What does it mean if you do not feel forgiven after going to confession? Are you forgiven?

I was asked this question at Confirmation class the other day. And I thought it was a really important question to address. The first thing to address is that forgiveness from God is not about how we feel. The only thing you really need in order to receive forgiveness from God is to be truly sorry for what you have done. You must, of course, confess in the sacrament of penance any mortal sin. But the same truth remains that as long as you are truly sorry for what you have done and confess it, then you are forgiven. God’s bar for receiving forgiveness is really set fairly low.

I think what this question is getting at is our inability to forgive ourselves. The truth is that it is far easier to receive forgiveness from God many times, than it is to forgive ourselves. We tend to be much harder on ourselves and on each other than God is. God accepts that we are sinners and—as I like to put it—we are broken and stupid. He realizes that at times we will make decisions contrary to his will and, by definition, that are bad for us. Any choice to sin causes us harm. Any choice to sin moves us away from the Lord even if only momentarily. Any choice to sin causes us to get more centered in ourselves. Any choice to sin is, by definition, something that will lead us to question our own sense of self-worth.

The harm sin does, therefore, is not just about the immediate ramifications/consequences of the action itself; it is also about the ripple effects of sin. They can, many times, be long lasting, and if left unattended, can create greater ramifications: they can pile up and leave us wondering about who we are and what our real relationship is with God. It can also lead us to grow in issues of self-loathing, a sinful breaking of our self-esteem and sense of self-worth. We can get so caught up in what we have done that we lose sight of what God wants to do for us.

The power of sin is that it directs us inward and forces us to see the world through our broken sense of the world. And, it can at times be difficult to let go of this. We get trapped in our own prison—made by us—and we become our own jailor. The only way we can break free of this bondage is to truly turn our hearts to Christ—He wants to set us free.

We need to accept responsibility for what we have done, but at the same time, know that God’s love is greater than anything we have done. The cross is the reminder to us of how much God loves us. His love is unconditional. It is not merited, deserved, or earned in any way. Unconditional love is simply given to us because God has chosen to love us. And once God makes that choice, He will never stop loving us. The reason we accept responsibility, hence, is not to feel bad about ourselves, but rather, to let go of what we have done and embrace God’s love instead. It is not about a feeling, but a conscious act of the will to reject sin, and accept the healing and merciful, encompassing love of God.