

“How Can I Forgive Myself?”
by Rom A. Pegram (4/3/16)

Forgiving yourself reminds me of a story I heard recently of a guy who was at LaGuardia Airport in New York. He was rushing through the terminal, afraid he was going to miss his flight. So, he goes up to a complete stranger—who himself is carrying two really big, heavy bags—and asks him for the time...

Well, the stranger makes a big deal out of carefully setting down his two bags. Then he looks at his watch and says...

- The time is 6 PM...
- In Singapore, it's 12 AM...
- The temperature outside is 37 degrees ... and the barometer is dropping...
- AND my stocks went up two points today...

Well, frankly, the guy was amazed! He said, “Your watch told you all of that?” The stranger then said, “Oh, that's just the tip of the iceberg. This watch tells you more than just that.”

Well, the guy was amazed. And he told the stranger, “I just have to have that watch. I will pay you \$1000 right now for that watch.” The stranger said, “No, you just don't understand. I made this watch. I invented this watch. It's not for sale.” So the guy told him—not giving up just yet, “I will write you a check right now for \$5,000 if you will sell me that watch.” The stranger, once again, said, “No, you don't understand. I made it as a gift for my son. He has graduated from college and I'm taking it to him right now.” The man, still persistent, said, “OK, you've got me. I will write you a check right now for \$10,000 if you will give me that watch.” Well, the \$10,000 was too much for the stranger to resist, so he said, “OK, it's a deal!”

So the guy writes out a check for \$10,000 and hands it to the stranger. The stranger hands him the watch. He puts it on his wrist and seems satisfied, as he turns to walk away from the stranger. The stranger then stops him and says, “Hey, wait a second!” He reaches down, grabs the two big, heavy bags that he was carrying ... and smiles, as he says, “Mister ... you forgot the batteries!”

You see all of us ... at one time or another ... have fallen into the same trap. We think we're making a good decision in our personal lives, in a relationship, or in a career or job choice. We think we're making a good decision, but we don't see the hidden 'baggage' that goes along with that decision ... until it's too late. We don't see the hidden consequences...

Folks, no one intentionally makes a decision, knowing that there's going to be a lot of emotional baggage attached to it. No one makes a decision, knowing that afterward they'll be haunted by guilt, regret, shame or disappointment as a result of their decision. We don't make decisions knowing that, do we?

Unfortunately, many times we don't see the consequences that are attached to our decisions until it's too late ... and we end up carrying emotional baggage for the rest of our lives ... or what seems like forever. And these things usually happen when we—you guessed it—turn our back on God ... and don't bring God in on our major decisions of life. Do you remember last week, the word 'home'? God wants nothing but his very best for us, but many times we choose to ignore that or we think we know better than God does, so we do things our way ... only to carry the baggage of regret around later. So, what do we do then? What do we do with this unwanted emotional 'baggage' that we so often carry around in our lives? The only answer to that is ... FORGIVENESS! And today we're going to get into another fairly familiar story, where the main character is in dire need of forgiveness, *especially forgiving himself*. Shall we go there? Listen (Matthew 26:69-76, NLT)...

Meanwhile, Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant girl came over and said to him, "You were one of those with Jesus the Galilean." ⁷⁰ But Peter denied it in front of everyone. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. ⁷¹ Later, out by the gate, another servant girl noticed him and said to those standing around, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." ⁷² Again Peter denied it, this time with an oath. "I don't even know the man," he said. ⁷³ A little later some of the other bystanders came over to Peter and said, "You must be one of them; we can tell by your Galilean accent." ⁷⁴ Peter swore, "A curse on me if I'm lying—I don't know the man!" And immediately the rooster crowed. ⁷⁵ Suddenly, Jesus' words flashed through Peter's mind: "Before the rooster crows, you will deny three times that you even know me." And he went away, weeping bitterly.

So, here's Jesus' #1 disciple ... and he certainly had a bad day, didn't he? He made some bad choices ... and I know he carried around some unexpected 'baggage' after that day. 'His only way out of this? Forgiveness. And let me say this: Forgiveness is real when it comes from God, but it doesn't become real in *my* life until I learn how to forgive myself! Peter was going to have to learn the same thing...

One of the people who would have been present the day Jesus told the story of the Prodigal Son was Peter—the most outspoken of Jesus' 12 disciples. He was a professional fisherman by trade and was very self-confident. He had a tendency to put his foot in his mouth—to speak without thinking about the consequences of his words. I think we've all known someone like that in our lives, haven't we?

The Bible tells us that the day before Jesus died he had a last supper with his disciples. There, Peter promises Jesus that he's going to stick with him to the very end—even if it means dying! Then Jesus turns to Peter and says rather harshly, "Before the rooster crows in the morning, you will have denied me three times." This greatly offended Peter. Peter, of course, denied this and said it wouldn't happen. BUT ... that same night—when Jesus was arrested and taken into custody, Peter followed at a distance ... as if he didn't know Jesus. Then, when asked three different times if he was with Jesus (once because of his Galilean accent which was undeniable), Peter denied knowing him! Not once, but three times he denied the one who'd given him life...

As soon as he'd done this horrible thing, the guilt began and he remembered Jesus' words to him. What had just happened? Peter had turned his back on God—the Son of God. Immediately he felt regret, guilt, and shame. Peter's future was in doubt at this point. It wasn't an issue of God forgiving Peter; it was a question of whether Peter could ever get beyond what just happened and forgive himself!

You are forgiven by God if you ask for it! The harder question becomes, "Will I forgive myself?" I'm sure there are some here today who are still asking that question in their lives, because of something that happened a long time ago—some decision that had consequences that were unexpected. And the 'baggage' still remains. So, what's the answer? Same as for Peter—FORGIVENESS. But, how does that happen? With 3 necessary requirements for forgiving ourselves: FORGIVING MYSELF REQUIRES...

COMING TO GOD FOR FORGIVENESS. That's the #1 thing that has to happen... We talked about this last week: No matter what you've done, no matter how far you've run from God, it's never too late to come back to God and receive forgiveness from him—complete and unconditional forgiveness! But, this #1 thing has to happen before anyone can forgive themselves! Why? Because God's forgiveness allows us to forgive ourselves! In other words, if I can say it another way, if God deems us *forgiveable* ... who are *we* to question that? Who are we to then *not* forgive ourselves? We have to...

As you recall, Peter really messed up. He denied knowing Jesus during a critical time in Jesus' life. *It's like having your best friend bail on you ... at a time when they should have had your back!* How would you feel? Jesus knew. Do you think God would forgive Peter for this? Do you think God still had a plan for Peter's life? Definitely!

In Mark 16 (vv. 6-7), we read about Easter morning, the women had gone to the tomb to find it empty, and then they had an encounter with an angel. And the angel said this: "Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He isn't here! He is risen from the dead! Look, this is where they laid his body. ⁷ Now go and tell his disciples, *including Peter* [*italics mine*]..." What did God say through the angel? **INCLUDING PETER!** In other words, don't leave anyone out of this Good News; it's for everyone *including Peter*—the one who messed up so badly a short time ago!

Folks, here's the key: We need to know God forgives us so we can receive it, then forgive ourselves in the same way—with the power of God behind it... There're actually 5 important characteristics to God's forgiveness I'd like to share with you now; these are important in order to understand God's forgiveness. They are:

- God forgives *specifically*... God wants to forgive specific things that are weighing you down in your life—that need to be lifted off of your life...
- God forgives *instantly*... There is no begging with God—no waiting around. Just like that thief on the cross, *today* is when God forgives...
- God forgives *completely*... With God, there are no leftovers—no residual unforgiveness (Is that a word?). When God forgives, it's done once and for all!

- God forgives *repeatedly*... With God, there're no limits. Now, God's not pleased with us when we don't learn from mistakes, but forgiveness is there—70 x 7...
- God forgives *freely*... There is no cost. No way to purchase it, no way to earn it; it's absolutely free; all we have to do is accept it...

The Apostle Paul describes God's forgiveness this way (Colossians 2:13-14, NLT): "...he forgave all our sins. ¹⁴ He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross." Jesus settled the issue of forgiveness on the cross—period! FORGIVING MYSELF REQUIRES COMING TO GOD FOR FORGIVENESS! Then it's all about...

CHANGING MY PATTERNS. Forgiving myself requires changing my patterns in life...

Folks, Peter had to make some significant changes in his life and in the patterns in his life after receiving God's forgiveness—and he did! Just 7 weeks after denying Jesus 3 times in that courtyard, we find Peter teaching about Jesus to a massive crowd in Jerusalem. And after Peter preached to this crowd of over 3,000 people, they became believers for the very first time and joined the new church in Jerusalem.

Later, because he kept on teaching and preaching with another disciple named John, they both were arrested and brought in front of the Jewish high counsel—very much like Jesus was. Being warned not to teach and preach about Jesus again, Peter's response is recorded in Acts (4:13, NLT) and it says: "The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see that they were ordinary men with no special training in the Scriptures. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus." This was the same guy who just a few weeks prior had denied that he even knew Jesus! What a transformation!

Then at the end of his life, Peter was crucified too. He was martyred for speaking out for Jesus. Tradition tells us that Peter, at his request, was crucified upside down. Why? Because he didn't think he deserved to be crucified the same way as his Lord!

Talk about a change in life patterns! Folks, we are still talking about forgiving ourselves, just in case you wondered. The truth is, unless we begin to change some of the destructive patterns of our lives that are the source of some of the baggage we carry, the source of the guilt and shame in our lives, we will never be able to forgive ourselves completely. So, after receiving God's forgiveness, we need to take a long look at the patterns of behavior in our lives ... and allow God's Spirit to transform them. This is so important because many of the patterns of our lives can affect our families generations down the line. Finally, folks, FORGIVING OURSELF ALSO REQUIRES...

CREATING A NEW FUTURE FOR MYSELF. You might be thinking right now, isn't that a bit presumptuous; isn't that what God does; isn't that God's job to provide a new future for me? Well, yes, but YOU have an important role to play in this; God's not going to do it all for you...

Look again at Peter's life—hot-headed Peter, who denied he even knew Jesus at the most pivotal time of Jesus' life. How would God ever see fit to use Peter after that mistake? Folks, look at what Jesus said to Peter in Matt. 16:18-19a (NLT) – “Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means ‘rock’), and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it. ¹⁹ And I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven....” Jesus said this, even knowing Peter's faults—knowing Peter would deny him. He knew what Peter was going to do, yet he still chose Peter, because he knew Peter's Kingdom potential! And Peter went on to be the central figure in the 1st Century Church; God used him to be the founder of the only organization that Jesus left behind—the only organization that will last for eternity!

Peter had to do his part though. Peter had to work up to the potential God had given him. And here's something else I want you to hear before I close today: God had a purpose for Peter's past! And God has a purpose for our pasts, too! *God does forgive our past, but he does not erase our past!* God uses it all to help create a new future for all of us—a vital part of forgiving ourselves...

In the end, there are two roads we can take when dealing with *unforgiveness* (a lack of forgiveness) in our lives. The first is the road we've been talking about today. God's plan is for you to receive his forgiveness into your life, to help you escape destructive patterns in your life by creating new ones, and then open your eyes to the incredible, balanced, healthy future God desires for you!

The second road, unfortunately, is the road most traveled... It's the road of carrying this baggage around with us for the rest of our lives. Living unforgiven is a horrible choice. And it's not because God won't forgive us; it's generally because we are unable or unwilling to forgive ourselves. I'm pleading with you today: **DO NOT GO DOWN THIS ROAD.** It's totally unnecessary ... and painful...

All you need to do today is receive God's forgiveness, forgive yourself (shown by changing life patterns), and open yourself to God's potential for your life—the future that God desires for you... It may be the hardest kind of forgiveness to be about; but it can also be the most rewarding. Let God have your past, folks. It's time to let it all go ... and leave all your 'baggage' at the foot of the cross...