

Issue 18 - When Guilt Is Really Pride: Receiving the Mercy You Need

Messy Story of the Week

“The Mistake That Wouldn’t Let Go”

Caroline had always been the steady one — the reliable friend, the organized mom, the woman who never raised her voice, never missed a deadline, never crossed a line.

People admired her. Some even quietly envied her. She didn’t think of herself as proud... but she liked being the one who did things right.

Until the night she didn’t.

It wasn’t dramatic. No one else even knew. A moment of anger. A reckless decision. A choice she couldn’t undo — one that wounded someone she loved deeply.

The next morning, she apologized. The person forgave her quickly, sincerely.

But she couldn’t forgive herself.

The guilt followed her everywhere — in the shower, while cooking dinner, in the car, even during worship on Sunday morning. She replayed the moment again and again, thinking:

“How could I do that? What kind of person does that? I knew better. I should have been better.”

She said the words to friends: “I just can’t forgive myself.”

She meant it. But the more she said it, the heavier it felt.

Weeks later, while journaling at the kitchen table, a thought rose up so sharply it felt like someone had said it out loud:

“You don’t need to forgive yourself — you need to accept My forgiveness.”

It stopped her in her tracks.

She realized with a jolt that what she called self-forgiveness wasn’t humility at all.

It was pride.

She didn't hate the sin. She hated seeing herself as weak.

She hated discovering she was capable of the same failures she easily extended grace for in others.

She hated that the image she had built of herself — competent, controlled, morally above average — had been shattered.

And in that moment, she saw it clearly:

She wasn't struggling because her sin was too big. She was struggling because her ego was.

Tears ran down her arms as she whispered:

“Lord... I thought I was stronger than that. But I see now — that's the problem. I trusted my strength more than Your mercy.”

For the first time, she stopped trying to “forgive herself.” Instead, she received the forgiveness Jesus had already purchased — the forgiveness she had no right to replace with her own.

And strangely, beautifully, that's when the guilt finally lifted.

Not because she had made peace with herself — but because she had surrendered her pride and accepted mercy she could never earn.

FAITHFUL GOD THEN & NOW

When pride masquerades as guilt—and forgiveness becomes an act of surrender

What Caroline experienced is something many Christians quietly carry: the belief that self-forgiveness is the missing step in healing.

But Scripture never instructs us to forgive ourselves. It calls us to confess, repent, extend forgiveness to others—and then receive the forgiveness that comes through Jesus alone.

So why do we struggle?

Because “I can't forgive myself” is often not about guilt. It's about pride.

It's the shock of seeing our weakness. The discomfort of discovering that we are capable of the very things we've judged in others. The disappointment of realizing we are not morally superior after all.

Caroline didn't need to work her way toward self-forgiveness. She needed to surrender the illusion of strength she had been clinging to...and let the mercy of God cover her.

And this is exactly the heart of Advent.

Advent is the season when God confronts our illusions:

- the illusion that we can save ourselves,
- the illusion that good intentions make us righteous,
- the illusion that competence can replace repentance,
- the illusion that strength can substitute for surrender.

Israel waited centuries for a Messiah because they could not rescue themselves. We wait now for Christ's return knowing the same truth: our hope is not found in our moral performance, but in His mercy.

And Mary understood this better than we sometimes imagine.

As a faithful Jewish girl immersed in Scripture from childhood, she would have heard Isaiah 53 read aloud many times in synagogue:

"He was pierced for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities...
and by His wounds we are healed."
(Isaiah 53:5)

She may not have grasped every implication at the moment the angel spoke to her, but she knew the Messiah would be a Suffering Servant— One who would carry the sins of God's people, One whose mission was rooted not in human goodness but in divine mercy.

So when Mary answered:

"I am the Lord's servant.
Let it be to me according to Your word." (Luke 1:38)

She was not saying, "I am strong enough."

She was saying, "I trust the God who saves the weak."

Her surrender wasn't passive resignation. It was active dependence. It was the recognition that the mercy promised through Isaiah's suffering servant was the same mercy she herself needed.

Caroline's breakthrough came the same way: not by forgiving herself, but by surrendering her pride and receiving the forgiveness that only the suffering, crucified, and risen Messiah can offer.

Self-forgiveness is a burden we were never meant to carry. Forgiveness through Jesus is the gift we were meant to receive.

And Advent gently leads us there—to the manger, to the long-awaited Servant, to the cross, to the empty tomb, and to the promise that He is coming again for all who trust in Him.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN

Here are a few truths we can carry into this Advent season as we reflect on surrender, forgiveness, and the mercy of God:

1. “Self-forgiveness” isn't biblical — receiving forgiveness is.

Scripture never asks us to forgive ourselves. It asks us to confess, repent, and receive the forgiveness Jesus purchased for us. Trying to “forgive ourselves” often reveals not humility but hurt pride.

2. We are often more offended by our weakness than by our sin.

Caroline wasn't crushed because she sinned. She was crushed because she thought she was too good to sin that way. Advent invites us to remember that Jesus came precisely because we are not as strong as we think.

3. God sometimes allows our failures to dismantle our self-righteousness.

Not as punishment, but as mercy. He reveals the cracks we've been hiding so we'll stop depending on our own goodness and cling to His.

4. Healing begins when we feel what we've been avoiding.

Jeanne Bill's reminder in last week's episode of "Marriage, Mayhem, and Mercy" — "If you don't feel, you won't heal" — mirrors Scripture's call to bring our emotions, our wounds, and our failures into the light rather than numbing or dismissing them.

5. Advent teaches us to welcome mercy with a surrendered heart.

Mary knew the Messiah would come as a suffering servant (Isaiah 53). She knew salvation would not come through human strength. Her "let it be to me" teaches us to open our hands and surrender to God's grace rather than trying to "earn" it.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

In coaching conversations, I see a powerful pattern again and again:

Many people can articulate the gospel — "Jesus forgives me."

But emotionally, they live as if forgiveness is something they have to deserve before they can accept it.

- They rehearse mistakes.
- They hold onto guilt like a form of penance.
- They expect themselves to be better than the people they gladly extend grace to.
- They confuse humility with internal self-punishment.

But here's the truth I wish every Christian could embrace:

Guilt after repentance is no longer conviction — it is unbelief. It is the heart clinging to a standard Jesus already fulfilled.

This is why Advent matters so deeply: It disrupts our quiet belief that we can — or should — be good enough to deserve forgiveness.

Advent reminds us: We needed a Savior.

We still need a Savior.

And He is coming again for people who know they cannot save themselves.

FAITHFUL FAMILY TOOLS

Here are some resources to support you as you walk out surrender, mercy, and emotional honesty:

- [Faithful Families Free Community on Facebook](#)
Our gathering place for encouragement, Scripture reflections, and real-life support.
- [Subscribe to this Newsletter](#)
Don't miss another issue of "Messy Families, Faithful God!"

FAITH STEP FOR THE WEEK

This week, ask the Lord:

"Where have I been trying to forgive myself instead of receiving Your forgiveness?"

Let Him bring to mind one moment, one regret, one area where you're still carrying guilt or shame.

Then pray:

"Lord, I confess my sin. I repent. And I receive the forgiveness You have already purchased for me. I choose mercy over pride."

Let this be your act of surrender this Advent.

SCRIPTURE FOR THIS WEEK

Isaiah 53:5 (ESV)

"He was pierced for our transgressions;
He was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed."

Psalm 51:17 (ESV)

“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

1 John 1:9 (ESV)

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Luke 1:38 (ESV)

“Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”

2-MINUTE PRACTICE

Take two slow breaths and sit with your hands open in your lap.

Whisper: “Lord, I let go of the guilt I was never meant to carry.”

Picture yourself handing Jesus the mistake, the regret, the failure that still stings. Imagine Him placing His hand over yours and saying:

“My grace is sufficient for you.”

Let your shoulders drop. Let your heart soften. Let forgiveness be something received, not achieved.

This is Advent surrender — making room for mercy.
