

Let me suggest five possible ways. Any or all of these may underlie a person's experience of "I just can't forgive myself."

**1. The person who says, "I just can't forgive myself," may simply be expressing an inability or unwillingness to grasp and receive God's forgiveness.**

This seems to be the most common explanation behind "self-forgiveness" talk. We say that we can't forgive ourselves because we really doubt that God has forgiven us. Or we don't see our need for forgiveness from God, so we take over the job ourselves. Unassured of a solution to our real or perceived failure, we manufacture a need for self-forgiveness to satisfy our lingering guilt or to supplement what we fear is God's insufficient forgiveness.

There are a host of possible reasons why a believer (true or merely professing) may fail to properly receive God's forgiveness. Let me give a series of common examples.

- Perhaps the person has failed to see his sin as a direct offense against God (Ps. 51:3-4; Gen. 39:9). His conscience is not quiet because he has underesti-

mated the seriousness of sin. He rationalizes it as a mere mistake, not a treacherous assault against our Creator and King. Hence, he is not driven to seek God's grace for his sins; instead, he chews over his mistakes.

- Perhaps the person has failed to see the holiness and the wrath of God against his sin (Isa. 6:5). Because he underestimates God's hatred of sin, he believes he must judge and then forgive himself. The real God is simply not in the picture.
- Perhaps the person has not gripped the scope and depth of God's forgiving grace and power (1 Cor. 6:9–11; Phil. 3:13–14; 1 Tim. 1:15–16). He disbelieves the truth that God can forgive even the worst of sinners. With such a narrow, limited God, he sees his sin as unforgivable. Or he views God's grace as "cheap," not powerful enough to break the hold of sin.
- Perhaps the person has never truly entered into God's forgiveness through saving repentance and faith (Mark 1:15; Acts 20:21). He may know the

gospel facts but has never come to Christ on God's terms. Maybe he holds distorted ideas about repentance and faith.

- Perhaps he is not responding properly to the obstacles that hinder assurance and tempt us to doubt. These can include Satan the Accuser (Zech. 3:1; Rev. 12:10), human accusers, the lingering remnants of the same sin, or the ongoing reminders of past sin (places, relationships, physical scars, etc.). When he succumbs to such temptations, he may think he needs additional self-forgiveness.
- Perhaps he has failed to grow in the graces of putting off the particular sin and putting on righteous replacements (Eph. 4:22–24). He doubts God's forgiveness because he repeats the same sin. And he repeats the same sin because, in terms of growth, he is the same person. His stunted sanctification results in repeated defeat at the hands of this besetting sin. And his ongoing "inability to forgive himself" is a veiled surrender to its binding power.

The remedy in all such cases is to properly understand, believe, and live out the gospel. Holding onto God's forgiveness in Christ undercuts all these errors and removes the risk of misunderstanding our true problem (i.e., a need for deliverance from sin's guilt and power) as "self-forgiveness." What we really need is to turn from our unbelief to the true gospel of grace!

Sally, for example, found that several of these points described her. She had underestimated her sin, God's holiness, and his grace. She had not seen how the Accuser works. She also had not addressed reminders of her past in order to build new associations. Her current singleness and childlessness, glimpses of the abortion clinic's building, and even her menstrual cycle seemed to curse her. But reminders of past sin can become reminders of the amazing love of Christ. As the hymn writer Horatio Spafford put it, "My sin—O, the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin—not in part but the whole, is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more, praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul." The Christian sees "bliss" when he looks at his sin because he sees it in light of the forgiveness purchased by Christ. Through coun-