

can I ever FORGIVE myself?

by Florence MacKenzie

A young woman struggled to share with me something that had been weighing her down for years. On the surface, Kathy* appeared chirpy and carefree. She had been brought up in the church and had become a Christian when she was a child. However, no-one would have guessed she carried a heavy, secret burden. Several years ago, Kathy discovered she was pregnant and decided to have an abortion. She told me that, as she considered her decision, she believed this was not the right course of action but, despite this, she still went ahead and had the pregnancy terminated. Now, full of regrets for what she had done, Kathy asked “Can I ever forgive myself?”

This is only one example of the many times I’ve come across people struggling with trying to forgive themselves. It’s not unusual to hear someone say to a troubled person, “Forgive yourself and move on.” The idea of “forgiving yourself” has become so commonplace that its validity is rarely questioned. There seems to be an assumption that the road to healing involves not just receiving God’s forgiveness but receiving our own as well. Despite its general acceptance, I want to suggest that “forgiving yourself” is not something that’s in your power to do.

After someone has committed a serious offense, they can feel so appalled and disgusted by what they’ve done that they talk about being unable to forgive themselves. However, if we check out what the Bible says about forgiving ourselves, we discover it says nothing at all about it! Would you not think that if God intended us to forgive ourselves, He would have made this crystal clear in His word, especially as He said so much about forgiving other people? But the pages of Scripture are blank as far as forgiving ourselves is concerned. Now that, to me, is a pretty good reason to question the whole concept of forgiving ourselves, even without considering any other argument against it.

Our responsibility is not to try and forgive ourselves for the wrong things we have done but to receive God’s forgiveness instead. It is the privilege of the person who has been wronged to *extend* forgiveness, while the person who has committed the wrong needs to *receive* forgiveness. If you’ve done something so awful that you feel you cannot forgive yourself, acknowledge that you are the wrongdoer and be aware that it’s not within your remit to extend forgiveness, but to receive it. You



receive forgiveness from God because, ultimately, every wrong thing we do is an offense against Him.

I stand amazed when I consider that God’s forgiveness is complete and all-sufficient. When we think we have to forgive ourselves, we give the impression that God’s forgiveness isn’t enough and that we have to add self-forgiveness to what Christ accomplished for us on the cross. What God requires of us is that we receive the forgiveness that *He* offers. We may not *think* we’re forgiven, but we can be *sure* we’re forgiven if we follow through on 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.” Don’t keep punishing yourself but cut yourself some slack and humbly accept the gift of God’s forgiveness so that your guilt can be removed. Any feeling of guilt that remains is false guilt.

The idea that we need to forgive ourselves is quite a common one, but it’s not in line with biblical teaching on forgiveness. If we’re going to permanently dispel this way of thinking, I believe we need to get a fresh appreciation of God’s forgiveness. His forgiveness is *complete* in that no other forgiveness is necessary for our spiritual wellbeing; His forgiveness is *comprehensive* in that it covers every type of wrongdoing; and His forgiveness is *conditional* in the sense that, in order for us to receive it, He requires that we agree with Him that we have done wrong. Perhaps it’s time to change our self-talk from “I can’t forgive myself” to “I don’t need to forgive myself”, not because we haven’t messed up, but because God is able to make a much better job of forgiving us than we ever could. Ask Kathy – she knows!

**Name changed to protect privacy*