

Chapter 6

“I Can’t Forgive Myself”



God has brought many post-abortion Christian women across my path. Often, they find it difficult to heal from their pain and find forgiveness for their sin because of the attitude they encounter *within the Church*! They know they killed their own child. But others are uncomfortable with this admission. They make excuses. They offer cheap Christian clichés, assuring her that she is really a “good” person. But she doesn’t feel like a good person. She feels like a murderer. And she wants people to acknowledge it—not deny it or make excuses.

I remember one woman who called me. She was depressed and desperate. We started talking, and it didn’t take her long to break down and tell me that she had had an abortion. She had killed her unborn baby and felt like a murderer. My response took her totally off-guard. “Yes,” I said. “This is true. You did kill your baby.” Finally, someone validated what she was feeling! She went on to tell me how she was a failure as a Christian. She knew God had forgiven her, but she could NOT forgive herself. Her pastor had solidified this feeling of failure when, through exasperation, he demanded, “God has forgiven you. Why can’t you just forgive yourself?”

Again, my response startled her. I said, “You’re right, you can’t forgive yourself. You will never be able to forgive yourself! It isn’t in your heart or your will to do that. Only God can change your heart. All you can do is admit what is really inside it and surrender THAT to God. You then simply accept HIS forgiveness in its completeness and rest in that forgiveness with no condemnation of self or others.”

We talked for a long time, and in the end, she wept as she took out all of the feelings she had been trying to overcome for so long and surrendered them to Christ. Not only did she give Him the guilt and heartache from her abortion, but she gave Him her anger toward her mother, who had forced her to have it. That night she found the path to peace and healing at the foot of the cross. The kind of healing that works from the inside out!

For Karen, too, surrender became a daily routine. As the Holy Spirit revealed what was in her heart, she laid it at the foot of the cross. God allowed her to see just how far He had taken her when one day about six months after our conversation, she ran across a photo of her baby’s father. If this had happened before, she would have gone into a long crying jag and been depressed for days. She was actually surprised when she felt no emotion.

There was just peace. She could not claim any victory of her own and therefore sidestepped spiritual pride. She had not strived, so she was never in a position to fail. God had done ALL of the work in her heart. She rejoiced at God’s faithfulness in taking her worst and turning it into His best. Since then, God has used her to minister to so many women who were in anguish over their abortions. Below is a poem Karen wrote after God released her from her grief and sorrow, and restored her to His joy. It reflects the depth of her despair and the power of God’s grace! While this poem deals with her abortion, it is a poem that can apply to all of us who have known pain, betrayal and abuse and have accepted Christ’s atonement and experienced God’s grace and mercy!



The Acquittal—God's Infinite Mercy

Karen Sullivan

In a faraway place and a different time
I killed my first child, a most heinous crime.

The state didn't come, and I didn't stand trial.
Judge Blackmun was calm when he said with a smile,
"Killing is legal, say we the High Court.
But don't call it murder. Just call it 'abort.'"

The judge in my heart would not let the case rest.
I had no defense when once put to the test.
Found guilty I was by my heart's Supreme Court.
"You murdered your baby!" they screamed in retort.

With tears on my cheeks it was too late, I knew
To bring back the life of the child I slew.
The gavel slammed down, and it rang in my head,
"You are guilty as charged and deserve to be dead."

"We now give you torment to pay for your sin,"
Was the sentence passed down from my own court
within. "You will never escape. You're branded. Don't
hide.

Your just due is death. You should try suicide."

I was beaten in prison by daily attack.
I was paying a debt, so I never fought back.
No hope of escaping, and this I knew well.
I cried out to God from my own self-made hell.

That day I met Jesus; He smiled in my face.
He said, "I forgive you. Come walk in My grace."
"Lord, I believe You forgive and yet,
Blameless You are. Can You pay for my debt?"

"And, Lord, please don't touch me, for I am unclean.
I'm filthy with murder, a most wretched being."
I poured out my story. He showed no surprise.
I gazed up with awe at the love in His eyes.

He said, "I paid for your crime,
yes, was nailed to a tree.
There's no condemnation if you'll trust in Me.
I took on your blame, and your curse on My soul
So you may be free without judgment, and whole."

I sputtered, "Dear Lord, where's the justice in this?
I killed my first son, and You offer me bliss?
Tears blurred my vision, yet there in His face
Were eyes of compassion, blue oceans of grace.

I thought to myself, "Now the past has been buried?
I'm free of the guilt that for years I have carried?"
He said to accept. It's a gift that is free.
This is atonement, not justice for me!

My judge was dismissed, my accusers and jury.
The truth of His love made them leave in a fury.
He smiled, "Walk with Me and come learn of My way,"
and grasping His hand I began a new day.

Chapter 6

I Can't Forgive Myself.

It is so easy to *know* the importance of forgiveness. After all, it is foundational to the Christian walk. Sometimes we can extend it to others but refuse to take it for ourselves. Interestingly enough, the scriptures are numerous about our need to forgive others yet there isn't one verse that specifically refers to "forgiving ourselves."

Read the following verses about being forgiven:

Acts 3:19 *Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out.*

Hebrews 9:26 *If that had been necessary, Christ would have had to die again and again, ever since the world began. But now, once for all time, he has appeared at the end of the age to remove sin by his own death as a sacrifice.*

2 Samuel 12:13 *Then David confessed to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." Nathan replied, "Yes, but the LORD has forgiven you, and you won't die for this sin.*

Psalms 32:5 *Finally, I confessed all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide my guilt. I said to myself, "I will confess my rebellion to the LORD." And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone. Interlude*

Isaiah 38:17 *Yes, this anguish was good for me, for you have rescued me from death and forgiven all my sins.*

Isaiah 43:25 *I--yes, I alone--will blot out your sins for my own sake and will never think of them again.*

The very essence of forgiveness is that sinners move from bondage of sin to freedom in Christ. It is a forgone conclusion that the person asking forgiveness is forgiven and set free from the sin.

Yet, there is another aspect to our sins that makes these verses so hard to accept. Being forgiven for our sins is different than facing the consequences of our sin. With true repentance comes the spiritual consequence - forgiveness and freedom. But there are still the physical/situational consequences we must live with. For example, with abortion, there is always an awareness that a child is missing. With addiction relationships are permanently broken. With adultery, there may be physical consequences like HIV or pregnancy, even though the marriage is restored by God's grace. Or, the marriage may end, and the children will live with the emotional damage. The ripple effect of sin is undeniable. So many people are affected, often times generationally.

Again, we need to apply the principles of surrender. Facing the wreckage of our sin can be overwhelming. But when we choose TRUTH about the sin, we choose CHRIST. And because He died on the cross the bondage has already been broken. We just need to leave it there.

1. Think of some things in your past where you did something that affected not just you but others.

My sin:

Spiritual consequence:

Physical/circumstantial consequences:

My sin:

Spiritual consequence:

Physical/circumstantial consequences:

MEMORY VERSE

*Therefore, there is no condemnation for
those who are in Christ Jesus.*

Romans 8:1

Chapter 7

The New and Improved Dinah

God had schooled me in the concept of surrender long before Whitney's ordeal. This idea was initially grasped when I became sick and tired of striving for spirituality. I had come out of a rebellious time early in my marriage where I had proved to myself just how wretched I really was. Up until that time, I had been a "good" person. Indeed, in high school my nickname was "the Puritan." I was very condescending to those who were weak and sinful. I was extremely judgmental of others and considered God to be fortunate to name me as one of His own! And then I rebelled. I did things that would have been unthinkable in years past. My marriage to a wonderful man was nearly sacrificed on the altar of my vanity and self-centeredness. The one good thing that came out of that time in my life was the realization that I was, at heart, a wretched human being. I did things that I had seen other women do and had been merciless in my judgment of them. It was a sobering realization when I acknowledged that I was no better than those I had judged!

After deciding to try to repair our marriage, my husband and I started going to church. It felt good to be back on track again. But I found myself putting tremendous effort into convincing people that I was spiritual. I was always gauging my performance. I almost felt panicked if I sensed that someone saw behind the facade. I said all the right words and repeated all the Christian clichés, but my heart was like the inside of the house—a shambles. I dared not acknowledge this, though, because I was working particularly hard at convincing *myself* of my spirituality. It took a lot of energy to maintain my spiritual exterior!

Part of the reason was that, while maintaining the façade, I was also reconstructing my personality—sort of my gift to God! I somehow had it in my mind that if I could



become a better person, I would arrive at spirituality. Not surprisingly, what I wanted to become was an imitation of my alter ego. (An alter ego is the person you want to be. This usually embodies all of those traits that are the opposite of the ones that you have.)

I have a very strong personality. I can be loud and outgoing and very frank. These traits, when combined with insecurities and a poor self-image, can be detrimental to one's emotional well-being. For many years the results were fractured and strained relationships and wounded feelings—usually mine. I hated these traits in myself, so I decided to do something about them. I would become soft-spoken, regal, kind, gentle, dignified, and wise, and I would command the respect of everyone—including myself! As if changing my whole personality wasn't enough, I had somehow thrown my spiritual maturity into the equation. I figured that if I could become all of those things, I would also become spiritual. When I perfected my new personality, I would "arrive" spiritually.

I found the embodiment of what I wanted to become in a dear Christian sister named Martha Jo. *She* was what I wanted to be. So, every morning I would set out to be like Martha Jo. I never actually SAID this was what I was trying to do; but in retrospect, it is very clear. I was doomed from the start. I could only carry off the "Martha Jo routine" for a few hours at best. In a moment of abandon, the real me would leak out. I always ended up feeling like a failure. But I would pick myself up, dust myself off, and try again, and again, and again, and again. And so, it went. The worst part was when I failed, I also felt I was a failure spiritually. Afraid that others would see this, I worked all the harder to make sure people perceived me as super-spiritual. The most frustrating thing of all was that I was making all of these changes for God—so I could do great things for Him with my new, super-spiritual, socially acceptable personality, and He wasn't cooperating! I finally got so sick and tired of trying and failing that I decided to give up. That was the turning point in my life!

Chapter 7

The New Improved Dinah

This is where it gets personal. Really personal. As women we are complex. We long to be known and accepted for who we are. Yet we put masks on and strive to “appear” like something we aren’t. Together, spiritual superior, all knowing, or just not different. Can you relate?

1. Do you have a Martha Jo?

2. If yes, what is her name?

Take some quiet time with God and honestly evaluate if you have a mask that conceals who you really are.

How do we know? Here are some hints.

3. When you walk into church do you look around and think that all the women in church “have it together,” unlike you?

4. Do you feel like you have to act a certain way, say certain things or look a certain way to be accepted?

5. Are you afraid that if the women of church really knew about you, they would reject you?

6. Which, if any, of the above statements apply to you?

I have counseled women for decades and I can tell you that most women feel this way!

This is NOT what Jesus intended for his church. It is in the church where women should find acceptance, healing and respect. Jesus cherished and respected women. We know this from the Bible’s account of the women in Jesus’ life.

Author, Sheila Graham writes, “Jesus’ honor and respect was...extended to all women—an attitude largely unexpected and unknown in his culture and time. Jesus, unlike the men of his generation and culture, taught that women were equal to men in the sight of God. Women could receive God’s forgiveness and grace. Women, as well as men, could be among Christ’s personal followers. Women could be full participants in the kingdom of God.... These were revolutionary ideas. Many of his contemporaries, including his disciples, were shocked.”

This went against everything in the culture. To give you a small idea of the value of women in Jesus’ time these are two sayings that reflected the accepted norm.

"A hundred women are no better than two men" (Talmud, Ber. 45b)

"A man is required to say the following three blessings every day: 'Blessed are you who have not made me a heathen, who have not made me a woman, who has not made me illiterate'"

Jesus elevated women and loved them in their sin to then lift them above it.

7. Can you relate to striving to be holy and always falling short? Are you ready to quit striving, trying, creating, and performing? Are you ready to allow God to shape you and fill you?

MEMORY VERSE

*Every way of a man is right in his own eyes,
but the Lord weighs the heart.*

Proverbs 21:2

Chapter 8

The Death of Martha Jo

I remember vividly God's introduction of surrender in my life. I was walking down the hall, thinking about how *exhausting* striving and failing had become. It was as if an audible voice from God asked me a terrible, frightening question: "If I want to keep you exactly the way you are right now, will you let Me?" It stopped me mid-stride. I couldn't believe He would ask me such a thing. "No!" was my emphatic, audible reply! "You can't really mean that. I need to change all these things about myself—for You!"



"Dinah," God said, "I made you with all of those traits. Who are you to re-create what I have created?" How could I make Him understand that He would be so much better off with the new improved, revised edition of Dinah Monahan? Again, He asked me, "If I want to keep you exactly the way you are right now, will you let Me?"

I knew I was beaten. Besides, I was so tired of striving to be someone I wasn't, giving up was starting to look attractive. I very hesitantly answered, "All right, God, You, can keep me just the way I am if You're sure that's what You *really* want." Then He impressed upon me that I had to surrender Martha Jo. So, I prayed a prayer of

surrender and left Martha Jo at the foot of the cross. For the first time in years I felt my burden lift. I could quit trying. I admit, I did hope He would see the need to make changes in me. But I stuck to my end of the bargain and, to the best of my ability, I quit trying. Of course, God didn't leave me just the way I was. But He did the shaping and changing instead of me. The difference was He was changing me at a heart level. Funny, the things he honed and shaped but did not fundamentally change were the things I hated about myself. God knew that it was those very traits that would equip me to serve in the ministry He was planning.

A few years after this encounter, God opened our home and hearts to unwed mothers and troubled teens. For six years these young women lived with us—often three at a time. Since all of these young women came out of dysfunctional families and painful life circumstances, my strong personality and frankness were essential in dealing with them! Lifelong relationships were formed, and I have the privilege of seeing not just their babies, but their grandbabies come into the world.

My dislike for who I was and my striving for an alter ego identity are not unusual. It is much more common than people want to admit. I have shared this message with many women through the years, and when I get to this part, they get a funny look on their face. They are amazed that someone else feels this way. Some can even name their alter ego. Over the years, as I have shared this message with women, I ask the question of them that God asked of me: "*If God wants to keep you just the way you are right now, would you let Him?*" I have seen this question strike terror in their hearts! They, like me, were carefully reconstructing their personalities for God. They didn't like who they were, and they didn't trust God to change them.

Some women might be worried that through surrendering their heart, they might lose their personality; they may become Christian doormats where others wipe their feet. In fact, the opposite happens. When I surrendered Martha Jo and allowed God to change my heart, for the first time in my life, I accepted myself as God had created me. (true self-esteem). True, God did and continues to change me every day. But the very things I once hated I now accept as simply being part of me. I don't demand WHAT

changes I want. I don't set myself up for failure by trying to manipulate my personality into something it isn't. I don't fear facing those things in me that I don't like. Surrender allows us to take honest stock of our strengths and weaknesses and put them all in God's hands. It takes control out of our hands. It is the act of uncurling our tight fist from those things we hang on to or protect and surrendering them over to God. It is trusting God completely.

Please don't misunderstand me. I am not talking about changing negative habits. I'm not suggesting that you can sit back and do nothing and wait for God to change everything about you. Surrender does not negate self-discipline or forming good habits. These are different issues entirely. For instance, I am always running late. I know it frustrates friends and family alike. I can't surrender my lateness and expect God to keep me on schedule. I have to change this bad habit with a change in my actions. I need to pay more attention to the clock and do some pre-planning. There is nothing wrong with trying to overcome bad habits or socially unacceptable behavior. What I am talking about refers to **matters of the heart**, the things that our heart dwells on. These are feelings and emotions that are beyond our control.



Chapter 8

The Death of Martha Jo

Poor Martha Jo had to be left at the cross. Instead of being an inspiration she became an idol. Instead of encouragement she became a critic.

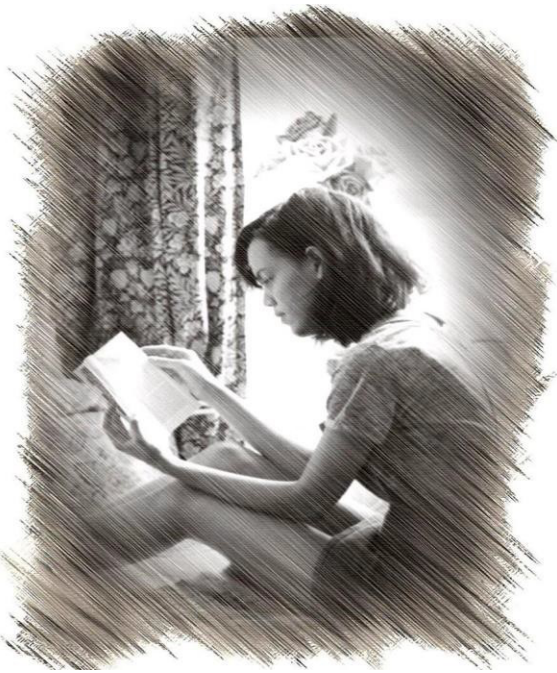
1. What lie was Dinah telling herself about trying to be like Martha Jo?
2. Why do you think striving to be like Martha Jo was so exhausting?
3. What traits does *your* Martha Jo have that you want?
4. What traits in yourself, by contrast, do you hate and want to change (for God of course)?

MEMORY VERSE

*How precious are your thoughts about me, O God.
They cannot be numbered
Psalm 139:17*

Chapter 9

From Sinner to Saint in One Easy Step



I think it is worth taking a minute to reflect on one reason women find it hard to accept themselves and feel like they never can measure up. Look at the huge number of tapes and books about the life experiences of Christian women. The theme usually runs something like this: A woman is caught in the lusts and sins of the world until she finds Jesus. She is then transformed into the perfect Christian woman. Between page 100 and page 225 she goes from sinner to saint and her whole life becomes wonderful. To top it off, she “arrives” spiritually!

Now, the authors don’t mean to say this. And they would be the first to say it’s not what they meant. But when the reader is a woman who feels like she doesn’t measure up spiritually or personally, these books set unreal standards. She will be inspired with the miracle of what happened in the author’s life. But at the same time, she will ask herself, “What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I become like her?”

The second type of books that cause women to have this mind-set are the instruction manuals on *how to* become

the perfect Christian woman. These books are written by the Christian “answer women” who present themselves as the standard to which all women should aspire. They set before you the recipe for becoming the perfect wife, lover, mother, homemaker, friend, and Christian. They have prescriptions to solve all of life’s problems and the rules that go along with it. If you have problems with your sex life, simply greet your husband at the door naked, wrapped in Saran Wrap. (This is really advice given in a book!) If you have problems with self-esteem, pamper yourself with a bubble bath and a new dress.

To the woman who sees herself as a murderer or the woman who was molested or any number of other abuses visited upon innocent little girls, these books only mock their despair. But, because of a wounded woman’s self-loathing, she doesn’t ask, “What’s wrong with this book?” Instead she will ask, “What’s wrong with me?” The books that were meant to inspire become condemnation because of shame.

Chapter 9

From Sinner to Saint in One Easy Step

1. Have you ever read a book like this?

2. Did it encourage you or make you feel like an “inferior Christian?”

One of the lies that happen from a dysfunctional upbringing is that life feels like a rehearsal and it will be better when something happens. This is why women run from their circumstances only to find themselves in the same mess only with different people. They are the common denominator in all of the places they run. God wants us to live life fully as ourselves not as a created personality. Our story is unique and is being written by God. When we surrender, we are saying, “God, I want to live in truth. I want you to be at the center of my life. And I want to live in the NOW. You have a purpose for my life.”

Let God write your book!

MEMORY VERSE

*Your eyes have seen my unformed substance;
And in Your book were all written
The days that were appointed for me,
When as yet there was not one of them.*

Psalm 139:16