

## **Forgiving Oneself: Biblical Precept or Distraction from God's Gift of Forgiveness?**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines a tendency in some quarters within Evangelicalism to assume the necessity for self-forgiveness as a part of receiving full forgiveness from God. Research shows significant support for the concept of self-forgiveness from secular disciplines focusing on mental health and emotional recovery. But consensus within either the theological world or the secular mental health world about self-forgiveness is not unanimous. The questions which will be addressed in this paper are two: first, is the concept of self-forgiveness described or taught anywhere in the Scriptures, and second, is the forgiveness which is supplied through the finished work of Christ contingently sufficient or necessarily sufficient for divine releasing of the guilt and penalty of sin. We will contend the secular models, however refined they may be, do not sufficiently consider the Biblical model of forgiveness, and theological advocacy for self-forgiveness similarly tends to dampen the evidence on the nature, working and efficacy of divinely provided forgiveness. Before engaging those questions, we will pursue a brief examination of the nature of forgiveness in both the Old and the New Testaments. We will also show the structure and intent of forgiveness as it is outlined in the Scripture, when properly applied, renders self-forgiveness a moot and unnecessary point.

**Keywords:** forgiveness, repentance, faith, self-forgiveness, self-acceptance.

## Introduction

Christians believe in forgiveness, wrote C. H. Dodd, not because of some human element looking for release from wrongdoing, but because “the principle of forgiveness is built into the structure of the moral order created and determined by the character of a just and faithful God.”<sup>1</sup> Michael F. Bird places forgiveness as “first and foremost” in any study of salvation;<sup>2</sup> Gary Inrig says God’s forgiveness is found throughout the Scriptures, from the beginning to the end.<sup>3</sup> Forgiveness in Christian thought and theology, as Stephen Neill has written, is not a primary Biblical doctrine but instead is one where intersecting are:

...the doctrines of God, of man, of the nature of the world and of immortality, and it is therefore invaluable as a criterion of the value of each system and of its practical efficacy. In Islam, the doctrine seems to me trivial; in Hinduism, it does not exist, its place being taken by a rigid law of expiation. No argument for the truth of Christianity is stronger than that it alone takes a sufficiently serious view of the gigantic evils of the world and provides a remedy which is adequate to the greatness of God, the dignity of man and the integrity of the universe in which we live. The distinguishing characteristic of the Christian Church is the proclamation of the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins.<sup>4</sup>

The wideness of forgiveness, in New Testament thought, is such that all but one sin is forgivable in this life. Jesus taught that

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from R. E. O. White, ed., *You Can Say That Again* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 96.

<sup>2</sup> Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2013), 550.

<sup>3</sup> Gary Inrig, *Forgiveness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House, 2006), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen C. Neill, “The Forgiveness of Sins”, *The Churchman* 48.3 (1934), 175.

blasphemy of the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this life or the next (Matthew 12:32, Mark 3:29). The precise nature or identification of this sin has no consensus; J. Kenneth Grider notes some think such blasphemy is holding on to an unforgiving spirit (cf. Matthew 18:34-35), while others, including the church father Augustine, felt it was persistence in evil; there were those in the early church who felt this blasphemy happened in the attribution of the work of the Holy Spirit to demons.<sup>5</sup> Another view is based on Acts 5:1-5, where deliberately lying about one's relationship to God, as did Ananias and subsequently, his wife Sapphira, is an example of blaspheming the Spirit.<sup>6</sup> Michael Wilkins believes blasphemy of the Spirit and the resultant withholding of forgiveness is an act of unbelievers who choose to reject the ministry of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 16:8-10) which draws such to salvation.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of the precise offense of such blasphemy, the end result is stark: no one who commits this sin will be forgiven. Beyond this, forgiveness is offered for every other kind of sin and trespass against the Lord.

### **Old Testament and Forgiveness**

Before we can discuss forgiveness, we must first understand what necessitates forgiveness. E. W. J. Schmitt used Walter Eichrodt's view that sin has meaning in the Old Testament only as it "is experienced as opposition to an unconditional Shall" as well as mankind's absolute moral responsibility.<sup>8</sup> God was

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<sup>5</sup> J. K. Grider, "Forgiveness", in Walter C. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 421.

<sup>6</sup> Graham F. Twelftree, "Blasphemy" in Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall, eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL and Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 1992), 76. Twelftree notes at the beginning of his comments on this sin that "there has been a great deal of discussion" about the precise nature of blaspheming the Holy Spirit. It is not in the present view to discuss this issue in any length.

<sup>7</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew* (NIVAC) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 449.

<sup>8</sup> Elmer William John Schmitt, *Sin and Forgiveness in the Old Testament* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Drew University, 1943), 1. Schmitt

willing to extend forgiveness if and only if the sin against His “unconditional Shall” was acknowledged in repentance with a genuine turning away from that sin (e.g. 2 Chronicles 7:14).

Forgiveness in the Old Testament was necessarily wedded to the sacrificial system codified in the Mosaic Law, although the idea of divine forgiveness towards a sinning human being antedates the giving of the Law to Israel. For example, when Israel, after the exodus, chose to sin against the Lord, incurring divine wrath, Moses interceded for the people, imploring God to “forgive their sin”, and if He would not, then the plea was to “blot (Moses) out of the book you have written” (Exodus 32:32).<sup>9</sup> The Hebrew word<sup>10</sup> Moses used for “forgive” is *nāsā*’, “to lift up” or “to carry”, stressing “the taking away, forgiveness or pardon of sin, iniquity and transgression”, which became a means of describing the character of God (cf. Exodus 34:7, Numbers 14:18); in this, sin could be “forgiven and forgotten because it was carried away.”<sup>11</sup> In the Psalm literature, King David’s petition for forgiveness for his sin with Bathsheba is expressed as “blot out my transgressions” (Psalm 51:1) and “blot out all my iniquity” (Psalm 51:9). David’s hope is his sin, by being

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referred to Walter Eichrodt, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1939), III:81.

<sup>9</sup> The “book” to which Moses refers is not described previously in Scripture; how he came to know about it is a mystery. W. H. Gispen, *Exodus* (tr. Ed van der Maas) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan and St. Catherines, Ontario: Paideia, 1982), 301 believes since God did not deny the existence of such a “book”, it must have existed, and the contents of the book were salvific/redemptive in nature: “It is thus the book that contains the names of those who have found favor with the Lord, His friends.” Later Scripture speaks of God’s “book”: Psalm 69:28, Malachi 3:16, Philippians 4:3, Revelation 3:5, 20:12.

<sup>10</sup> Schmitt, *Sin and Forgiveness in the Old Testament*, 38 rightly cautions against building theology upon etymology. The use of Hebrew words herein is illustrative and should not be considered exhaustive. Schmitt’s study of “sin” in the Old Testament covers quite a number of words which will not be considered here.

<sup>11</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, “*nāsā*” in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer and Bruce Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1980), II:601.

“blotted out” would “no longer testify against him.”<sup>12</sup> Another word connected with forgiveness in the Old Testament is *sālah*, “to pardon.”

Within the Law of Moses, prerequisite to Yahweh’s forgiveness was a component of blood (Leviticus 4:13-20, 5:7-10). It was through blood, offered in specific and precise steps, that atonement was made for sin and reconciliation affected towards God.<sup>13</sup> God’s desire to forgive is declared in Numbers 14:18-19; He is described as “slow to anger” as well as “abounding in love”, effecting forgiveness because of His “great love”. Ezekiel 18:30-32 is Yahweh’s plea to His people to repent, to turn from their sin, so they will live and not die. While the word “forgive” is not specifically mentioned, the idea is there; those who repent of their sin (“turn away”) will be forgiven, and instead of suffering death for their sin (Ezekiel 18:4), they will live. Since it is apparent God has no delight in effecting judgment,<sup>14</sup> the implicit idea is He delights rather in forgiving and restoring to a place of reconciled relationship with Him.

David’s plea for forgiveness in Psalm 51, his response after the exposure of his adultery with Bathsheba and conspiracy in the murder of her husband, Uriah the Hittite, is a poem “prompted by the inner conscience instructed by God.”<sup>15</sup> David admits to “transgressions” (Heb.: *pesha*, “rebellion”<sup>16</sup>) and “iniquity” (Heb.: *‘awon*, “waywardness”).<sup>17</sup> He knows his sin was against God and God alone (verse 4), which brings up a question of how were his acts not sin against both Bathsheba and Uriah, as well

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<sup>12</sup> C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Psalms* (Psalms 36-83) (trans. Francis Bolton) (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 139.

<sup>13</sup> Paul E. Hughes, “Blood”, in T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL and Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 2003), 88.

<sup>14</sup> Lamar Eugene Cooper, Sr., *Ezekiel* (NAC) (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 192.

<sup>15</sup> Craig C. Broyles, *Psalms* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 226.

<sup>16</sup> Marvin Tate, *Psalms 51-100* (WBC 20) (Dallas, TX: Word, 1990), 3.

<sup>17</sup> Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 4.

as his commander, Joab, who arranged for Uriah to be killed in battle at the king's direction. It is probable David, as he wrote the psalm, recognized that in his sinful choices he broke God's specific directions about adultery and about murder. When Nathan the prophet, under divine direction, confronted David about the sins, the rebuke was that the king had "done evil in the sight of the Lord" (2 Samuel 12:9). Thus, while there was sin done against Bathsheba, against Uriah, and against Joab,<sup>18</sup> the confession centered on the breaking of divine law, of having deliberately and willfully transgressed the Mosaic Law. The overall sense of Psalm 51:1-2, then, is a plea for forgiveness, based on the mercy and the lovingkindness of God, a plea made with direct acknowledgement of responsibility. The words of Psalm 51:10-12 are David's petition to be thoroughly cleansed of any trace of this sin.<sup>19</sup> Psalm 32 is a Davidic hymn of thanksgiving for the blessedness of receiving Yahweh's forgiveness. Both repentance and confession are seen as integral to receiving such release from the guilt of sin.<sup>20</sup>

Psalm 18:21-26 expresses two thoughts; first, the writer sees blessing coming his way because he has not transgressed the Law and second, that those who choose to be "perverse" (KJV) will find themselves victims of their own perverseness. The New Testament principle of reciprocity (Galatians 6:7) is certainly in view here. Forgiveness would not be extended to those who chose to sow continued sin into their lives without repentance. The promise is made to those who repent that they will experience salvation (of which would include forgiveness) but to

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<sup>18</sup> It needs to be recognized that both Bathsheba and Joab were willing participants in the entire sordid episode; only Uriah remains innocent and yet suffered the most because of the sin of the others. Nothing is said in the Old Testament of David seeking forgiveness either from Bathsheba or Joab.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Treasury of David* (McLean, VA: Macdonald, n.d.), I:402, comments: "(David) desires to be rid of the whole mess of his filthiness...which had become a haunting terror to his mind.... (H)e is sick of sin as sin; his loudest outcries are against the evil of his transgression, and not against the painful consequences of it."

<sup>20</sup> Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (WBC 19) (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 266.

those who choose to continue in their sin, they will not only not receive forgiveness, but they will experience the wrath of God (Isaiah 30:15-17). God is ever willing to forgive, but as Richard Owen Roberts rightly noted, “even God’s mercy has a limit.”<sup>21</sup>

Among the prophets, forgiveness was often connected to messages of impending judgment and calls to repent; failure to heed the call meant the surety of the judgment.<sup>22</sup> While the references to forgiveness at times are direct, Isaiah 38:17, for example, is metaphorical with the idea of Yahweh “casting” one’s sins (Heb.: from the root *hāṭā*, “to miss, to incur guilt, to sin”<sup>23</sup>). That forgiveness is always a divine prerogative is not lost within the prophets; McKeown points out receiving forgiveness could never be assumed, as humans who had sinned against God needed to depend on His mercy and compassion rather than be presumptuous in thinking forgiveness was in some way automatic.<sup>24</sup> Schmitt observes that one of the difficulties the prophets had in motivating the people to hear and to respond to the messages of repentance and forgiveness was a “legal casuistry” which developed, where the “weight” or the “heaviness” of a specific sin was weighed, and not all sin was necessarily viewed as solely against God or of much importance. Those who thought they had not committed “heavy” sin felt there was no need for them to repent or that they had any need for divine forgiveness, for, in their minds, they had nothing for which God needed to forgive. This gave rise to a stark social division, where those who felt they were without need of forgiveness tended to denigrate the “sinners” whose lives were apparently filled with these “heavy” sins.<sup>25</sup> The social division is

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Owen Roberts, *Repentance: The First Word of the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 61.

<sup>22</sup> James McKeown, “Forgiveness” in Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets* (Downers Grove, IL and Nottingham, UK: InterVarsity, 2012), 253.

<sup>23</sup> G. Herbert Livingston, “*hāṭā*” in Harris, et. al., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, I:277.

<sup>24</sup> McKeown, “Forgiveness”, 255.

<sup>25</sup> Schmitt, *Sin and Forgiveness in the Old Testament*, 121.

evident in John 9:34, where the man who was born blind but healed by Jesus was cast out of the synagogue by the religious leaders who viewed the man as having been born in sin and thus unworthy to speak anything useful to any of them.<sup>26</sup>

## **New Testament and Forgiveness**

Since sin is a universal reality (cf. Romans 3:23), forgiveness remains a universal need. Mark 1:15 records Jesus' first "sermon" calling for repentance in view of the coming of the Kingdom of God. The Greek word for repent, *metanoëite*, indicates a change of mind.<sup>27</sup> Instead of a call to return to the Mosaic Code, Jesus announced the coming of the "Kingdom of God" through belief in the "good news".<sup>28</sup> Those who do not believe in the good news are the ones most likely failing to exercise faith in Christ; such would also be likely to have no sense of guilt or responsibility for acts of sin. David Garland observes that faith's absence probably indicates no repentance.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See also Luke 18:9-14, the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Notice the Pharisee's self-elevation over the tax-collector, giving the sense the former felt he had nothing accountable for which he had to answer to God.

<sup>27</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (NIGTC) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans and Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2002), 93, points out that repentance is linked to belief (*pisteuō*) are common ideas in the New Testament for discipleship and conversion. J. D. Jones, *Commentary on Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1992), 22 argues the meaning of "repent", especially so in Jesus' message as a continuation of that which was proclaimed by John the Baptizer, is not being sorry for sin or being sorry for having committed a sin, but is a complete repudiation of it. The idea of forsaking or "turning" from sin is seen in what the kings of Israel did not do (cf. 2 Kings 3:3, 10:29, 13:11, 14:24) and in what Israel, when it sinned, needed to do (cf. 2 Chronicles 6:24, 7:14; Psalm 51:13; Jeremiah 36:3).

<sup>28</sup> The ESV uses "gospel", while the NIV2011 employs "good news". Ezra P. Gould, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Mark* (ICC) (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 17, argues "gospel" obscures the reference to the kingdom. Jesus' call is to repent (of sin, and thus, be forgiven) and believe the good news (in its plain non-theological sense) that the (now promised) kingdom of God is near.

<sup>29</sup> David E. Garland, *Mark* (NIVAC) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 66.



In His earthly ministry, Jesus, as the Son of Man,<sup>30</sup> claimed to have the authority (*exousian*<sup>31</sup>) on earth to forgive sins (Luke 5:24). The Pharisees in attendance rightly understood that only God forgives sin (cf. Psalm 9:9, Micah 7:18); Jesus, in using “Son of Man” and claiming the divine prerogative to forgive,<sup>32</sup> demonstrated, if not slightly veiled, definite Christological – and thus, Messianic -- implications.<sup>33</sup> His revelation of equality with the Father in terms of nature (i.e., John 10:30; cf. John 1:18) gave Him the authority to forgive sin.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The debate over the precise meaning of “Son of Man” is lengthy and beyond our present discussion. For a well-written examination of the issue, see Darrell L. Bock, “The Son of Man in Luke 5:24,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 1 (1991): 109-121. For this discussion, Robert Maddox, “The Function of the Son of Man According to the Synoptic Gospels”, *New Testament Studies* 15 (1967-1968), argues the “Son of Man” term had significance within the Judaism of Jesus’ day: “When we ask what the title ‘Son of Man’ meant in Jewish terminology of the first century A.D., the first and most obvious answer is that the Son of Man is a heavenly, superhuman figure whose primary concern is with eschatological judgment. This is emphatically and vividly set forth in the *Similitudes of I Enoch*. If, as many believe, the *Similitudes* were a pre-Christian Jewish product, there is good reason to suppose that they provide evidence of a background of speculation and piety that prompted Jesus to use this title to express his own intention and function; if, as others hold, they were written early in the Christian era and under the influence of Christian ideas, they at least bear testimony that the author or authors understood the Christian title to carry just this signification.” Robert H. Stein, *Luke* (NAC) (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 178, says “Son of Man” is a term probably known to the audience and served as a circumlocution for Jesus.

<sup>31</sup> From the root *exousia*, which in the context of Jesus’ use in Luke 5:24 refers to “the power of authority and of right” (Joseph Thayer, *The New Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 225.

<sup>32</sup> Stein, *Luke*, 178.

<sup>33</sup> Stein, *Luke*, 177.

<sup>34</sup> John 1:1 firmly declares Jesus, the “Logos”, is in fact God. As Paul Rainbow, *Johannine Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 149 writes on John 1:1, “There is a progression from the presence of the Logos with the creator in the first clause, implying his transcendence vis-à-vis the cosmos and his aseity, to his intercourse with God in the second, to their identity in the third. Hence the Logos neither came to be, as the world did...nor stands poles apart from God, as in metaphysical dualism, nor partakes of a diffuse “divinity” as do the gods of polytheism, but rather is a second eternal existent of the same monadic being.” Richard Van

John the Baptizer announced prophetically<sup>35</sup> as Jesus came towards him, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). To “take away” sin is metaphorical for the act of forgiveness and its intended results. As Max Turner has noted, Jesus, as the God- provided lamb, and through the shedding of His blood as a sacrifice for sin, “is the divinely appointed means of cleansing from sin.”<sup>36</sup> Forgiveness is necessarily implicit; the cleansing of the blood of Christ is the means by which God is able to effect forgiveness and reconciliation.

The *Pericope Adulterae* (John 7:53-8:11) is thought by many scholars to be a spurious or later addition to the Johannine text.<sup>37</sup> A detailed examination of whether it was original or spurious is beyond the scope of this study.<sup>38</sup> Of interest here is

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Egmond, “A Study of the Prologue of John”, *McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry* 4 (2001), n.p. (accessed from [www.cbite.org/mjtm/4-7.htm](http://www.cbite.org/mjtm/4-7.htm), on April 26, 2023), affirms: “...the opening verses leave little doubt that the Logos is identified as being equal in divine status to that of God, and is fully God, so that what will be said about the Logos will be said, in the fullest sense, of God.”

<sup>35</sup> Jesus refers to John as a prophet in Matthew 11:13; John was thus the last of the Old Testament prophets. Matthew 21:26 points out the common people believed John was a prophet.

<sup>36</sup> Max Turner, “Atonement and the Death of Jesus in John – Some Questions to Bultmann and Forestell”, *Evangelical Quarterly* 62:2 (1990), 110.

<sup>37</sup> Philip W. Comfort, *New Testament Text and Translation Commentary* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2008), 285-288, documents the thesis that this story was not in the earliest extant manuscripts of the New Testament, and was probably an editorial insertion by the editor of Codex Bezae. He complains that as long as it is included in Bible editions it will continue to receive attention through preaching and study even though it is more than likely a spurious text. See also Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament* (tr. Erroll F. Rhodes) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans and Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1987), 227. However, William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1953), II:35 refers to the church father Augustine who wrote the story was removed from ancient copies of the Scripture with the argument inclusion of the account would encourage women to excuse any infidelity. Hendriksen believes the story is original with John, even though its genuineness remains the subject of much debate.

<sup>38</sup> Of interest is Chris Keith, “The Initial Location of the *Pericope Adulterae* in Fourfold Tradition”, *Novum Testamentum* 51 (2009), 209-231. Keith does

the conclusion of the story, which richly illustrates Jesus' compassion and willingness to forgive. While the woman's repentance is not specifically mentioned anywhere in the account, a consistent view of forgiveness drawn from the Old Testament, as previously discussed, required repentance ("turning away from sin") before forgiveness could be given.<sup>39</sup> Arguing from silence is unwise, but it would seem any person on the verge of execution for a sin could well be attentive to contrition and sorrow over the sin (although some might have sorrow for having been caught in the sin, not for the act itself). Jesus, after dealing with the accusers, told the woman two things: first, He did not condemn her, and second, He told her to leave her life of sin. It is probable Jesus discerned the condition of the woman's heart and acted on that knowledge.<sup>40</sup> As Gary Burge has noted, canonical considerations aside, this account is a strong statement about Christ's mercy towards the

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not accept this account as original with John, but he does believe that its location in John's Gospel is where it was subsequently added and not, as another scholar claimed, originally part of Mark. Also see Kyle R. Hughes, "The Lukan Special Material and the Tradition History of the *Pericope Adulterae*", *Novum Testamentum* 55 (2013), 232-251, who argues, based on literary evidence, that the account was originally found in the so-called "L" source behind Luke's Gospel.

<sup>39</sup> An interesting evaluation of the *pericope adulterae* asserts the narrative is a drama in which the speeches of each actor figures into the conclusion of the story. The suggestion is made from John 8:9 that Jesus' challenge to the accusers (John 8:7) (which, as is disclosed in John 8:6, is an action more against Jesus and less about the woman) had a perlocutionary effect where the woman would then understand she was no longer in danger from the Pharisees; John 8:11, where Jesus instructed her to go and stop her sin was an illocutionary statement which challenged her to go beyond the moment and find a full restructuring of her life. See Piet van Staden, "Changing Things Around: Dramatic Aspect in the *Pericope Adulterae* (John 7:53-8:11)", *HTS Teologiese/Theological Studies* 71(3), Art. #3071, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v.71i3.3017>, accessed May 6, 2023.

<sup>40</sup> The Gospels record instances where Jesus knew what others were thinking (cf. Matthew 9:4, 12:25, par. Luke 11:17; Luke 6:8); John 2:24-25 seems to indicate Jesus, by virtue of His deity, had the ability to discern what thought processes were in each person. It is not unreasonable to assume in the case of the woman caught in adultery, He was aware of what was in her mind which she did not articulate.

helpless and His forgiveness, which because of His mercy, was completely undeserved.<sup>41</sup>

Forgiveness in the Pauline literature is connected to justification (e.g., Romans 4:25). Drawing from Romans 8:33, Thomas Schreiner asserts that no charge brought against God's redeemed people "in the last day" will stand in that God in Christ "has already vindicated the defendants."<sup>42</sup> Justification is the legal declaration of the dismissal of the guilt of sin and "complete forgiveness of all sins."<sup>43</sup> So complete is God's forgiveness, when seen in light of His salvific purposes, that Paul was able to declare that no condemnation existed for those who were "in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Nothing is said of a need to deal with some innate sense of condemnation; all condemnation is removed in Christ.<sup>44</sup>

This forgiveness is meant to be reciprocal; those who have been received God's forgiveness must themselves forgive others in the same manner (Colossians 3:13).

### **Self-forgiveness**

The literature on self-forgiveness is abundant; most of the papers examining self-forgiveness do so from a psychological

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<sup>41</sup> Gary M. Burge, *John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 245.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul: The Apostle of God's Glory in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity and Leicester, UK: Apollos, 2001), 204.

<sup>43</sup> James I. Packer, "Justification" in Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 595.

<sup>44</sup> For a good discussion on the meaning and function of this verse within Christian thought, see Chuck Lowe, "There is No Condemnation' (Romans 8:1): But Why Not?". *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42.2 (June 1999), 231-250. He points out the true Christian life depends on Spirit-obedience (Romans 8:14), which reflects their salvation (248). The effect of Christ's meritorious work is to bring freedom from the Law and the breaking of the power of sin (244). Since the power of sin is broken in the finished work of Christ on the cross, those who are "in Christ" have nothing negative in their lives needing "self-forgiveness". Through Christ, all condemnation is taken away.

purview towards achieving stable mental health.<sup>45</sup> Secular psychotherapy offers a model for self-forgiveness which is founded, generally speaking, on a humanistic, self-realized philosophy separated from any religious connection, although there are some voices advocating for a connection between religious experience and the need for self-forgiveness.<sup>46</sup>

One such example of the humanistic approach is in the abstract of *The Handbook of the Psychology of Self-forgiveness* which clearly advocates that the path to forgiving the self is a self-determined one.

Self-forgiveness is one method by which people process self-condemnation in the aftermath of perceived wrongdoing or failure. When people seek to resolve self-condemnation, they attempt to reconcile conflicting identities—one who accepts personal responsibility for violation of a socio-moral value and experiences consequent emotions like guilt and shame, as well as one who seeks self-acceptance through release of distressing emotions directed at the self. For this reason, the challenge of forgiving oneself is to both accept responsibility for a

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<sup>45</sup> E, g., Jon R. Webb and Loren Toussaint, “Self-Forgiveness as a Critical Factor in Addiction and Recovery: A 12-Step Model Perspective”, *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly* 36:1 (2018), 15-31. The literature in the field of psychology, psychiatry and counseling on self-forgiveness is numerous; considering even a percentage of the articles and books available is well beyond this paper. Instead, a few representative and generally less-technical monographs will give us reference points along the way.

<sup>46</sup> Neal Krause, “Church-Based Emotional Support and Self-forgiveness in Late Life”, *Review of Religious Research* 52:1 (2010), 72, says studies on self-forgiveness typically provide a narrow field of focus, typically on “cognitions and other internal psychological factors” whereas a need exists for a deeper investigation of the effect of social factors (“interpersonal relationships”) such as are found in church-based affiliations.

perceived violation and accept oneself as a person of value.<sup>47</sup>

The authors then assert the need for self-forgiveness even when a sacred element may be offered and accepted.

The experience of having committed a wrong or not done what is right can result in lingering feelings of condemnation and resentment toward the self. Often feelings of shame, guilt, remorse, or regret persist even after a period of punishment by others or oneself, or even after receiving forgiveness from others and feeling forgiven by whatever one considers to be sacred.<sup>48</sup>

A later chapter in the book addresses pastoral-related care, albeit from a broad ecumenical ideology, on the premise that some people may need the guidance of a religious leader to help them come to a place of self-forgiveness. The assumption is made that forgiveness by God will often necessarily require a journey through self-care designed to arrive at self-forgiveness.<sup>49</sup> Such psychological approaches are not without their critics. Vitz and Meade argued some years ago that advocating for “self-forgiveness” creates more problems than it solves; in the directed and focused appeal to self, “it promotes narcissism and appeals to narcissists”. They would propose use of “self-acceptance” rather than self-forgiveness.<sup>50</sup>

An immediate issue with this model of self-forgiveness is the reliance on self-determination to achieve the desired end. For

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<sup>47</sup> Lydia Woodyatt, Everett L. Worthington, Jr., Michael Wenzel and Brandon J. Griffin, eds. *Handbook of the Psychology of Self-Forgiveness* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International publishing AG, 2017), v.

<sup>48</sup> Woodyat, et al, *Handbook of the Psychology of Self-forgiveness*, vii.

<sup>49</sup> Jon R. Webb, Jameson K. Hirsch, and Loren L. Toussaint, “Self-Forgiveness and Pursuit of the Sacred: The Role of Pastoral-Related Care” in Woodyat, et al, *Handbook of the Psychology of Self-forgiveness*, 313-315, here 314.

<sup>50</sup> Paul C. Vitz and Jennifer M. Meade, “Self-forgiveness in Psychology and Psychotherapy: A Critique”, *Journal of Religious Health* 2011 (50), 248.

example, Bauer, *et al*, argue self-forgiveness assists in a “shift of identity”, going from “an attitude of judgment to embracing who one is”, all of which “grows out of the larger meaning the given incident has for one’s life,” a clarity about who one is and where one belongs in the world.<sup>51</sup> Krause asserts self-forgiveness “may be viewed as the process of developing positive self-reaffirmations in spite of evidence to the contrary.”<sup>52</sup> Such an essentially humanistic approach excludes the necessary foundation of identity in the salvific union with Christ.<sup>53</sup> As we will discuss below, the self-forgiveness model falls short of Biblical standards; the secular model ultimately gives no consideration of a Scriptural understanding of repentance/forgiveness/restoration nor an understanding of the nature of sin and the Scriptural view of offender/offended.<sup>54</sup> Thus, the route to emotional wholeness lies not in receiving forgiveness and restoration from God but on the ability of the individual to develop coping and healing mechanisms whereby the perceived shame and guilt of the wrong act can be ameliorated. Vitz and Meade insist such mechanisms leading to self-forgiveness cause an unhealthy “splitting” within the individual, where there is a “good self” which is forgiving and a “bad self” that needs to receive forgiveness; such splitting can, if realized at an early age, result in arrested development or narcissism and borderline disorders.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Bauer, *et al.*, “Exploring Self-forgiveness”, 153.

<sup>52</sup> Krause, “Church-Based Emotional Support and Self-forgiveness in Late Life”, 73-74.

<sup>53</sup> Many of the papers on self-forgiveness which were read for this paper tended to downplay any mention of faith in Christ, if mentioned at all, providing a model which would allegedly be sufficient for those who stand outside a Christian faith tradition. But even in this, it could be argued that those who stand outside the Christian faith (i.e., “unbelievers”) remain locked in the destruction of their own sin, having no innate capability for determining how to “be better” or “to heal” regardless of how they face the issues of life. See Jeremiah 17:9, Romans 3:10-18.

<sup>54</sup> Here we would agree with Vitz and Meade, who correctly point out “traditional religion provides no rationale for self-forgiveness” (*ibid.*)

<sup>55</sup> Vitz and Meade, “Self-forgiveness”, 250.

Colin Tipping's work on self-forgiveness adopts an essentially "New Age" understanding of the human interaction with the divine. He writes:

You are a perfect expression of the Divine. You have always been, but you didn't know it until now. You are now about to come into the fullness of your divine nature as you journey on in your human body, loving yourself in your beautiful, divinely organized imperfection.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, sin against a perfectly holy and righteous God is reduced to "divinely organized imperfection"; Tipping does not address the Biblical position of sin as gateway to spiritual death and separation from God (e.g., Romans 3:23, Romans 6:23). All the "self-forgiveness" comes from one's own self-realization. This is evident in a study from 2020 where the process of forgiveness expressed to a wrong-doer and the wrong-doer's attempts to establish reconciliation are based on the latter's efforts at self-forgiveness and the former's decision to extend forgiveness all for the sake of achieving a (humanistic) "value consensus".<sup>57</sup> The humanistic or self-determining factor is evident in a 2012 paper where those who experience difficulties with anxiety will find self-forgiveness difficult until such time as their anxiety issues are resolved.<sup>58</sup>

Some theologians advance the case for self-forgiveness as a necessary and Biblically-actuated reality in the process of dealing with sin. Kim and Enright have argued for an essential

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<sup>56</sup> Colin Tipping, *Radical Self-forgiveness* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, Inc., 2011), 156.

<sup>57</sup> Michael Wenzel, Lydia Woodyat, Tyler G. Okimoto and Everett L. Worthington, Jr., "Dynamics of Moral Repair: Forgiveness, Self-forgiveness, and the Restoration of Value Consensus as Interdependent Processes", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2020), 1.

<sup>58</sup> Anna Macaskill, "Differentiating Dispositional Self-Forgiveness from Other-Forgiveness: Associations with Mental Health and Life Satisfaction", *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 31:1 (2012), 30.



difference in the process of divine forgiveness and self-forgiveness.

In the case of self-forgiveness, is the person forgiving his own sins? The principle of forgiveness should not be altered for self-forgiveness. Self-forgiveness is for the wrong done against oneself (the violation of one's own moral standards—namely conscience), and God alone forgives sins against Him. Therefore, when a person feels guilty and shameful (the evidence for one's sense of justice violated), the person can seek emotional healing by deciding to pursue the journey of self-forgiveness by offering unconditional forgiving love toward the self. Yet, because persons do not forgive sins, the person still needs Jesus Christ for the removal of sins.<sup>59</sup>

Kim and Enright further argue that self-forgiveness is not forgiving sin, which is the provenance of God alone. The process of self-forgiveness creates an atmosphere of self-acceptance and self-love so that the guilt and shame of the wrong act is removed and the individual is able to return to a healthy emotional standing.<sup>60</sup> In a similar study, Enright argued for self-forgiveness as a necessary means of achieving personal self-acceptance. He defined self-forgiveness as “a willingness to abandon self-resentment in the face of one's own acknowledged objective wrong, while fostering compassion, generosity, and love toward oneself.”<sup>61</sup>

It has been argued, through a limited demographic study, that there is “some evidence to suggest religion may influence

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<sup>59</sup> Jichan J. Kim and Robert D. Enright, “A Theological and Psychological Defense of Self-forgiveness: Implications for Counseling”, *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 42(3) (2014), 262.

<sup>60</sup> Kim and Enright, “A Theological and Psychological Defense of Self-forgiveness: Implications for Counseling”, 264-265.

<sup>61</sup> Robert D. Enright, “Counseling Within the Forgiveness Triad: On Forgiving, Receiving Forgiveness and Self-forgiveness”, *Counseling and Values* 40(2) (1996), 116.

self-forgiveness”.<sup>62</sup> Bauer, *et al*, argued that the Jewish/Christian tradition of forgiveness needs to be clarified, for in Western civilization, particularly, forgiveness has become “alien, disturbing and not generally understood.”<sup>63</sup> The authors argue for a better understanding of self-forgiveness, equating it with “experiencing forgiveness”, where the individual must move “from an attitude of judgment to embracing who one is.”<sup>64</sup>

### **Is “self-forgiveness” a Biblical position?**

While the concept of self-forgiveness as a means towards emotional and spiritual health is indeed a very attractive one, we would here argue that it misses the intent of Scripture concerning the process of forgiveness. Enright’s thesis that self-forgiveness necessarily activates self-acceptance bypasses the restoration process intended from forgiveness out of interaction with and restoration by God into an essential self-determining effort to achieve emotional stability. In other words, the Biblical focus is not “self-acceptance” but full acceptance of the divinely offered forgiveness and resultant freedom from the guilt of the sin.

Guilt in the Scriptures carries a generally consistent meaning from the Old Testament to the New. The Old Testament uses ‘*āwōn* “sin, wickedness, iniquity” 233 times, the primary choice indicating sin as an offense against God.<sup>65</sup> The word derives from ‘*āwā*, “bend, twist, distort”; it can be translated as “perversion” (e.g., Genesis 15:16, “the perversion of the Amorite is not complete”). It refers to both the (sinful) deed and the

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<sup>62</sup> Frank D. Fincham, Ross W. May and Fiorella L. Carlos Chavez, “Does Being Religious Lead to Greater Self-Forgiveness?”, *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 15:3 (2020), 400.

<sup>63</sup> Lin Bauer, *et al*, “Exploring Self-Forgiveness”, *Journal of Religion and Health* 31:2 (Summer, 1992), 499.

<sup>64</sup> Bauer, *et al*, “Exploring Self-Forgiveness”, 153.

<sup>65</sup> William D. Mounce, *Mounce’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 315.

(consequential) punishment.<sup>66</sup> In the Pauline literature, the apostle does not employ “guilt” terminology as much as his statements about sin indicate those who sin stand guilty of that sin before God.<sup>67</sup> The same idea is carried in the translator’s choice in John 9:41, where the word “guilt” is used for the Greek *hamartia*, “sin”.<sup>68</sup> Being guilty of sin against God is to incur culpability for having transgressed against divine standards (echoing Eichrodt as previously cited in Schmitt). Sin is an act which offends God, which means God then has the “prerogative both to judge it and to forgive”.<sup>69</sup> David’s confession, “Against You alone have I sinned” (Psalm 51:4) shows sin is primarily an offense against God for which the perpetrator bears the guilt or the responsibility for the trespass. Gerald Bray has argued, based on Romans 1:18-32, that (sinful) humans “know in their hearts that they have turned away from God”; claiming ignorance of God’s standards is not a defense, nor are the “elaborate philosophical systems” mankind devises to somehow demonstrate God does not exist.<sup>70</sup> It is perhaps in denying the existence of God a person might think escape from guilt and sinfulness is possible, but human conclusions do not change the revealed truth about God.

If divine forgiveness is the release of the guilt/sin from the perpetrator (based on repentance), it would follow that human forgiveness is similarly the release of the guilt/sin from the perpetrator. The perceived need for self-forgiveness is thus

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<sup>66</sup> Carl Schultz, “*’āwā*”, in Harris, *et al*, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, II:650.

<sup>67</sup> Leon Morris, “Sin, Guilt”, in Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL and Leicester, England, 1993), 877.

<sup>68</sup> The sin of which Jesus accused the Pharisees was the sin of unbelief, which made them *de facto* guilty of unbelief. See George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36), Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 160.

<sup>69</sup> M. Ovey, “Guilt and Forgiveness” in Martin Davie, *et al*, eds., *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic* (London, England and Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 2016), 373.

<sup>70</sup> Gerald Bray, “Man’s Guilt (Romans 1:18-32)”, *Evangel* 9:2 (Summer 1991), 8.

obviated; if in forgiveness the guilt of the sin is released, then the need for some form of additional forgiveness act assumes the release was not complete. Sin is against God, not legally against the sinner; the act of releasing the sin in forgiveness absolves of any culpability for the sin, and the release through forgiveness is absolute. Hebrews 10:17, when taken as an emphatic statement, reads, “I will never in the furthest future remember their sins against them.”<sup>71</sup>

Kim and Enright argue that “moral virtues” can be self-directed; they assert it is cruel “if one is not allowed to love oneself because he or she violated his sense of justice by breaking his or her own moral standards.” They then ask, “how can we love others if we are not allowed to love ourselves (Matthew 5:44)?”<sup>72</sup>

“Moral virtues” are God-supplied; sin in the individual prevents formation of anything that would prove pleasing to God. Post-salvation, whatever moral values one holds are no longer self-determining; they necessarily find their foundation in a mind set on heavenly things (Colossians 3:1-2) which comes as the result of the transformation of the mind (Romans 12:1-2). If the sinful human heart is purified by faith (Acts 15:9), then the proclivity towards debased thinking (i.e., a continued sense of worthlessness post-forgiveness) is changed into, as St. Augustine expressed it, a clear vision, where one sees self only as God sees the self.<sup>73</sup> If self-forgiveness is necessary to counter feelings of self-condemnation because of a sin, then the intent of Romans 8:1, coupled with 1 John 1:9, is lost. Condemnation is removed in salvation, and self-condemnation because of sin

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<sup>71</sup> Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans and Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1993), 514.

<sup>72</sup> Kim and Enright, “Theological and Psychological Defense of Self-forgiveness”, 262.

<sup>73</sup> T. L. Suttor, “Why Conscience Likes Dogmatic Definitions”, *Canadian Journal of Theology* 14:1 (1968), 42-43.

is unnecessary because of the absoluteness of Christ's forgiveness.

Moral virtues derive from worldview; a Christian's worldview is established by his or her understanding of theology and doctrine, a foundation in the nature and the actions of God. Dennis Hollinger referenced the British writer, Dorothy Sayers, who insisted Christians claiming a moral base can do so only on the strength of their stand on Biblical dogma.<sup>74</sup> Further, while humans have an innate desire to choose the good, all are incapable on their own of achieving that good, including the self-love which in some secular models is catalyst for self-forgiveness. Even within the salvific experience is the inability for self-determination towards the good, as Paul wrote, "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Romans 7:15). Thus, the ability to live a God-honoring moral life depends solely on the grace of God.<sup>75</sup> One who is outside of Christ cannot truly experience love as it is found in God; without that foundation, what is termed "self-love" runs the risk of becoming narcissistic which ultimately will not achieve the desired end in self-forgiveness of establishing a healthy view of one's life.

Further, the idea of self-determination and self-improvement through the mechanism of self-forgiveness completely bypasses the Scriptural value of humility (cf. Isaiah 66:2, Zephaniah 2:3, Matthew 23:12, Ephesians 4:2). As Ramial-Williams argued some years ago:

Humility is the Cinderella of the Christian graces, banished into obscurity, yet a true jewel of the faith. It is the fertile soil from which the other graces bloom beautifully. Yet it is rarely identified as a desirable human attribute in our times. It is not recognized in

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<sup>74</sup> Dennis P. Hollinger, *Choosing the Good: Christian Ethics in a Complex World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 63.

<sup>75</sup> Hollinger, *Choosing the Good*, 68.

psychological assessments of personality. The high value society places on self-sufficiency, perhaps influenced by five decades of humanistic psychology, and more recently self-esteem psychology, may have led to humility being misunderstood as inferiority.

Furthermore, inner drives may have worked from deep within the human psyche to hinder expression of humility. At best, drives for autonomy, freedom, self-advancement and self-prominence have fired the human trail to emancipation. At worst, in our fallen state, they have led us into a false psychological liberation in which we seek independence from our Creator, relationship with whom and worship of whom ought to be our *raison d'être*.<sup>76</sup>

Enright, who in his article co-written with Kim tried to locate self-forgiveness within Biblical parameters, stated in a different article that a person moving into self-forgiveness must have a “willingness to abandon self-resentment in the face of one’s own acknowledged objective wrong, while fostering compassion, generosity and love towards oneself.”<sup>77</sup> This position considers neither Biblical humility nor stated inability, outside of Christ, to achieve anything beneficial. Humility would accept the work of Christ in forgiveness as all which is needed for emotional wholeness, finding identification of the real “self” considering the finished work of Christ instead of a psychologically proposed effort at positive self-determination.

In terms of the finished work of Christ, the apostle Paul declared that the life he lived post-salvation was not his life, but Christ’s in him (Galatians 2:20). Prior to his conversion to Christ, Paul (as Saul of Tarsus) deliberately and “intensely” persecuted the Church (Galatians 1:13; cf. Acts 8:3). For all that, there is never

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<sup>76</sup> Angela Ramial-Williams, “Humility: The Devalued Jewel of the Human Psyche?”, *Caribbean Journal of Evangelical Theology* 7 (2003), 1.

<sup>77</sup> Enright, “Counseling within the Forgiveness Triad”, 116.

a mention of him seeking “self-forgiveness”. Instead, he allowed God’s grace to have its full work in him (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:10). Two truths in the Gospels affirm the fullness of God’s grace in salvation, showing the work of God through Christ is sufficient, without any need for an “additional” work to complete the process of forgiveness.

The first, in John 8:32, says, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free”, and the second follows soon after in verse 36: “Whom the Son sets free will be free indeed.” We would argue that although the context of those verses is not about forgiveness *per se*, they express a principle of God’s salvific dealings with humanity. To know the truth — to be aware of what God has spoken and what God has promised — brings freedom, which we would aver includes spiritual and emotional freedom. Then, whom the Son sets free or releases will be truly free. It is, as Charles Cameron has written, a freedom to stand in the liberty in which Christ has made believers free (Galatians 5:1). It is “inviting (God) to show us how things should be done in His world” through our attention to His Word.<sup>78</sup> Two observations need to be made at this point. First, since self-forgiveness is a psychological construct without any mention of it in the New Testament, we would submit that turning to something “more” such as self-forgiveness instead of accepting the wholeness which comes in and through divine forgiveness, is a surrender to human elements instead of standing solely on the authority of the Word of God. Second, it is difficult to see how being forgiven of sin, where God (the offended party) releases the guilt of the offender would then require something beyond His own restoring work. It might be argued 1 John 1:9 refers to God’s removing of the sin, not to the effects of the sin via guilt and shame, thus necessitating self-forgiveness, but such misses the point of the verse. The apostle John’s point is that in forgiveness, not only is the sin released from the sinner, but there is also cleansing and purification from “wrong

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<sup>78</sup> Charles Cameron, “Can We Give An Adequate Account of Human Experience Without Reference to God?”, *Evangel* 18.1 (Spring 2000), 22.

doings.”<sup>79</sup> Being set free is not being partially free only to have to wrestle with inner conflict and some suggested need to come to peace within one’s self. The peace which comes in and through Christ keeps the focus on Him (Philippians 4:7) where full healing and reconciliation is found.

An example of this total freedom in Christ is in 1 Corinthians 6. The sexual issues in Corinth were many and have been covered in the literature.<sup>80</sup> In order to give a balance to the warning and exhortation in 1 Corinthians 6:8-10, Paul insists the “passed away” past has been replaced by something better. Whereas some of the Corinthian believers were once involved in deep sexual perversion, they had been (radically) changed through their new relationship in Christ. Implicit in verse 11, as Gordon D. Fee has written, is an “inherent imperative” to live according to Christ and not as the wicked who will have no part in the Kingdom of God.<sup>81</sup> Whatever those Corinthians may have been at one time in the past, they were not that now; all traces of their sin had been washed away in salvation. Paul’s primary focus is God’s transforming power.<sup>82</sup> The vital issue is not what they necessarily thought of themselves or felt some need to release themselves from their past; at the forefront is how God saw them in Christ.

Kim and Enright posit that when someone receives forgiveness from God, there may well be “residual negative feelings after

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<sup>79</sup> Kore Wai, “The Role of the Holy Spirit in Renewal”, *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 10.2 (1994), 59.

<sup>80</sup> For example, see Peter Richardson, “Judgment in Sexual Matters in 1 Corinthians 6:1-11”, *Novum Testamentum* 25.1 (1983); Julie-Ann Dowding, “1 Corinthians 6:9-11 as a Caribbean Response to the Homosexual Agenda”, *Caribbean Journal of Evangelical Theology* 16 (2016); Brian S. Rosner, “The Origin and Meaning of 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 in Context”, *Biblische Zeitschrift* 40:2 (1996); Judith Gundry-Volf, *Paul and Perseverance: Staying in and Falling Away* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1990); and any of the standard commentaries.

<sup>81</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 245.

<sup>82</sup> Mark Taylor, *Mark* (NAC 28) (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2011), 149.



confessing our sins” post-forgiveness, which are “a symptom of our not fully accepting divine forgiveness.”<sup>83</sup> Do we then draw from this that if divine forgiveness, if fully accepted, would ameliorate any negative feelings about the sin? The emphasis in Kim and Enright’s work is the importance of self-acceptance, of establishing some personal moral value system which must be employed to make divine forgiveness fully effective. But if the intent of John 8:36 is considered, how is it possible a person could remain in some kind of emotional bondage theoretically necessitating self-forgiveness as opposed to a simple acceptance of the removal of the sin and its judicial guilt before God, and view self through God’s eyes instead of through the lens of a psychological construct, relying on the apparent “need” for self-forgiveness that is assumed through theoretical reasoning and not on any given Scripture. Kim and Enright argue self-forgiveness is “one form of the virtue of forgiveness”.<sup>84</sup> But where is this mentioned in Scripture? We suggest those who advocate for self-forgiveness, particularly so in a faith-basis setting, lessen the full effect of God’s grace of forgiveness by creating a false “add-on” as opposed to simply accepting the release of the guilt of the sin and the full reconciliation to God. Instead of having two sets of standards for judging worth, God’s and one’s own, there should be just one metric by which all of life – including worth – is measured.

Bauer, *et al*, postulate that people in a state of pre-self forgiveness often struggle with “a deep sense of remorse”, along with “emptiness, sadness and intense loneliness” as well as “cynicism and anger”; further, such an individual will often fall into “self-recrimination” which often manifests in “beating oneself up.”<sup>85</sup> It would seem what they describe is a self-loathing as a form of self-condemnation. If this is a right

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<sup>83</sup> Kim and Enright, “Theological and Psychological Defense of Self-Forgiveness”, 264.

<sup>84</sup> Kim and Enright, “A Theological and Psychological Defense of Self-forgiveness”, 267.

<sup>85</sup> Bauer, *et al*, “Exploring Forgiveness”, 155.

assessment, it runs counter to Biblical norms. As the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 8:33-34 –

Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

To “bring (a) charge” is to make an accusation.<sup>86</sup> Condemnation is the polar opposite of justification, which in Christian theology is God’s declaration of “being right”.<sup>87</sup> Since God justifies, which would include forgiveness, then the individual receiving this act of grace has no standing even for self-condemnation (i.e., “I am worthless because of what I did”) leading to a theorized self-forgiveness facilitating a return to emotional wholeness. As Macleod argued, if personal peace depended on personal transformation (which we understand is the intent of self-forgiveness), then there would not be any real peace because “we could never to ourselves seem to be transformed enough.”<sup>88</sup> The key to emotional wholeness is not through some psychologically suggested self-forgiveness but in acceptance of the relationship each believer has with the One who forgives and restores.

The idea of self-forgiveness, especially in reference to believers in Christ, is often positioned to be a noble and necessary thing, when, in reality, based on Biblical evidence, it sets aside the

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<sup>86</sup> A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, n.d.), IV:378.

<sup>87</sup> Donald Macleod, “How Right Are the Justified? Or, What is a *Dikaios*?”, *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 22.2 (Autumn 2004), 175.

<sup>88</sup> Macleod, “How Right Are the Justified?”, 195. If no human could ever personally seem “transformed enough”, it would follow no human could ever feel self-forgiven enough; there would always be perceived areas of non-forgiveness throughout one’s life. Referring again to John 8:36, those whom the Son sets free have no worries over incompleteness or additional areas needing further examination. Christ’s freedom is absolute: it leaves no space or opportunity for remaining strains of bondage to one’s own perceptions of what would constitute an act of “self-forgiveness.”

fullness of God's forgiveness, restoration and reconciliation in favor of a humanistic paradigm having no genuine Biblical support.<sup>89</sup>

We would agree with Vitz and Meade about the lack of objectivity in transgressors to "judge fairly the consequences of his actions".<sup>90</sup> We disagree with their position that "rare" is the one who, having transgressed, actually understands the full weight of those actions. "Rare" assumes some people can judge themselves fairly; Scripture shows there is no such person, especially so when speaking of those who have no relationship with Christ. Sin has dulled the ability of self-discernment (cf. Romans 3:10) so much so that alone, self will only tend towards more sin (cf. Romans 1:18-32). Even for a believer in Christ, fleshly attempts at either self-defense ("I'm not all that bad") or self-denigration ("I am a really bad person") are fundamentally flawed because of the continued weakness of the flesh. Far better it is to receive God's forgiveness and His acceptance, and see one's self, one's sense of worth or capacity to love and/or to be loved in light of Christ and His finished work on the cross,

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<sup>89</sup> In Kim and Enright's study, the reasoning process in establishing a theological basis for self-forgiveness is one of asking theoretical, if not rhetorical questions which "bounce" off an established Biblical parameter. In other words, they create a favorable climate for self-forgiveness through a piggy-back on a known doctrinal position. For example, God's love for humans is a bedrock of Biblical revelation (e.g. John 3:16); a human capacity to love comes from relationship with God (1 John 4:19). Thea authors then argue, "We offer unconditional love toward the self and others as God has offered His love on the Cross of Christ" ("Theological and Psychological Defense of Self-forgiveness", 265). Such a position overstates the evidence. Humans can not offer any love of their own to anyone; all love, and the ability to love, is rooted in the love of God. "Love for self" is not a self-generated "virtue"; any ability a human has to express love or receive love stems from the gift of God's love (see Stanley J. Grenz, *The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997], 282). Thus, it is wholly God's love which affects the believer's view of him or herself, and consequential to that love is the knowledge of having been forgiven and adopted into God's family as His child. We would argue here that promoting self-forgiveness is a lack of acceptance of the totality of God's salvific work in those who have been saved.

<sup>90</sup> Vitz and Meade, "Self-forgiveness in Psychology and Psychotherapy", 25

fully apart from any psychological constructs which tend to subtract from all Christ has done.

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