



LUTHERAN MILITARY
SUPPORT GROUP
Shoulder to Shoulder in Service

YES, BUT I CAN'T FORGIVE MYSELF

INTRODUCTION

How often have you heard, “Jesus has covered all your sins, you are forgiven!” and thought, “Yes, but I can’t forgive myself.” It is as if we have two separate selves, one that knows we are forgiven by Jesus, and another that feels separated by our own failure to forgive ourselves. Is there a limit to the gospel? In this session, we will look at the connection between faith, trauma, and moral injury and how the gospel is still the answer to finding peace and self-forgiveness.



GOALS

- 1) Define moral injury and trauma and discover how they influence self-forgiveness
- 2) Explore paths to resolution and healing

MORAL INJURY DEFINED

“Moral injury is a wound in the soul, an inner conflict based on a moral evaluation of having inflicted or witnessed harm... Moral injury can result not only from active behavior, such as torturing or killing, but also from witnessing a close friend be slain... it can also involve feeling betrayed by persons in authority” Brock & Lettini, Soul Repair

- 1) Based on the definition above, what type of wound is a moral injury?
- 2) What three actions are listed as possible reasons why moral injury may occur?
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“Symptoms of moral injury can include guilt, shame, disgust, anger, and an inability to self-forgive. Questioning one’s beliefs in God are also symptoms of moral injury.”
VA National Center for PTSD

3) What may be some examples of moral injury that you can think of? That apply to your military or first responder vocation?

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Thinking about that definition and the 3 situations where moral injury can occur, let’s briefly look at three examples of moral injury in the Bible:

- Judas Iscariot (Commission) Mt 27:3-5
- The Disciples in Gethsemane (Omission) Mt 26:36-46
- David and Ahithophel (Betrayal)

4) Is “moral injury” another name for “sin”?

TRAUMA DEFINED

The word “trauma” means *wound* in Greek.

Sometimes moral injury is referred to as “secondary trauma”. For military veterans and first responders, it is not uncommon for moral injury to accompany trauma they have experienced.

5) Based on the definition of trauma below, what three components must be present for trauma to occur?

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“Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.” (SAMHSA)

6) What may be some examples of trauma that you can think of? What are some examples that apply to your military or first responder vocation?

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7) What differences between moral injury and trauma do you notice, based on the definitions?

Trauma is not a new concept. The Bible is full of examples of characters who have experienced trauma and have unresolved trauma. Consider the life of King David as he matures from a young man and warrior to the King of Israel and as a father. Consider the rape of Jacob's daughter Dinah or David's daughter, Tamar. Consider the atrocities that happened with the exile of Israel. Consider the impact on Jesus' disciples as they watched him die on the cross.

STATISTICS

- Most people who go through a traumatic event do not develop PTSD 1
- 6% of US population will develop PTSD during their life 1
- 55% of post-9/11 veterans reported exposure to morally injurious situations 4
 - 19% - Commission
 - 28% - Witnessed
 - 41% - Betrayal
- 51% of veterans who say they had emotionally traumatic or distressing experiences while in the military also say they have suffered from PTS 2
- 44% of combat veterans believe they have suffered from PTS as a result of their military experience 2
 - 38% pre-9/11
 - 55% post-9/11
- 80% of first responders report experiencing traumatic events while on duty 3
- 10-15% of first responders estimated diagnosed with PTSD 3

1) National Center for PTSD, *How Common is PTSD?*, 2025

2) Pew Research, *American Veteran Experience*, 2019

3) *Aggression & Violent Behavior, PTSD in Police, Firefighters, and Dispatchers*, 2018

4) *PTSD Research Quarterly, Moral Injury*, 2022

TWO SELVES

When we have unresolved trauma, it can feel as if we are two different people. One person, or self, is stuck at the moment of trauma - the other is trying to cope in a world where they do not feel like themselves. The goal of therapy is for counselors to help the person work through their trauma and bring the two selves back together as closely as possible. In this way, healing is possible. It takes courage because to heal from the trauma, it means going back to the trauma and processing it.



How does this relate to moral injury? With moral injury, we can also feel like there are two selves. One that knows that Jesus died on the cross for all their sins, and yet we struggle to forgive ourselves. When people say, "You are forgiven! Lay it at the foot of the cross and move on.", we can have the thought, "It's not that easy. You don't understand."

Does this sound familiar to you?

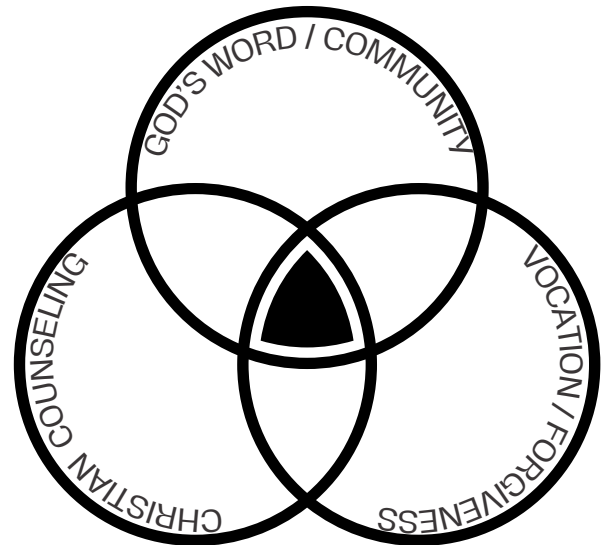
Buddy Check - How does learning these things impact you? How do they impact your faith?

HEALING & RESOLUTION

God's Word / Community - Stay spiritually nourished by regularly studying God's Word and actively participating in your church community.

Vocation / Forgiveness - God's Word affirms the warrior's vocation, viewing them as His servants. Taking lives in duty is not inherently sinful, and fellow believers can provide support, reminding warriors of their calling and God's forgiveness, especially when struggling to forgive themselves.

Trauma-Informed Christian Counseling - Healing comes from God, who has given us powerful minds. Combining spiritual wisdom with mental understanding can help with processing trauma and moral injuries.



MOVING TOWARD FORGIVENESS

What Can You Know?



Lament

Acknowledgement

Self-care

God's Agents of Wrath

God declares these facts about YOU through His objective promises rooted in Himself

I will not let my pain/hurt/trauma/loss define me

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Mt. 5

I am victorious

“No, ..., we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” Ro 8:37

I am valuable

“While we were still sinners Christ died for us, the righteous for the unrighteous.” Ro. 5:8

I am loved

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Jn 3:16

I am powerful, hopeful, helped

“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” Is 41:10

I am redeemed, restored, and clothed in grace

“The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire? See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you.” Zec 3:2-4

I am seen, known, and capable

“The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry; The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” Ps 34:15,17-18

I am blessed

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Jn 20:29

I am not alone

“Don't be afraid, those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” 2 Kgs. 6:16

SUMMARY

- Moral injury is a spiritual injury needing spiritual care. Forgiving self can be challenging when influenced by trauma.
- The gospel works to bridge the gap, mending what feels unmendable, healing what seems to be unhealable. Focus on God's promises and his grace for you.
- It takes time. Give yourself grace. Your experience was no small thing. God is in it for the long game.