told them how very sorry he was for what had happened. And through tears, Mike's sister, Lisa, said, "Mike had spoken to the family and had said how proud he was of one particular player on the team, his friend, Tino." She wanted Tino to know that the family was not holding this against him. He was forgiven. And then the three of them – Mike's sister-in-law, Susan, Mike's sister, Lisa, and Tino Sanchez, the man who accidentally killed their brother – they all held each other and wept. Tino said for the first time since Mike died, he was able to sleep through the night.

There is a way to be freed from guilt. Let's pray.



## **When You Say “I Can’t Forgive Myself”**

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Rich Nathan

October 6-7, 2007

Finding Freedom From Your Past (Forgiveness)

1 John 1:9

### **I. Is the Answer for Guilt Self-Forgiveness?**

### **II. Are You Sure That The Christian Approach to Guilt Doesn’t Work?**

- A. Have You Tried Believing in God’s Forgiveness? (1 Tim. 1.15, 16)
- B. Have You Tried Confession? (1 Jn. 1.9)
- C. Have You Tried Repentance? (Jer. 17.9; 1 Cor. 4.3, 4)
- D. Have You Tried Confessing to Another Person? (Jas. 5.16)
- E. Have You Tried Making Reparations? (Num. 5.5-7)