

God has forgiven me; how do I forgive myself?

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Q: I messed up in some pretty big ways in my life. I made some decisions that have wrecked relationships and have done significant damage to myself. I've been to confession, and I know that God in his mercy has forgiven me. But I can't seem to be able to forgive myself. What do I do?

A: This is a fantastic question. Not only are you asking about something that nearly every person who takes sin and the effects of sin seriously experiences, but you also have clearly taken God's mercy seriously. You noted that you know that God has forgiven you; this is so critically important. Too often, one of the obstacles to receiving forgiveness is the fact that we miss how much forgiveness has cost God.

Before looking at your question, I think that it might be worth it to look at this a little more closely. I will often speak to people who observe that going to the Sacrament of Confession is "too easy." All a person has to "do" is show up, name all of their sins, and Christ forgives

us through the ministry of the priest. It isn't painful (usually), and it rarely costs a person more than the slight discomfort of coming face-to-face with our sins and admitting them to the priest.

But we realize that truth. Being forgiven by God is easy — for us. It costs Jesus everything. The only reason we can be forgiven is because Jesus Christ willingly embraced his suffering, death, and resurrection for our sakes. It is this Mystery (what we call the "Paschal Mystery") that makes forgiveness possible. Without Christ's allowing himself to be overwhelmed by death and conquering it, we would still be dead in our sins. Therefore, when someone experiences God's mercy as coming a bit "too easily," they do not understand what they are saying. God's mercy is free, but it is not cheap. It was purchased at a price. You were purchased at a price.

And you understand this. You know that it is not your resolution to do better that makes you better. It is not your desire to be made new that makes you new. And it is not you who has to be the first to forgive, it is God himself who forgives us first.

But now it is your turn. You now need to forgive yourself. But how?

The Second Great Commandment is: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is quite a bit to unpack in this commandment (it is, after all, "Great"), but I want to highlight two aspects.

First, when Jesus affirms the command to love your neighbor as you love yourself, he is implying that you would first actually love yourself. In many ways, the first step to being capable of loving our neighbor is the capacity to love ourselves. And yet, there are a great number of very normal people who do not actually believe that they are worth being taken care of. I came across the observation that many people are more likely to give their pets medication on a regular and consistent basis than they are to take important medicines themselves. This seems to indicate that these people are capable of caring — for others — but that they find it somewhat difficult to care for themselves.

Could it be that you need to grow in this area? Could it be that God is inviting you to begin seeing yourself as someone worth taking care of?

Second, you are being called to love yourself (and others). What is love? The classic definition of love is "willing the good of the other." In this case, we could alter the definition to include yourself: willing your own good. We don't always like the person we've become. We definitely do not always like what we've done. But we must love ourselves. This is to say that you must will your own good. How would you treat yourself if you a) were someone worth caring for and b) truly chose the good for yourself?

At times, the most important way to move forward is to make whatever restitution we possibly can. If I can pay back what I've cost, I need to try that. If I can heal what has been hurt, I need to try.

I believe that the heart of being unable to forgive oneself has other realities that are hidden from us. For example, we feel shame that others know our sins. We know that the consequences of our sins are real and that others truly have to pay for them. We know that the wounds that have resulted from our sins are self-inflicted. Because of this, I find it helpful to take all of this and to place it under the Lordship of Jesus.

When there are situations that cannot be made right, I place them under Christ's dominion. When there are wounds I cannot heal on my own, I place them under the Lordship of Christ. Essentially, I try to say, "Jesus, there is nothing more that I can do to undo what has been done. There is so much out of my control. But I place all of this under you and your will. Use this — even this brokenness — for your glory and for the health and help of all of the people who have been hurt by me."