

Is Self-Forgiveness Biblical?

INTRODUCTION

Many today are trying to tell us that we need to forgive ourselves in order to FEEL forgiven. This theory is creeping up from many angles – Christian devotional booklets and books, Christian psychologists, Internet blogs and sermons, and pop culture. Actually, most of the advice that's given contradicts Scripture.

We need to consider this idea of self-forgiveness in two ways – historically and biblically.

I. Historically

A. Before the 20th century

Traditional theological and philosophical thought was concerned with vertical forgiveness (God forgiving humans) and horizontal forgiveness (humans forgiving one another). The idea of self-forgiveness is not found in ancient history, medieval history, or even post-medieval history. It's missing from all ancient civilizations and writers before Christ (Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Medo-Persian, and Greece) as well as from all those after Christ (the Roman Empire, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, or even the Industrial Revolution).

B. The 20th and 21st centuries

1. The concept of forgiving oneself originated quite recently. Roots of self-compassion can be found in Eastern contemplative traditions as well as ancient Stoic thought, but it was not until the early 20th century that psychology shifted from diagnosing pathology to dealing with mental well-being. Sigmund Freud and later psychologists investigated any relation between neurosis and either unarticulated shame or repressed guilt.

2. In the Humanist and self-help movements of the 1970s and 1980s the phrase "forgiving oneself" gained popularity in modern therapeutic models that emphasized personal growth and self-acceptance and attempted to overcome chronic guilt for past failures. One wonders if psychologists have begun telling hardened, convicted criminals to forgive themselves.

II. Biblically – The silence of Scripture on the idea of self-forgiveness is deafening.

A. The Old Testament

If we look at various prominent sinners in the different periods of Old Testament history, we find nothing about self-forgiveness for individual's sins – for example, Eve and Adam (that caused their expulsion from the Garden of Eden), Moses (his anger – that resulted in God's keeping him from settling in the Promised Land), David (his adultery with Bathsheba and arranged death of her husband), and Solomon (his polygamy and idolatry).

Not only is nothing recorded *about* any self-forgiveness on the part of these sinners. Nothing is recorded *by* them either in the books they wrote – nothing in Exodus-Deuteronomy by Moses, nothing in the Psalms that David wrote, and nothing by Solomon (in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, or Song of Solomon).

Furthermore, none of the prophets or priests wrote about any self-forgiveness in their own lives or in those of others. Nathan, Elijah, and Elisha – plus all the prophets who wrote Bible books – omit any mention of self-forgiveness.

B. The New Testament

We likewise seek in vain in the Gospels for any self-forgiveness expressed by Jesus' disciples during His earthly ministry or by any believers during the first decades of the Church (in Acts or in the Epistles) – much less in the Book of Revelation (which mainly describes events during the future 7-year Tribulation).

In other words, whether we consider the various types of Bible literature (history, law, poetry, prophecy, or epistle) or the various dispensations of God's different ways of dealing with mankind, we find not even a hint of self-forgiveness (either recorded or recommended).

More particularly, Jesus did not exhort His disciples (later Apostles) to forgive themselves. Likewise, the Epistles written to and for the Church are silent regarding self-forgiveness.

CONCLUSIONS

A. Psychology – Even the non-Christian world did not come up with the idea of self-forgiveness until recent decades in human history. It is just one more recent way the unsaved are trying to avoid the fact that only God can (and does) fully forgive sin.

B. Conformity – Too many who profess to believe in the Bible and in Jesus are seeking wisdom from the world and actually following the world in many respects. This is not wise, and it is certainly not based in Scripture.

C. Theology – Since the concept of self-forgiveness is not found in Scripture, there is no need to recommend it to those who are trusting Christ for salvation and trying to follow His Word for life in this world. Self-forgiveness is an idea that is – at the very least – unbiblical, and some would say is anti-biblical. God has forgiven ALL the sins of believers (Col 2:13), so there is biblically no need at all for believers to even consider forgiving themselves. It is merely a psychological way that the world has come up with to allegedly give emotional peace – to those who should count on the peace with God that every true believer already *has* in Christ (Rom 5:1).