



TIME OF GRACE®

Freedom in Forgiveness: I Can't Forgive Myself

Study Notes

Summary

What if you struggle to forgive yourself? When you come face-to-face with the earthly consequences of the sins you have committed, it can crush your spirit, making it feel impossible to move on and enjoy the grace of God. This message takes a surprising approach to this common struggle and brings us back to the authoritative declaration that Jesus made at the cross.

- Forgiving yourself is harder when . . .
 - ... you are _____.
 - ... you are _____.
 - ... there are _____.
- Offensive Truth #1: Not forgiving yourself is pure _____.
- Psalm 51:1,5: ¹Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love. . . .
⁵Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
- Offensive Truth #2: Forgiveness is his _____, not your _____.
- 1 John 1:7: The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.
- Romans 8:1: Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
- Lamentations 3:19-23: ¹⁹I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. ²⁰I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. ²¹Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: ²²Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. ²³They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Points to Ponder

1. For which sins from your past do you find the hardest to forgive yourself? How did this message change your way of thinking?

2. Meditate upon every word of Romans 8:1. Then rank the top two words that bring you the most comfort.

3. Evaluate: If God could forgive King David (an adulterer), the apostle Peter (a Jesus denier), and the apostle Paul (a former killer), he must be able to forgive me.

Homework for Next Week

Read Acts 17:17; Isaiah 53:2; I Peter 1:21; I Corinthians 15:3-8

Time of Grace Ministry
Freedom in Forgiveness: I Can't Forgive Myself
Psalm 51:1,5; 1 John 1:7; Romans 8:1; Lamentations 3:19-23
June 26, 2022

Pastor Mike Novotny

We need to cover a topic and a phrase that many of you have spoken to me. It pops up in all areas of life and it shows up a whole bunch of times in the Christian church. The phrase, "I can't forgive myself." You know, when you throw a stone and it hits someone, and they're willing to leave it alone, but you just have to go and keep picking it up. And the self-loathing, and the regret, and the bitterness. When we retell the same story of our stupidity from the past, and we just can't let the past be the past, that's what I need to talk to you about today. Because the truth is, you might not know this about our church, but many people here and actually many people who e-mail us, who watch on TV from "Time of Grace," many of you, in fact, think that I don't know much about God.

Here's what happens. You text me or e-mail me really late at nights, "Pastor, can we talk?" And I've done this a thousand times, so I know exactly that something happened and it's really bad. So, we find a time to meet. I meet you at the back door. I try to start the interaction with a smile but you're not smiling. In fact, you can barely look me in the eye. And we sit down in my office and I say, "What's going on?" And you tell me about this. Pastor, I sinned. I messed up, like bad, bad messed up. I cheated. I drank, I've relapsed, I used, I clicked, I did the thing I swore that I wouldn't do, and it's a mess. Pastor, I don't even know what to do. And that's when I say the thing that I always say. I say, Thank you. Like, thank you for telling me about this. It's so easy to hide. Thank you for talking. And there's so many things we need to figure out because of this, but there's one thing I need to tell you right up front. I want to tell you right up front because it's the most important thing I'm going to tell you today, so listen closely. God forgives you.

And I grab my Bible and I open up to one of a thousand pages, and I find one of my favorite passages and I read it to you. And I say, isn't that amazing that even now, even for this, God forgives you? And you know what most of you do? You react like I don't know that much about God. Either you dismiss the passage I just quoted as if it's unimportant, or you push back. But there are so many consequences, Pastor, or you flat out call me a theological liar. You say, 'But that can't be true. I will never be able to forgive myself.' It happens a ton in the church, especially with people who thought that coming to church would put all of the worst choices in their past. When we just hold on and we can't let go, it's not that we don't take it seriously, it's just that we can't believe that God would still be with us. And that he would like us. And that he would be for us. That's when these words come out of our mouth, I can't forgive myself.

Now, that reaction and feeling can happen to any one of us and it can really happen with any sin. But there are three specific situations where you might be most tempted to think that. So, I want you to grab a pen and write these down in your program.

It is so hard to forgive yourself when, first of all, you are close. When you sin against someone in a comments section that you don't even know, you move on with your day pretty fast. When some bozo, you know, is being a bozo in traffic and you react in some way that's sinful, you probably don't toss and turn at night, feeling so guilty. But when you're close, when it's your mom or your dad, your significant other, or your kid. When it's your roommate or the person you see at church every Sunday, when you're close enough to see the damage that your sin does, the hurt in their eyes, how it changes the whole dynamic in the room, or in a marriage, or a family, or whatever, it can be so hard to forgive yourself. When you realize this isn't some stranger, this is a person who has loved me, and served me, and sacrificed for me, and then I told my dad I hated him. And she could have been with anyone, but she chose me, and then that's the way that I treated her. When you're close, you get to see the damage up close. When you see that person wince when they walk by you in your home, it is so hard to move on and rejoice in the fact that God says you're forgiven.

Second, it can be really hard to forgive yourself when you are compassionate. The word compassion, by its very definition, means someone that suffers with another person, and some of you have really big compassionate hearts. But the dark part of having a big heart is that it's really hard to move on when you cause the hurt. When someone is in pain and you are the cause of it. When you're trying to nurse them back to emotional health, knowing that you're the one that caused the wound, it's so hard to let that sin go. This happens a ton when people are in rehab. When you get to that step where you're making amends and you're thinking deeply about the consequences of your actions. And you start to realize, like, how many nights did my dad and my mom stay up, thinking about my addiction? How many prayers did they pray with anguish in their heart, wondering if I'd make it through the year? How many hours did they spend making phone calls, paying for counseling and rehab because of what I chose to do? And if you have a compassionate heart and you realize the hurt that sin causes, it's pretty hard to move on.

But I think the third one is actually the worst of all. It's not just when you're close or when you're compassionate, but when you know that there are consequences. When you can say you're sorry and they can say, I forgive you, but there are still consequences that you have to live with. You know, when you hook up with a guy that you barely know, that hadn't committed to you in love. And now you're raising this kid and you know it's hard for that kid because mom and dad aren't in love in the same home. That's hard. When you see yourself struggling to date again or your kids are going from home to home, bedroom to bedroom, toothbrush to toothbrush, because the relationship didn't work and part of it, honestly, was your fault. And you see the kid that you adore more than anything in the world and it just hurts your heart that you caused it. When you fight in a war and in the craziness of combat, you do things that you can't take back. And you stay up at night, and you talk to the men and women who fought, but you still realize that what you did, even if you had to, it had consequences. You know, sometimes we hook up and there's an abortion. Sometimes we encourage someone to get an abortion. Sometimes we flirt with someone we shouldn't. We sleep with someone we shouldn't. We talk to someone, and kiss someone that we shouldn't. And the damage is so profound. It is not a small stone. And when we see it, day after day after day, how could we just move on? How could we forgive ourselves when someone is hurting that badly?

And so, for all three of these and so many other reasons, it's no joke. I get why it's so hard to believe what the pastor says is so simple. You are forgiven, period. Our conscience wants to put a question mark on that sentence. Really? But that's why I'm glad that you're here today. Today, God is going to confront that feeling that we just can't forgive ourselves. And I want to make you two promises, one last time. I'm going to promise you that by the end, what God has to say is amazing. The best thing you're going to hear all week. And I want to warn you that before I get there, it will be amazingly offensive. So, are you okay if I preach the sermon on that paper? All right, you didn't get up to leave. All right, grab your pen because today I need to teach you two offensive truths about not forgiving yourself. Here's the first one.

The first offensive truth is that not forgiving yourself is pure arrogance. When you hold on to the stone from your past, you might feel like you're being very humble. You might think that you're taking sin as seriously as God does. You might feel you're being compassionate to the people that you have hurt. But when you hold on to this stone, you are actually being the most arrogant maybe you have ever been in your life. Here's why. If you can't forgive yourself for what happened, let's say a year ago -- you know, divorce, the addiction, the words that you spoke, the choice that you made five years ago, you just can't get past it. God couldn't love me after I did that. Here's my simple question. What did you think you were like before you did that? I mean, if it's such a stumbling block that God can't get past it, what did you honestly think of your own behavior before that sin?

Some of you grew up in churches like I did, where we confessed, Sunday after Sunday after Sunday, I have sinned. I don't deserve you, God. But did you believe that? Or, did you only become undeserving after that one big thing? Because the offensive thing that I need to say to you today is, if you are not going to forgive yourself for that thing, then at least be biblical about it. Then at least not forgive yourself for all of it. If you don't want to forgive yourself for an abortion, then don't forgive yourself for the attitude you had towards your dad when you were 15, because God hated that, too. And if you relapse into heroin or drug use, it's just a thing that you can't let go and believe that God likes you, then don't believe he likes you after speeding on the interstate, because that was sin, too. So, don't make up some new theological category. Either you're unforgivable because of sin, or you're forgiven because God forgives sin, but there's nothing in between.

In other words, what you should do is what King David did. Do you all know the story of King David's major sin in the Bible? I'll show you a picture of it. I took this picture in Jerusalem a few years ago, up where King David's palace used to be, and you can see that in the ancient world, his palace was on a high ground. And about 3,000 years ago, one day King David got up and he looked out, and he saw a woman bathing. He looked again, then he lusted, then he leveraged his royal power, and then he made love to her. He cheated on his wife and he led her into cheating on her husband. Except that that wasn't bad enough, then she got pregnant. And David tried to cover it up, but he couldn't. And so, one of the most shocking sins of the Old Testament turned into an episode of B.C. TMZ.

Do you know what David did? He had the woman's husband murdered and he tried to cover it all up, but God wouldn't let it happen. God, who knew about all of it, dragged that stone into the light. He confronted David. David confessed, I messed up, I sinned. And God did the most offensive thing, he just forgave him like that. Yes, there were consequences, but God just forgave him. And afterwards, David actually wrote a song, called Psalm 51, to detail the experience. He said, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." Imagine if you confessed these stones, not to some pastor in an office, but at a coffee table with God the Father and Jesus the Son. Let's imagine you confess all of it. God, I can't believe I did that. I can't believe I said that. I hurt so many people and I wish I could take it back. I'm such an idiot. You don't even know, God. And what does God say? Actually, I do. Yeah, I know. I know it better than you do. But here's the thing. I forgive you. But you don't understand, God. I mean, the look on her face. I have hurt her. Whoa, whoa, whoa, God says. I actually do know the look on her face. I see it more than you do. And that's serious to me, but I need you to hear this. I forgive you.

And you say, But, God, I could just never forgive myself. And that's when the Father looks at the Son, like, what do we do with this one? Right? They tag team it, so the Father taps in the Son. Jesus comes in and he puts out his hands. He says, hey, do you know what these scars are? Yeah, Jesus, that's when you died. Yeah, you're right. And do you remember why I died? Well, you died for sins. Yeah. Do you remember what I said to the Father when I was on the cross? I said, Father... Father, forgive them, you said. Exactly, why? Because they don't know what they're doing. Exactly. And do you remember what I said next? It is finished. And you grab Jesus by the scarred hands and you say, but is it? Do you see? We think we're being so humble when we hold onto sin, but it's crazy. It's telling God he's a novice at his job of forgiveness. That the judge of all the universe couldn't possibly judge this correctly. So, it might be offensive to say and I know some of you have stones in your hands. Don't throw them at me, because you need to know the truth. You're not being humble. The devil duped you with pride when you committed the sin. Don't let him beat you twice by holding on to it.

Which brings us to offensive truth number two. This is my favorite one. And I think you'll like it a little bit better. Here's the last thing I need to tell you today, that forgiveness is God's fact and not your feeling. What I love so, so much about church, about the Bible, about Jesus, is that forgiveness is just a fact and it's not waiting for you to feel it. I grew up in the church, and I grew up in one of those churches where no one had any emotions. Have you ever been to a church like that before? Like, this is the face we made for everything. Yeah, rejoice in the Lord always. I am. Yeah, that's what we'd do! You know, there are some bad parts about being in a church like that. Like, it's easy to go through the motions, and just come to church and check the box, but let me tell you the really good thing about going to a church like that, is that I learned it doesn't matter how I feel. I don't have to wait until I really feel like God loves me.

In fact, a college professor used to mock that all the time. "But I really feel," he would say. Who cares how you feel? Here's what God says. My wife and I watch The Office a lot at night. Any Office fans here? And I was thinking of this as like, Dwight Schrute. Any of you know Dwight Schrute from The Office? What would Dwight Schrute say to your heart? False! And he'd open his Bible and what would he say? Fact. You are forgiven. God's patience isn't waiting for your

permission. His compassion for you doesn't need your consent. And his salvation of you doesn't need your stamp of approval. It just is. So, tell your feelings to put that in its pipe and smoke it because that's the truth. You are forgiven, you're loved and your feelings might have to catch up later after I say amen but it is simple truth.

And I'll prove it to you with three passages. Here's the first one. 1 John 1 says, "The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." Now, you don't need to be a pastor to understand that, right? You don't have to speak Greek. All sin. You can tell me the sin and I don't know what it is, but I know what the word all means. It means it doesn't matter the size of the stone or how many times you threw it. All sin means all sin, and so, you are purified. In Jesus, you are washed, you're clean, you're holy, you're righteous. I'm looking at this camera back here. I'm thinking about all the guys in jail who have written me that you watch. You stay up late and this word applies to you. There might be crazy consequences you face because of your choices, but because of Jesus, there's absolute cleansing. And it's true for all of you, too. All sin, purified, no exceptions.

In our church we have a big cross. There's no asterisk after it. And then, Paul jumps on the forgiveness bandwagon. Romans 8, he says this, "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." How much condemnation? None. If you're in Christ, if you trust in Jesus, there might be consequences, but there is no condemnation. In fact, in the Greek language, if Paul wants to emphasize something, he says it first. Do you know what the first word of this verse is in Greek? No! Like, no condemnation, not a bit of it! You're not even close to being condemned. If you think that God is far from you, that's how you feel, but here's the fact, there is no condemnation for those who cling to the cross of Jesus Christ.

And then, my favorite from the Old Testament. The prophet Jeremiah said this, "I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall." Right? He can't forgive and forget. "I well remember them and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore, I have hope. Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; and great is your faithfulness." These days, I'm this close to having a preteen daughter, but six years ago, Brooklyn was just a little kid with a bob haircut in a car seat of the van. And I've told some of you this story, when she and I had this really in-depth discussion about forgiveness.

Here's what happened. I said, Brookie, do you think your daddy is a good guy or a bad guy? And she immediately said, Bad guy! Well, guess who's not going to McDonald's today! Well, why do you think daddy's a bad guy? She goes, because daddy does sins. Well, it's terrible grammar, but okay, I'll give you that point. You're right. So, I gave her the spiritual test. I said, Brooklyn, you're saying God doesn't love Daddy? No, God loves you, Daddy. God forgives you. But, Brooklyn, what if Daddy's done bad stuff, like really, really, really, really bad stuff? He would still forgive you Dad. And she smiled and looked out the window.

Grown-ups, don't complicate this. It's so simple, a kid can get it. If God loves the world, he loves you. If the blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin, it includes yours. If there is great love and compassion, then it's true for you today, too. When you came into church today, many of you got

a stone. Would you grab it in your left hand for a second? More than one of you said, Pastor, is this for us to throw just in case we don't like your sermon? The fact that many of you said that is concerning to me! I want you to grab that stone. I want you to grab a pen. And I want you, on your stone, to make a cross. And I want you to take this home and I want this to remind you of what's true. There are some things that we do in life that are just hard to forget, and they're hard to let go, and they're so big we stumble over them. And think we can't be forgiven, but let this stone be a reminder that you are. Maybe you can't forget, but you can forgive yourself because Jesus did it first. Let's pray.

Dear God, thank you for not respecting our feelings. If something wasn't true until we felt it, so many of us would be condemned, but we're not. Right now, there is no condemnation for all of us who look to Jesus and call him our savior, and we're so grateful for that.

Holy Spirit, I ask that you would help the hearts of everyone here today. Let those hearts catch up to what is actually true. That we are loved, that because of your great love we are not consumed that instead today we have your compassion, and in fact, we have the greatest thing in the world, your face, which is looking towards us, not in anger, but it's shining upon us in acceptance. Help us to be the community of faith that you call us to be.

Heavenly Father, I ask that we could encourage each other. Accountability is great, but gospel accountability is better. Help us preach the gospel to each other, to remind one another not just of your standards of behavior, but of the cross of your son, Jesus.

Thank you over the past few weeks, Father, for teaching us about forgiveness. It's been hard, but it's been good for our soul. And I pray that we would work our hardest to reconcile and remedy the brokenness of the past. And at the end of every day to know what's true and what can't be changed. That you're with us, you're for us, and your spirit is within us. We pray these things with confidence as your loved, forgiven, purified children, because we pray today in Jesus' name. Amen.