

“How Do I Overcome My Hurts and Disappointments From My Church?”

I have been a Christian for over 14 years. I love God very much, but I have become truly discontent with church. I have suffered from many hurts and many disappointments. I know this may sound childish but I have been badly hurt by people who say that they are trying to be more like Jesus.

When my husband and I lost our 4th child at 11 weeks, I was accused of having an abortion. I was told to “stay in my calling.” When I asked for the youth leader position I knew my call, my children (I have six) knew my call, but my pastor refused to acknowledge it. Over the next several years, more than a dozen different people took that position, and I cried each time the position went to someone else. I was told that I was not faithful enough.

I always was ready and willing to help where needed but was pushed aside. I am very outspoken and speak when God says to, which produces a lot of friction. I have been lied about, talked about and pushed aside. I have cried over so many lost hopes and dreams.

I left that church, but am still suffering from the things that I endured. I feel like I don't fit in anywhere I go. I live in a small town and feel that no matter where I go my “reputation” precedes me. How can I overcome this? Or should I just wait and not go back to church? I can't move from this area.

I have been told I will do great things for God. That I am called. But I can't do it here. I am always under someone's microscope. Is there hope for me?

I am so very sorry to hear your story! My husband and I know personally how the wounds from one's church weigh heavily on the heart. You have my complete sympathy. I hurt for you, and I am asking the Lord to bring comfort and peace to you.

You ask, "How can I overcome this? Or should I just wait and not go back to church?" Not going back to church is not an option if you want to walk in obedience, since God's word tells us not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together (Heb. 10:25). The only way to overcome this pain is to forgive those who hurt and disappointed you. I suggest you make a list: ask the Lord to show you every person you are still hurting over, every person you are still holding a grudge about. Write down his or her name, along with everything they said or did to hurt you—or that you took as hurtful. (Sometimes, our perception is different from what people intended, but we can't know that unless we do a reality check with them. For your purposes, though, if you are still hurting, you are still harboring unforgiveness, and you need to deal with things as you perceived them.)

Before the Lord, remember that Jesus was tortured and crucified for every single one of those sins and hurts. He paid for them all. In His strength, release each of those offenses to the Cross, and let go of them. Forgiveness means choosing to let go of our desire to make the other person hurt or pay for what they did, and the reason we can do that is because Jesus both hurt and paid for what our offenders did.

Sometimes, people hesitate to release the offenses because they so deeply want the other person to *understand* how much they hurt us. We have no control over making another person understand; but we can know that Jesus understands. He was there, receiving into Himself, everything that happened to us. (Remember what He told Saul on the road to Damascus? Every time he persecuted Christians, Jesus said he was persecuting HIM.) Not being understood, not receiving compassion from One with a full knowledge of what happened and how much it hurt,

is not an obstacle to us forgiving because Jesus does understand, and His heart is filled with compassion.

I do hope you will get before the Lord and forgive those who hurt you. Otherwise, you will be stuck in pain and the temptation to wallow in self-pity.

One other thing that I wanted to mention, which I wonder might not be a major cause of your difficulties: you said, "I am very outspoken and speak when God says to, which produces a lot of friction."

Uh-oh.

I understand the importance of obeying God. However, people who see themselves as outspoken can be blunt to the point of being needlessly insensitive and abrasive. I'm not saying this is true of you, since I don't know you—but I am just making an observation based on years of watching people. Since you say your outspokenness produces a lot of friction, do you think it's possible that you have set yourself up? Is it possible that you have been prevented from serving where you feel called because the friction you cause disqualifies you as a leader? Consider what the Word commands us about what we say and how we say it:

Speaking the truth in love. . . (Eph. 4:15)

Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear. (Eph. 4:29)

There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. (Prov. 12:18)

She opens her mouth in wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. (Prov 31:26)

Let me just ask you: as the mother of six children (bless your heart!!), how prone are you to give a lot of responsibility to a child who causes friction among his or her siblings? Why would it be any different for those in church leadership?

I am praying as I type that God will soften your heart and enable you to receive this letter, since I know it must be painful to hear that you might be responsible for some of the pain and disappointment you are experiencing. (Again: I do not know this is true since I don't know you.) I do pray that you will have grace to hear my words as coming from a sister who longs to encourage and bless, not to inflict more pain. Please invite the Lord to give you His perspective on my answer and ask Him for help to lay down any defensiveness and sort out what is true.

The Lord bless you and keep you today, _____.

Cordially,

Sue Bohlin

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Can You Forgive Michael Vick?

Public reaction to football star Michael Vick's confession and apology for dog fighting has been passionate and polarized. Was he sincere? Or was it just a last resort when cornered by the law, a PR move to help rehabilitate his image and financial future?

The crimes were abhorrent. Underperforming canines were executed by hanging and drowning. This sickening stuff hits many folks in their guts, hard and deep.

He faces legal consequences. But should you and I forgive him?

Genuine Contrition?

Vick says, "Dog fighting is a terrible thing, and I did reject it. I'm upset with myself through this situation I found Jesus and asked him for forgiveness and turned my life over to God."[\[1\]](#)

Smooth but not convincing, cry some. It's just a show. He's a disgusting person and a terrible role model. Off with his head! Others quote English poet Alexander Pope, "To err is human, to forgive divine."

Perhaps time will tell how sincere he was. Some wonder, Michael Vick didn't do anything to me, so *for what* could I forgive him? True, he may not have harmed you personally. But he did violate society's laws and many people's sense of decency. Public figures' actions can have wide social impact. The fact that lots of kids looked up to him compounds the anger many feel when they indicate they could never accept his apology or forgive him for the harm he's done.

Indeed, negative feelings expressed toward Vick sometimes sound visceral, as if the speakers themselves had been injured. Frederic Luskin, former director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, says, "Our bodies react as if we're in real danger right now to a story of how someone hurt us seven years ago. You're feeling anger, your heart rhythm changes breathing, gets shallow."[\[2\]](#)

Can you and I forgive Michael Vick?

Consider a wise woman who wrestled with similar feelings. Corrie ten Boom and her Dutch family hid Jews from the Nazis during World War II. For this she endured Ravensbruck, a concentration camp. Her inspiring story became a famous book and film, *The Hiding Place*.

Chilling Memories

In 1947 in a Munich church, she told a German audience that God forgives. {3} When we confess our sins, she explained, God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever. After her presentation, she recognized a man approaching her, a guard from Ravensbruck, before whom she had had to walk naked. Chilling memories flooded back.

A fine message, *Fraulein!* said the man. How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea! He extended his hand in greeting.

Corrie recalled, "I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me. . . But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. I was face to face with one of my captors, and my blood seemed to freeze."

The man continued: "You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk.... I was a guard there. But since that time I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well, *Fraulein.*" He extended his hand again. "Will you forgive me?"

Forgive Him?

Corrie stood there, unable to forgive. As anger and vengeful thoughts raged inside her, she remembered Jesus' death for this man. Of His executioners He said, "Father, forgive these people, because they don't know what they are doing." {4}

How could she refuse? But she lacked the strength. She silently asked God to forgive her and help her forgive him. As she took his hand, she felt a healing warmth flooding her body. "I forgive you, brother!" she cried, "With all my heart."

And so, Corrie later recalled, “I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world’s healing hinges, but on [God’s]. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.”

If Corrie could forgive one who did her such harm, should we be willing to consider forgiving a public figure whose actions harm society? Could what Corrie found in faith help manage overwhelming anger and rage?

Will you and I forgive Michael Vick?

Notes

1. Text of Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick’s statement, USA Today, August 27, 2007, www.usatoday.com/sports/football/2007-08-27-2672656486_x.htm
2. “Peace Work,” Stanford Magazine, Joan O’C. Hamilton, 2001, <http://www.stanfordalumni.org/news/magazine/2001/mayjun/features/forgiveness.html>.
3. Corrie ten Boom, “Death Camp Revisited,” Worldwide Challenge, July/August 1994, 35-36.
4. [Luke 23:34](#) NLT.

“Accepting Jesus as Your Savior Means You Won’t Have to Suffer Bad Karma Anymore?”

I have friends who believe that people will suffer bad karma from past lives and it will be carried over to this life. Now,

I read in the Bible that if you accept Jesus Christ as your Savior and ask him for forgiveness with a sincere heart, He will wipe away your imperfections and you won't have to suffer "bad karma" anymore. Is this correct? If not, then what's the point of asking for forgiveness? Isn't this what Christ died on the cross for? I need the truth because it will set me free.

What Eastern religions call karma is the Bible's principle that "a man reaps what he sows" (Galatians 6:7). God created a cause-and-effect universe where our choices have consequences.

In the Eastern systems, each person has to work off his own bad karma. . . over and over and over, through as many lifetimes as it takes. In contrast, the Bible offers the marvelous gift of forgiveness and grace (God's blessing that we don't deserve) through Jesus Christ. You are right that Jesus takes away the guilt of our sins and the eternal punishment of being separated from God forever. However, although forgiveness takes away the obstacle of sin that separates us from friendship with God, it does not take away the consequences of our choices. In the same way that a parent disciplines his child because he loves him, God allows us to suffer the consequences of our choices so that it builds character and helps us to grow and mature and become wise.

Christ died on the cross to reconcile us to God, but He does not take away the effects of our choices. For example, let's say I steal something from a store. Stealing is a sin, and I then confess it to God, who forgives me because Jesus paid for that sin on the Cross, but He will still let me experience the shame and humiliation of being arrested and having to go to trial and then jail. My relationship with God has been restored, but I still have to experience the consequences of my actions. In the process, He will develop my character and help me to grow from this painful experience, making me more mature and less selfish, preparing me for this life and my life in heaven. But once I die, it's all behind me, forgiven

and never to be suffered again.

Does this make sense?

Sue Bohlin

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Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and You

Forgiveness Can Be Good for Your Health

Have you ever been cheated or mistreated? Got any lingering grudges you're holding onto? Is there any "unclear air" between you and a family member, neighbor, or coworker regarding a dispute, a slight, an offense? Could those situations use some forgiveness?

More and more medical doctors and social scientists are extolling the benefits of forgiveness and reconciliation, benefits both to individuals and to society. This article examines some of these benefits and presents several inspiring case studies, stories of forgiveness in action.

Would you believe that forgiveness can be good for your health? Lingering anger, stress, or high blood pressure could indicate that you need to forgive someone (or to be forgiven yourself). Many religions—including, of course, the Christian faith—have long held that forgiveness is an important component of a fruitful life. Now secular research supports its value.[\[1\]](#)

In the early 1980s, Kansas psychologist Dr. Glenn Mack Harnden searched in vain to find studies on forgiveness in the academic digest *Psychological Abstracts*. Today there exist an International Forgiveness Institute and a ten-million-dollar "Campaign for Forgiveness Research" (Jimmy Carter and Desmond Tutu have been among the ringleaders). The John Templeton Foundation awards grants in the field.

Harnden says forgiveness "releases the offender from prolonged anger, rage, and stress that have been linked to physiological problems, such as cardiovascular diseases, high blood pressure, hypertension, cancer, and other psychosomatic illnesses." {2}

He's big on this theme. When I ran into him in Washington, DC, a while back, he spoke enthusiastically about attending an international gathering in Jordan that saw forgiveness between traditional individual enemies like Northern Irish and Irish Republicans, Israelis and Palestinians.

George Washington University medical professor Christina Puchalski cites forgiveness benefits supported by research studies. Writing in *The Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine*, she says, "The act of forgiveness can result in less anxiety and depression, better health outcomes, increased coping with stress, and increased closeness to God and others." {3}

Daily life brings many sources of conflict: spouses, parents, children, employers, former employers, bullies, enemies. If offense leads to resentment and bitterness, then anger, explosion, and violence can result. If parties forgive each other, then healing, reconciliation, and restoration can follow.

Startling Contrition

Robert Enright is an educational psychology professor at the

University of Wisconsin–Madison and president of the International Forgiveness Institute. He laments the fact that despite society's conflicts, "almost never do we hear public leaders declaring their belief that forgiveness can bring people together, heal their wounds, and alleviate the bitterness and resentment caused by wrongdoing." {4}

The year 2006 brought a startling example of contrition by Adriaan Vlok, former Law and Order Minister under South Africa's apartheid regime. During the 1980s, racial conflict there boiled.

In 1998, Adriaan Vlok confessed to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission that ten years earlier in 1988 he had engineered the bombing of the headquarters of the South African Council of Churches, a prominent opposition group. The bombing campaign also included movie theaters showing "Cry Freedom," an anti-apartheid film. {5} I had tickets to see "Cry Freedom" in Pretoria the night it opened, but the screening was cancelled. The next morning, a bomb was discovered in the theater I would have attended.

You can imagine my interest when BBC television told of Vlok's 2006 attempt to reconcile personally with Rev. Frank Chikane, former head of the South African Council of Churches, the group whose headquarters Vlok had bombed. Chikane, now director general of the South African president's office, reports that Vlok visited his office and gave him a Bible with these words inscribed: "I have sinned against the Lord and against you, please forgive me (John 13:15)." That biblical reference is Jesus' Last Supper admonition that his disciples follow his example and wash one another's feet.

Chikane tells what Vlok did next: "He picked up a glass of water, opened his bag, pulled out a bowl, put the water in the bowl, took out the towel, said 'you must allow me to do this' and washed my feet in my office." Chikane gratefully accepted the gesture. {6}

Vlok, a born-again Christian, later told BBC television it was time “to go to my neighbor, to the person that I’ve wronged.” He says he and his compatriots should “climb down from the throne on which we have been sitting and say to people, ‘Look, I’m sorry. I regarded myself as better than you are. I think it is time to get rid of my egoism . . . my sense of importance, my sense of superiority.’”[{7}](#)

Startling contrition, indeed.

Strength to Forgive

Have you ever unexpectedly encountered someone who has wronged you? There you are, suddenly face-to-face with your nemesis. How do you feel? Frederic Luskin, director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, says, “Our bodies react as if we’re in real danger right now to a story of how someone hurt us seven years ago. . . . You’re feeling anger, your heart rhythm changes . . . breathing gets shallow.”[{8}](#)

Corrie ten Boom and her Dutch family hid Jews from the Nazis during World War II. For this she endured Ravensbruck, a concentration camp. Her inspiring story became a famous book and film, *The Hiding Place*.

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crop swinging from his belt. I was face to face with one of my captors, and my blood seemed to freeze.”

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“My Father, the Town Alcoholic”

When Stanford education and psychology professor Carl Thoresen and his colleagues began recruiting adult subjects for the Stanford Forgiveness Project, they had trouble signing up males. When they started using the terms “grudge” and “grudge management” in the recruiting, the men came. Thoresen thinks some men felt “forgiveness” was a feminine activity, but a “grudge” was something they probably should deal with.[{10}](#)

Consider a guy who had a longstanding grudge involving a family member. And aren’t family conflicts often causes of intense stress?

As a teenager on the family farm, Josh McDowell loved his

mother but despised his father “more than anyone else in the world.”[{11}](#) His friends would joke about his dad being drunk. It tore him up inside. “I hated my father for the embarrassment and shame his alcoholism caused my family,” McDowell relates. “I also resented what it caused him to do to my mother. I’d go out in the barn and see my mother beaten so badly she couldn’t get up, lying in the manure behind the cows.” Eventually his mother lost the will to live and died, Josh says, “of a broken heart.”

In college, Josh met some followers of Jesus whom he liked. Skeptical about Christianity’s validity, he accepted their challenge to examine evidence regarding Jesus’ claims and found it convincing.[{12}](#) He thanked Jesus for dying for him, admitted his flaws to God, and asked Christ to enter his life and take over. Soon he realized he no longer hated his father.

Josh says, “I had confessed to God my feelings for my dad, asked God to forgive me, and prayed that I could forgive. And it happened as quickly as I asked. No longer was my dad a drunk to be hated. Now I saw him as a man who had helped give me life. I called him and told him two things I had never told him before: ‘Dad, I’ve become a Christian and . . . I love you.’”

“But how . . . how can you love a father like me?” Josh’s dad asked on another occasion. Josh explained how to place his faith in Christ and his father made that decision, too. About fourteen months later, his alcohol-ravaged body gave out and he died. But the changed life of the town alcoholic influenced scores of people to place their lives in God’s hands. “My dad’s life was brand new those last 14 months,” recalls Josh. “His relationship with me and with God were both reconciled. Jesus Christ is a peacemaker.”

Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and You

Secular research supports the value of forgiveness, a concept

at the core of Christian faith. You might wonder, "How does all this relate to me personally?" May I offer some suggestions?

As a starting point, *become forgiven yourself*. The late and renowned ethicist Lewis Smedes wrote, "Forgiving comes naturally to the forgiven."^{13} Josh McDowell says once he was forgiven by God, he could forgive his alcoholic father. If you've never known for sure that God is your friend, I encourage you to ask Him to forgive you. You might say something like this to Him right now:

Jesus, I need you. Thanks for dying for my flaws and rising again. I ask you to forgive me and enter my life. Please help me to become good friends with you.

If you asked Jesus to forgive you and enter your life, He did. Tell another believer about your decision. Contact this radio station or the Web site Probe.org and ask how you can grow in your faith.

If you've already come to faith in Christ, *keep short accounts with God*. One early follower of Jesus wrote, "If we confess our sins to [God], he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong."^{14} The proverbial country preacher said, "I 'fesses 'em as I does 'em."

Ask God to give you the strength to forgive others and love them as He does. Lewis Smedes mentions three components of forgiving others: "First, we surrender our right to get even. . . . Second, we rediscover the humanity of our wrongdoer . . . that the person who wronged us is a complex, weak, confused, fragile person, not all that different from us. . . . And third, we wish our wrongdoer well."

Contact the person you've wronged—or who has wronged you—and seek to make peace if appropriate and possible. The biblical prescription is that the offender and the offended

should run into each other as each is en route to contact the other.^{15} Of course, not everyone will want to reconcile, but you can try.

Realize that forgiving may take time. Shortly before his death, Oxford and Cambridge scholar C. S. Lewis wrote, "I think I have *at last* forgiven the cruel schoolmaster who so darkened my youth. I had done it many times before, but this time I think I have really done it."^{16}

Forgiveness and reconciliation can be contagious. They can make an important difference in families, neighborhoods, workplaces, and nations. A good relationship takes two good forgivers.

Is there anyone with whom you need to reconcile?

Notes

1. Gary Thomas, "The Forgiveness Factor," *Christianity Today*, January 10, 2000, 38-45.
2. *Ibid.*, 38.
3. Christina M. Puchalski, M.D., "Forgiveness: Spiritual and Medical Implications," *The Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine*, September 17, 2002; <http://tinyurl.com/yw45eo>; accessed January 27, 2007.
4. Thomas, *loc. cit.*
5. "Botha implicated in Church bombing," BBC News online, July 21, 1998; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/136504.stm>; accessed September 3, 2006.
6. "Feet washed in apartheid apology," BBC News online, 28 August 2006; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/5292302.stm>; accessed September 3, 2006.
7. "Minister atones for race sins," BBC News video, 3 September 2006; <http://tinyurl.com/2ruu2l>; accessed October 4, 2006.
8. Joan O'C. Hamilton, "Peace Work," *Stanford Magazine*, May/June 2001, 78;

<http://www.stanfordalumni.org/news/magazine/2001/mayjun/features/forgiveness.html>.

9. Corrie ten Boom, "Death Camp Revisited," *Worldwide Challenge*, July/August 1994, 35-36. Quotations from and details of this encounter as related in this section are from this source.

10. Hamilton, loc. cit., 77.

11. Josh McDowell, "Forgiving My Father," *Worldwide Challenge*, July/August 1994, 37-38. Quotations from and details of McDowell's story as related in this section are from this source.

12. To examine some of the evidence for Jesus, visit www.WhoIsJesus-really.com and www.probe.org.

13. Lewis B. Smedes, "Keys to Forgiving," *Christianity Today*, December 3, 2001, 73;

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/015/42.73.html>.

Quotations and concepts from Smedes cited in this section are from this source.

14. 1 John 1:9 NLT.

15. Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15-17.

16. Smedes, loc. cit.; emphasis in the quotation is without attribution.

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A Little Kramer in All of Us?

Comedian Michael Richards—"Kramer" on TV's *Seinfeld*—saw his racist tirade at African-American hecklers ignite a firestorm. Mel Gibson, whose earlier anti-Semitic rant made headlines, said he felt compassion for Richards.^{1}

Lots of people have dark sides. Maybe everyone. Maybe you.

I do.

Remember Susan Hawk? Her infamous diatribe against [another CBS Survivor contestant](#) declared if she found her “laying there dying of thirst, I would not give you a drink of water. I would let the vultures take you and do whatever they want with you.”^{2}

Richards–like Gibson–apologized profusely. Prominent African-American comic Paul Mooney says [Richards told him privately](#), “He didn’t know he had that ugliness in him.”^{3}

I can identify with Richards’ surprise at his darker inner impulses. My own failing was private rather than public, differing in degree but not in kind. It taught me valuable lessons.

Growing up in the US South, I learned from my parents and educators to be tolerant and accepting in a culture that often was not. Racism still makes my blood boil. I’ve [sought to promote racial sensitivity](#).

One summer during university, I joined several hundred students—most of us Caucasian—for a South Central Los Angeles outreach project. We spent a weekend living in local residents’ homes, attending their churches, and meeting people in the community.

A friend and I enjoyed wonderful hospitality from a lovely couple. Sunday morning, their breakfast table displayed a mountain of delicious food. Our gracious hostess wanted to make sure our appetites were completely satisfied. It was then, eying that bountiful spread, that it hit me.

I realized that for the first time in my life, I was living in Black persons’ home, sitting at “their” table, eating “their” food, using “their” utensils. Something inside me reacted negatively. The strange feeling was not anger or hatred, more like mild aversion. Not powerful, not dramatic, certainly not

expressed. But neither was it rational or pleasant or honorable or at all appropriate. It horrified and shamed me, especially since I had recently become a follower of Jesus.

The feeling only lasted a few moments. But it taught me important lessons about prejudice. Much as I might wish to deny it, I had inner emotions that, if expressed, could cause terrible pain. I who prided myself on racial openness had to deal with inner bigotry. How intense must such impulses be in those who are less accepting? Maybe similar inner battles—large or small—go on inside many people. I became deeply impressed that efforts at social harmony should not neglect the importance of changing human hearts.

Holocaust survivor Yehiel Dinur testified during the trial of Adolph Eichmann, the Nazi leader responsible for killing millions of Jews. When he saw Eichmann in the courtroom, he sobbed and collapsed to the floor. Dinur later explained, “I was afraid about myself. I saw that I am capable to do this. . . . Exactly like he. . . . Eichmann is in all of us.”[\[4\]](#)

Jeremiah, an ancient Jewish sage, wrote, “The human heart is most deceitful and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?”[\[5\]](#) A prescription from one of Jesus’ friends helped me overcome my inner struggles that morning in South Central: “If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth. But if we confess our sins to [God], he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong.”[\[6\]](#)

Notes

1. “Mel Gibson Feels Michael Richards’ Pain,” Associated Press, November 29, 2006; AOL Entertainment News: <http://tinyurl.com/vh2nf>, accessed December 3, 2006.

2. Tim Cuprisin, “Susan Hawk stays afloat on ‘Survivor’ celebrity,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, January 23, 2001; <http://www2.jsonline.com/enter/tvradio/jan01/survive23012201.a>

[sp](#), accessed December 3, 2006.

3. "Paul Mooney Cites Richards in N-Word Ban," Associated Press November 29, 2006, <http://tinyurl.com/5pxnxy>, accessed December 3, 2006.

4. Charles W. Colson, "The Enduring Revolution," excerpts of his 1993 Templeton Address; <http://www.gcts.edu/communications/contact/fall04/article03.php>, accessed December 3, 2006.

5. Jeremiah 17:9 NLT.

6. 1 John 1:8-9 NLT.

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South African Apartheid Leaders Apology for Racial Sins

Could the world use a bit more contrition, forgiveness and reconciliation?

Recent international news reports brought a startling example of contrition by Adriaan Vlok, former Law and Order Minister under South Africa's apartheid regime.

Robert Enright is an educational psychology professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and president of the International Forgiveness Institute. He laments the fact that despite society's conflicts, "almost never do we hear public

leaders declaring their belief that forgiveness can bring people together, heal their wounds, and alleviate the bitterness and resentment caused by wrongdoing.” {1}

Here’s an exception.

During the 1980s, conflict raged between South Africa’s white minority Afrikaner government and the black majority opposition. One former African National Congress operative—now a government official—told me over breakfast in Cape Town that his responsibilities back then had been “to create chaos.” Mutual hostility and animosity often reigned.

Bombing Campaign

In 1998, Adriaan Vlok confessed to South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission that in 1988 he had engineered the bombing of the headquarters of the South African Council of Churches, a prominent opposition group. The bombing campaign also included movie theaters showing “Cry Freedom,” an anti-apartheid film. {2}

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An Example to Follow?

That biblical reference is Jesus’ Last Supper admonition that his disciples follow his example and wash one another’s feet.

The inscription's words echo those of the Prodigal Son who in the famous biblical story returns home after squandering his inheritance, hopes his father will accept him as a hired hand, and says, "I have sinned against heaven and against you." {3} The father rejoices over his return, warmly receives him as son, and throws a welcome celebration.

Chikane tells what Vlok did next: "He picked up a glass of water, opened his bag, pulled out a bowl, put the water in the bowl, took out the towel, said 'you must allow me to do this' and washed my feet in my office." Chikane gratefully accepted the gesture. {4}

Vlok, a born-again Christian, later told BBC television it was time "to go to my neighbor, to the person that I've wronged." He says he and his compatriots should "climb down from the throne on which we have been sitting and say to people, 'Look, I'm sorry. I regarded myself as better than you are. I think it is time to get rid of my egoism my sense of importance, my sense of superiority.'" {5}

Startling contrition, indeed.

Forgiveness Components

The late and renowned ethicist Lewis Smedes stressed three components of forgiving others: "First, we surrender our right to get even... Second, we rediscover the humanity of our wrongdoer...that the person who wronged us is a complex, weak, confused, fragile person, not all that different from us... And third, we wish our wrongdoer well." {6}

Former U.S. Senator Alan Simpson has quipped that those in Washington, DC traveling "the high road of humility" won't encounter "heavy traffic." {7} Too often the same holds in workplaces, neighborhoods and families. Could Vlok's example inspire some changes?

Notes

1. Gary Thomas, "The Forgiveness Factor," Christianity Today, January 10, 2000, 38.
2. "Botha implicated in Church bombing," BBC News online, July 21, 1998; news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/136504.stm; accessed September 3, 2006.
3. Luke 15:21 NIV.
4. "Feet washed in apartheid apology," BBC News online, 28 August 2006; news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/5292302.stm; accessed September 3, 2006.
5. "Minister atones for race sins," BBC News video, 3 September 2006; <http://tinyurl.com/g899l>; accessed October 4, 2006.
6. Lewis B. Smedes, "Keys to Forgiving," Christianity Today, December 3, 2001, 73; www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/015/42.73.html.
7. Harry Kreisler, "Let 'er Rip! Reflections of a Rocky Mountain Senator: Conversation with Alan K. Simpson, Former U.S. Senator, Wyoming," Conversations with History, Institute of International Studies, University of California-Berkeley, September 17, 1997; globetrotter.berkeley.edu/conversations/Simpson/simpson1.html; accessed October 2, 2006.

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Leftist Jewish Journalist Survives Evangelical Beat

Quiz: What do you get when you take one leftist Jewish journalist, assign him to the evangelical Christian beat for major newspapers on both US coasts, sprinkle in some fiery sermons and politically conservative speeches, mix thoroughly,

and bake with the heat of fiercely contested national elections?

Note: This is not a joke.

Sound like a recipe for nitroglycerin shortcake? Maybe you'd expect mutual animosity: "Those wacko God-squaders are at it again, imposing their beliefs and politics on the rest of us sane people." "He's just another example of the biased secular humanist liberal media that's ruining America."

Yet this cake hides no explosives. The leftist Jewish journalist made a significant discovery on the road to meeting deadlines, one he feels can instruct his colleagues and us all.

He says to effectively cover the strange tribe to which he was assigned, it helps to know its members as neighbors and friends. His lesson has affected his writing in ways that have conservative evangelicals commending him for fairness and that provide useful illustrations for managing today's turbulent culture wars.

A Jew Among the Evangelicals

[Mark Pinsky's new book](#), *A Jew Among the Evangelicals: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Westminster John Knox), tells how this "nice Jewish boy from Jersey" ended up attending church "more often than many Christians" and sometimes more often than he attends his own synagogue. During his ten years covering religion for the *Los Angeles Times*, he focused on leaders of major evangelical ministries and had little connection with local grassroots evangelicals.

When he moved to Florida in 1995 to write for the *Orlando Sentinel*, they were everywhere: In the neighborhood, at kids sporting events, birthday parties, PTA meetings, Scouts, "I encountered evangelicals simply as people, rather than as subjects or sources of quotes for my stories."

Still a committed Jew, Pinsky found they were neither monolithic nor, as *The Washington Post* once claimed, “poor, uneducated and easy to command.” They displayed surprising diversity on a range of issues including the Iraq war, environmentalism, tax policy, women in leadership, and immigration.

The Readable Radical

Disclaimer: Pinsky, whom I’ve known since our university days, is a personal friend, so I’m biased. But I’ve also observed a curious development here that merits wider consideration. His *Duke Chronicle* column was entitled “The Readable Radical” and he was at the vanguard of late-1960s campus leftist causes. I didn’t always agree with his politics, but I admired his concerns about justice, hypocrisy and the disenfranchised.

He still votes with the Democratic left, but he also understands the Christian subculture he covers better than many of its members. Mutual respect characterizes his relations with its leaders.

Pinsky is not without good natured humor as he highlights evangelical quirks. Example: the Orlando golf club that hyped its Easter sunrise service and “Easter Egg Scramble” golf tournament. And, perhaps-not-so-tongue-in-cheek, he admits he especially likes about evangelical Christians that “if you are sorry, they have to forgive you.” He knows their boss said, “When you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against^[1]”.

Lessons for Life in the Larger World

His book draws lessons from his peculiar and unlikely journey for life in the larger world. His stories of “how people just like you wrestle with feelings, values, and beliefs that touch the core of their beings” provide “a glimpse of someone learning to understand and get along with folks whose

convictions differ from his own.”

Get to know your intellectual and philosophical adversaries, he recommends. Take them to lunch. Ratchet down the rhetoric. Maybe connection can produce understanding and civility can grow into bridgebuilding.

Not bad advice in a world too-often filled with brickbats and name calling.

Note

1. Mark 11:25 *New Living Translation*.

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“Will God Punish Me Forever for My Mistakes?”

I am so depressed right now because I feel all the mistakes in my past mistakes are so many that I won't have a good future.

I'm 29 years old and I had 2 abortions before I was 20. Two years ago I slept with my boyfriend even though I was already a Christian; we went our separate ways because of this. (He's also a Christian.) I have been single ever since and I have been told that I am being punished for all my sins. Does this mean because of what happened in my past I will never find peace, joy or fulfillment? Does this mean God will never trust me with a relationship again? Will I have to pay for the rest of my life?

Will He refuse to forgive me since I made the mistakes when I was already a Christian? I have been so tormented by all this

and I am in constant pain—my heart aches. I really don't know what to do, I have prayed and asked for forgiveness, don't know what else to do. All I feel is guilt, guilt, guilt.

Oh, you precious girl! I have such wonderful news for you!! Your flesh and Satan have been doing a number on you, pouring guilt and self-condemnation onto you all this time . . .when God has been standing there, extending grace and mercy and complete forgiveness to you, wanting you to receive it, but you haven't been able to see it.

How do I know this?

Because of "the Christian's bar of soap," 1 John 1:9—"If we confess our sins [and you have, over and over and over, right?], He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us of all unrighteousness." Note that God does two things when we confess: 1) He forgives us, which means He sends them away forever, and 2) He cleanses us of ALL unrighteousness, making our souls clean and pure as snow. What's missing for you is the decision to consciously RECEIVE His forgiveness and cleansing.

Are you being punished for your sins? Well, consider this: there is a difference between punishment, which includes wrath being poured out on us, and the consequences of our choices, which is loving discipline. Romans 8:1 says that there is NO condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because the Lord Jesus took all of the Father's condemnation on Himself on the cross. So God is not punishing you. Are you experiencing consequences for your sinful choices? Maybe in the beginning. But from what you describe to me, with peace, joy, and fulfillment eluding you, it sounds like you have your cup upside down, which is preventing you from receiving any new blessings from God because of the mistaken belief that you are still under condemnation.

No, beloved sister, you will not have to pay for the rest of

your life. What God wants is repentance, and you have already done that. Scripture says that godly sorrow leads to repentance (2 Cor. 7:10), but there is a worldly sorrow, fed by our own flesh or by demonic forces in temptation, that leads to death. And that's where you've been living, hasn't it? Camped out in a living death?

I would love to lead you in a prayer to receive God's forgiveness and cleansing. May I also suggest that you do something physical to make it more real: lift up your arms, palms up, like a small child ready to be picked up by her daddy: *Dear Father, I want to turn my cup right-side up and receive all the forgiveness and cleansing You have for me. I make a choice today to open my heart to You and let You love me, let You forgive me, let You cleanse me from all unrighteousness. Thank You for exchanging my sin for Jesus' righteousness. Thank You that Your word is true, that because I have confessed my sins, You are faithful and just to forgive me of my sins and cleanse me of all unrighteousness. I receive it in Jesus' name.*

From here on out, every time the old feelings of condemnation and guilt pop up (and they will, because they have become a habit), go back to the Father and thank Him again for forgiving you and cleansing you, and tell Him, "I do not accept those false feelings of condemnation and guilt, but I do receive Your grace, and thank You for loving me, Abba!" It may take awhile for your feelings to catch up with the truth of your decision to receive God's grace, but that's OK. They will. Feelings follow beliefs and actions like a caboose follows the engine of a train.

The Lord bless you this day, _____, and I pray that you will hear the love in your Father's voice and see the love in His eyes as you receive His truth through this email!

Warmly,

Grappling with Guilt

What Makes You Feel Guilty?

What makes you feel guilty?

Has a relationship gone sour and you find yourself agonizing about what might have been if you'd acted or spoken differently? Maybe your slave-driver boss hassles you for being behind. Are your kids wondering why they ended up with you as a parent?

These days, food guilt is common. With super-slim models gracing supermarket tabloids and magazine covers (admit it, now; you've peeked), even a fit, petite-sized former cheerleader can get depressed standing in the checkout line. "No-Guilt Nachos," offers a *Ladies' Home Journal* recipe.

America Online has a special guilt section dealing with "Relationship Guilt," "Parental Guilt," "Food Guilt," "Workforce Guilt," "Pricey Guilt," "I'm-a-Rotten-Person Guilt," "Stay-in-Touch Guilt," and "Trying-to-Please-Everyone Guilt." Whew!

Ever been late paying a family bill due to negligence or overspending? Been unfaithful to your spouse? Lied to the IRS or a friend? Been angry without reason?

When we fall short of our own – or others' – standards, guilt

feelings can result. Unresolved guilt can bring anxiety, depression, ulcers, low self-esteem and more.

I am a recovering perfectionist. As a teenager, I could be pretty hard on myself. I once fouled out of a high school basketball game in the final seconds with our team ahead. The opposing player made his free throws, putting his team ahead. I felt bleak. Our team's desperation inbound pass went to midcourt, where a teammate caught the ball and threw up a prayer. The ball swished through the net as time expired. We had won. I was the second happiest player there. I probably would have excoriated myself had he missed.

A single man I know became involved with another man's wife. Her rocky marriage had sent her lonely heart wandering and his youthful enthusiasm and libido met many of her wants. They dreamed, schemed, sneaked, and rendezvoused. When discovered, he lied and sought to perpetuate the affair. Eventually, friends convinced him to break things off. He felt guilty for having the fling, guilty for lying about it, and guilty for dumping her.

Feeling guilty can cripple you emotionally. Serious ethical or moral lapses can bring blame and shame. A seemingly minor flaw can sometimes bug the daylight out of you. This article looks at healthy, biblical ways to deal with guilt, and how to know that you are really forgiven.

Some Causes of Guilt Feelings

Why does guilt affect us so, and how can we alleviate it? Some psychologists emphasize that problems in our past can plague us in the present. Inability to reconcile or move past unhealthy relationships with parents, siblings, teachers or classmates may color our emotions. Other authorities feel that people may be following overly rigid standards.

Suggested solutions have included discovering and resolving

past hang-ups, relaxing moral codes or easing personal expectations. Certainly many people still suffer from past problems or set unrealistic standards. Forty-eight hours of tasks won't fit into one day, so don't necessarily castigate yourself when only half your ambitious to-do list gets accomplished. If you find yourself sneaking a diet-busting snack, maybe rewarding yourself occasionally is better than whipping yourself. But it seems wise to also consider that, at least in some instances, we may feel guilty because we are guilty.

If this is true, then therapy for a guilty person could begin with getting them to admit their shortcoming. That's not always easy.

Admitting you're wrong can be hard. Perhaps you've heard of the writer who asked his domineering editor if he'd ever been wrong. "Yes," replied the editor. "I was wrong once. It was when I thought I was wrong but I wasn't."

University of Illinois psychologist O. H. Mowrer pointed out a common dilemma in trying to face your own shortcomings:

Here, too, we encounter difficulty, because human beings do not change radically until first they acknowledge their sins, but it is hard for one to make such an acknowledgement unless he has "already changed." In other words, the full realization of deep worthlessness is a severe ego "insult," and one must have a new source of strength to endure it. [\[1\]](#)

I understand this inner weakness problem. As a teenager, I found success through athletics, academics, and student government. I was attending one of my nation's leading secondary schools. President John F. Kennedy and actor Michael Douglas were alumni. But my achievements didn't bring the personal satisfaction I wanted. Guilt, anxiety, and a poor self-image often plagued me on the inside.

My first year in university, I met some students who said that the spiritual side of life offered a solution to the guilt problem. A relationship with God, they said, could give me the “new source of strength” necessary to face my own flaws and seek help. Because of them, I discovered practical reasons why faith could help me overcome my guilt.

A Solution to Guilt

The hit movie *Bruce Almighty* depicts God’s attempts to contact the main character (played by Jim Carrey) by leaving a number on his pager. Turns out the phone number is valid in many area codes. After the film’s release, people and businesses began getting calls from folks asking for God.

A Florida woman threatened to sue the film studio after twenty calls per hour clogged her cell phone. A Denver radio station built a contest around the fluke. Some callers to the station seemed to think they’d really discovered a direct line to God. One even left a message confessing her adultery. [{2}](#)

Owning up to guilt can help clear your conscience.

Those college students I mentioned earlier had a joy and enthusiasm that attracted me. They claimed to have a personal relationship with Jesus of Nazareth. I couldn’t believe it all. I kept returning to their meetings because I was curious and because it was a good place to get a date. Especially because it was a good place to get a date!

They explained that God loved me, but that my own self-centeredness or sin had separated me from Him. They said His Son, Jesus, died to pay the penalty for my sins, and rose from the dead so I could receive forgiveness as a free gift. Eventually, it made sense. [{3}](#) Through a simple heart attitude, I invited Jesus to enter my life, forgive me, and become my friend. There was no thunder and lightning, no angels appeared, and I did not become perfect overnight. But I found

a new inner peace, freedom from guilt, assurance that I would be with God forever, and the best friend I could ever have.

Of course, my experience is not unique. Harvard psychologist William James, in his classic book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* cites Henry Alline who placed his faith in Christ: “the burden of guilt and condemnation was gone . . . my whole soul, that was a few minutes ago groaning under mountains of death . . . was now filled with immortal love . . . freed from the chains of death and darkness....”[{4}](#)

One early believer wrote: “God made you alive with Christ. He forgave all our sins. He canceled the record that contained the charges against us. He took it and destroyed it by nailing it to Christ’s cross.”[{5}](#) I found that my own guilt was gone, but I also had to draw on His power daily.

A friend of Jesus wrote, “If we confess our sins to him, he [God] is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong.”[{6}](#) Some call this statement the believer’s “bar of soap.” We confess, being honest with God. He forgives and cleanses us.

But what if you don’t feel forgiven? Is there such a thing as false guilt?

True or False?

A reader who signed his e-mail “Guilt plagued” told me of his struggles:

A few years ago, out of desperation, I made a series of terrible mistakes. I am committed to the Lord and confessed my sins. I’m terribly ashamed and embarrassed about what I have done, and I feel ten times worse because I can’t make restitution. . . . I’m having a difficult time processing the idea that He has forgiven me. . . . Please help me . . . what should I do? The guilt is eating me alive.

Sometimes we feel guilty because we are guilty. Other times we feel guilty without cause. Is your guilt true or false, and what can you do about the feelings?[{7}](#)

When my wife, Meg, was in graduate school at Stanford, she regularly parked on the street near her campus office. One afternoon she discovered a parking ticket on her windshield. During that day – while she was parked there – campus management had painted the curb red, signifying “No Parking.” (The curb had never had paint during her tenure.) Was she guilty?

Her dilemma was both laughable and burdensome. Meg would have to either pay a fine or go to court. She appeared in court and told the judge what had happened. He dropped the charges. (I should *hope* he would!)

The law and the judge’s application of it determined guilt or innocence. Similarly, if we violate God’s proscriptions, we stand guilty. If we do not violate biblical principles, then we may or may not be guilty.

If you know your guilt is real, your solution begins with placing your trust in Christ to forgive you. Once you have, and you become aware of sins in your daily life, simply admit them to God.

Keep short accounts with God. As the proverbial country preacher said, “I ‘fesses ’em as I does ’em.” Feelings may lag behind, but if you’ve admitted your sin to God, He has forgiven you.

What if you’re unsure if your guilt is true or false, or if you confess your sins but still don’t feel forgiven?

Consider *the Holy Spirit’s guidance*. Jesus sent His Holy Spirit to guide us into truth,[{8}](#) especially concerning sin.[{9}](#) If the Bible doesn’t prohibit certain behaviors, you – if you’re a follower of Jesus – can ask the Holy Spirit for

wisdom about them. Jesus' brother James wrote, "If you need wisdom—if you want to know what God wants you to do—ask him, and he will gladly tell you."[{10}](#) Discerning God's guidance is not a perfect science, but His inner conviction can help you sort things out.

Making Things Right

What do you do if you're not sure if your guilt feelings are legitimate, or if you don't feel forgiven?

Realize that *God's promises trump your own self-criticism*. Members of God's family can trust His opinion even when they don't feel like it's true. We can "set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything."[{11}](#) Does your heart condemn you unjustly? You can say, "Listen, heart. I'm a child of God. I've confessed my sin and He says I'm forgiven. I refuse to believe your condemnation."

I recommend that you converse with yourself in private rather than in public! For a variety of psychological and spiritual reasons, your guilt feelings may not disappear immediately. Changing established emotional patterns can take time. Choosing to believe God is good starting point.

Realize also that *God's promises trump the real enemy*. This may be hard to swallow, but it's important. Jesus taught the existence of "Satan," a "liar and the father of lies,"[{12}](#) the "accuser" of believers.[{13}](#)

I once considered myself too intellectual to believe in Satan. Our university mascot was the "Blue Devil." To me, the devil was some guy in a blue costume with a pitchfork who ran around at basketball games. Then I heard that Satan the deceiver has some people so deceived that they don't believe he exists. Jesus' life and teachings eventually convinced me that Satan was real. If you experience false guilt feelings, realize that

they may have a lower source. You needn't deny the feelings, but you can deny false guilt based on Jesus' friendship with you. [\[14\]](#)

You may need to *make restitution*. My second year in college, I swiped a plastic bucket from behind the lectern in the psychology lecture hall. It had been there every day during the semester. "No one wants it," I convinced myself. "It deserves to be taken." I used it to wash my car.

Two years later, I read a booklet about God's forgiveness. That bucket kept coming to mind. I not only needed to admit my theft to God. I needed to make restitution.

My booty long since lost, I purchased a new bucket and carried it sheepishly across campus one afternoon. Finding no one in the psychology building to confess to, I left the bucket in a broom closet with a note of explanation. Maybe a janitor read it. My conscience was clear.

After hearing of this stolen bucket episode in a lecture, one friend wrote his former employer to confess all the items he had stolen and to offer restitution. "We all probably have some plastic buckets in our lives," observed another associate.

Feeling guilty? You may just need to relax unrealistic standards in a stress-filled world. But you also may need to face genuine personal shortcomings. If you do, you can know that the complete forgiveness that Jesus offers is free and that His truth trumps all challengers.

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Notes

1. O. H. Mowrer, "Sin, the Lesser of Two Evils," quoted in

- Henry R. Brandt, *The Struggle for Peace* (Wheaton, IL: Scripture Press Publications, 1965).
2. Mitch Stacy, "'Bruce Almighty' Phone Number Annoys Many," *Associated Press/AOL News*, May 28, 2003.
 3. For detailed information on Jesus and evidence to support His claims, see www.WhoIsJesus-Really.com.
 4. *The Life and Journal of the Rev. Mr. Henry Alline* (Boston, 1806), 31-40; selection abridged in Henry James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: The Modern Library/Random House, 1936 [original copyright 1902]), 214-215.
 5. Colossians 2:13-14 NLT.
 6. 1 John 1:9 NLT.
 7. For more on false guilt, see, Kerby Anderson, "False Guilt," www.probe.org/false-guilt/ and Sue Bohlin, "It's Not Your Fault!" www.probe.org/its-not-your-fault/.
 8. John 16:13.
 9. John 16:8.
 10. James 1:5 NLT.
 11. 1 John 3:18-20 NIV.
 12. John 8:44 NASB.
 13. Revelation 12:9-10 NASB.
 14. 1 John 4:4 NLT.

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**“When Are We Truly Forgiven,
at the Cross or at**

Confession?"

Some Christian writers have claimed it's unnecessary for Christians to ask for God's forgiveness since all our sins (pre- and post-conversion, past and future) were forgiven when Christ said "It is finished" (John 19:30). But two scriptures seem to contradict this: Jesus' model prayer instructs us to pray for forgiveness for ourselves (Luke 11:4), and he says in Matthew 6:15 that God will not forgive us (assuming "us" refers to believers, as he is addressing his disciples) if we do not forgive others. When do you consider that we are truly forgiven, at the cross or when we confess our sin (1 John 1:9)?

Great question!

I think it's frankly obnoxious to teach that we don't have to ask for forgiveness when we sin. One follower of one of these writers you mention carried it so far as to make a personal vow that he didn't ever have to say "I'm sorry" or "Please forgive me" when he hurt anyone because after all, his sins were forgiven at the Cross! (Need I elaborate on what that did to his marriage and family and workplace relationships???)

There is a difference between knowing we were forgiven at the cross, and experientially RECEIVING that forgiveness after we sin. It's like the difference between standing at the bottom of a waterfall, thirsty, with our cup upside down. . . and turning the cup right side up to receive the water.

Forgiveness was offered to everyone at the Cross, but we don't experience it until we confess our sins and receive it by faith (turning our cups right side up). The question of when we are truly forgiven depends on if you're looking at it from God's perspective or from ours. God-wise, we were forgiven before we even knew we needed forgiveness. Man-wise, we are forgiven when we receive it.

Also, receiving forgiveness afresh when we sin is what reconnects our broken relationship with God and with others. Confession and forgiveness are intrinsically related to fellowship and intimacy.

Hope this helps!

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries