

question: How do I forgive myself for messing up my life so badly? It gets me down for days. What would Jesus do?

Guilt-feelings can be divided into real, objective guilt or mere subjective guilt-feelings. On one hand, real guilt can bring on a bothered conscience because of actual mistakes or sins one has committed. However, some individuals may not “feel” guilty when they actually are guilty of wrong-doing. On the other hand, subjective guilt is the uncomfortable feeling of regret, shame or self-condemnation for something one may have done or thought which he believes is wrong even though it is not. Some people have such an over-developed conscience that they feel guilty when they have done no actual wrong.

Determining if any guilt-feelings are based on real guilt or some mistaken feeling of guilt is an important first step. One should reflect back in time and inwardly in search of the beginning and source of any guilt-feelings. Then, examine the cause of the guilt-feeling. Is there some moral or civil law that has been broken? Does this constitute a sin? Has someone been injured? If there is actual sin or unresolved guilt, a person should face it honestly, confess the sin and make any corrections that are needed. Proverbs 28:13 says, "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy." Without taking these steps, a guilty person with any conscience of right and wrong will continue to face a heavy heart that accuses him and perhaps other problems.

But, how does one deal with subjective guilt-feelings that are not founded on any real guilt? To get rid of these unrealistic and nagging guilt-feelings, a person needs to work on replacing negative thinking with positive. To overcome anxiety and fill our hearts with the peace of God, the Bible says: "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about these things" (Philippians 4:8). I heard a Christian psychologist suggest that one might try writing on index cards Bible verses about God's love, grace and forgiveness. When negative thinking comes to mind, that person can block those thoughts by reading and meditating on these positive thoughts from God's word.

In addition, a person should look for a trustworthy Christian mentor or perhaps a trained Christian counselor to whom he is willing to openly confess sins as well as discuss feelings and problems. This friend can help a person check out any guilt-feelings in a more objective way. He or she can help that person deal with issues and can give needed encouragement.

Above everything, we can know that there is a God who loves us and stands ready to help us with forgiveness and grace to make us whole from any real guilt or guilt-feelings. However, there can be no real forgiveness in our lives apart from the forgiveness God offers. The Bible says that all have sinned at one time or another. We all stand in need of forgiveness. Nothing we do can ever make up for our sins. That's why Jesus died on a cross just outside Jerusalem over 2000 years ago. Since he came into this world and lived without sin, he was able to make atonement for our sins. Thus, God could remain a perfectly just God in punishing sin, but also offering forgiveness to those who place their trust in Christ. To accept that gift of forgiveness, we must go to God's word and learn how to become and live as a Christian in the grace of God.

Consider what King David the psalmist said: "Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the LORD does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.' And you forgave the guilt of my sin" (Psalm 32:1-5 NIV).

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