

Forgive Yourself

By Bobby Schuller

Let me begin by saying you can and should and ought to forgive yourself. Life is too good to spend beating ourselves up all the time. It's too good to continue to dwell on something that happened five, ten, or twenty years ago. And by no means am I suggesting that you should simply bury it or forget about it or whatever it is that thing that you did that still nags you today, I'm asking you simply to forgive yourself.

Today we're going to begin a very short series called Forgiveness is Freedom. We're just going to talk about this for three weeks, but talk about this journey of forgiveness that first begins on the inside, where we receive forgiveness from the Lord, and when we do, we forgive ourselves. Then we ask for forgiveness from others and take responsibility for the mistakes that we've made. Then we agree with the Lord, and this will be next week, to forgive others. And finally after that, we will receive a real gift which is to become almost un-offendable. That the more we become people who are forgiving, we take on a resilience that we need to endure the rudeness, harshness, competitiveness of this world.

And so today I want to begin there. I want to talk about the importance of mercy, of forgiving yourself, of letting go of the sins that God's already let go of. Of choosing to trust that He's forgiven you, and so you can forgive yourself.

And before we go too far into this, many of us, we have things from our past that haunt us, that nag us. When we think about them, we feel embarrassed about them. We think those parts of our lives are unlovable. And I want every person in this room to think of something like that. Maybe normally when it comes to your mind you just kind of push it out because it's embarrassing, or it's like oh, I can't think about that. But I want you to intentionally, almost pull it up to meditate on it, and hold it before the Lord and before me, and I want you to know something – that part of your life is forgiven, it's been redeemed, and its loveable. In a way, a part of being a believer is embracing our past in order that we can be free in our present.

Too often we reject our past, or we say that part of my life is unlovable, or that part of my life is too embarrassing to think about, but I want you to know that God loves even that part of your life. And the mistakes that you've made, they're forgiven, so forgive yourself. Life is too good to spend beating ourselves up thinking we're worthless or that we don't have any sense of belonging, or that that thing is too embarrassing. If all of us could read each other's minds, we would see that everybody is a little bit messed up. Everybody's got baggage. Everybody's got sin and mistakes from their past. God doesn't reject you because of those things. He's forgiven you and He loves you. And this is an important part of having a healthy, spirituality.

Look, one thing that is clear that I've seen being a pastor now for about 20 years, being in ministry and talking with a lot of people and hearing from people, and people trusting me with their vulnerabilities, and maybe seeing people evolve and grow as disciples of Jesus Christ have seen very clearly that forgiveness is medicine. Its medicine for the soul, its medicine for the mind, and it's even medicine for the body. Throughout history you see that many of the great movements of God were preceded by forgiveness: forgiveness of sin, forgiveness of one another, mercy, kindness. We could use some of that today, couldn't we. Healing in our country?

We need to become a people who forgive one another, and forgive ourselves. Forgiveness causes healing. Isn't that good news? It always, always, always leads to healing. It's all throughout the scriptures.

Second Chronicles 7:14 says, if my people, who are called by my name, will argue with each other on Twitter. "If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven," and I will what? "Forgive their sin," and then what? "I will heal their land." Forgiveness leads to healing. If you need healing in your family, if you need healing in your church or your school or your country, it begins with forgiveness. You need to forgive yourself, you need to forgive your neighbor, and watch as God uses that to bring healing into your work

environment, into your relationships, and into everything that's important in your life.

James 5:16 says, "Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." Right? There it is. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

So we see again forgiveness leads to healing. Maybe you need healing in your life. Maybe you feel broken, maybe you feel like you're just out of energy, maybe you feel stressed out all the time. Maybe you're sick. I want to recommend to you in the name of Jesus, forgive yourself. If you need healing in your body, begin by having mercy on yourself – on your soul. The soul is fragile, so forgive yourself. God's forgiven you. And I think very often when, you know, for us as Christians, we think God has forgiven me, and because that was such a great gift, and because I didn't deserve it, I need to be hard on myself so I don't mess up anymore. We think the more God has forgiven me, the more I need to white knuckle and like never mess up, and if I do, I need to really feel it. Feel bad so that I won't do that anymore.

Friends, I'm talking from experience here. Can I tell you that beating yourself up does not make you a better person. Grace does. Forgiving yourself does. Having compassion on yourself does because then you have fresh vision, energy, you hear from the Spirit. It's something God's doing in you rather than something you're doing through willpower. Quite the opposite is true. When you beat yourself up,

it becomes harder to be a good person and to do what's right. I have seen consistently in the behavior of others that shame leads to bad behavior. Shame leads to judgment. In fact there's been real clinical studies in psychology that what the scriptures say about shame is true, that this legalism, like when you hear somebody that's judgmental and harsh, that those people themselves usually struggle with shame. All the things that they're saying to people, they're unconsciously saying to themselves.

And unconsciously is really the word. Very often when you run into people that are mean spirited, judgmental, condemning, harsh, they have this unconscious – they don't know it – they have this unconscious voice swirling around in their heart and their mind that says you're a bad person, you're a mess up, you never get things right. You're just like your dad. You're just like your mom. You're just like your brother. You're just like that bully. And it's these voices, for whatever odd reason, that cause people to be more strict, more judgmental, and more harsh.

You see this in John chapter 8, the amazing story where Jesus is in the temple, and these really harsh, wicked men take a woman, who was caught in the act of adultery, in the very act it says, and they drag her out. Of course the man's not there, right? Just the woman. And they bring her out in front of everyone to humiliate her and embarrass her. And the reason they bring her before Jesus is they know He's merciful, and they know He's so merciful that He might reject the law of Moses,

the word of God in order to have mercy on this woman. They hate Jesus mercy.

And so they bring the woman out, and the Bible says they do this to trap Him and they point to her and they say ‘rabbi, this woman was caught in the very act of adultery. The Bible says we should stone her. What do you say?’ And Jesus doesn’t say anything. He just gets down on His knees and He starts to kind of like write in the sand. People love to think about what He was writing, and the Bible doesn’t say. Some people say He was writing down the scriptures about God’s mercy, God’s forgiveness. Some people think maybe He was writing down some of their sins, or the Ten Commandments. But anyway, when He’s done, He says to them “he who has not sinned, throw the first stone.” And the Bible says oldest to youngest, they dropped their stones and they walked away. Oldest to youngest, right, because the older you are, the more sinning you done. Right?

You know what’s amazing about this story, by the way, and this is my point, is that I think all those men struggled with shame. That they all knew they didn’t live up to the law. So unconsciously there’s all this shame swirling around, but consciously they’re like I’m going to put that on this woman. I’m going to project all of my shame on her. And so when Jesus calls them out on it, that unconscious shame becomes conscious, and they feel ashamed about whatever it is that they’ve done, and they

walk away. Jesus loved them, too, and would have had mercy on them, as well, if only they'd asked.

He asked the woman, "Where are those that condemned you?" She says "nowhere, Lord." And He says "neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." The Lord is not condemning you. The Lord is not angry at you. The Lord has forgiven you and He loves you, every part of you, even your past. So forgive yourself. You're worth it.

And this is what happens to us. When we're filled with shame, we become judgmental. I remember there was this church, I won't say their name, but they protested my grandpa's funeral, they're hated by the left and the right. One thing you can like about them is the one thing that unites liberals and conservatives in America today, this community.

And there's this guy, Keith Allen, who was interviewing one of the main spokeswomen who just says, 'God hates' I can't say the word, and you know 'God hates America,' and God, and all this stuff, and 'you're going to hell,' and just very judgmental. And he found out that the lady that's kind of the main spokesperson for this really satanic church. They claim to be Christian but, that this lady herself had had multiple affairs, and that one of her sons who was in the church was out of one of these affairs, and had been married several times.

And so he calls her out on it on TV and you just see her, she's been on a rant and she just locks up. And he points to the guy, and he goes 'are you the illegitimate son,' and he looks shocked.

And you find out very quickly, I don't say that to shame her, right? I mean lots of people have made mistakes. I say that to simply say I wonder if she grew up in the view that if you get a divorce or if you have an affair, if you make these mistakes, that you're going to hell so you got to hide it and you got to just white knuckle your way to holiness. And you could see on her face, I just believe, that all of her judgementalism that she lobs on everyone else is coming from this unconscious place. Well God loves that woman, too. And if she could learn to forgive herself, and know that God just loves her and adores her and cares for her, she'd lose her need to control everybody through judging.

Pastors, of course, preach on the things that they struggle with. It's like a joke. Like whatever your pastor preaches on the most, they struggle with. I had a friend, when I say that once, I had a friend who said 'Bobby, you must really struggle with loving people.'

You know to be honest, I really.. I do struggle with the message I give. I struggle to feel loved. I don't know why. I had great parents and a great family. But maybe, like you, maybe through my experience of life, I think I'm a tenderhearted person. And I learned in high school to stonewall and to be tough, but really that came because words of condemnation and judgment and harshness on me, and bullying, it was really hard for me to take those things as an eleven-year-old, twelve-year-old, thirteen-year-old. And I learned that to be tough is the way to do it.

And so much of my life, the last especially ten/fifteen years, have been learning from Hannah and through the love of my kids and through friends, that I am loveable. So maybe it is true that even I struggle with these things, and that's why I preach on them so much. But maybe you feel that way, too. You think.. maybe you feel numb in life, or you feel like there's this part of my life that's not loveable, and I want you to know that I have learned through friends and family and through the Holy Spirit that God simply loves everything about you. He's not embarrassed by you, He's not rejecting you, He's not holding your past against you. You are His beloved son, His beloved daughter. How He adores you.

So forgive yourself and get in sync with that wave of mercy that flows from heaven. When I say forgive yourself, by the way, I'm not saying it in the way that society says. I feel very often that society is kind of like.. doesn't say forgive yourself. They almost pretend like don't feel shame by pretending it doesn't happen, but that makes things worse, doesn't it! When I say forgive yourself, I mean forgiving yourself doesn't mean pretending that you never did anything bad. We all do bad things. Forgiving yourself means you look to the cross. The cross is at the heart of our faith. It's at the center of everything we believe because on the cross He who knew no sin became sin that we could be called the righteousness of God. Isn't that good news? I'm not saying pretend that you never messed up, and that you'll never mess up again. I'm saying

forgive yourself. God's forgiven you, He's paid the ultimate price that we could be one hundred percent totally made righteous. The Bible says you are righteousness. Wow! That doesn't change, so receive it.

And this is an important message that Paul gives in Romans chapter 8, the scripture from today. Paul in Romans 7 talks about how he used to struggle with legalism, how he was a Pharisee, how he tried to live in the spirit of legalism and law, and how that only made him want to sin more. Anybody grow up in a strict religious environment? I guarantee people who grow up in those environments, dancing sounds a lot more fun to them than it does to people who dance. Movies sound more fun, sinning sounds like fun! I want to go smoke something! That's what legalism does to children and to teenagers. That's what it does.

And that's what Paul says. When I heard do not covet, I wanted to covet all the more! Right? It's human nature to want what we can't have. And he said, and I found, and this is in Romans 7 that that spirit of the law was one of death. That the more I focused on the law, the more I died on the inside. And he says finally, therefore, and this is Paul rejoicing. This is a Pharisee, a legalistic Pharisee who left that legalistic life and embraced the life of the spirit, which is a holy life, but it's a life in the spirit. And he says, "therefore, there is now no condemnation," none, none, no condemnation, no condemnation for any of us, "for those who are in Christ Jesus because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit, who gives life, has set you free from the law of sin and death." You have

been made free, so live in that spirit of freedom. To walk in the spirit, that is the Holy Spirit, means to walk with no condemnation. None at all. Doesn't mean you're perfect, doesn't mean you're innocent. It means you're forgiven. No condemnation. They've opened up the jail cell. They've wiped your slate clean. You're free. Now go live in that freedom. God's forgiven you, forgive yourself.

The soul is so fragile. That's why we do become so defensive. That's why we run away from people who love us. It's because when the soul, the heart experiences pain, like rejection, criticism, ridicule and judgment, it's very painful. You're going to receive that your whole life from people, but you're never going to receive that from God. You're never going to receive that from me, and therefore, never do it to yourself. Don't judge yourself or criticize yourself. Always do your best, and forget the rest. That's not an original, that's Tony Horton, I think his name is, from P90X. When I'm sweating and dying on P90X? I'm like I can't do any better. I think it's like do your best, forget the rest. I'm like okay.

Another thing I want to say, and this is for sure going to be the weirdest thing that I've said in my whole sermon. I was walking around Back Bay, and I felt very strongly that the Holy Spirit wanted me to say this to the church. And this might just be for one person and one person alone, and maybe that's you. He said to tell the church to forgive your body. Forgive your body. You ever feel angry at your body? It's not doing what it used to do. It's not doing what it's supposed to do. I think

unconsciously sometimes we have this frustration towards our body when we feel sick, when there are things about aging, or things maybe we inherited in our birth that makes us in a bad way unlike everybody else. Weaknesses. Remember what I said at the beginning of this message that forgiveness always leads to healing. Sometimes we feel, as weird as this sounds, angry at our body, frustrated at our body, or shame especially about our body. I'm too whatever. Too old, too fat, too short, too bald, too tall, too young. Forgive your body. Be good to your body. I don't know if that makes sense, but maybe that was for you.

Finally, when we become the types of people who learn to forgive ourselves, we forgive our soul and we forgive our body and we become merciful to ourselves, and we live in the spirit of no condemnation that Paul is talking about in Romans 8, we then need to cowboy up and go and ask for forgiveness from our neighbor. This is huge. We must experience the joy of taking responsibility for our mistakes and reconciling with our neighbor. And when I say our neighbor, I mean your spouse, I mean your kids, I mean your brothers, your employees, and I'm not saying today that you need to forgive them. We're going to talk about that next week. Today I'm saying first, you need to ask them to forgive you. And this is hard to do because of the pride in our heart, especially when you've learned to hate that person. Or maybe you feel embarrassed.

Here are three things that I want to tell you that I think are important in this process. If you're going to go and ask someone for forgiveness, whether it's from twenty years ago, or five minutes ago. This is important. Take responsibility without defending yourself. Take responsibility without defending yourself. That is a good apology. Very often we're like 'honey, I'm so, so sorry I did this,' right? It starts out pretty good. 'Honey, I'm so, so sorry I did this, and the only reason I did it is because you did that and if you hadn't done that, I promise I wouldn't have done that, and I won't do that ever again as long as you don't do that other thing that you do.' Anyone? We sort of mix in a little blame, just a little bit.

Look everybody knows there's two sides of a story, but the best kind of apologies are the ones that don't include what the other person did. If they receive your apology, they will take their share of the blame. If you just say 'honey, I'm so sorry I did that. That wasn't kind. That was impatient of me. That was disrespectful.' Then very often, not always, very often your spouse or neighbor, your kids, your friends will say 'no, no, I shouldn't have.' Right? That's how you want the conversation to go. Say it with your whole heart. Anything else, it would have been better if you hadn't said anything at all. It's all or nothing.

I remember I had a really good friend who hurt me in a big way. This was years ago. And I called him and I talked to him about this thing. We hadn't talked in awhile. And he just said plainly, I didn't do

that, and he did, this thing. It was really rotten. And then he finally said, 'well if you want, I'll say that I'm sorry to you so at least you can hear the words, but I just.. I don't really mean it.' I'm like.. what are you.. are you trying to make it worse?

You know, most people aren't that bold, but there is a little bit of that sometimes that happens. So when you ask for forgiveness, be humble.

Number two: remember that forgiveness takes time. Don't expect people to forgive you. Very often they won't and that's okay. Just the step of asking for forgiveness is one that is kind and loving. And it's not your right to be forgiven by others, so go into it with that expectation.

Remember that it takes time and very often just asking for forgiveness can be like planting a seed where maybe now you don't get any response at all. Maybe you get the cold shoulder, but that person heard what you said. And it may take a year or two years or five years, but they just might come around because a few years back you planted that seed and you took responsibility.

And finally, number three, and this is so important. Ask forgiveness from the least of these. Yes, of course we're going to ask forgiveness from our spouses, etc., but don't forget to ask for forgiveness from children, for example. From that annoying guy in the office that is annoying and rude to everybody that you lashed out at. Or your

employees. Apologizing to the least of these is an important part of being a believer.

I remember not long ago, my daughter, Haven, who's eight years old, told me a secret and it was a silly thing and I mentioned it to someone else and she found out. She said 'daddy, I told you to keep it a secret.' And we even pinky promised. It was.. there was a lot involved. I remember later that day, I made a point to go and sit with her, and I said 'Haven, I'm so sorry.' To an adult, it would have seemed silly, not a big deal, but to her it was a big deal. And I said 'I'm sorry. You asked me to keep it a secret and I let it out of the bag. Will you forgive me?' And she just gave me a big hug and she just kind of nodded like this: I forgive you.

This is important. Children need these kinds of messages from adults and mentors and teachers. We're never too big for our britches, right? We have to be okay apologizing to children and to people that maybe wouldn't always think need an apology from us. More than anything, you must learn that God is a merciful God. That He loves us, and He's forgiven you, so forgive yourself.

Father, we love you, and we thank you that you love us, and that you call us loveable. It's in Jesus' name we pray, amen.