

Against the Current

A column for teens and young adults

March, 2012

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Never Let the Devil Laugh Twice

“Why did I do that?” “What was I thinking?” “How am I ever going to face them again?”

I’m sure we’ve all asked ourselves such questions. Every human being, at one time or another, has experienced shame and guilt. It doesn’t feel good. It’s a gnawing, uncomfortable feeling, often accompanied by anxiety or anger. It’s something no normal human being wants to experience - a conviction that I’ve done something I shouldn’t have, often accompanied by the knowledge that because of what I’ve done or said someone is suffering. It affects us physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Sometimes we experience guilt for things we haven’t done. There’s such a thing as “survivor’s guilt”, for example, when people survive a catastrophe like a plane crash or a famine, and then feel remorse because other people died but they didn’t. Survivors of abuse, as well, often feel guilty, even though they not only didn’t do anything wrong, but are in fact the victims of evil. Sometimes we even feel guilty for doing things which haven’t harmed anyone else, like telling a “white lie” in order to save someone grief, or taking a truly-needed break from household chores or homework when we think we should be working harder.

As Christians we can’t talk about guilt without mentioning sin. As children we’re often given a simplistic explanation of sin: “God gave us His commandments, when we break one of them we’ve sinned and need to be punished”. As we mature and gain a deeper understanding of our faith and our human nature, we begin to understand that sin is really any act which is not in accordance with God’s will. We know that there are many

kinds of sin: “great”, “small”, known, unknown, committed in knowledge, in ignorance, willingly, unwillingly, etc. Sin, essentially, is whatever we do when we’re not doing what God wants us to do.

If we’ve got a well-tuned conscience and a good Christian upbringing we’re bound to feel shameful and guilty when we do sinful things. We all know how it hurts when someone sins against us – bullying us, breaking a confidence, gossiping about us behind our back, etc. And so, whether we want to admit it or not, we know how much our sins hurt others.

Most of us carry these feelings of guilt and shame around with us, and they end up affecting us, and those around us, negatively. They might be the result of something I did yesterday, or something I did years ago, which at the time I may not even have known or realized was sinful.

Feelings of guilt, shame, and sinfulness, like pollution in the environment, will eventually poison us if we let them build up and don’t get rid of them. How do we deal with these feelings of guilt and sinfulness? The key here is forgiveness.

Forgiveness means that though I’ve done something which has hurt, offended, or negatively impacted someone, it won’t be held against me. For Christians this forgiveness has three aspects: the forgiveness of God; the forgiveness of one another; and the forgiveness of self.

A world without forgiveness would be hell. On the other hand, a world where people forgive each other is closer to heaven. We all know how important mutual forgiveness is between friends, family members, coworkers, teammates, etc. I hope you know how good it feels to forgive and be forgiven. If you don’t, it’s not too late to find out.

Because we are all God’s children, and the world is God’s creation, any time we hurt one another, or damage God’s creation, we also sin against God. Even our smallest, most seemingly insignificant, private sins are known to God, and if we love Him we will certainly want to ask His forgiveness as well.

The most difficult thing for most people is forgiving themselves. Since the fall of Adam and Eve we humans experience “brokenness”, or “fragmentation” within ourselves. Most of us, at one time or another, either consciously or unconsciously experience regret for things that we might have done or failed to do, feelings of failure or worthlessness, of shame and remorse. Being able to forgive ourselves is essential if we want to be spiritually and psychologically healthy.

As Orthodox Christians we receive the gift of God’s forgiveness through the deeply meaningful mystery of confession. Many people, though, don’t really understand this blessed sacrament, and tend to regard it either as an empty ritual, a spiritual pep-talk, or a sort of pseudo-psychological counseling session. Confession is, in reality, a chance to “take the garbage out”, to get rid of our feelings of guilt and shame, to dump our sins into the abyss of oblivion, and to unite ourselves to the forgiveness that Jesus gives us from the Cross.

Ideally all of us should have a confessor, a priest with spiritual experience and wisdom, who loves Christ, loves us, and is absolutely trustworthy. He doesn’t have to be the pastor of my parish, and in some ways when we’re younger it’s perhaps better if he isn’t, because until we reach a certain state of maturity our sins embarrass us (which they should – this shows our conscience is working). Though everything said in confession is absolutely confidential, and the priest isn’t supposed to remember anything said to him in confession, we ourselves might be embarrassed to speak with him after having confessed shameful acts. If our confessor is not our parish priest the ideal situation would be a priest or priest-monk from a nearby parish or monastery, who our pastor knows, and blesses us to confess regularly to him.

When we confess we should state our sins specifically, not in general or theoretical terms, but “I did this”, “I have such-and-such feelings”, etc., without blaming others or making excuses. It is especially important to confess those sins and temptations which make us feel ashamed, those

which trouble our hearts the most, and those we tend to repeat. Often just saying a sin in front of another human being will help us to overcome it.

It's also very important to remember that God truly can forgive us, as long as we truly repent. Part of repentance and confession is making sure to forgive and ask forgiveness of others. This should be an ongoing part of our life, remembering the words of our Lord, "If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (*Jn 6:14-15*).

"Never let the devil laugh twice". This saying refers to the way that the devil uses sin, guilt, and shame to enslave us. He tempts us to sinful acts saying "Go ahead, do it! God is merciful and will forgive you!" Then we commit the act, feel guilty and ashamed, and he says "You evil thing! What you did was horrible! God is merciless! There's no forgiveness for you!" Or he works in a more sinister way, convincing us that the evil deed we've done is actually good, or righteous: "Everyone does it, so it must be OK!", "She deserved it!" etc. In other words, he laughs once when we commit the sin, then laughs again when we internalize the shame and guilt, don't see the sinfulness of our actions, or lose hope of God's forgiveness.

So don't let the devil laugh twice. Accept the fact that God forgives you. Forgive others, and ask their forgiveness as well. And don't beat yourself up over things you've done or said which make you ashamed. Confess them, offer your repentance to Christ, and forget about them. Bring peace to your soul and joy to God.

As for the devil, let him be miserable. He's good at it.