

Introduction

Have we considered the importance of forgiveness as part of the foundation of salvation in Christ? I really hadn't considered this much in the past nor all that this might entail. Neither did I include practical forgiveness as a stepping stone for spiritual growth in my daily life.

Ask yourself some questions in honest reflection:

- 1) Have I forgiven myself based on the Lord's word? Do I continue to succumb to past sins, entangling sins, and sins that hinder my obedience to the Lord? (Hebrews 12:1) This may indicate that you have not forgiven yourself (or others) sufficiently.
- 2) Have I accepted, received, and applied the forgiveness/cleansing of sins to myself in the past and in the present? Can I honestly say that "I do not sin any more" (John 8:11) related to sins the Lord has cleaned? The Lord told the woman caught in adultery, "go and sin no more." (John 8:1-10) This is only possible when there is divine forgiveness and genuine repentance.
- 3) Do I live a life of faith, wholly dependent on the Lord alone so my life is an exhibition of faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, brotherly love and love? (2 Peter 1:5-7) Have I recognized spiritual growth in my life or do I continue to struggle, accept defeat, or hide, cover, and make excuses or assume blame for my sins? As in Genesis 3, the signs of the fallen flesh are hiding from God (and each other), covering ourselves with "fig leaves" of activity, religion, self-righteousness, etc., and due to fear, pain, guilt, shame, and unbelief we make excuses for our sin(s) and blame others or things outside ourselves rather than take responsibility.
- 4) Do I know how to forgive myself?

Gracia and Martin Burnham had three children, all in school. They took a long-awaited anniversary trip to the Philippines (without the children). They were abducted by rebels and held hostage for ransom (as American citizens) for a year. They were tortured, demeaned, humiliated, starved, and dragged through the jungle. One day, Gracia had to relieve herself and she took the one possession they were allowed to keep for themselves, a backpack of survival items. She forgot it as they were dragged on their unpleasant journey. Gracia was self-deprecating and self-introspective because of her forgetfulness. Her husband spoke gently, "I forgive you; God has forgiven you, but you must forgive yourself."

Forgiveness as the Foundation of Salvation

Let's first consider forgiveness as the foundation of salvation.

“And He took a cup and gave thanks and He gave it to His disciples, saying, Drink of it, all of you. For this is My blood of the covenant, which is being poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” (Matthew 26:27-28)

“Peter said to them, Repent and each one of you be baptized upon the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

Zachariah spoke about his son, John, shortly before Christ's birth, **“You also, little child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the forgiveness of their sins.”** (Luke 1:77)

This applies to Israel: **“This One God has exalted to His right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.”** (Acts 5:31)

Peter was sent to Cornelius, a Gentile Centurion in the Roman army, showing that salvation and forgiveness are extending to all men and women (Gentiles): **“To this One all the prophets testify that through His name everyone who believes into Him will receive forgiveness of sins.”** (Acts 10:43)

Why is forgiveness the foundation of salvation? **“And almost all things are purified by blood according to the law, and without shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness.”** (Hebrews 9:22)

An important aspect of the New Covenant (New Testament) is forgiveness. **“And their sins and their lawlessnesses I shall by no means remember anymore. Now, where forgiveness of these is, there is no longer an offering for sin.”** (Hebrews 10:18)

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9)

“Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and He was buried, and He was raised on the third day according to the scriptures.” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4)

Putting all these verses together, we can see that Christ died for our sins so that God could forgive us and be reconciled to us (2 Corinthians 5:18).

Forgiveness is a necessary ingredient of God's salvation. However, is forgiveness automatic? Is everyone forgiven based on Christ's work on the cross? Is it a “once for all” act accomplished wholly on God's part? Or do we have a role in forgiveness? And do we need to apply forgiveness on a daily, moment by moment basis? It seems a lack of clarity exists among believers regarding forgiveness.

The purpose of this article is to emphasize that believers in Christ have a role in forgiveness, not only to be forgiven based on Christ's death and resurrection, not only to forgive others (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13; Matthew 6:14-15), but also to forgive ourselves. The verses listed indicate that forgiveness also requires action on our part. For instance, the Lord told us to

“drink of it” (1 Corinthians 11:25) regarding His blood that offers forgiveness. Peter preached that we must repent and be baptized to receive forgiveness (Acts 2:38). In Acts 10:43, Peter said those who believe will be granted forgiveness. John said that we must confess our sins for God to forgive us (1 John 1:9). To experience God's forgiveness, we need to receive it, accept it, and live accordingly.

Forgiveness And Love (Two Sides of the Same Coin)

7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so, they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

21 The Lord God made garments of animal skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.

(Genesis 3:7, 21)

After Adam and Eve's fall in the garden, they took upon themselves to cover their nakedness. They used fig leaves, representing their own effort and their own standard to deal with their sin. God did not accept their covering and clothed them with animal skin, which required the shedding of blood. This is a type and figure of Jesus as the perfect Lamb of God, whose blood was shed for our eternal redemption (Hebrews 9:14, 22). God could not look upon man's sin (Habakkuk 1:13) so He covered it with His own blood.

4 God chose us in Him before the foundation of the world ... in love. ... 7 In Him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace ... 9 He made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Christ, ... 11 In Him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of Him who works out everything in conformity with the counsel of His will. (Ephesians 1:4, 7, 9, 11)

In eternity (before time), God planned and had a council with Himself as the Triune God. The decision He made was to choose us in Christ in love. In order to accomplish His eternal purpose or economy, He would need to become a man, live a perfect human life as God manifested in the flesh, die on the cross (shedding His own perfect blood), resurrect, and ascend into heaven as a God-man who becomes our Lord and Savior (Acts 2:36). This is significant in so many ways, but we will focus on the matter of forgiveness and love. Everyone knows, “**God so loved the world**” (John 3:16), yet few realize that this love is 100% based on forgiveness. God could not love us without having forgiven us first. Some may argue that the verse says, “God loved us and then gave His Son.” Read Ephesians 1 carefully and see that God planned His own death and resurrection before the foundation of the world. God planned forgiveness as part of His love to us. Therefore, forgiveness is inherent in love.

The Lord Jesus healed people. In one situation He said, **Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'?** (Matthew 9:5; Luke 5:23) Forgiveness is part of healing. The story of the woman (and man) caught in adultery ends with the Lord telling the woman, “**I do not condemn you, either.**” (John 8:11) This meant that He forgave her. Then, he commanded her to “**Go and sin no more.**” Forgiveness is a pre-requisite to serving the Lord and

obeying Him. The Lord told us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44) and He modelled this on the cross when He looked down and prayed, **Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.** (Luke 23:34) By forgiving His enemy, He expressed His divine love for them.

Hopefully, we all realize that forgiveness is the foundation of all of God's dealing with mankind. Love is based on forgiveness. Healing is a form of forgiveness. Obedience comes after forgiveness. Love issues forth out of forgiveness to even our enemies so this surely applies to our brothers, sisters, and everyone God places in our lives. Do we apply forgiveness towards others and towards ourselves as the foundation of our relationships and interactions? God does and so should we.

The Greatest Commandment

Jesus taught that the greatest commandment is to love God and our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-39; Mark 12:29-31). Notice the three parties we are to love: God, our neighbor, and ourselves. Do we love God, our neighbor, and ourselves according to and with God's divine love or according to and with our natural love? If you ask most of us, "Do you love [your child]?" We would all immediately say, "yes". However, that is most likely natural love. Surely, the Lord demands His love, not our natural love. We do not possess God's love or forgiveness in ourselves. Therefore, a process is required on our part. Here is one reference showing how God's love is poured out into our hearts:

... we glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. (Romans 5:3-5)

Paul exhorted us to "walk in love" as imitators of God (Ephesians 5:1-2). How is this possible? Certainly not in or according to our natural effort or love. But a process is needed for God to impart His love and grow it in our hearts. This process is laid out in the previous chapter:

You have heard Christ and were taught in Him in accordance with the reality that is in Jesus. 22 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; 23 be renewed in the spirit of your minds; 24 and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:21-24)

First, we must hear the Lord's word within our heart. Simultaneously we must be taught in Christ, by Christ, and through Christ. Taught what? We must be taught to: 1) put off the old self which is corrupted and deceived by seeking God and cooperating with Him to empty out the old things in our heart; 2) be renewed in the spirit of our minds through transformation (Romans 12:1); and 3) put on the new man which yields the righteousness and holiness of God in our living. Without this process (which is repeated in Colossians 3:1-18), we cannot grow Christ as righteousness and holiness in our hearts. Neither can we grow the love of Christ or forgiveness in our hearts. God's love and forgiveness do not grow in us automatically or spontaneously. They must be cultivated by the Spirit with our cooperation and obedience in Him.

God's love includes and requires forgiveness. Therefore, it is entirely proper to say that to love ourselves in Christ, we must forgive ourselves in Christ. Conversely, if we have not forgiven ourselves, we cannot love others with the divine love. This same logic applies to loving others. We must forgive others in Christ in order for the divine love to grow within our heart to love others with God's love.

There is a fleshy, soulish, and natural love derived from our God-created life before regeneration and subject to the fallen nature. But the love of God based on the forgiveness afforded through Christ's death and resurrection is imparted into our hearts after regeneration based on forgiveness and cleansing of sin. However, God's love and forgiveness can only grow through the proper spiritual process we described earlier.

If we are honest, open, and laid bare before God (Hebrews 4:13), we have to admit that loving others, forgiving others, is impossible apart from the operation of the divine life within us. If believers in Christ would follow one verse in the Bible, the world would be completely different: **"They will know you are My disciples by your love for one another"** (John 13:35). Christians often deceive themselves by saying "I love my brother and sister;" yet exist in a divided state, in thousands of denominations and church societies. Christians can harbor hatred, strife, jealousy, malice, and bitterness towards others, building walls of enmity that the Lord has broken down (Ephesians 2:14-16). Christians can be apathetic, passive, and ignorant towards many saints in need. Paul wrote, **Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.** (1 Timothy 5:8) This related to caring for each other in the church. We may say we love others, but our passivity shows otherwise.

John gave this warning,

"If we claim to have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. 8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1:6-8).

The context of 1 John is loving God and our fellow believers. It is common to claim that we have fellowship with others or that we love others, yet we are actually walking in darkness, deceiving ourselves. 1 John 3 goes on to prescribe what we should do. First, we stop sinning, meaning we stop lying to ourselves that we love others when in fact, we do not. Rather we confess that we harbor bitterness, malice, envy, jealousy, and even hate towards our brother (3:9). Then, we recognize that love is not passive, but active (3:10-18). Maintaining walls between us like denomination or refusing to communicate with others shows our lack of love. Love actively lays down its life for the other person.

Why is love so lacking among Christians when love is the greatest commandment of God? Why do believers maintain distance between each other and still think they can pursue Christ effectively? The answer is likely that we lack the experience of forgiveness. Not only do we not

forgive others, but equally as important, we do not forgive ourselves. To love ourselves according to and with God's love, we must forgive ourselves. Likewise, to love others according to and with God's love, we must forgive them as God has forgiven us (Matthew 6:14-15; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:12-13). This requires the process laid out in Ephesians 4:21-24 and Colossians 3:1-17.

The apostle John put it all together perfectly in His first epistle. He spoke of light, cleansing, forgiveness, and love (1 John 1). He then wrote about growth in life from young ones to strong young men to fathers in Christ (1 John 2). This picture of maturity was preceded by the realization that we are forgiven. We must forgive ourselves in order to love and forgive others. We must forgive ourselves in order to mature in the divine life.

Forgiveness as the Stepping Stone of Maturity in Christ

There are not a lot of Bible verses that specifically and directly command or show the matter of forgiving oneself, but it is implicit in many passages of the Bible. There are hundreds of verses that relate to forgiveness in the scriptures and it is possible and likely that in the original language (Hebrew and Greek) forgiveness of oneself was implicit in the matter of forgiveness. Forgiving oneself is a critical aspect to live Christ and grow to maturity in Christ.

One such passage is Matthew 7:1-12. **“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. 2 For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. 3 “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? 4 How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye. 6 “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.”**

Judgment and the lack of loving consideration on our part is a problem for Christians. The Lord Jesus addressed it by implying that we **“reap what we sow”** (Galatians 6:6-10). If we judge others, we too will be judged. The standard of measurement we impose on others will likewise be imposed on us. But did you notice the need to deal with yourself? The Lord particularly pointed out that we are hypocrites because we try to deal with little, tiny specks in our brother's eye, but refuse to deal with the plank or beam in our own eye. The Lord purposely makes this comparison to emphasize our need to deal with ourselves before we ever minister or deal with others. To us, our brother's speck may seem like a mountain, but to the Lord it is only a tiny splinter compared to what exists in our own unrepentant eye. Until we see that we have a huge beam, a huge boulder, a huge impediment in our own eye, we have no business dealing with others.

We need to understand that first and foremost, whatever we want others to “see”, we must see it first before the Lord. If we need others to see forgiveness, then we need to see it for ourselves first. Otherwise, it is like casting our pearls before pigs and sacrificing holy things to dogs, both of which will trample the precious things under their feet. How many times have unbelievers

complained about hypocritical Christians and mock the word of the Lord because of a Christian's hypocritical testimony or duplicity in their daily manner of life? It is too common to observe Christian's living "multiple" lives, one kind of life at work, another kind of life at home, and still another manner of life at church.

7 "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened." (Matthew 7:7-8)

Christians mistakenly think that these verses allow us to ask God for whatever we want or whatever we feel we need. No, there is a context, and that context is "dealing with ourselves." We need to ask the Lord for light to see the beam in our eye as we observe the speck in our brother's eye. We need to seek God for wisdom related to dealing with ourselves and our hypocritical nature. We need to knock until the Lord opens the door of our heart and makes clear how we must deal with ourselves first, get a renewed mind, and then obey Him to deal with others.

There are many Christians who fit in this hypocritical category, so Matthew 7 continues with, **"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. 14 But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."** Few believers are willing to deal with the beam in their own eye before dealing with the speck in their brother's eye. Christians tend to be as judgmental as non-believers, and this profanes the Lord's name to the unbelieving. Christians need to ask, seek, and knock in order to be exposed and deal with their own sins. This requires forgiving oneself once the Lord exposes these things.

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So, he divided his property between them. "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So, he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' So, he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So, they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:11-24)

This son demanded his inheritance, disowned his family, squandered every penny with debauchery and licentiousness without guilt ... until a famine came. God knows how to get our attention. The son was starving, unemployed, and had to beg just to survive. He was brought low. He came to himself (thanks to God's grace) and decided to go back home. However, he had not forgiven himself for what he had done. Even after his father poured out compassion and lavished him with love, he still had not forgiven himself, but rather told his father that he was not worthy to be his son and asked if he could be a servant. The son did confess his sin, which was good, but he needed to forgive himself and recognize his true person that God made him to be.

The Need for Repentance & An Advocate

Repentance is a process, like all aspects of salvation. It involves sorrow and a change of life. **“For sorrow according to God works repentance unto salvation, which is without regret; but the sorrow of the world works out death.”** Contrast this with Esau's sorrow in Hebrews 12:17, **“For he found no place for repentance even though he sought it with tears.”** Sorrow is not enough to secure repentance; tears are not enough. Repentance requires a change of heart and a change in our living. Repentance produces fruit of salvation which proves it is real. Therefore, we have a responsibility in repentance and salvation. It is not automatically given to us. There must be a process we go through that includes sorrow, dealing with yourself, confession, and believing.

John told us that when we sin, we have an Advocate with the Father (1 John 2:1). Why did he write this to us? For assurance. Two verses prior we are confessing our sins to receive forgiveness (1 John 1:9) and John knew we would need assurance, confirmation, that our sins truly are forgiven. True repentance requires sorrow for our sinful deeds, for our rebellion against God, for our offending and grieving the Holy Spirit. God forgives us when we repent and confess, but do we forgive ourselves? Consider the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Slaves were given their freedom, but did they apply that freedom to themselves? Many had no idea whether it was true, whether it applied to them, and whether they could change their manner of life. There was little in the outward realm in America that indicated they were truly free. Likewise, when we are forgiven by God, we need to receive it, accept it, and live according to it overcoming guilt, shame, unbelief, pain, etc. and all the outward things.

The Apostle John

“I write to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you because of His name.” 1 John 2:12 The amplified translation expands the thought, stating that we have been pardoned and released from spiritual debt through His name because we have confessed His name, believing in Him as Savior. We have to do something on our part to be forgiven. God does not just wave a magic wand and poof we are forgiven. No, we have to confess His name, meaning we agree that He is Lord and we are not. We also have to believe in Him as Savior. Savior from what? Savior from our sins and fallen nature, meaning we accept His forgiveness for ourselves and depend wholly on Him for salvation.

The apostle John wrote the last five of the 66 books of the modern Bible. He wrote 20-25 years after the other apostles had passed away. His words were not ecclesiastical nor liturgical nor theoretical, but experiential, practical, and universal to all believers. Why would the Holy Spirit inspire John to write verse 2:12?

Let's consider the context based on chapter 1, **“This is the message we have heard from Him and declare to you: God is light; in Him there is no darkness at all.”** (1 John 1:5) God is the source of light and is light itself spiritually. Light will expose our darkness (John 3:19-20) which includes our sins that need forgiving in order for us to be reconciled to God. **“If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin.”** (1:6-7) Whenever we sin, we are walking in darkness, and sin blocks our fellowship with God and other believers in Christ. Only the blood of Jesus, God's Son, can cleanse us from all sin. This means that only the blood of Jesus can bring forgiveness of our sin.

“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” (1:8) Some claim that forgiveness is once for all, but John indicates that cleansing of sin, which is the same as applying forgiveness, is ongoing. Whenever, we walk in the light and have fellowship with one another, our sin will get exposed and needs cleansing, it needs forgiveness. To deny this fact is to deceive ourselves. 1 John 1:9 confirms this: **“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”** We must actively confess our sins to apply the blood of Christ and receive forgiveness practically. Forgiveness yields purification. **“If we claim we have not sinned, we make Him out to be a liar and His word is not in us.”** John knew that we all sin even after regeneration, so he wrote about the need of forgiveness. To deny that we sin makes God a liar and shows that His living and operative Word (Hebrews 4:12) is not operating within us regarding this point.

“My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. For He Himself is the propitiation for our sins ...” (1 John 2:1-2). John is not encouraging us to sin, but acknowledging that we will sin. Therefore, he explains that we have an Advocate Who takes care of our sin by His sacrifice on the cross, which satisfied God's righteous requirement. Christ's sacrifice is once for all (Hebrews 9:12-14), but our need to apply the efficacy of this sacrifice continues as long as we live in the flesh on earth. Therefore, our need to confess our sins and receive forgiveness continues in the same way.

Love and Forgiveness are One

It is interesting that John seemingly changed direction in 2:3-11. He wrote about how we know that we know Christ/God. We know we are true believers because we keep His commandments, we obey His living and operative Word, and we love our brothers and sisters in Christ. John distinctly compares loving our brother to hating our brother in terms of walking in the light or in darkness. Why would John make such an inclusion? He knew that forgiveness and cleansing of sin are necessary for us to love one another. **“I write to you, little children, because your sins**

have been forgiven you because of His name.” (2:12) Little children includes all believers, fathers, young men, and young children in Christ (2:13-17).

John, inspired by the Holy Spirit, directly linked forgiveness, the cleansing of sins, with love. There is a divine cycle involving love and forgiveness. God loved the world (John 3:16) so He forgave the world, meaning He sent Himself as Jesus Christ to redeem the world by shedding His blood. God had to forgive us in order to pour out His love upon us (Romans 5:1-11). God could not extend His love to us in our sinful condition without dealing with the sin first. In fact, Paul says that we were dead in offenses and sins (Ephesians 2:1). Do you see the divine cycle? God had to forgive us in order to love us. He loved us so He forgave us.

How about us? Forgiveness and love are two sides of the same coin, not only with God, but also with us. God requires us to love one another and this includes forgiving one another (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13; Matthew 6:14-15). To love is to forgive and to forgive is to love. They go hand in hand. Therefore, in order to keep the commandment of loving one another, we must forgive one another. Part of the famous “Lord’s Prayer” is “**Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors**” (Matthew 6:12). Surely, this is not once for all, but ongoing. Every time someone offends us, we are commanded by God to forgive them. The Lord tells us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44). How is this possible? Only by forgiving them.

Consider when the Lord Jesus visited Simon, the Pharisee. A woman came in and wiped the Lord’s feet with her hair using her tears and perfume. The Pharisee was upset by this so the Lord spoke a parable and ended with, “**Her many sins have been forgiven, because she loved much. But whoever has been forgiven little, loves little**” (Luke 7:36-50). The parallel is clear. In order to love, we need to forgive. Likewise, when we experience forgiveness, we will love much!

Other Examples of Forgiving Oneself in the Scriptures

David was a man after God's own heart, and Psalm 51 shows a detailed description of him seeking forgiveness for himself. The apostle Paul wrote more than half of the New Testament scriptures and in 1 Corinthians 15:9 and 1 Timothy 1:15-16 he brought up his sin of persecuting Christ years after committing it, I believe, to show us the need of forgiving ourselves as a foundation for trusting and living Christ.

In order for us to be saved and transformed we need faith in Christ, which is a believing ability imparted into our hearts (James 1:21). We must believe by faith that God has actually forgiven our sins. Otherwise, we are filled with unhealthy fear (often due to guilt and shame) and pride, which paralyzes us and hinders us from entering into the process of putting off the old man, renewing of the mind, and putting on the new man (Ephesians 4:20-24), and therefore, stunts our spiritual growth (Hebrews 5:12-14). It is one thing to think about forgiveness in our old creation minds ("the letter kills"). It is a completely different thing to believe it in our regenerated hearts ("the Spirit gives life" ... 2 Corinthians 3:6b).

Consider the concept, "**Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you**" (Colossians 3:13; Ephesians 4:32; Matthew 6:12). I believe this means that if we haven't accepted the Lord's forgiveness of

ourselves then we cannot forgive others. The woman caught in the act of adultery in John 8:1-12 illustrates this. After the self-righteous Pharisees decided they were not worthy to stone this sinful woman, the Lord told her that He did not condemn her either, meaning He forgave her sin, but He also told her to “go and sin no more.” How would she be able to not sin anymore? Only by accepting the Lord’s word into her heart and obeying it. She needed to accept the Lord’s forgiveness for herself. She surely knew how susceptible to sin (e.g., adultery) she was and how she could not overcome her sin in or by herself. Her dependence needed to shift from herself to the Lord. She had to believe His word of forgiveness and apply it to her life and living so that she could go and sin no more.

King David

There are many examples in the scriptures that show how saints needed to constantly forgive themselves. Two expounded examples are seen with David and the apostle Paul. Psalm 51 shows David's process of accepting God's forgiveness of himself after his hideous sin of adultery with Bathsheba and murdering Uriah, one of his renown companions. David said his sin was ever before him (vv. 1-3). He realized that his sin had put a blockage between him and God (vv. 4-9), and that his heart, his innermost being, needed truth (v. 7). He realized he needed cleansing, washing, and restoration through the Spirit's work. He even pleaded with God not to cast him out from His presence (vv. 7-12). He asked for deliverance from the guilt of bloodshed probably referring to how he killed Uriah (v. 14), and he realized that activities like sacrifices and burnt offerings would not bring the forgiveness that he needed ... but only a broken and contrite heart would God accept (vv. 16-19). Forgiving oneself is a matter of dealing with our heart.

The Apostle Paul

In 1 Timothy 1 Paul writes in a way that shows how he forgave himself in order to become the minister that God made him to be in Christ since he had persecuted the church. It begins by saying that God commanded him to be a minister (v. 1). Paul did not choose this, God did. Paul most likely would have “run away” based on his persecuting the Lord’s people. Paul goes on to share that his ministry was based on love out of a pure heart and a good conscience (v. 5) meaning that he had to forgive himself. Without a complete and thorough process of forgiveness, emptying, and filling, Paul could not have had a pure heart or good conscience and therefore love could not issue forth. This coincides with the greatest commandment in Matthew 22:37-39 “loving our neighbor as ourselves” ... Love directly issues from forgiving yourself.

Paul then contrasted his life with false ones who are lawless and unruly and full of ungodly behavior yet bold to teach others (vv. 6-10). I think we can imply that these false ones did not know forgiveness. Peter wrote that if we do not have the life of Christ issuing forth from our living, we have forgotten the cleansing of our past sins (2 Peter 1:9). Forgiveness and cleansing our sins go hand-in-hand as recorded in Luke 5:12-25 and John 13:1-1. In Luke 5 the Lord asked rhetorically if it was easier to forgive or to cleanse sin, meaning they are the same thing. In John 13 the Lord told His disciples that all but one of them was clean in the context of forgiveness that He would render on the cross and in resurrection. Paul stated that he was entrusted with the gospel (v. 11) and he thanked God for counting him faithful (v. 12) and he delineated his terrible sins against the church (vv. 13, 16). He gave the source of how he forgave himself, which was

Grace (v. 14). Paul continued by stating that God as the Word is faithful and worthy of all acceptance especially to Paul who considers himself the chiefest of sinners (v. 15). Paul was writing to explain how he had gone through the process of forgiveness as part of his constitution of being a minister of God. He reiterates the importance of having faith and a good conscience which others throw away and thereby become shipwrecked (vv. 18-19).

Consider how Paul must have felt on the road to Damascus when the Lord appeared to him and he realized he had been persecuting and even murdering Christ (Acts 9:1-5). He spoke this testimony two more times in Acts (22:4-8; 26:12-15) and then again in 1 Corinthians 15:9 and 1 Timothy 1. Paul opened ten of his New Testament epistles by stating he was "an apostle of Jesus Christ". Yet, he said, "I am not fit or worthy to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God. Surely, he needed to forgive himself as part of accepting God's forgiveness, and this process took place throughout his life, not just at his initial regeneration.

The Apostle Peter

Another profound example of needing forgiveness of oneself is repeatedly shown in the life of Peter ... who was exposed more than any other believer in the New Testament. It is easiest to relate to Peter in terms of failing and having to forgive ourselves. He always "ran ahead" of the Lord and stumbled. The Lord would rebuke, admonish, and correct him in love. Peter's best-known failure (at least that most people remember) is his denying Jesus three times the night of the Lord's crucifixion. Yet, one may feel that would be expected since Christ had not yet died and resurrected. The scriptures continue ... The Lord appeared to His disciples after his resurrection and breathed the Holy Spirit into His disciples (John 20:22). They were regenerated at that moment. Yet, John 21:1-3 shows Peter discouraged and leading 6 others back to their former profession, fishing. The Lord Jesus appeared on the shore and called out to them. Peter was considered naked (vv. 4-7), again, showing his spiritual condition was waning. Eventually the Lord honed in on Peter and asked him 3 times "Do you love me?" Surely the Lord knew Peter was struggling with forgiving himself for the denials as well as so many previous failures. Peter's ability to love and to serve Christ was directly related to his ability to forgive himself. In Luke 22:31-32 the Lord told Peter outright that Satan would defeat him, but when he turned back to Christ by faith, he would establish his brothers. Again, I believe this relates to Peter being willing and able to forgive himself so he could trust Christ.

Peter was used by the Lord to save thousands at Pentecost (Acts 2:41). Yet, approximately 20 years later Paul rebuked Peter for hypocrisy related to Jews versus Gentiles (Galatians 2:11-16). Peter surely knew failure even after regeneration. Therefore, he needed a fresh application of forgiveness for each failure.

In 2 Peter 1:9 Peter explained why many believers do not have a life that displays Christ, nor exhibits the divine power of God or His precious and exceeding great promises or His divine nature (2 Peter 1:3-4). He specifically laid out the wonderful characteristics of Christ that true believers possess in their living (2 Peter 1:5-7). But there are many who do not have faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, brotherly love, and love because they have forgotten the cleansing of their past sins. As we mentioned previously, cleansing and forgiveness go hand in hand (Luke 5:12-25; John 13:1-3). The problem is not on Christ's part. He has offered

forgiveness to all. The problem is on our side. We have refused to relinquish our pride and accept in total dependence the Lord's word of forgiveness which cleanses our sins. The woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-12) needed to accept and receive the Lord's word of forgiveness in order to "go and sin no more." If she hadn't, she would return to her sinful life. Likewise, we must accept and receive in total dependence the Lord's word of forgiveness to experience the cleansing of our sins. This is not just once for all, but on-going. Paul, on one hand, remembered his great sin of persecuting the church and therefore, said that he was not worthy to be called an apostle. Yet, on the other hand, he humbled himself by the Lord's grace (1 Corinthians 15:9-10) and accepted and received the Lord's word of forgiveness and stood on the Lord's commission that he was an apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul had to forgive himself every time he felt inadequate, every time he failed, and every time he knew he was apart from Christ in his experience.

Unfortunately, I believe that forgiveness and the need to forgive ourselves is misunderstood and downplayed as an obvious fact. We have taken it in an objective, doctrinal, cognitive way, but not in a subjective, experiential, manner of the heart. This is pictured in Exodus related to the Israelites who were redeemed out of Egypt, but ended up wandering in the wilderness for forty years. Only 2 of 1 million adults lived through that wandering because God struck them down due to their lack of faith. This affords a clear example and warning to us as written in 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 and Hebrews 3:7-4:16. When the Israelites ate the Passover and crossed the Red Sea, this signified their redemption and forgiveness of sins that God afforded them. Yet, they never lived by faith (accepting and receiving in total dependence the Lord's word for themselves) and their "bodies were scattered in the wilderness". Had they accepted, received, and applied the Lord's forgiveness to themselves, they would have totally depended on the Lord in faith. Likewise, we need to accept, receive, and apply the Lord's forgiveness to ourselves so that His life and nature can be constituted into us in our daily living.

If we walk in the light, we will see how much we lack Christ and do not know Him personally and intimately and therefore, the fruit of Christ in our lives is greatly lacking. One of the biggest reasons is that we have forgotten the cleansing of our past sins, meaning we have not intimately, deeply, and profoundly experienced forgiveness. Forgiveness includes God's forgiveness in Christ, but also our forgiveness of ourselves.

A Practical Application of Romans 7:15-25

A famous passage of controversy for believers in Jesus is Romans 7:15-25. Believers debate whether the author, Paul, was regenerated or wrote this passage regarding the time before he knew Jesus Christ as Savior.

15 For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. 16 But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. 17 So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. 19 For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. 20 But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

21 I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. 22 For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, 23 but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.

Four Laws and Their Operation

There are four laws mentioned in the passage: 1) the law in my members (v. 22), 2) the law of God (vv. 22, 25), 3) the law of my mind, and 4) the law of sin. The law of God is good (v. 16; 1 Timothy 1:8) and it establishes and portrays the righteousness and holiness of God. The Lord pointed out in Matthew 5:19-20 that the law is to be followed to the very minutest detail: **19 Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.**

20 "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Christians need to believe in Jesus Christ who fulfilled every jot and tittle of the law. It is Christ's life within us that can live out God's law (Galatians 2:20), our unregenerate, old creation humanity cannot. The problem is that we also have a law in our members that is directly associated with the law of sin and death. If we do not live by the faith of Christ, we will live by the law in our members that is driven by the law of sin and death (Romans 8:1-8). Our God-created humanity also has the law of our mind, which desires to love and follow God, but is easily seduced and easily defeated. In fact, Romans 7:23 states that the law in our members will capture the law of our mind and imprison it.

The law in our mind will agree that the law of God is good and even rejoice in the inner man. This inner man is the soul (mind, will, and emotion) with the mind as the leading part. We may intend to follow the law of God, we may set our mind to follow God's law, but that is not enough. The law of sin which influences the law in our members (flesh) will defeat the law of our mind every time. Only when we turn to our spirit and engage with the Holy Spirit can we defeat the law of sin (Romans 8:1-16).

Why do I bring this up? In our experience, we often sin and this produces a separation with God that needs to be reconciled. We can confess our sin and God is faithful and righteous to forgive (1 John 1:9). However, the source of the problem is not dealt with and we will repeat that sin again. The source of the problem is that we utilize the law of our mind or the law in our members to defeat the law of sin. Yet, as Paul wrote, the law of sin is more powerful and insidious. The law of sin always defeats the law of our mind. So, no matter how good our intentions, the law of sin will win the battle unless we turn to the Holy Spirit in our spirit.

Forgiving oneself requires the realization of the operation of these four laws. We sin because we are weak, but also because we are rebellious. This means that sometimes our sin is deliberate. We choose to sin. We choose to go against the law of God and God Himself. So, how can we forgive ourselves when we voluntarily walked into the sin and possibly even enjoyed it for a season (Hebrews 11:25-26). When we realize that we used our own effort or followed the law of

our mind, we can now understand that the law of sin defeats us. The solution is simple: turn to the Holy Spirit in our spirit.

So again, ask yourself some questions in honest reflection:

- 1) Have I forgiven myself based on the Lord's word? Do I continue to succumb to past sins, entangling sins, and sins that hinder my obedience to the Lord? (Hebrews 12:1) This may indicate that you have not forgiven yourself (or others) sufficiently.
- 2) Have I accepted, received, and applied the forgiveness/cleansing of sins to myself in the past and in the present? Can I honestly say that "I do not sin any more" (John 8:11) related to sins the Lord has cleaned? The Lord told the woman caught in adultery, "go and sin no more." (John 8:1-10) This is only possible when there is divine forgiveness and genuine repentance.
- 3) Do I live a life of faith, wholly dependent on the Lord alone so my life is an exhibition of faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, brotherly love and love? (2 Peter 1:5-7) Have I recognized spiritual growth in my life or do I continue to struggle, accept defeat, or hide, cover, and make excuses or assume blame for my sins? As in Genesis 3, the signs of the fallen flesh are hiding from God (and each other), covering ourselves with "fig leaves" of activity, religion, self-righteousness, etc., and due to fear, pain, guilt, shame, and unbelief we make excuses for our sin(s) and blame others or things outside ourselves rather than take responsibility.
- 4) Do I know how to forgive myself?