



EDWARD T. WELCH

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HOW GOD LIFTS THE PAIN OF  
WORTHLESSNESS & REJECTION

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# SHAME INTERRU PTED



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 CCEF

“Ed Welch finds us hiding in our shame and draws us out to be re-clothed by Christ. He surprises us again with the deep relevance of God’s Word—even Leviticus—to the secret fears that dominate our daily lives. This brutally honest book is for everyone.”

**Mike Wilkerson**, Pastor and Director of Biblical Counseling at Mars Hill Church; author of *Redemption: Freed by Jesus from the Idols We Worship and the Wounds We Carry*.

“Shame is everywhere. It is obvious on the faces of those who have been abused. But because of sin, it lies in the depths of every human heart. Ed Welch shines the light of the gospel of Christ into the dynamics of shame and explains how it is overcome in the honor Christ obtained for us through his identification with our shame on the cross.”

**Eric Johnson**, Lawrence and Charlotte Hoover Professor of Pastoral Care, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Director of the Society for Christian Psychology

“This side of heaven, we all struggle with shame and guilt. Ed Welch has served the church well by writing a thorough, practical, Christ-centered treatment of this difficult subject. Your love for Jesus will be greatly increased as you reflect on the way His work on the cross has freed you from the paralyzing effects of sin.”

**Steve Viars**, Senior Pastor of Faith Baptist Church; author of *Putting Your Past in Its Place: Moving Forward in Freedom and Forgiveness*

“In *Shame Interrupted*, Ed Welch reminds us that the gospel really is good news. He provides a candid perspective on the suffocating reality of human shame with an honest courage that is only possible because of Christ’s

healing love. Dr. Welch brings the wisdom of an experienced counselor and the resilient hope of a Christ-follower into this compassionate book.”

**Mark R. McMinn, PhD**, Author of *Sin and Grace in Christian Counseling*

“Dr. Welch seems to know what the reader needs long before he or she knows and recognizes that shamed people are often hopeless people. *Shame Interrupted* is not just a remedy for persons caught in paralyzing shame; it gives them hope that it is possible to live a life that feels clean and holy. That is a gift.”

**Jeffrey S. Black PhD**, Chair and Professor Graduate Program, in Counseling, Philadelphia Biblical University; Licensed Psychologist

“This book proclaims a message of hope and healing. Ed Welch calls us to identify with Jesus because he identified with us, and shows that the answer is to turn to Christ for relief from shame, not inward. Ed’s book is a robustly biblical, deeply personal, and powerfully high-octane gospel answer to the universal human experience of shame.”

**Justin Holcomb**, Pastor, Mars Hill Church; Executive Director of the Resurgence; adjunct professor of theology, Reformed Theological Seminary; co-author of *Rid of My Disgrace: Hope and Healing for Victims of Sexual Assault*

“Ed’s book has immediate application into my own spiritual journey and the women I journey with who are seeking freedom from the shame of their own relational and sexual brokenness. *Shame Interrupted* encouraged and nurtured me in the sweet truths of the gospel that come when we face shame through Jesus Christ and the lens of God’s Word.”

**Ellen Dykas**, Women’s Ministry Coordinator, Harvest USA

“Ed Welch has given the family of God a tremendous treasure in his book, *Shame Interrupted*. Serving for many years as a pastor and shepherd of people, I know firsthand how this issue plagues many in the body of Christ. As always, Dr. Welch has written with loving concern for those who are hurting and with biblical accuracy. That combination makes his handling of this topic a resource that will help people address shame properly and will help those who seek to equip others in this process.”

**Dr. Bryan Hughes**, Senior Pastor of Grace Bible Church, Bozeman, MT

“Welch has given us a profound and comprehensive work on the often neglected topic of shame, addressing the issue with pastoral sensitivity, biblical acuity, and practical advice. In our world, people are asking less about guilt and more about how to deal with shame in their lives and in their past. This is a great resource for pastors, counselors, and for anyone interested.”

**Rankin Wilbourne**, Lead Pastor, Pacific Crossroads Church, Los Angeles, CA

“With the skill and care of a farmer turning over his soil in spring, Ed manages to unearth the shame buried within the human heart. The title will cause some to shy away with a degree of self-denial saying, ‘I don’t have this problem.’ If you came from the line of Adam, you have this problem. Having taught the Word for many years, I am not ashamed to admit how much I learned about my own heart and the redemptive power of the gospel to set me free.”

**D. Michael Minter**, Senior Pastor of Reston Bible Church, VA

“As someone who has had a long struggle with the demeaning, paralyzing, idol-fueling power of shame, I am so thankful for Ed Welch’s

newest book, *Shame Interrupted*. Ed shows us how the gospel of God's grace not only cancels the legal guilt of sin, but also how it breaks the lingering power of shame. As Jesus works in our hearts, to heal and free us from shame, we don't become proud triumphalists, but 'boasters in weakness'—men and women gladdened and gentled by the irrepressible love of our grace-full Bridegroom, Jesus, set free to serve him and love others. This is such a practical and encouraging read!"

**Scotty Smith**, Pastor for Preaching, Franklin, TN; author of *Everyday Prayers: 365 Days to a Gospel-Centered Faith*

"Ed Welch creates a safe place to deal with shame. Whether your shame is worn as a scarlet letter for all to see, or invisibly written on your heart, he turns shame on its head, showing us how to move away from shame and proudly wear the robes of honor that God himself bestows on us. Whether you are trying to deal with shame yourself or ministering to others, I would encourage you to read this book to guide you in the process of restoring hope and joy to those who hang their heads in shame."

**Janet Nygren**, Co-author in the *Bringing the Bible to Life Series*;  
Director of Assimilation at Princeton Presbyterian Church

# SHAME INTERRUPTED

HOW GOD LIFTS THE PAIN  
OF WORTHLESSNESS  
AND REJECTION

Edward T. Welch



New Growth Press, Greensboro, NC 27404

[www.newgrowthpress.com](http://www.newgrowthpress.com)

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Published 2012.

Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version<sup>®</sup> (ESV<sup>®</sup>), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

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Cover Design: faceoutbooks, [www.faceoutbooks.com](http://www.faceoutbooks.com)

Interior Design and Typesetting: North Market Street Graphics, Lancaster, PA

EBOOK ISBN-13: 978-1-938267-29-1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Welch, Edward T., 1953–

Shame interrupted : how God lifts the pain of worthlessness and rejection / Edward T. Welch.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-935273-98-1 (alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-935273-98-1 (alk. paper)

1. Shame—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

BT714.W45 2012

233'.4—dc23

2011034606



*To*  
*David Powlison,*  
*kindred spirit and friend.*  
*Working side by side is an honor.*

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am especially indebted to:

—the administration, staff, counselors, and faculty of CCEF. Thank you. There is no way I could do anything without your help, instruction, and fellowship. Roslyn, thank you for quietly picking up many of my responsibilities so I could be more focused on this project.

—counselees who waited patiently for me to understand the experience of shame. This is a start.

—friends who read early versions of this book and gave careful feedback. Thank you.

—Susan Lutz. What a gift to have you edit, clarify, and refine. Once again, thank you for making something I have written much better.

—my wife, Sheri. You were patient (again) when I was preoccupied, and you were always available to listen to ideas. Thank you. I am honored to be your partner and friend.

Over the last few years, I have gradually absorbed ideas from many excellent works on shame in the New Testament and the ancient Near East, so this book is light on endnotes. Here are some of the authors and texts that shaped my thinking:

Dan Allender, *The Wounded Heart: Hope for Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1990). This isn't a scholarly study of shame in the Ancient Near East, but Dan put shame on the evangelical map with this book.

David Arthur de Silva, *Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, SBL Dissertation Series no.152 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995). De Silva gives a nice overview of the honor material and helped me see it in Hebrews.

Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). Gorman does a great job with Philippians 2. Inspiring.

Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998). This book provided a significant boost to my own thinking on shame. Neyrey carefully documents the discourse about honor and shame in New Testament culture and demonstrates how Matthew has this background in mind as he organizes his Gospel. He includes helpful material about worth and value. You can find the entire text online at Google books.

Jay Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement: The Priestly Conceptions* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005). Sklar wrestles with why the Hebrew word for atonement or covering extends to both sin and impurity that isn't from personal sin. The book is fairly technical but fundamental to the discussion of shame.

Johanna Stiebert, *The Construction of Shame in the Hebrew Bible* in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* (346), D. J. A. Clines and P. R. Davies, editors (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002). Stiebert offers a helpful warning to those who make shame and honor central, especially in the Prophets.

Richard P. Thompson, "Gathered at the Table: Holiness and Ecclesiology in the Gospel of Luke," in *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament*, Kent E. Browers and Andy Johnson, editors (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

2007), 76–94. Thompson is one of several scholars to notice Luke’s interest in meals. This article looks at all the significant dining events in Luke.

Shame greatly hurts or greatly helps mankind.

—Homer

# Chapter 1

## THE QUIET KILLER

I hate shame.

I know there is a place for it. Utter shamelessness is not what we are after. I have learned much through the shame I've experienced and there are times when I should experience more of it. But I still hate it. I hate how pervasive it is, how it stalks in disguise beneath so many modern problems. Look under anger, fear, even guilt, and you will find a root of shame. I hate to see the suffering. People are dying from it—some quickly, others slowly. It is the heart disease of this and every era. Shame is Tolkien's Ringwraiths: "The Nazgûl came again . . . like vultures that expect their fill of doomed men's flesh."<sup>1</sup>

I asked a group of one hundred students if they experienced shame. They were an excellent class: ages twenty-two to sixty-eight, male and female, thoughtful, wise, and adept at helping others through complicated problems. Not too many people want to acknowledge shame in their lives, so I didn't expect many to raise their hands—maybe a few auction-like finger twitches or head nods. But I did begin the discussion with an illustration of shame in my own life, which probably made the class feel a little more comfortable.

"We are going to talk about shame this evening. Have any of you experienced shame?" I hoped at least one person would come to my rescue and leave me feeling less exposed.

Then, as if to guarantee that no one would raise his or her hand, I added, "Debilitating shame?"



Immediately, the entire class raised their hands in unison.

I was hoping for one or two hands. To see so many broke my heart. Who would have thought? It was as if they simply needed a place where it was okay to acknowledge their shame.

I hope this book is a place where you can identify shame, acknowledge it in your life, bring hope to it, and then be humbled—not humiliated—as you receive comforting words and cleansing acts from God. I hope this book is a safe place.

Though the book will start by jumping into a number of descriptions of shame, the answers to shame will unfold gradually because the Bible has so much to say about it. Its words can't be shared or assimilated quickly. It is a story that builds until you can actually notice beauty—without the sense of foreboding that it will soon be swallowed up by pain and disgrace.

What is shame?

Shame is the deep sense that you are unacceptable because of something you did, something done to you, or something associated with you. You feel exposed and humiliated.

Or, to strengthen the language,

You are disgraced because you acted less than human, you were treated as if you were less than human, or you were associated with something less than human, and there are witnesses.

These definitions can get us started. There isn't one mandatory definition or description for shame, but any definition will include certain elements. For example, you can expect images of being an outsider, naked, and unclean. And don't forget shame's public nature. Guilt can be hidden; shame feels like it is always exposed.

Once you identify shame, you can find it everywhere.

A middle-aged man seemed fine to others, though he himself felt like a little boy, stuck in the past, inadequate, small, and worthless. A decent job couldn't erase the words and actions of his parents. Some of the words were all too common: "You will never amount to anything." Those words were bad enough. Now add his parents' indifference to his recounting of his school day, coupled with their enthusiasm whenever his sisters appeared. No wonder he had a lingering sense that something was very wrong with him. That sense is called shame.

Or you can find shame in a recently married woman who feels dirty after a sexual encounter with her husband. She remembers some inappropriate sexual touching by her brothers and wonders what else happened that she doesn't remember.

Sometimes the descriptions of shame in this book will be jolting. For example, "You *are* an outcast" is blunt, matter-of-fact, and a bit impolite. A nicer way to say this would be, "You *feel as if* you are an outcast"; "You *feel as if* you are worthless, though you really aren't." Shame doesn't seem as oppressive when you insert enough *feel-as-ifs*. If you only *feel* shameful, maybe it can be covered over by some affirming self-talk and you'll be good to go: "Don't pay attention to what you feel because it isn't true. You really are acceptable and worthy. Clean as a whistle. Really! Just ignore the fact that you feel naked, contaminated, and rejected. Think positive."

Well, that is not true. Shame is not a mirage. It is very real. A sexually violated woman feels contaminated by what has been done to her, and *she really is contaminated*. A person who has lived with rejection can't neutralize it with happy thoughts. Shame is like dirt. No matter how it happened, you are a mess and something has to be done about it. When you are dirty, there is *no feel-as-if* about it. Wishful thinking is ineffective.

Psychiatric medications, drugs or alcohol, a change in perspective, and self-affirmation are equally ineffective. Shame demands something much more potent than these superficial treatments.

The first steps out of shame will be the hardest. These are the anti-denial steps in which we will put shame into words. You can't do battle with something nameless, and too often shame eludes accurate identification. So we will search for words that bring shame out into the open, where it can be seen and fought against. The words you read in this book, though you might not want to hear them, will be familiar to you; many of them have been your longtime companions. At times they will make you want to turn away, but don't give up; stay with it. Identification is only the first step. It isn't the whole story.

After that, you will hear God's words to the shamed, and you will discover shame's opposite: You are acceptable. You will receive honor, value, worth, even glory, and it will be public.

At first you might be suspicious, as if God's words are too good to be true. Are they just more happy thoughts, more positive self-affirmation? Don't turn away. As those words pile up—as you can no longer deny God's accepting love—you will want to turn toward him and hear more.

Listen for the love, hate the shame, and have no tolerance for resignation. That's the plan.

# Shame Uncovered



We are familiar with guilt. Shame is more elusive. But once you name it, you can see it everywhere. That is one of the goals for the next few chapters—to see it everywhere. You might be tempted to say “Enough already” after the first page or two because it can be painful to rehearse shameful experiences. But you can’t hear good news about shame unless you first identify it. As you do, you will discover that shame afflicts us all.

What is shame?

You are shunned.

Faces are turned away from you.

They ignore you, as if you didn't exist.

You are naked.

Faces are turned toward you.

They stare at you, as if you were hideous.

You are worthless, and it's no secret.

You are of little or no value to those whose opinions matter  
to you.

# Chapter 2

## SHAME EXPOSED

“I suck.” That’s what shame says on a good day.

“LOSER!” You would think it was a surname—John Loser, Jane Loser.

You will find shame in the girl who obsesses about suicide. While her classmates take part in their normal schoolgirl chatter, she reflects on how her life is one big mistake. She is certain that she doesn’t deserve to live. And she is ten years old.

Or consider Carlos Acosta, the world-famous Cuban dancer, who as a young boy was sent to a boarding school far from home. While there, he started talking to the cockroaches.

Why?

“They and I had much in common.”<sup>2</sup>

Carlos, thank you. These are hard words, but they are words that identify the dehumanizing nature of shame. It’s a start.

Take a closer look at a heroin addict. Yes, he has trashed the lives of others, but his specialty is trashing his own. Why do such a thing? Because he is certain he deserves the very worst. Addiction, with all its humiliating behaviors and degrading consequences, perfectly depicts an addict’s ever-present shame. Watch Ewan McGregor’s character in the movie *Trainspotting* as he goes swimming in “The Worst Toilet in Scotland”

looking for his beloved heroin suppository. He is more than a mere junkie. He is a performance artist who is acting out his autobiography.

Shame is everywhere. Even children can identify it. “That’s yucky” is their version. “Ick!” was among my granddaughter’s first words. Initially it is about mud, peas, sticky hands, and squished spiders. Something is dirty. “Don’t touch!” If you do, be sure to wash your hands. In a few years *yucky* will describe boys for girls and girls for boys. Sadly, for many women (and more men than you would think), soon after that it describes themselves. Expect to find *ick* and *yucky* not just at the extremes of abuse or addiction but in everyday life. Expect to find it in your life.

Just talk to someone who has been on the short end of a divorce—the spouse who wanted to stay in the marriage. Guaranteed, that person feels yucky. Long before the marriage was over, the cutting words or actual betrayal took its toll. Someone promised to love and didn’t. Despite all evidence to the contrary, if you are the forsaken person, you are sure there is something very wrong with you. You are worthless. It doesn’t matter that divorce is commonplace and you are (probably) no longer shamed by neighbors or fellow church members. You can do a fine job heaping shame on yourself.

All it takes is a tradition of demeaning, critical words from the right person.

All it takes is *nothing* from the right person. No interest in you, no words spoken to you, no love. If you are treated as if you do not exist, you will feel shame.

Get fired from a job. Fail. That will do it, if others know about it. A young man who recently lost his job noticed his shame when he wanted to talk to his friends about the loss to get their support and counsel. He also noticed it when he wanted to avoid those same friends because, who wants to

announce that he doesn't measure up? He decided to take the middle course and lie: "The company was downsizing."

Do you find that your resumé is never quite good enough? Do you ever boast, just a bit, in conversation with colleagues or friends? Boasting is a kind of cover-up to make yourself look more honorable—or at least acceptable. Have you ever name-dropped with the hopes of getting a little glory by association?

What are we so ashamed about? Why do we always have to cover up an unseemly part of ourselves? It doesn't take long before you see shame everywhere—the hum of low-grade self-loathing and shame.

On the surface, life might look fine. Tennis pro Andre Agassi was successful by almost any standard, yet his secret meth habit did double duty. It gave him a high and, at the same time, "I get an undeniable satisfaction from harming myself and shortening my career. After decades of merely dabbling in masochism, I'm making it my mission . . . I hate tennis more than ever, but I hate myself more."<sup>3</sup> Yes, shame has a death wish.

Maybe you know it as low self-esteem, in which case you *really* see it everywhere. The words *worthless* and *failure* seem to be inscribed on our birth certificates, and they travel with us through life. Just try dislodging low self-esteem with good grades, above-average income, or the red sports car. It won't budge.

Shame is complicated indeed. Low self-esteem can say, "I want to be greater than I am and I feel bad because I am not more successful." Our pride runs deep and it is one of low self-esteem's accomplices. The other is our shame.

Shame says, "You are not acceptable. You are a mistake." At first you might hear it from others, such as parents or classmates. Later you make it your own: "*I am not acceptable. I am a mistake.*"



You confess things that aren't your fault:

being the target of someone's anger or contempt  
being hurt or rejected by other people  
being alive  
being born  
being.

Ironically, despite its reputation for separating the elite from the untouchable, shame has no prejudices or preferences. It insinuates its way into the essence of rich and poor, majority and minority, failures and successes—it targets anyone and everyone.

Ugh. What a way to begin. Shame is crude, intrusive, demanding, and relentless. Don't expect subtlety or refined manners. But we are not going to turn away. That would mean hopelessness and defeat. Instead, up ahead we will search for words that speak *for* you. Then we will search for words that speak *to* you. We are going to set our sights on shame.

Shame attaches itself to our humanness and is more common than you think. It often hides in guilt's shadow, so we might speak about guilt when shame is the real culprit. We might speak about forgiveness and no condemnation, yet shame is unmoved by such things. When a judge says, "Not guilty," and you still feel like scum, the verdict doesn't bring much help or hope. You might even find it a little disappointing. At least a guilty verdict would give you a chance to make amends or atone for something.

These days, shame is emerging from the shadows and beginning to have its own identity. For example, if you talk about guilt to people under thirty, you often get blank stares. But if you talk about "worthless," "failure," or "shame," they feel as if you have deciphered the core of their being. For them, shame is arguably *the* human problem. If the next generation is talking

about it, that's a good sign, in the sense that shame may soon receive the attention it deserves. Meanwhile, you won't hear about it on the national news nor even in many Sunday sermons. It's hard to know how to speak about the unspeakable. You don't mention shameful things in polite conversation.

## SHAME AND GUILT

Shame and guilt are close companions but not identical. Shame is the more common and broader of the two. In Scripture you will find shame (nakedness, dishonor, disgrace, defilement) about ten times more often than you find guilt.

Guilt lives in the courtroom where you stand alone before the judge. It says, "You are responsible for wrongdoing and legally answerable." "You are wrong." "You have sinned." The guilty person expects punishment and needs forgiveness.

Shame lives in the community, though the community can feel like a courtroom. It says, "You don't belong—you are unacceptable, unclean, and disgraced" because "You are wrong, you have sinned" (guilt), *or* "Wrong has been done to you" *or* "You are associated with those who are disgraced or outcast." The shamed person feels worthless, expects rejection, and needs cleansing, fellowship, love, and acceptance.

Guilt and shame intersect when a particular sin is regarded, by yourself or others, to be worse than most sins. For example, get caught with child pornography and you will experience both guilt and shame. Same-sex attraction finds itself here too. But

what if your anger briefly flares at a reckless driver? You might feel a little guilt but, most likely, no shame because everyone else has done similar things.

Don't forget that your sensors for guilt and shame are fallible. They can be silent when they should say something, and they can also sound false alarms. But, false alarm or not, when we hear them we must do something. They don't turn off automatically.

With this in mind, the first order of business is to face shame and describe it. Once out, it will put up a fight. But there is a path that actually leads away from shame and ends in acceptance and honor. Otherwise, there would be no point in doing anything beyond trying to live with it.

Here are some basics about shame. Shame is life-dominating and stubborn. Once entrenched in your heart and mind, it is a squatter that refuses to leave. You might notice hints of it when you are embarrassed. You pick your nose in public and get caught. You break out in acne and someone points it out. At those moments you don't fit in and everyone knows it. There is a momentary rupture of relationships. You turn red. You wish you could die, right on the spot.

But there is an important difference between embarrassment and shame. Whatever caused your embarrassment has been experienced by everyone else too, at one point or another. Your sense of social isolation was fleeting. Within the hour—or decade—you laugh about it. With shame, you *never* laugh at it. It feels like unending embarrassment, but it is more than that. Embarrassment doesn't afflict the core of the person's soul, but shame becomes your identity. It touches everything about you. Embarrassment *points* toward shame, but it wears away over time. For shame to wear away,

it feels as though the shame-ful person would have to wear away, and some people have tried such things.

Imagine a ten-year-old boy, smaller and less athletic than his peers, waiting to be picked for a soccer game. Two of the more “honored” (that is, cool) boys are captains, and they select teams from a group of eager participants. The two go back and forth, choosing the best players first. As players are chosen they walk to their teams, and the selection pool gets smaller and smaller. With each pick the remaining boys become increasingly self-conscious, then embarrassed. Shame, however, is reserved for the last boy standing, who isn’t picked at all. Slowly, head down, he walks to the side that is stuck with him. The opposing team laughs while his team groans as if they have become contaminated. Apparently, shame is contagious. The young boy spreads it to his new teammates. But he shouldn’t expect anyone to say, “Okay, we’re all in this together.” The shamed boy will be the scapegoat for the team’s loss and, somehow, he will be blamed for any teammate’s misfortune for the next week.

This experience *might* pass. The rejected boy might become a respected and powerful CEO where *he* gets to do the picking and the rejecting. The curse of that old shameful experience has been reversed. But it’s not always that easy. More often than not, scratch the surface of the CEO and the rejected ten-year-old boy is still there, still hearing the derision of his classmates.

Do the following sound familiar?

- You feel so wrong, but you don’t know why.
  - Blame always seems to end up at your doorstep.
  - You still feel the shameful moment as vividly as the day it happened.
- Sometimes it even feels worse.

For young girls, sport is not the prime venue for shame. Boys are. How many times does a young girl want to run away and hide because she wasn't asked to dance, didn't go to the prom, or was ignored by a boy she liked?

Stay with me. We are just getting started. There is good news to come, but the only way to get to the good news is to bring our shame out into the open.

Sometimes shame grabs hold of your heart and life because of something that happened to you. It doesn't matter that so many others have experienced these things. With shame, misery doesn't care if it has company. Lepers might live in the same colony, but they share no vibrant community.

- *Any* sexual violation brings shame to the victim. In creation, there are God-given boundaries that establish where things belong. We all have a sense of this, even with everyday objects. For example, mud is fine by a pond but not on your hands or in a home. When sex happens outside its intended boundaries, it brings shame on the victim. It *should* bring shame on the perpetrator.
- Unfaithfulness in marriage brings shame on the betrayed spouse. It *should* bring shame on the unfaithful spouse.
- Verbally battered men and women are filled with shame. They have been told that they are wretched and, once they get worn down, they believe it. Then they feel compelled to endure the abuse in silence because it is shameful to reveal that someone who is supposed to love them now berates them.
- Women who have been treated like objects experience humiliation and shame. Sadly, nearly every woman has been treated this way at some time.
- Did you grow up with an angry, unpredictable parent who exploded, apologized, and exploded again? When this person was angry, he or she

spoke piercing and demeaning words, and those words outweighed any apology. When you live around irrational anger, you will eventually blame yourself.

- *Any* rejection, neglect, or demeaning words by someone who is supposed to love you, such as a parent or a spouse, brings shame.
- Adopted children can feel different from children living with biological parents. Even when their adoptive parents love them well, they can hear the message inside their heads, “You were rejected. Somebody didn’t want you. You are not like everyone else.”
- If you are noticeably different—physically, intellectually, or financially—you know shame. And who doesn’t feel noticeably different in at least one of these categories? Have you ever said “I’m ugly” or “I’m stupid”? People who went through school with misunderstood learning disabilities *or* learning abilities always experience shame, even as successful adults.
- Even in our “enlightened” era, psychiatric hospitalization brings shame.
- If you carry extra body weight in a culture obsessed with thinness, you carry shame. Fall below the community standards of beauty and you carry shame.
- Filing bankruptcy, losing a job, and being forced to rely on the generosity of others all bring shame.

Sometimes shame comes because of what happened to you, but you can’t point to a particular event. Instead, it comes from the gradual accumulation of demeaning words and actions.

- Daily criticism from those you respect will add up to shame. There might be offhand comments, perhaps even “joking” remarks about how you never measure up. The poet Elizabeth Bishop once described her

childhood as “naturally born guilty.”<sup>4</sup> She used the word *guilt* as a tamer substitute for shame.

- Racial minorities can be the numerical majority in some places, but wherever they live they sense their *different* status every day. Racism is never far away. The last degrading comment or racial slur was probably heard within the last twenty-four hours. Racism tries to impose shame onto an entire group of people, and it is usually successful.
- Do you believe that one of your siblings was favored? Is there good evidence for that? If so, your parents, who know you best, chose someone else over you. It’s like getting picked last every day.
- Was a parent or caretaker a heavy drinker or drug user? You will be called horrible things, you will feel different from other people, and you will feel responsible.
- Were parents absent, preoccupied with their own problems, untrustworthy about their commitments, or inconvenienced by your presence? You felt shame.

Sometimes shame attaches to you because of what *you* did or do.

- Addicts live with shame, whether the problem is drugs, alcohol, food, or sex. No one tells you that when you fall in love with any of these, you also say “I do” to shame. Then, when shame strikes, it is so nasty you have to numb yourself, and what better anesthetic than your addiction? It is the perfect vicious circle.
- Homosexuality follows the same path. Those who have same-sex imaginations or act on their impulses often feel shame.
- If you do anything seen as scandalous by you or your community, expect to experience shame.

- Victims of sexual violation often report perverted sexual imaginations, such as fantasies of bondage or prostitution. These are deeply shameful and seem sinful. If you have these fantasies you will certainly feel contaminated. However, these fantasies usually would not have existed without victimization. They are a tragic consequence of being linked to someone else's sin and violence.
- What do you want to hide? That is a shortcut to identifying shame in your life.
- Anything connected with nudity and genital contact outside God-given boundaries will bring shame. Yes, the connection between shame and sex has already been mentioned, but it can't be overemphasized.
- If you have an overactive or scrupulous conscience, every wrongdoing or perceived wrongdoing will add to your heap of shame. Every sordid thought, however fleeting, causes you to retreat ever further from other people.

Sometimes shame is the result of your associations.

- Did something shameful happen in your family? Has there been a suicide, poverty, a public failure, public immorality, someone imprisoned? Remember that one person's shame rubs off on those near him or her. If you are close to someone or something shameful, you can feel shame too.
- Are you associated with a people group that committed atrocities? That will bring shame too.

Perhaps you feel we've done much more than dip our toes in the water. Does drowning feel more like it? That's the problem with shame: there is no gradual way to deal with it. Could there be a gradual way to deal with



something so lethal? If you approach it tentatively, you can expect defeat. Shame will never surrender its power over you if you are tentative about it. You need to identify it and attack it with hope.

Here is what we know and where we are going.

First, shame is blended into our present human condition. That doesn't mean that happiness and joy only come at the cost of massive denial. No, there can be real contentment and peace. We don't feel all of our emotions at once. But if you look deeply within yourself, you will find shame. It is part of being human. It is why hiding and covering are universal instincts.

Second, we can be bold in the face of shame because shame *can* be removed, though not by something we do. There is absolutely nothing *you* can do to detach it, which you already know. You might try bolstering your resumé, confronting your low self-esteem with positive affirmations, or even reciting to yourself the new identity given you by God. But all these strategies are like putting cheap paint over rust; they might work for a season, but the rust will win in the end. There is only one specific remedy that can bring change and transform. The purpose of this journey is to discover that remedy and let it wash you all over.

Third, shame is tackled best in the context of a relationship. Granted, going public with your shame is something you have tried to avoid, but being open about it, at least with someone who is a wise encourager, is part of the way out of shame. Wonderful deeds deserve to be praised publicly. But if your shame is due to something evil that someone else did to you, those deeds deserve to be publicly “unpraised” (as a friend said to me), and you can't do that by yourself. Do not allow shame to intimidate you into silence.

For Discussion

1. How are you responding to what you've read so far? Are you hopeful? Feeling sick to your stomach? A little of both?
2. How would *you* define shame? How would you distinguish it from embarrassment?
3. How would you distinguish shame and guilt? They overlap, so their treatments overlap, but what does shame need that makes it unique?
4. Some violations feel highly personal, but they don't permanently damage the victim. Theft is one example. A T-shirt stolen at the local gym is maddening. A cell phone stolen from your car is a loss, and you swear to lock your car ever after. But a locket and heirloom jewelry stolen from your bedroom is personal. You feel dirty. Defiled? Your privacy has been invaded. These injustices, however, don't provoke shame. What makes some violations shameful?
5. Women can usually identify shame in their lives without much effort. Men tend to *feel* it but not identify it. If you are a man, see if you can locate that shamed little boy.
6. Can you see the benefit of putting the experiences that shamed you into words and actually speaking those words to someone? One benefit is that it shatters the myth that shame must remain hidden at all costs. What are other benefits?
7. What would you add to the lists of shameful experiences in this chapter?

What is shame?

You are different

rejected

exposed

contaminated.

# Chapter 3

## SHAME THROUGH THE YEARS

It might help to know that the struggle with shame has been quietly waged throughout history. For example, you probably remember Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, in which Hawthorne identified the intersection between guilt and shame. In the book, Hester Prynne forever wore the scarlet A as punishment for her adultery. Was she guilty? Yes. And forgiveness is the very center of Jesus' message to her. She had sinned and there is always forgiveness available for sinners—always. Yet the story is really about her shame—the public and lasting scorn she received from the community. When you receive such reproach from the community, you can easily believe that God himself joins those many voices, though he certainly does not.

Hester's scarlet A is a literary reminder that, once shame attaches itself, it's hard to get rid of it. At least that's the way it feels. The only time Hester removed her letter, her daughter refused to go near her. She didn't recognize her mother without the mark of shame. Meanwhile, Reverend Dimmesdale, the adulterous partner whose identity Hester did not reveal, wore his own scarlet letter, which he privately etched onto his own bare chest.

Sadly, the story is timeless. Hester Prynne is much more than a marginalized and shamed adulteress. Both she and Rev. Dimmesdale speak for shame specialists who wear a scarlet A perpetually, either in public or in private. Most of us notice at least a trace of shame in our lives, but there are some who have reminders every single day. If you are wearing a scarlet A or

any other scarlet letter, our aim is to get rid of it so that no one, including yourself, will be able to find any evidence that it ever existed.

You have heard of stocks and pillory, which figure in *The Scarlet Letter*. Stocks were wooden boards that locked together around your feet. If you broke the law, in you would go. You could find them at marketplaces, prominent crossroads, or large gathering spaces to intensify the public humiliation. If you swore, you could be locked up for an hour; drunkenness might get you four. But at least your hands were free to defend yourself from the objects that might be thrown at you.

You weren't so fortunate with a pillory. If you were put in one of them, you would stand with your arms and head locked between two wooden boards, defenseless against yesterday's rotting food. Thieves often ended up there.

Do you think that those who were once in stocks or the pillory were more sympathetic to the next person in line? Or do you think they were among the first to throw garbage and hurl insults? If you struggle with shame, you might find a little of both responses in yourself. You might have compassion for some while you stand in judgment over others.

The worst part of the stocks and pillory was the public spectacle of it all. The best part was that you were eventually released to re-enter everyday life. If people threw garbage at you then, *they* would end up in the stocks. The system sounds inhumane, but at least the person's release acted as a public announcement that he or she was now socially acceptable. I don't doubt that if people could be done with their shame today by spending a few hours in the stocks, we would see an endless line of volunteers.

Shame remains an essential feature of punishments around the world. If humans have an aversion to feeling shame, why not exploit this as a way to control unwanted behavior? Parents have often used demeaning tactics to

control their children. “You should be ashamed of yourself.” Not long ago even teachers prided themselves on mastering these strategies, as many students in parochial schools before the 1980s can tell you. We are only a generation or two removed from dunce caps and public embarrassment in the classroom. But present strategies of people in power go far beyond the stocks and pillory. In lawless regimes around the world, soldiers go on sprees of rape and other forms of humiliation. Their despicable acts are part of the leadership’s tactics, because shame gives power. That is, the ones who humiliate have power over the humiliated. It becomes a form of social control because shamed people rarely take stands against injustice. Such a stand would mean they would have to go public, which would only double the shame. Instead, once we are shamed, most of us try to make sense of it by believing we are getting what we deserve. So why would we protest?

You can find this in the souls of most sexually victimized women. They are of two minds. On the one hand they know they were victims of ungodly perpetrators. But right next to that conviction is an equally strong sense that they, somehow, deserved what they received. Even worse, they might think that God himself decreed the injustice as a form of punishment. Be on guard: assume that shame always accumulates lies.

Since the desires for power and control are in every heart, you don’t have to look overseas for lawless brutality. It happens every day between parents and children, boyfriends and girlfriends, husbands and wives. Where there is injustice, shame will be part of its fallout.

## For Discussion

1. Can you think of other historical or fictional figures that capture the experience of shame? Did they do something shameful for that era or were they treated shamefully? (Hester experienced both.)

2. Are you or people you love walking around with a scarlet A? What is that like?
3. Can you identify any modern versions of the stocks and pillory?
4. Would you volunteer for the stocks or pillory? Why or why not?
5. It is never too soon to look for the lies that attach themselves to shame. What lies can you identify?

What is shame? You are  
WORTHLESS.  
NOTHING.  
ZERO.



# Chapter 4

## SHAME AND DISGUST

**L**et's do a little more to bring shame out in the open.  
Shame connects three human experiences.

You feel like an *outcast*. You don't belong.

You feel *naked*. While everyone else is walking around with their clothes on, you feel exposed and vulnerable. You are seen, and what others see is not pretty.

You feel *unclean*. Something is wrong with you. You are dirty. Even worse, you are contaminated. There is a difference between being a bit muddy and harboring a deadly, contagious virus.

When you put words to it you can find it everywhere.

The ancient cultures of Asia have identified shame as the deepest problem of humanity. They have elaborate systems to manage it. For them, shame comes up daily. If you don't get into the right school, for example, you have shamed your entire family. If you don't measure up to *any* of the innumerable expectations of your family or culture, you "lose face." Your job is to maintain the social status of your group. Otherwise, you dishonor yourself and others. Ugh. You don't just bring shame on yourself; you bring it on others too. But that shouldn't surprise us because we already know that shame can contaminate those who are close by.

Western countries are less sophisticated when it comes to shame. The relative youth of our culture leaves us with a limited vocabulary for it, and

our social conventions expect us to manage shame on our own. But you can still find it everywhere.

Here are a few places to look:

Depression: What depressed person doesn't think of himself or herself as a miserable, unredeemable failure?

Anger: As in "STAY AWAY or you will see me, and what you see won't be pretty." Look for the paradoxical combination of self-loathing and arrogant judgment. Men are specialists at this.

Anorexia: The deep logic of anorexia is that you are unworthy and deserve nothing, so you give yourself nothing. If you give yourself nothing, perhaps you will disappear, or at least less of you will be seen.

Fear and withdrawal: You might as well avoid other people since you feel like you don't belong with them. You don't want to be seen.

Exhibitionism: The person who is the life of the party acts shameless in the hope that such a thing is possible.

Addiction: This will both cause shame and cure it, at least temporarily.

Cutting: This seems like the perfect treatment. It punishes you for being "bad," and the blood makes you feel punished and therefore cleansed. Of course cutting silences shame for only an hour or so, but at least that's something.

Fears of being exposed: Among the socially or financially successful can lurk a persistent sense that they are only one misstep from being found out and humiliated.

Suicide: Sadly, some people who expect to be exposed and humiliated feel as if they have no alternative but suicide. Many others who live with shame *wish* they could take their lives, but they are too afraid of what death might bring.

Doubts that God could ever love you: Who could love something so gross?

“I can’t forgive myself”: You might be saying, “I believe God has forgiven me, but something is still wrong. I still feel dirty.”

“I’m just a failure”: Who hasn’t thought that?

Of course, families remain the hotbed for shame. Non-Asian families don’t typically have the same expectations for success that many Asian families can impose in their quest for honor, but all families can reject, criticize, abuse, and shun.

The message is clear: you have fallen short, you don’t measure up. Other people are acceptable, you are not. They succeed, you fail. They are good, you are bad. They are important, you are disposable. It is all about value and worth. The shamed person feels worthless in the eyes of others and worthless before God.

Every culture has its worthless and esteemed, honored and rejected. Tribes, even street gangs, have their rivals who are viewed with contempt: the Hutu have the Tutsi, the Sinhalese the Tamil, and the Islamic Sudanese the Christian, and vice versa. The schoolyard is the world in miniature. During the very first recess the caste system begins falling into place. The popular kids have the prestige while the unpopular ones are devalued, ignored, or ridiculed. Sometimes these outcasts form their own tribe, but it too will soon have its own dictator and less worthy underlings.

Life at the top looks enviable from a distance. Yet since shame is more pervasive than it first appears, you will discover that even some of the popular children who do the choosing and belittling go home to parents who belittle them. Their schoolyard bravado is a cover-up; their derisive words are attempts to enhance reputations they already fear are beyond redemption.

Go visit the upper reaches of the social ladder—the successes. Look behind the resumé and you often find an ashamed little kid who is still trying to prove his or her worth. When corporate executives sneak into therapists' offices, they tell stories of insecurity. They feel like frauds. They want advice on how to keep disgrace at bay. When famous actors speak openly, they reveal that they find peace only when they play roles other than themselves.

What about people who are self-confident and boastful? There is more trouble there than you might think as well. Authentic human beings know they are imperfect and needy creatures, and they are not compelled to boast. Honorable people don't need to boast. Boasting and arrogance are for those who have deceived themselves into thinking that shame can be banished with a hyped press release.

All this leaves us wondering if the popular and prestigious people feel as marginalized and fearful of exposure as the rest of us. If so, we need something more profound than a climb up the social ladder or a bigger paycheck to cast off shame. A passing comment about your cool car or nice body is not enough to rehabilitate scum, if that's what you believe you are. Shame isn't impressed by our possessions or accomplishments.

You don't fit in. The world around you has some kind of standard for what is acceptable, and you don't measure up. You are on the sidelines, and everyone else is in the game. You are off in the shadows while your friends are on the dance floor.

Here are some key words to go along with shame:

Inferior

Alienated

Embarrassed

Minority

Ridiculed

Weak  
Powerless  
Failure  
Different  
Insulted  
Rejected  
Inadequate  
Humiliated  
Ignored  
Loser

These words point in the right direction, but some of them, such as embarrassed, insulted, different, and ignored, can fade with time. Real shame requires more intensity. That's why the language of this next list may make you want to turn away, but it's much closer to shame.

Unclean  
Dishonored  
Filthy  
Shunned  
Disgusting  
Defiled  
Outcast  
Unlovable  
Discarded  
Repulsive  
Disgraced  
Worthless  
Loathed

Scorned  
Vile

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“Disgusting. I am disgusting.” It took her a few weeks to put words to how she saw herself. She had to dig through a few layers. The top layer of her life seemed very ordinary. She was married with kids and had enough money to pay the bills. Depression always seemed to be nipping at her heels, but maybe she was just a little tired. Peel back that layer and you heard anger. It seemed to be directed at everyone. But there was more. The next layer revealed her habitual cutting. She had been so discreet her husband didn’t even know about it and, in some ways, she herself didn’t even know. Then there was the next layer, “I am disgusting.”

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In other words, the idea that you are on the B team or never invited to the big dance is far too tame. Shame has much more affinity with the leper who cries out, “Unclean!” and contaminates others with a mere touch. Some take showers with the hope that they can be clean. A lawyer who witnesses executions washes his clothes.<sup>5</sup> Others try to purge themselves of filth by shedding their own blood as a way to be more acceptable. Blood may seem like a poor substitute for soap and water, but blood sacrifice has a long history. There is something about uncleanness that asks for blood.

Now go one step further. Sometimes with shame there are no words. Shame takes us to the extremes where words fall short, so we express shame by doing disgusting things. Intentional vomiting and degrading promiscuity can be part of it. Less degrading, though just as effective, is intentional failure in work or relationships. Yes, shame can deliberately undermine any

possible success. If you catch a whiff of something good, you treat it as a threat. You run from it, drink at it, drug at it, sabotage it. Why else would a bright young man with a promising future embezzle company funds when he knew that the company accounting system would eventually expose him? People who live with shame believe they don't deserve anything good. Sure, others get hurt by shame's self-destructive ways, but it's not as if you wanted to hurt them. You are doing your loved ones a favor (you think) if you distance yourself from them. You will ruin lives eventually, so you might as well get it over with.

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He actually had words for himself: his self-ascribed moniker was "the Ruiner." He left behind a woman who had an abortion, a friend who died from a drug overdose while he was the drug supplier, three good jobs because of his addiction to alcohol, and a destitute ex-wife and two children. He heard there was good news about forgiveness of sins and acceptance for the defiled, and he wanted to believe it. But he held on to lies that said, "You have slid so far into the pit, you could never crawl out." "The Ruiner" was a description that had become a prophecy, and he was committed to being a true prophet.

In his case, shame reflected his shameful behavior, but his biography was complicated. Find shameful behavior and you often find people who were also shamed by others. The Ruiner had been ruined by his parents' divorce, his father's rejection, and a woman who decided to abort their child without even consulting him. Sometimes we *do* shame, sometimes we *are* shamed, and many times we are a combination of both.

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One way the world has hurled shame on other people is by spitting on them. Watch a handful of movies and you will come across at least one scene in which someone is being spit on. Most recipients believe they deserved it: they think they did something disgusting so they deserve something disgusting. The tradition goes all the way back to biblical times.

“If her father had but spit in her face, should she not be shamed seven days? . . .” (Numbers 12:14)

If he persists, saying, “I do not wish to take her,” then his brother’s wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face. And she shall answer and say, “So shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother’s house.” (Deuteronomy 25:8–9)

It gets worse. In World War II, the concentration camps of Auschwitz, Dachau, and Buchenwald were shame factories where Nazis toiled to dehumanize Jews. Among their methods was one constant: every Jew was called “excrement” or “piece of s\_\_\_\_.”

The language of shame is extreme. Hear it enough and you believe it. You are told you are disgusting and unclean, and eventually you *believe* you are. For many men and women who experience shame, Nazi-style name calling would be redundant. They already have been calling themselves those names for years.

There it is again. It is hard to talk about shame gradually and delicately because shame sucks you into darkness. If you try to sanitize it, you are just trying to avoid or deny its ugliness, its deadliness. No one can blame you for wanting to minimize the experience. After all, who wants to stare into something that seems to cannibalize our humanity? But that is hopelessness



talking. Don't forget, there is a way to be cleansed from shame, and for that reason, shame can and must be confronted.

You will encounter raw language in the soul of anyone who is intimate with shame. Scripture itself isn't shy about this. If you are filled with shame, you feel utterly disgusting, and what is more disgusting than excrement? Vomit maybe, which may be why the purging of bulimia serves double duty: it is both a dieting aid and a way to express self-contempt. But it's hard to name anything else so gross. No wonder Scripture makes the connection between dung and shame.

But when they went to bury her, they found no more of her than the skull and the feet and the palms of her hands. When they came back and told him, he said, "This is the word of the LORD, which he spoke by his servant Elijah the Tishbite, 'In the territory of Jezreel the dogs shall eat the flesh of Jezebel, and the corpse of Jezebel shall be as dung on the face of the field in the territory of Jezreel, so that no one can say, This is Jezebel.'" (2 Kings 9:35–37)

"And now, O priests, this command is for you. If you will not listen, if you will not take it to heart to give honor to my name, says the LORD of hosts, then I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings. Indeed, I have already cursed them, because you do not lay it to heart. Behold, I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it." (Malachi 2:1–3)

Dung was unclean and disgusting. A good Hebrew had to stay away from it. To have one's body spread out on the ground like dung or to have dung spread on your face was a severe form of shame.

If you do something stupid, you might mutter under your breath, “I am such an idiot.” Others call themselves something more profane. For most, the sentiment is a passing comment. But for those who live with shame, they are speaking literally. They are describing themselves as they believe they really are. They feel like they have permanent dung on their face, they believe they deserve it, and they believe everyone else can see it.

How does it get there? How do we get dung on our faces? Sometimes we put it there ourselves by our own shameful acts. More often someone throws it at us or we touch someone who has it on himself. Maybe you grew up in a home where dung was thrown at you. When you hear dehumanizing, profanity-laced epithets often enough, you will assume they are true, and your self-loathing remarks are really quotes from other sources.

Yet even with these tragic forms of shame, humans retain inklings of hope. There is a resiliency in the human spirit that keeps us going even when we have no reason to continue. Hope *is not* a sign that you have failed to numb yourself. To be human is to experience shame, but to be human is also to hope. The shamed person doesn’t want to remain unclean forever, and he or she doesn’t have to.



Anna would have said she had no hope. But she has taken some small steps that really weren’t that small. When she confided in a friend that at times she didn’t want to live another day, she was saying more than she knew. She was saying she *did* want to live. Her simple act of speaking to her friend and coming out of isolated darkness expressed hope. Then, as she put more words on to her despair, she noticed the word *shame*. What good is a word? Without it, the problem stays in the emotional background of our lives.

But once we have identified something, we can work with it. We can understand it and, in this case, discover God's words about shame.



Though we can all identify shame in our lives, some have less and others have much more. If you have less shame, this is an opportunity to understand people who feel unclean, marginalized, and exposed. If you have more shame, it is an opportunity to have the hope you thought was impossible. For us all, it is a time to marvel at how God speaks more deeply to the human soul than we ever imagined.

### For Discussion

1. The raw language in this chapter is not intended to shock and it is not gratuitous. If you shy away from it, you will shy away from millions of people. Does that make sense?
2. How do you try to spit on yourself?
3. "Disgusting people deserve something disgusting." That's the motto with shame. Have you ever tried, unsuccessfully, to talk yourself or someone else out of shame? You would think it would be easy: "I love you"; "I think you are beautiful"; "It was their fault, not yours." But shame is like a resistant virus. It is unmoved by treatments that would seem highly effective. What are some unsuccessful ways you have tried to talk yourself out of shame?
4. Whom are you quoting when you fall into your self-loathing jags? A parent? A teacher?
5. Why do you think some women who experience shame have an attraction to Nazi horror and movies depicting dehumanizing

conditions? Is it possible that those images, as horrible as they are, at least provide a language for what they feel?

6. Although the Jews of the Holocaust had shame heaped on them, not all accepted it. Some were able to see reality more clearly: the shame was really the Nazis'. Do you think this kind of perspective is possible for you? Do you think it might be possible to reject shame and return it to where, at least in the Nazis' case, it truly belonged? How would you do that?

# Shame, before Christ



Shame can be traced through three historical periods: before Jesus Christ, during Jesus' life on earth, and after Jesus' resurrection. In this first era, we will see that shame begins as nakedness. Rejection is quickly added, and then contamination completes shame's basic core. All three stand in contrast to God's holiness, which in one sense makes shame even more shameful. But ultimately this contrast is intended to remind you of your need for the covering, acceptance, and cleansing that only God can and will provide. As you consider what you read in this section, expect to discover love. Expect hope to grow.

What is shame?

God identifies it.

God *experienced* it.

You are not alone.

# Chapter 5

## NAKED WITHOUT SHAME

**T**he Bible, it turns out, is all about shame and its remedy. Why else would it be introduced at the very beginning?

The man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. (Genesis 2:25)

This invites us into an unfolding story that says, “This fine beginning won’t last long. Soon shame will cover absolutely everything. But don’t worry. Keep listening because much more will happen. Cleansing, acceptance, and even honor will appear long before the story ends. And these will come with a surprising twist.”

If you are familiar with shame, each step further into God’s story will bring you a little more hope. Sometimes hope will come gently; you will feel understood. At other times it will be so amazing that it will take your breath away.

You can be sure of one thing: Scripture is about shame from start to finish. Our task is to figure out which passages to consider. The sheer amount of Scripture devoted to shame can in itself bring hope. So instead of quietly tolerating shame until you die, get busy—there is a lot of good work to do.

Properly understood, the Bible’s teaching on shame is deeply encouraging. It can be summarized as “the gospel,” which means “good news.” Sometimes it is called the gospel of grace. Grace is what is operating when you receive good things you know you don’t deserve. Let me preface

the discussion by saying that if what follows doesn't sound like good news to you, you are not really hearing the story. On the other hand, if it sounds too good to be true, you are hearing it correctly. Your heart and mind just need to catch up to its reality. You won't find this hope anywhere else.

It all began so well. In the beginning, there was absolutely no shame, with people walking around in the nude literally and figuratively. They had no concerns about their bodies, which were flawless, and no concerns about what they had done because they hadn't done anything wrong. They feared no one's critical judgments because no one was critical or condescending.

Nakedness without shame. To be known without feeling exposed. To live without any need for self-protection. It sounds wonderful (though from my present vantage point, I might prefer a clean and comfortable wardrobe).

That era is long gone, but it is important to start the story there. If you think shame shouldn't be part of the human condition, you are right. You were not intended to carry such a load. Shame is an intruder and, as such, maybe it can be dispatched . . . .

Does that seem impossible? If you feel like you *are* shame, how can you get rid of *yourself*? How can you cleanse yourself of *you*? You are pretty sure that if you wash off the contamination, it will simply reappear. If you rub off a layer of skin, you will find shame on the next layer. If you rub down to the bone, it's still there. But there was a time when it wasn't part of you. So there might be a way to reverse the damage.

Shame can be removed, and you can still be you. Despite your feeling that your destiny and shame's destiny are identical—that if shame no longer exists, you won't either—the reality is that you will be *more* you without shame.

Let's add a dash of the audacious to whatever spark of hope you might have. We can have something even better. Eden sounds very good—



nakedness without shame, God's presence, satisfying work, and sinless relationships. But Scripture reveals that we have something better than Eden after the death and resurrection of Jesus. And though Scripture takes a while before it gives more detail about "better," it will definitely take us there.

Can you imagine a better place? Maybe there *is* the possibility of friendship, complete forgiveness, freedom, openness. . . .

### For Discussion

1. Maybe there is the possibility of . . . what?
2. Have you found anything encouraging yet, anything that gives you a spark of hope?

What is the way out of shame?

It is the way of humility, not humiliation.

It is the way of being known, not exposed.

Listen, really listen, to a story of hope.

# Chapter 6

## NAKED WITH SHAME

**H**e couldn't identify the day when shame became a partner in his life. Some people can pinpoint the moment, but not him. He never fit in. Always felt odd. In his mid-teens he connected this feeling with same-sex attraction. He was right—that explained some of his shame, though it explained only a part. His sexual feelings were a source of shame, as was his day-to-day life in a cold home in which he could never measure up. Yet even that didn't explain everything.

Since shame is so painful, we could be tempted to race to the end of the story and hope to be done with it quickly. But shame rarely responds to quick fixes. Better to walk through the biblical story than run through it. There is much to be learned from shame's long history. And this is where it first appears. Here is the stuff of life crammed into one paragraph: God, temptations, self-consciousness, and shame.

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the

presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” (Genesis 3:6–10)

One-by-one shame’s trinity of nakedness, rejection, and contamination invades humanity. Nakedness came first. For Adam and Eve, the sense of nakedness dominated. They hoped fig leaves would cover, but they had an uncomfortable feeling that the leaves might be invisible. So they hid too, just in case.

Hiding. Covering up. Self-protection. Feeling exposed. They are telltale signs of shame.

Not long after came the experience of being rejected, separated from, or cast out. This might be the most common description of modern shame, though wherever you find rejection you will also notice the sense of nakedness and contamination—the three go together. In this Genesis story each person felt separated from the other and both were separated from God. God “drove out the man [and woman]” (Genesis 3:24) and “sent [them] from the garden of Eden” (3:23).

“Unclean” or contaminated, the third part of shame’s triad, came later. This description of shame might sound foreign at first, but these words will help you identify an important feature of shame that you could easily miss. “Unclean” appeared first in Exodus. In the book of Leviticus it became the preferred way of identifying shame.

All this, of course, took place before we were born, which begins to explain why shame doesn’t always have a clear starting date in our lives. We experience shame because we have ancestors who did something shameful and we are connected to them. We didn’t have to do anything to be contaminated by the family traditions. We just had to be born. Yet, once we

are born into this family, we can replicate those old shameful traditions in our present lives. We can do shameful things.

Please don't think this means that your shame is essentially a result of your own sin. We have all sinned; no one can deny that. But all sins are not necessarily shameful sins—at least they aren't always shameful before other people.

We are taking a walk. This is where the walk begins. The first few steps revealed that your family history began without shame, so you know that shame is an intruder. Now, with these next steps, you know that you can feel shame because you are linked to a shameful family line. It is as if your last name is the same as that of the person who ruined the kingdom, and you can't escape that connection. On this part of the walk you also have the opportunity to realize that you are, in your very heart, not much different from Adam. You can replicate his actions each day. With this in mind, you are watching your family history unfold, but you are also watching yourself.

## **UNPRESENTABLE BEFORE GOD AND OTHERS**

You can't miss the message in shame's debut. Shame says, "I am unpresentable."

"Unpresentable before whom?"

"Unpresentable before God and other people."

Adam and Eve hid from each other and from God. Shame is experienced horizontally, before other people, and vertically, before God. But a curious amnesia takes place as soon as the man and woman leave the borders of Eden. We continue to feel shame before other people, but we are blind to the fact that shame is also, and primarily, before God.

You might be able to detect this vertical blindness with your own shame. You feel shame before other people, but you really don't think much about it

before God. If you are aware of both dimensions of shame, you are ahead of the rest of us. You are seeing clearly, and that is reason for hope. If you are only marginally aware of your shame before God, spend some time considering the before-God part. You will find that once shame has been addressed in your relationship with God, it won't constantly attack you in your human relationships.

### **UNPRESENTABLE BECAUSE OF WHAT WE'VE DONE**

Shame says, "I am unpresentable."

"*Why* are you unpresentable?"

In this opening story the reason is because of what you've done. Adam and Eve contaminated themselves by moving toward something God said was forbidden. They brought shame on themselves.

This doesn't seem like a very encouraging way to face shame. You could easily think, *Thanks a lot. It's all my fault; I knew it all along.* But don't veer off into hopelessness. Just listen for now. This is a more hopeful beginning than you might think. Scripture distinguishes between shame that comes from our own actions and shame that comes from the actions of others. If you really want to know cleansing and acceptance, you should distinguish between them too.

Here is what to expect. Identifying shame that stems from your own sin is not a pleasant experience, but it's still good—especially when you realize that God is quick to forgive. You might even notice a hint of relief as you come out into the open. The process should seem fairly simple: you did wrong and you admit it. You own what you did. When shame is attached to the sins done against you, it is more complicated, and we will get to that.

For now, what things have you done that you prefer to keep private? What things in your life do you insist on keeping secret? That's where we will find

the shame that is attached to what we do. This ancient story is *our* story.

### **UNPRESENTABLE BECAUSE OF OUR ALLEGIANCES AND ASSOCIATIONS**

In the beginning, the man and woman were the offspring of the King. As royalty, they were clothed in honor even though they had no clothes. They were identified with the King, who was God himself. They belonged to him. His reputation was their reputation. But in that simple act of disobeying God and eating the fruit, everything changed. When they chose what the King forbade, they were opting out of the royal line. They cut their association with the Creator and chose to identify with a creature who was both an animal and the anti-God—a serpent and Satan himself. Either way, beast or demon, the creature had a bad reputation. Satan was the disgraced outsider who had refused loyalty to God, so saying yes to him, attaching themselves to his reputation, was certainly degrading. And the serpent? Serpents are merely creepy; you wouldn't call them disgraceful. But if you were once identified with the King and Creator, and now you are identified with an animal, you have fallen a long way. It is a sign of disgrace. “You pig” is rarely a compliment.<sup>6</sup>

This connection between shame and your associations or allegiances is an important one and an everyday experience. If you have an older sibling with a bad reputation and you now attend the school where that reputation was established, you are going to try to hide your family tie. When someone does make the connection, you immediately feel the shame of being associated with your sibling and his or her behavior.

When I was in sixth grade there was an event at school to which we could invite our parents. Somehow my mom heard about it and asked if she could come. It came up while we were driving in the car. I was in the backseat and she was driving.

“No, you don’t need to come,” I said.

“Why not? I thought parents were invited.”

“Because you are too fat.”

As I looked into her rearview mirror, tears were running down her face. It was the only time I remember seeing her cry.

Of course, I can still feel horrible about what I said, even though my mother is no longer alive. Shame, my own shame in this case, doesn’t erode over time. My point, however, is that you can see a human instinct operating here. I understood that I was connected to my mother’s status. Because I thought it was low, I wanted to break the association.

We turn *from* those we think will damage our reputation and we turn *toward* those we think will enhance it. We identify with a rock star, a fraternity, or a club because we want to be connected to something we find prestigious. We are name-droppers who hope that in saying “I know so-and-so” we will be elevated. In a pinch, two degrees of separation from a famous person will work: “I know so-and-so who knows so-and-so.” These are ways, pathetic ways, we hope for a better reputation and a bit of honor.

It works in a similar way with God. If we turn toward him and trust him, we associate ourselves with him and share in his reputation. If we run from him, we may enjoy a moment of independence, but it will be followed by the enduring sense that we are outsiders.

Shame isolates, but it is more personal and relational than we realize. That is, shame and its opposite, honor, always have something to do with other people. We experience honor when we are associated with honorable people. We experience shame when we are identified with the shameful.

Now we understand why a few injections of self-esteem are such temporary cures. No matter what we tell ourselves, if we are associated with something or someone shameful, the only thing that will help is severing the



relationship. Yet our ties to the contaminating person or event are not literal chains that can be broken. They are soul ties—they are spiritual—and call for deeply spiritual solutions.

There will be much more to say about this, but for now, try to see how shame can reveal links to objects and people. In this opening story, there is no beating around the bush. If we experience shame from what we have done, we are linked to the serpent, and that feels disgusting. Soon, we will identify shame that comes from the shameful acts of other people. If you have been sexually violated, for example, you are connected to someone who did a shameful thing to you. The abuse created what feels like a permanent bond. Nevertheless, despite what your instincts tell you, there is something powerful enough to sever the connection. If God can break the links between the disgusting serpent and us, he can certainly break any bonds that were established by the sin of a mere human being.

#### **UNPRESENTABLE SO WE POINT AT OTHERS: SHAME AND BLAME**

Let's consider another element of Adam and Eve's fall into shame. Notice the finger-pointing that begins when shame is made public. All the fingers are pointed in the wrong direction.

He [God] said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."  
(Genesis 3:11–13)

Shame is disorienting. Once we are in it, we are not very good at remembering how we got there. The most obvious error is to blame ourselves when others are at fault. This is a curious mislabeling, but there are reasons for it. One reason is that everything gets muddled in the darkness of shame. It is a big mess that resists nuanced distinctions. All we know is that something really bad happened to us. Then, when in doubt, we rely on the timeless explanation that bad things happen to bad people and really bad things happen to really bad people.

But that is a lie. Jesus and the early disciples weren't really bad people, but really bad things happened to them. This alone should persuade you that bad things can happen to very good people. There is such a thing as victimization. You may have been victimized by really bad people—wicked people. People are wicked because wickedness is in their hearts. In their wickedness such people might defend themselves by blaming you. You might believe them because their anger is confident, and confident people are hard to disagree with. But let the Bible help you understand life accurately. The Bible says that no one can make an oppressor sin. If you were sinned against, it's not your fault (Deuteronomy 24:16; Ezekiel 18:18–23).

Yet the myth persists. We still believe bad things happen because we have been bad. It is as if we *want* to believe the lie. Perhaps we blame ourselves because in a strange way it helps us feel as if we have more control. If we are responsible for whatever went wrong, for whatever hurt us, we might be able to figure out how to keep it from happening again.

For example, if you have been sexually violated, you might feel that you are stuck with shame and there is nothing you can do about it. Not only that, you feel utterly powerless and vulnerable as you look to the future. That is very scary. As you look for a way to live with some sense of power and control over your existence, you might tell yourself that the abuse was your

fault. If you hadn't done xyz, it wouldn't have happened. From now on, you tell yourself, you will be safe if you just avoid xyz. You will be protected. This is just one way shame distorts and confuses. What you haven't realized is that you will experience shame that does not belong to you because you have blamed yourself for something evil that someone else has done.

Adam and Eve's response to shame was the opposite: they blamed other people for what they did. When you feel relentless condemnation and don't know where to go for forgiveness and cleansing, you look for a way to prove your innocence. When you feel dirty because you have caked the mud on yourself, you try to say that other people have been slinging mud at you.

Whether shame leads you to take the blame for everything or shift the blame for everything, you will experience hopelessness. The only way out of this quagmire is to put things where they really belong. Own what is yours and *only* what is yours. It sounds easy, but if you have been living with shame, this one might be too advanced for your skill set, at least for now.

Welcome to a story where shame has been part of the air we breathe almost from the start. It's not surprising that we should find it everywhere now.

There is free-floating shame which hovers around us, barely perceptible, that exists because of our connection to Adam.

There is shame from what we do, and we experience that shame before other people and God himself.

There is shame from what is done to us. That will be a significant part of the story that is to come.

For now, be encouraged that God puts his finger on this human struggle at the very beginning. Our shame problem is important to God and, since it is important to him, you can be sure he will do something about it.

What happened to the young man with the same-sex attraction? There are many young men and women who are sitting in churches but don't feel like they belong there. Many of them are willing to do battle with their imaginations. The problem is that the only way they know how to do battle is by heaping condemnation on themselves, which only intensifies their shame and almost guarantees their silence. Shame comes from what we have done, our past associations, and what has been done to us. Which one of these is same-sex attraction? Here is where Scripture's initial strategy of blending all these together makes our internal battles less complicated. If you can't figure it out, all you have to know is that if you experience shame, no matter what the cause, there is a way out.

### For Discussion

1. What are some examples of shame that come from what we do? What are some examples of shame that come from what others have done?
2. Why do you think Adam and Eve were concerned about uncovered genitals, but not bare arms, legs, noses, or ears?
3. Do you lean toward either of shame's extremes: "It's all my fault" or "It's all the other person's fault"?
4. Does the connection between shame and our allegiances or associations make sense to you? Notice that this chapter talks about two kinds of associations. The first was a deeply spiritual association with God or Satan. The second was an earthly association with honorable or dishonorable people.
5. Do you have any ideas on how to sever these shame connections?

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!" But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.

The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai." The angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit to her." The angel of the LORD also said to her, "I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude." And the angel of the LORD said to her, "Behold you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has listened to your affliction. He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen."

So she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, “You are a God of seeing,” for she said, “Truly here I have seen him who looks after me.” Therefore the well was called Beer-lahairoi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. (Genesis 16:1–15)

# Chapter 7

## THE OUTCAST

**S**hame comes in many forms.

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She was friendly, warm, always busy with good things at work and church. She was everyone's confidant. You could rely on her. Everything seemed fine until a fine man wanted to marry her. Then the complexities of shame began to emerge. She could be angry for no apparent reason, then tearfully apologetic, only to go through the cycle again. If you got to know her a little better, you might have noticed lots of fear. But you would have never known that she felt dislocated from everyone. In her mind, she didn't deserve anything, including God's mercy and grace. She deserved to be an outcast, and she didn't want to drag someone into that place with her.

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Shame's profile includes being an outcast, and there are plenty of outcasts with whom we can identify. Adam and Eve were cast out; so was Cain. But let's pick up the story a little later. Like most good stories, the story of Scripture gets richer and more meaningful as it goes on. By the time we get to Hagar, some of that richness is already apparent.

No one could have guessed that the Lord God would take such an interest in outcasts. Kings don't deal directly with ordinary people. They use

ambassadors to communicate with them so their royal honor doesn't get soiled by anything common. When it comes to the riffraff, kings either forget about them or expel them. The Lord God, however, is no ordinary king. He is especially attentive to the marginalized and forgotten. As the story of his dealings with humanity unfolds, you can sense his unabashed preference for the neglected, to the point that those with status should feel left out.

He chooses a small, insignificant group to become the earthly line of the Messiah.

He consistently opts to honor someone other than the firstborn, violating the cultural protocol of the day.

He brings judgment on nations for their treatment of the poor, the widow, and the orphan.

You may think that the Lord is like other gods; he is not. You may believe that the Lord thinks you are scum, as you would if you were God. But the reality is *not* what you would predict, so listen to what the Bible says.

According to ancient Near East tradition, a childless wife could have a child by a surrogate, that is, by having her husband sleep with her maidservant. To us, the potential for trouble is obvious, but it was the tradition all the same, and Abraham followed it.

Hagar was the one who was hurt. She is one of the early outcasts. When Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden, they were not separated from other people. At least they had each other. Hagar's shame is more extreme. She is unwanted and excluded by others *and* she is sent into exile alone. Yet the message of her story is surprising and unmistakable: In the desert, she learns that God cares for the marginalized, the oppressed, and the outcast—for her.



If you are experiencing shame, the message of this story is clearly relevant to you. But some read it and say it hasn't reached them yet. They might be able to teach it to someone else, but they can't yet teach it to themselves.

How do you respond when you hear encouraging, hopeful, beautiful, and true words that specifically target your shame?

- A. I don't notice them.
- B. I think they might be helpful for somebody else, somebody less contaminated and bad than I am.
- C. I am not worthy of the words.
- D. I don't care.
- E. They speak to my heart and they bring hope.

The answer is E, but most people struggling with shame choose something else. Your task—and it is a challenging one—is to get to the right answer. Intelligence isn't the issue. Your memory is fine. A cheat sheet won't help. The problem is that an offer of hope puts you in a shame-induced trance and you automatically check responses A through D. Shame's hold over you leads you to believe you don't deserve to be rid of shame. As a result, you treat *hope* as if it were a contaminated substance.

Objectively, it doesn't make any sense. You would think that anyone would jump at the chance to escape shame. But that isn't the way it happens. Though shamed people are happy to guide others out of their dark prisons, they are always sure to get back to their own prisons by nightfall. That's home. That's what they are used to.

Maybe it's a mindless habit, like driving in a trance to get to a destination you have driven to a thousand times and, somehow, finding yourself parked at the right place. But the nearly engaged woman mentioned earlier was

involved in something more intentional. She was persuaded that she didn't deserve to hear anything good. She went back to her prison every night because she was certain she should never live anywhere else.

There have been many times I have spoken to groups and my words were . . . to put it generously, less than clear and helpful. At those times, there are no encouraging words that can persuade me that I deserve the praise people offer.

Hmm. Since almost everyone who experiences shame feels like he or she deserves it, you too might be pre-programmed to avoid all things hopeful and encouraging. But deserving or not, just listen. You will hear that God says good words *only* to those who feel undeserving.

So let's try out some good words.

"It isn't your fault"? That won't work.

"You are created in the image of God, so you are worth it"? Nice try, but that won't work either. You could try the popular version, "God doesn't make junk," and that won't persuade you either. You need something that goes deeper.

Show God how hard you are trying? Forget about it.

Remember that you are loved by a parent, friend, child, spouse, or loyal dog? That is only a temporary fix that, frankly, I hope *won't* work. If it does, it means someone else has become your god. You are hoping to find your reputation in *that person's* acceptance—in being linked to him or her. But that's like trying to kill a grizzly (shame) with a pea shooter. If you've put your hope in this answer, ask God for mercy. Confess that you are looking for rescue in the wrong places.

The most promising response is that Jesus loves you, which is certainly true. But, believe it or not, that usually doesn't work either. Either

you prefer someone else's love or you don't feel worthy of Jesus' love. Either way, you are back where you started.

Instead, try a counterintuitive approach to escape shame. Try changing the subject so it is more about God than about your shame. The basic idea is to focus on the matchless worth of the Lord God and then get connected to him.

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 7:6–8)

These words are exactly what you need. They say that God is the better King. He invites you to his kingdom. He is faithful to you because of *his* love, not your worthiness. He loves us not because we are lovable but because he is love. And, in this particular passage, he is talking to scoundrels who are certainly no better than you.

Once we get over the mild jolt to our pride—I would like my spouse to love me because she thinks I am the greatest male alive—we couldn't ask for anything better. The character of God is the basis for our connection to him, not our intrinsic worth. Self-worth, or anything we think would make us acceptable to God, would suit our pride but it has the disturbing side-effect of making the cross of Jesus Christ less valuable. If we have worth in

ourselves, there is no reason to connect to the infinite worth of Jesus and receive what he has done for us.

So if you feel unworthy of God's love, you can turn in one of two directions. You can turn inward, in which case you are looking for a little *self*-worth to bring to the Lord, and that is pride. Or you can turn to him and discover that he has a heart for the unworthy. He pursues those who, like Hagar, have no glory or honor in themselves.

The Hagar story surprises you with the character of God, and your response to it is an important test. It reveals what is really going on within you. It reveals which way you have turned.

Can you say, "Lord, I believe you more than I believe me"?

Can you understand that when you believe him, you are associated with him? (And when you don't believe him, you are not associated with him?)

Can you say, "You are asking a lot. This is so unnatural for me. I never knew that listening could be so hard"? The walk we are on has much in common with a battle. Expect a struggle. Expect lies to insist on the status quo.

Can you understand that there is nothing more important?

What about the woman whose anger, fear, and isolation were all wrapped together in a complicated package of unworthiness? As we sorted through another shame-induced conflict she'd had with her would-be suitor, we spoke about Hagar. When she asked, "Did God really do that?" with amazement more than doubt, I knew we were on our way to disarming shame.

## For Discussion

1. Would you agree that we need more than knowledge to overcome shame? Many people know the story of Hagar, but it doesn't make any difference to their lives until it is coupled with faith. We want

knowledge that leads to faith. And faith—trusting God rather than ourselves or our other associations—will lead to deeper knowledge.

2. Are there other reasons why someone would treat hope as if it were contaminated? What is the way through such a stronghold?
3. Being seen by God can seem intimidating, but it is a blessing. How is it a blessing in this story? How could it be a blessing in your story?
4. What is it about God's character in this story that causes you to love him and turn toward him?
5. What are you hearing so far?

What is the way out of shame?

Knowledge that leads to belief.

Belief that leads to trust:

trust in Jesus

trust in his words

trust in his promises.

# Chapter 8

## CLEAN AND UNCLEAN, HOLY AND COMMON

**I**f we are going to talk about critical spiritual realities associated with shame, we need to talk about crayfish and cows.

When we read the Old Testament we usually skip “so-and-so begat so-and-so,” most of the Minor Prophets, details about sacrifices, and all the talk about things that are clean and unclean. Who really cares that animals with split hooves that chew the cud are clean (Leviticus 11:3), while owls, shrimp, and lizards are unclean? Who even knows what a completely split hoof is? And why are unclean animals, which include majestic soaring birds, called detestable?

It seems like a lot of archaic stuff for scholars to sort out. And, admittedly, a lot of it can be skipped without missing much. But when it comes to the teachings on clean and unclean, these are ideas that have significance today. Even today we categorize some meats as edible (that is, clean), such as cows, pigs, and escargot, and other meat as just plain wrong (that is, unclean)—things like dogs, cats, and garden slugs. There are endless distinctions involved with the matter of clean and unclean, but if you can bear with them, you will hear something familiar.

There are clean and unclean animals.

There are clean and unclean people.

**CLEAN AND UNCLEAN**

When we look at the world, we view it with certain categories in mind: cities, suburbs, countryside, mountains, and oceans. When it comes to people, we categorize them, rightly or wrongly, according to race, intelligence, income, weight, and attractiveness.

The ancient world also had its distinctions. They might seem old-fashioned, but if you know something about the human condition, you know these categories are stubbornly enduring.

“You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean.” (Leviticus 10:10)

With these four categories of holy and common, clean and unclean, God gives us the basic building blocks of the spiritual universe. You will find yourself, and everything else, in two of the four groups. Notice how clean and unclean fit the experience of shame.

They are two separate groups. You can’t be a *little* clean or *sort of* unclean. You are one or the other. Clean is acceptable; unclean is defiled and cast out. Clean is normal; unclean is abnormal. The clean can’t cleanse the unclean, but the unclean can contaminate the clean. That’s one reason why the unclean are separated from the clean, like lepers in biblical times.

So you were right. The world is divided into clean and unclean.



**Unclean.** If you are unclean, something is wrong with you. You don’t fit in. You aren’t like other people. You just aren’t normal. You stick out and you are kicked out. In Scripture, look for the word *defiled* and you will find the



unclean. The person has done something or had something done to him that makes him damaged goods.

You have heard people say that something is taboo. It means it is forbidden. If you violate the taboo, you are excluded from the community. In ancient Israel, a taboo was anything that could make you unclean. Whoever you were, at some point you would probably become unclean and thus abnormal. You might try to avoid this by living the life of a recluse, which would keep you from being inadvertently contaminated by others who were unclean. But you still might touch an unclean animal carcass or develop a weird blemish. Uncleanness strikes us all. “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment” (Isaiah 64:6).

People could become unclean from what they did or what was done to them. Some of the ways people became unclean seem strange to us: touching or picking up an unclean carcass, giving birth, having a period, developing a suspicious skin lesion. Others make complete sense, such as a host of sexual violations (Leviticus 18). Even today there is a keen sense that there are sexual boundaries between close relatives that should never be crossed. If you do and are found out, you will experience shame. If you were the victim of such a boundary violation, you will experience shame too—shame, but not guilt.

At least three guiding principles distinguished clean and unclean.

- Anything associated with death (e.g., blood) was unclean.
- Anything associated with idol worship (e.g., certain unclean animals) was unclean.
- Any violations of God’s intended order (sexual sins, skin diseases) were unclean.

It seems unfair that both perpetrators and victims should be placed in the same category, but God is making a point. Both our actions and our associations make us unclean, and uncleanness doesn't belong in his kingdom. That doesn't mean the unclean are unwelcome, but it means God must do something for them before they can enter his presence.

This is a very important part of the story. Unclean is not the same as sin. It can come from our own sin but also from contact with something sinful. The unclean *might* be guilty; they *always* experience shame.

The unclean were cut off from other people. They were untouchable. *They had to be sent outside the camp.* To re-enter the community they needed to be cleansed, sometimes by offering animal sacrifices. This is an ancient way of thinking, to be sure, but if you know shame, it makes perfect sense: people can be unclean. What you may not have anticipated is the fact that the unclean could return to the community. The Old Testament spends a lot of time explaining how people could become part of the group again. It was critical then and it is critical now. The difference now is that you don't have to find a priest to make a sacrifice for you. There are better ways.

**Clean.** Clean, of course, is the opposite of unclean. Scripture talks about those who are pure, uncontaminated, or upright. Try to imagine what that feels like. You feel normal. There's no reason to cover up, nothing to hide. Your conscience is clear. Nobody is looking at you funny or suggesting you don't belong. In the Old Testament era, being clean meant you could freely come and go to the temple, the place of God's presence. It's the difference between feeling sick and feeling fine. When you feel sick, you are always aware of your weakness. You feel bad even when life's circumstances are good. When you feel fine, you are hardly aware of your body. It feels normal, which is very good.

- Clean is a cool shower at the end of a dirty, grimy, sultry workday, and you actually feel clean. Somebody asks how you feel and you say “good”—and you actually mean it.
- Clean is a meal with good friends. Your attention is drawn to the food and the fellowship. There is no self-consciousness.
- Clean is shalom, the Hebrew word meaning peace. Everything is right, the way it’s supposed to be.

You already know that this land of the clean exists. Your sense is that most people live there and you never will. You are a crab (an unclean animal), and a crab can’t suddenly morph into a cow (a clean animal). You assume that there is no path between the two, only thick, impenetrable walls. And you are right. You can’t simply decide to walk over to the clean part of town. But you *can* do something.

In the Old Testament you went to the temple, the symbolic place of God’s presence on earth, and you brought whatever sacrifice you could afford. The way of cleanness always went through the temple. If you couldn’t afford much, there was no reason to worry. You didn’t have to bring a high-class sacrifice. An ordinary pigeon would do. The cost of the sacrifice wasn’t the critical matter. The important thing was the shedding of blood. Sounds barbaric, but the Old Testament was reminding us that there was a significant cost involved in moving from unclean to clean. *You* didn’t have to pay it, but it still had to be paid. That sacrifice might be accompanied by the sprinkling of water. Maybe you would wash your clothes too. Then you were clean. You could go back with everyone else, have free access to the temple, and no one would either stare at you or completely ignore you.

Would you do this if you had the opportunity? Would you go to the temple and have the sacrifice made on your behalf? Yes or no?

If yes, keep reading. If no, you still think you are too disgusting to receive cleansing and acceptance. Maybe you feel like you have to punish yourself a little longer—a kind of self-imposed exile: “Bad girl, go to your room and you can’t have supper.” Be careful—lie alert. The truth is that God himself gave this system to his people. He provided a way to be clean and, since you have nothing, he essentially gave you the sacrifice to offer.

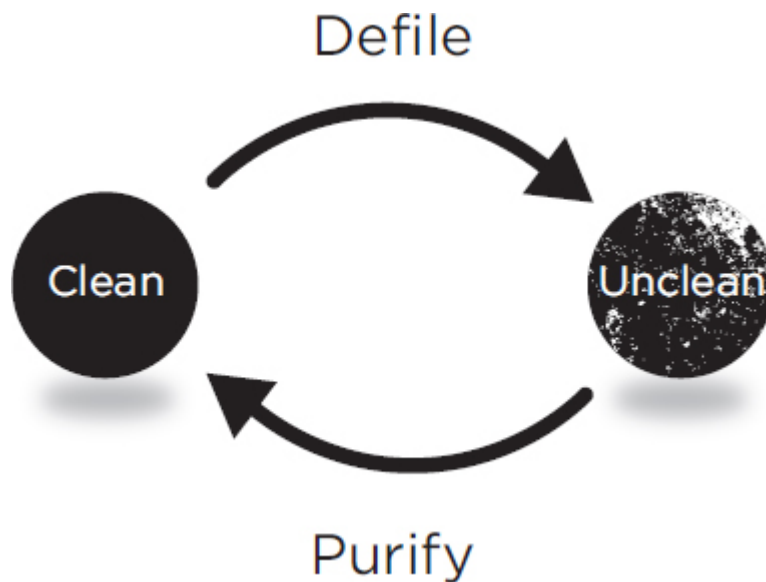
You could put it this way. If you were an Old Testament Israelite, you could make up your own system to make yourself clean, which would be ineffective and silly. Or you could adopt the one God gave you and just say thank you.

If you are still reluctant, there could be one other explanation. You are plain stubborn and ticked off. You believe there has been an injustice done against you, and God didn’t do much about it. Now you face a stalemate. You can’t win, but you don’t want to resign. To resign is humbling. Sometimes we are willing to be unclean if it allows us to indulge a good snit. But, though you feel stuck, you can be sure that God isn’t. He is the one who makes the first move. He will continue to show mercy and grace to you. You will find that resignation and trust in the Lord is better than you think.

You might already know that this Old Testament ceremony was pointing to the one who eventually replaced it. Jesus is the temple. He is God-with-us. He is the sacrifice. He is the one who gives water for cleansing. No cost to you; just come. The road we are on leads us to Jesus.

At first glance, the Old Testament system had its advantages. The way to become clean was highly prescribed. Go through the steps and then, in a ceremony that brought closure to the matter of your uncleanness, off you went, back into the community. But we have to remember that the path we are on keeps getting better. The rituals of the Old Testament are only the warm-up.

So there are, indeed, ways we can become unclean. The clean can be defiled, but the unclean can be purified.



#### **HOLY AND COMMON**

The clean and the unclean, though very different from each other, both have the same parent—the common. The common is separate from the holy.



**Holy.** The category of the holy is all about God. When you think of the common, both clean and unclean, you are thinking of created things. When you turn toward the holy, your attention is directed to God, the Holy One. He is holy and anything he declares uniquely his is also holy. Those things, of course, were highly honored (Leviticus 10:3).

Granted, every created thing is his, but certain things are set apart as his possessions or, to put it more intimately, his *treasured* possessions (Deuteronomy 26:18). For example, the Garden of Eden was holy. It was the place where God was present on earth. Adam and Eve shared in that holiness (remember, your reputation depends on your associations) until they rejected God and were cast out of the garden.

Certain places could be holy, such as Mount Sinai when God was present, or the temple in Jerusalem when priestly ordinances were followed. Even certain days were holy (Leviticus 23:2). In the yearly calendar a number of feast days were categorized as holy, most notably Passover. In the weekly flow of life the Sabbath was holy (Leviticus 23:3). These days were set apart and treated differently from other days. They were *consecrated*, made holy, or dedicated to the Lord.

People, too, could be holy or sacred, even though they belonged to the realm of common, created things. To be holy you had to be clean, but clean didn't automatically make you holy. Only a few, such as the priests, were clean *and* holy (Leviticus 21:8). If you were called to be holy, you had to pass stringent tests, and then you were set apart for the Lord's work in the tabernacle, the place of his presence. To come into the King's courts, you had to be clean; to come into his *presence* you had to be made holy. This is why only the priests had access to the parts of the tabernacle closest to the Holy of Holies, where God symbolically resided with his people.

Uh-oh, another barrier. If you were unclean you could become clean, and that made you okay with other people. But there was still a barrier between you and God, and both barriers had to be breached before you were really okay and able to enjoy full acceptance and fellowship. Human aspirations went like this: if you were unclean, you wanted to be made clean. Your well-being depended on it. Would people desire to be holy? Probably not

everyone. Most settled for being clean, because unless you were specifically made holy, the holy was dangerous. People could die if they accidentally touched something holy. And even if some brave soul wanted to be closer to the Lord, this was unattainable except by a chosen few. Only priests and Levites were set apart as holy in order to do holy work.

Holy means that a person or object is uniquely devoted to God. The person or thing belongs to God and thereby shares in his holiness. It is *set apart* in the best way. While the unclean were set apart because of their contamination, those made holy were set apart because of their special relationship to the Holy One. They were uniquely honored.

There is one peculiarity in all this:

“I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.” (Leviticus 11:45)

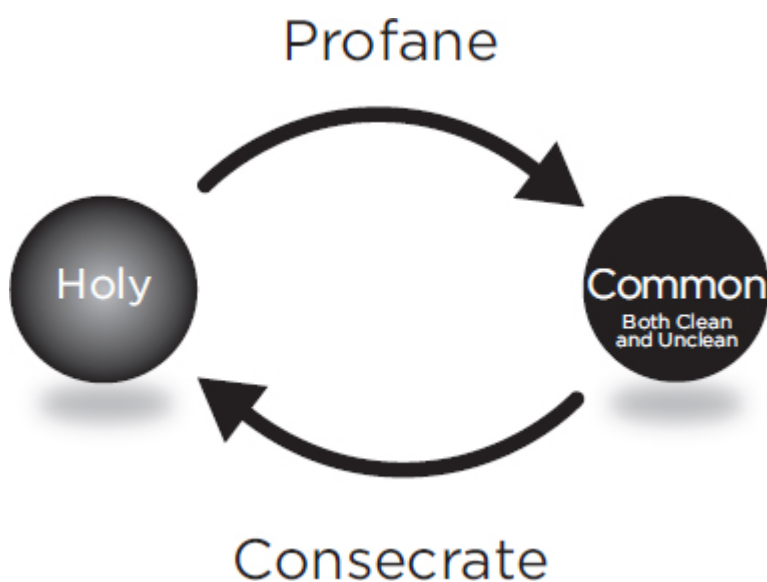
Here we see that the *entire people* of Israel were called to be holy. They were called by God to be *his* holy nation. God’s mission was to possess a people and make them his own. It’s enough to make you wonder if this exclusive category of the holy is less dangerous and more attainable than we think.

**Common.** Don’t be too concerned about this fourth category. The holy relates to God; the common relates to people and all created things. For example, everything inside the tabernacle—priests included—is holy because it belongs to God. Everything outside the tabernacle, like us, is common. There is usually no shame in this. Basically, every person and created thing is common.

Since the common includes the clean, it could be made holy, in which case the common thing was *consecrated*. You might have heard of the hymn,

“Take My Life and Let It Be [consecrated, Lord, to thee].” In the New Testament the journey from common to holy is called *sanctification*. It is the process of common people like us becoming *sanctified*—more and more like the Holy One.

The opposite of consecrated or sanctified is profaned. It happens when you take something declared holy and treat it as if it were common. “Her [Israel’s] priests have done violence to my law and have profaned my holy things. They have made no distinction between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have disregarded my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them” (Ezekiel 22:26).



Since the common contains both the clean and the unclean, we can simplify it this way. The universe exists in three categories: unclean, clean, and holy. Our goal is to get clean, stay clean, and then set our sights on the holy. The holy can be intimidating, but only when we enter into that realm can we have true fellowship with God. Whether we know it or not, that is what



we truly want. We aim to be holy and enjoy the presence of the Holy One. That is the deepest answer to the problem of shame.

### For Discussion

1. The distinctions between clean and unclean foods help us see how deeply embedded these differences are. Other than people, what else does our culture place in the unclean category?
2. How do *you* try to move from unclean to clean?
3. What would it mean to be holy? Can you imagine that? Don't forget, you do not make yourself holy. You are made holy by an act of the loving God.

What is the way out of shame?

The unclean become clean. The clean become holy.

The naked are clothed in royal garments.

The outcasts are accepted as children of the honored King.

You might decide that life is worth living.

# Chapter 9

## WHEN GOD IS YOUR TAILOR

**S**he never looked anyone in the eye. There was a time when she could, but that was before her face was badly burned in a fire. If you moved toward her and tried to converse with her she was certain that you were only showing pity, which made her feel even more like an outcast. She heard about cleanness and uncleanness, and she could hear little slivers of hope in the possibility of feeling normal, being whole, without self-consciousness. But it didn't go very deep because she didn't feel contaminated or dirty. She felt disgusting, and a bath couldn't help. Her shame came from her sense that she was ugly—so ugly that people would either stare or turn away. If you feel ugly you will experience shame. The two are bound together. She needed a makeover that would bring beauty. Without it she didn't believe there could be any possible acceptance and love.



The makeover will start with her clothes.

What we know so far is that humans were created naked and *unashamed*; they made *themselves* naked and ashamed. As a result they ran and hid. They did not want to be seen. God's response was to cover them with animal skins.

There is a double message in this covering. It was good news because Adam and Eve were covered, which was *far* better than being naked. But it certainly was not optimal because the covering was dead animals, a message

that branded the wearer as unclean. You don't have to be a vegan to imagine how such clothes were a bit gross. The one wearing the skins was covered but certainly not attractive. It left only two possibilities. Either we would forever be covered with the skins of dead animals or this was the first step to a better wardrobe.

## ROYAL CLOTHING

Who would have thought that the story of beauty would begin with the Old Testament priests? When God established the priesthood to lead his people in worship, he again provided the clothing they needed to wear. But in contrast to the way he dressed Adam and Eve, this time everyone agreed that those who wore the garments were beautiful. This clothing would be sacred and holy, set apart by God himself, just as its wearers were.

“Then bring near to you Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the people of Israel, to serve me as priests—Aaron and Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. And you shall make *holy garments* for Aaron your brother, *for glory and for beauty*. You shall speak to all the skillful, whom I have filled with a spirit of skill, that they make Aaron’s garments *to consecrate him for my priesthood*.”  
(Exodus 28:1–3, emphasis mine)

The war against shame is on. God puts shame in the crosshairs as he gives glory and beauty to his people. *Glory*, *beauty*, and *consecrate* are all words that identify things that are holy. They belong to God, and everything that belongs to him is made beautiful by association. Now, at this very early stage in the story—which is the story you want to adopt as your own—*splendor* is possible. This, indeed, was good news.

On off days, the priests were ordinary Joes. You knew they were priests, but you also knew they didn't earn that title. It was bestowed on them. As a result, they were neighbors, shoppers, parents, little league coaches—regular people, until they got dressed. Then they looked spectacular.

## **THE ROYAL DESIGNER**

The directions for making the priests' garments were all very precise (Exodus 28). The Lord left nothing to the imagination of the artisans. If you read through the instructions, you will initially get lost in the specifics about ephods and Urim and Thummim, but you *will* get the point: this is a very elegant garment. And what is an outfit without a hat? (Stay with me, men.) The priest also wore a turban with an engraved gold plaque fastened on it. It read, "Holy to the LORD" (Exodus 28:36) and was fastened with a *royal* blue cord. It marked the wearer as someone associated with the Holy King. It was clothing that changed the status of the wearer, and God designed it.

When you buy designer clothes, you know that the designer didn't actually sew the garment. But you know that the designer was involved in overseeing the details: the design, the material, the stitching, the lace, and all other adornments. It was assembled by highly skilled people, but the designer put his or her name on it. That's why it is so costly.

God, then, is the designer of this lavish garment so vastly superior to animal skins. The animal skins covered nakedness but didn't cleanse and certainly didn't add beauty. The priestly garments assume there has been cleansing and take the wearer all the way to holy.

## **THE ROYAL PRIEST**

All this was good news for Aaron and his sons, the priests who were allowed to wear these clothes. But you are not Aaron. What is the relevance of these clothes to your life? At first, the situation would seem analogous to watching movie stars in their impressive outfits walk down the red carpet on Oscar night. In other words, you might live vicariously through a Hollywood star if you had a good imagination. But these priestly clothes have more significance to you than you think. You will have to work to make the connections, and once you do, life as you know it will not change immediately. But it *will* be another step of hope and encouragement. Even more, it could grow into a God-given vision of what you actually look like and who you are becoming.

Here is your link to the garments. Don't forget, associations matter.

First, these priests were flawed human beings, just like you. They were men who had done wrong and they came from a family line that had all the problems of the worst modern families. The point is, you don't have to be perfect to be made holy.

Second, the Old Testament culture was similar to many modern cultures: your identity was tied to your representative, who was usually a king. The status of the king was the status of the people. The beauty of the king was the splendor of the people. In Israel's case, especially since the directions for the priestly garments were given before there even was a human king, your reputation depended on the worth of the priests. So, you have to be an honorary Israelite. You have to be a *true* Israelite, which is no problem. If your allegiances are with the true King of Israel, who is also the King of the world, you are indeed engrafted into the community. True Israelites, as we later learn, are defined by their spiritual commitments rather than their genetic line (Romans 4:16; Ephesians 3:6).

Third, the priests *wore* you. This garment was designated to contain various precious stones that symbolized Israel's twelve tribes. "So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breast-piece of judgment on his heart, when he goes into the Holy Place, to bring them to regular remembrance before the LORD" (Exodus 28:29). In a very real sense, the people entered the presence of God when the priest did, and whenever you go into the presence of God, you will look a bit more glorious.

Are you following this? Priests and robes seem a little far-fetched at first, but the connection between clothes and beauty is well established. Have you ever liked what you were wearing? If you did, you felt just a little more attractive. Have you ever been a little proud to be seen with a new outfit? When I was six years old, I wore a new red sport coat to church on Easter Sunday. I was proud as a peacock. I felt like royalty. At that moment, there could be no shame. Of course, the coat didn't work its magic after that first Sunday. It was only a transient symbol of an eternal reality, but for a moment I felt presentable.

Most of us feel better when we really like the clothes we wear. Little girls feel like the belles of the ball when they put a pink tutu over their everyday clothes. Shyness disappears. The public dancing begins. They know that beauty must be displayed. Men might wear the jersey of their favorite football player and couldn't be more proud to advertise their allegiances.

Here is where the path is headed. Since the story is too much to take in all at once, it unfolds gradually. Watch God on the move. Splendor re-enters the world by way of a group of old, bearded men—people you wouldn't say were beautiful if you saw them walking down the street. But the garments on these men announce that God's work of adornment and beautification is in motion. At this point, it touches you vicariously because of your connection

to the priests. But once you are ready to hear, God will say, “*You* are a chosen race, a royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:9, emphasis mine).

## **OUR ROYAL DUTY**

There are different kinds of garments. One makes you stand out. The other makes you fit in. This garment does both. What is most obvious, however, is that it announces that you belong. When you wear a special garment, you are no longer a solitary outcast and you no longer act as you once did.

Think of it as a school uniform, a Brownie or Girl Scout uniform replete with badges, the warm-up jacket for your sports team. I remember wearing a special shirt that had places for badges when I was part of a boys’ club in elementary school. My tendency was toward self-consciousness and shyness, but on the days I wore that shirt I wanted to be seen. How cool was that! It gave me a sense of belonging, and I have to admit it left me feeling pretty good about myself every time I put it on. I guess I had a clothes thing going. “Look at me,” it said. “I belong to a cool and prestigious group—and what about these badges!” The right uniform makes you stand up a little straighter. Yet it can do even more.

When you receive a uniform for your job, you represent your company whenever you put it on. In the best of companies, you become part of a family when you are hired. You share in the company’s prestige. You adopt its mission as your own. You also adopt the culture and values of the institution you represent. If customer service is a value, you are quick to serve others. If safety is a value, you drive the company truck more carefully than you would drive your own car. Put someone in the right uniform and watch that person act differently.

If we have experienced this clothing makeover on a job or as part of a larger group, how much more should we expect that when we are connected



to the King's garments or actually wear them we will live in a new way? We now represent the King. We have received his honor, prestige, and beauty. We have accepted his mission as our own. We have become his emissaries.

Priestly, royal garments connect you to God himself. You belong to him and you have a purpose. No longer is life a way-too-long wait for death, as it is for people who live with shame. Instead, there is a reason to get out of bed and move toward other people. For example, part of your new job description is to bless other people.

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, 'Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.'"

"So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them." (Numbers 6:22–27)

This blessing works as first, you hear it spoken to you and then, you speak it to others. Right now, it might be too much too soon because you still have a hard time believing that God is good. But at least stay on the path and resist the impulse to kill hope. Maybe you could even take a moment to imagine walking around wearing a designer outfit. Better yet, maybe you could imagine love. The prominent value in the kingdom of heaven is love. We receive God's love; we give God's love. That is the heart of the priestly blessing.

## For Discussion

1. What uniform are you wearing now?
2. Does the part about the priestly garments make sense to you?

3. Love and the priestly garments always go together. If you have one, you have the other. Can you recount how God's love has been expressed to you in what Scripture has said so far? Can you imagine how to express this to others?
4. Tell the story, as you understand it so far, in your own words. If you can anticipate where the story is going, include that too. Are there places where your telling of the story sounds hopeless? If so, is it because you are inserting material from somewhere else?

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said, “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.” (Isaiah 6:1–7)

# Chapter 10

## TOUCH AND CLEANSING

**T**he Old Testament is filled with signposts. You get directions, walk a ways, and then you see another sign. Just when you are getting tired or think you might be lost, a new and better sign points the way.

The first signs put words on shame such as *unclean*, *rejected*, *exposed*, *outcast*, and *naked*. Since naked is the same as unsightly, we can attach *ugly* to the list. You can't do much with vague feelings that have no words, so Scripture gives us words. Then stories of hope begin to appear. People are covered, outcasts are accepted, regulations are given for making unclean people clean; and animal skins can be traded in, at least temporarily, for garments that transform the one who wears them. It makes you want to hear more of the story.

This next chapter in the story announces that cleansing is indeed possible and makes it clear that cleansing is not dependent on how precisely we follow the temple rules. God is the one who cleanses, and it is his pleasure to do so. But the familiar story of Isaiah adds a detail that could soon become your favorite. The point of cleansing is not simply that we can be clean and acceptable in the community. The deeper reason for the cleansing is that the Holy One can then come close, so close that he touches us.

At the time of Isaiah's ministry, things in Judah were very bad and getting worse. It wasn't a great time to be a prophet. The people were increasingly dead to the words of God (Isaiah 1:2–6), and no one supported the cause of

the oppressed (1:17). This meant that Isaiah had to tell the people hard things about themselves.

What's more, the country was about to be overrun by Assyria. Not much would be left after that, so Isaiah had to predict his country's destruction. To add to his misery, the vision coincided with the death of one of Judah's few decent kings. What a time to participate in history!

There was hope, though. There is always hope in God's story.

### **HOLY, HOLY, HOLY**

In his vision, Isaiah was escorted into the heavenly throne room. He hadn't asked to go there and he was not properly dressed, so the first thing he did was avert his eyes. That is what anyone would do before an eastern king. To look directly at him would be too familiar, too brazen. It makes you think of children who cover their eyes—if I don't see you, you don't see me. But before Isaiah could look away from the heavenly Presence, he caught a glimpse of a scene he wished he hadn't. Why the trepidation? Because Moses had asked to see the divine glory and was told it would mean certain death.

Moses said, "Please show me your glory." And [the LORD] said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name, 'The LORD.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live." (Exodus 33:18–20)

This was Isaiah's understanding of what would happen to anyone who saw the Lord. If the great Moses could die looking upon the face of God, how much more vulnerable would be a marginalized prophet! Even the heavenly

beings covered their eyes. So Isaiah fell to the ground, but it was already too late: he had seen more than a human being was allowed to see. Yet for some reason he wasn't dead.

Instead he was listening to the ongoing refrain, "Holy, holy, holy."

This three-fold *holy* inspires awe. Since repetition in Hebrew amplifies or intensifies the original idea or word, this rare three-fold repetition left Isaiah completely surrounded by the overwhelming holiness of God. He could avert his eyes from the Presence, but nothing could keep him from being enveloped by the sound of the thrice-holy. Even a deaf person would have *felt* the depths of the words. The temple itself trembled when the words were spoken.

*Holy*, when it is used of the Lord, means that he is God and we are not. He is infinite and eternal; we are finite. He is righteous; we violate his law at every opportunity. He is the one who rules over all things from his throne; we are rebellious subjects. So far, the comfort for those who experience shame is hard to find. Isaiah himself was only *more* aware of his shame as it stood in contrast to the perfection and purity of the Lord. It brought him to despair at his predicament. But despair is not a bad thing when it compels us to trust in or be associated with God himself. Not only that, but within the word *holy* lies the *answer* to shame. God is not a mere human. Humans disregard and ignore you; they stand over you in judgment; they shun, they avoid, they victimize. They accentuate your shame. And they can only contaminate. The Lord, however, is better than that, greater than that. Nothing you have found on earth compares to him. His response to Isaiah's shame—and yours—is completely different. It's the opposite of what you expect. Here is an example.



A married mother of three was a spiritually gifted contributor to her local church, but, once again, there was more going on below the surface. Though friendly, she was isolated and fearful. She was always scanning her environment for danger. She was always preparing for the time when she would be violated by *another* man or her children scarred by the actions of others. She lived in battle-ready vigilance that verged on paralyzing fear. Sometimes it moved into full-blown paranoia, though you probably wouldn't have realized it if you had seen her.

In her early teens, she had been sexually violated. From that day on, everyone seemed to wear a mask of her abuser's face; everyone seemed dangerous. She imposed that mask on every man she met because doing so somehow made her feel more prepared and protected. She generalized from the abuser to all men, and that made good sense. The abuser was a human male, and she should stay away from human males.

She came to know Jesus in her late teens. She heard the story of Jesus' love for women who were otherwise rejected. How could she resist? He was safe and compassionate. But over the next few years, as she continued to experience hardships and vulnerability, she gradually imposed the mask of her abuser on Jesus. She turned to him less and less. Jesus was a male and, in her eyes, he was increasingly human.



The thrice-holy of Isaiah's vision is exactly what she needed. Other people may indeed be dangerous, but God can never be rightly understood if you are looking at him as if he were someone else, especially someone who has damaged you. To do so is to ignore the refrain of "Holy, holy, holy" that echoes through the universe. Holy means God cannot be compared to anyone

else. He certainly cannot be likened to the worst person you know. He cannot even be compared to the best. His love and faithfulness endure forever.

At this point you have to listen to Scripture in a new way: you must listen with humility. Humility means that you acknowledge you don't know everything, and you might be especially confused when it comes to God.

A friend of mine was annoyed when, on the evening of his fiftieth birthday, his wife made arrangements to go to a church committee meeting at a local home. How could she make a dull and less-than-critical meeting more important than a nice dinner celebration? They had gone out the night before, but after all, this was his actual birthday. He was going to drop his wife off, say a brief hello, and then indulge his frustration. Everything was going according to his plan until he poked his head in and dozens of people yelled, "Surprise!"

In this situation he didn't need much humility. He adopted his wife's perspective of the evening and went from anger to love in a moment. But when it comes to changing our spiritual perspectives, we can tenaciously hold onto our false beliefs and refuse to be persuaded that we have made that classic blunder of mistaken identity. At that moment, humility is vital. The fastest way to bring a wrecking ball to our skewed interpretations is through confession.

Lord, you say you are good, and I want to know that. I confess that I can be blinded by my own fears and my thick-headed insistence that I am right. Please give me ears to hear, eyes to see.

Listen. That is humility. Listen as Isaiah's vision spells out some aspects of God's holiness.

**GOD COMES NEAR**



Isaiah mentions seraphim, creatures that aren't mentioned anywhere else in Scripture. All we know is that they had six wings and had to fly because the presence of God took up so much space in the throne room. They could speak loudly enough to shake a building, and they were messengers who did the King's pleasure. Their name suggests that they were bright and pure, which is fitting for the nature of their message.

They were the ones who dealt with Isaiah's predicament as he stood in the presence of the Holy One, contaminated (sinful), mortal, dirty, and uncovered. Given God's warning to Moses, he thought a death sentence was sure. But in the same way that little children learn more about their parents over time, the Lord tells us more about himself as we are able to hear it. Here he shows Isaiah—and us—that he will take the initiative to cleanse those who come to him.

Pause again. Are you still under the delusion that you can clean yourself? What are your normal strategies? Even those *without* glaring shame try to clean up before they go to the King. They make a few promises to be nicer to friend and foe; they promise to pray more and read their Bible. If these people, who feel a lot less dirty than you, have to jump through religious hoops to be more acceptable, how much more are you going to feel compelled to do *something* to get ready to see the King?

Ironically, our desire to clean ourselves actually minimizes the problem of uncleanness. It assumes we can give ourselves a good enough scrubbing to get a little holy before we meet the Holy One. But beware of any approach to uncleanness that doesn't rely on the cleansing power of God. The reality is that unclean people can't wash anything. Only the Holy One can make us holy. That leaves us with one alternative, and it is the hardest thing for an unclean person to do. Just state the obvious: "I am unclean and I live with people who are unclean."

Go ahead and say it. This is an important step that is actually low risk. You don't have to worry about getting stuck in despair because this story is going somewhere good. Also, when Isaiah leads you in this, you are showing your solidarity with Isaiah, the church past, and the church present. And, best of all, good things happen when we make this simple confession.

When Isaiah said it, the Lord sent the seraphim on a royal mission. They took hot, purifying coals (fire is often associated with holiness), left the throne area, touched Isaiah's mouth and, in so doing, purged his sin and shame. Isaiah was forgiven, cleansed, and welcomed into the presence of God, where we are all intended to live. That is where we truly belong. The whys and wherefores of these divine initiatives would not be fully explained until a later time. This episode is a foretelling of how Jesus would be sent from the throne, come close to us, and come so close that he would touch us. In that touch he would transfer his holiness to unclean people. Isaiah isn't told all this. For now it was enough for him to know that these seraphim represented God and revealed his character. When they come close, God comes close. When they cleanse, God cleanses. When their touch makes us holy, God makes us holy.

Surprising, isn't it? None of this is what a person shrouded in shame expects of holiness. But since holiness is so not-human, it always has an element of the unexpected. You never expected that God himself would, by his representatives, actually come close to unclean people and touch them.

The Holy One is not human.

The triune God is not human.

Don't limit God's character by your expectations of what a decent human king might do.

You expect God to reject; he accepts.

You expect him to turn away; he turns toward.

Think of yourself as someone who has a delusion. Shame is not your delusion. Shame is very real. But your knowledge of God's defy-all-expectations holiness is a delusion. Do you know how hard it is to give up a delusion? A young man believed that he was on the verge of a discovery that would change the world as we know it. He was already seeing connections that no one had ever made. For example, the white car he just saw was one of the horses in the book of Revelation. When he listened to a television preacher, every conjunction—every *and*, *if*, and *but*—was a personal message to him. If you tried to dislodge the delusion with “That’s your mania talking,” he would not be persuaded. We couldn’t persuade him of his grandiosity unless he trusted and loved us. Unless, in humility, he was willing to accept our version of reality over his own.

This is the miracle that happened to the married mother of three. Gradually, she submitted her version of her life’s story, which included her delusions about Jesus, to God’s truth about himself. She found that mere education wasn’t enough. A delusional person can study someone else’s perspective without ever adopting it. She opted, instead, for a better plan. In humility and faith, evidenced by how she confessed her tendency to believe her interpretation of God rather than his own self-revelation, she submitted to what God said about himself, and she began discovering that joy is possible.

### For Discussion

1. What encouraging thing does this story tell you about the character of God?
2. The favorite name for the Lord in the book of Isaiah is “the Holy One of Israel.” What difference would it make for you to use this name for the Lord, especially if you allowed Isaiah 6 to provide the content for that name?

3. Is your imagination coming alive? What do you see when you allow God's story to control your imagination? How are you seeing yourself?

“Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married,” says the LORD. “Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes. For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left, and your offspring will possess the nations and will people the desolate cities.

“Fear not, for you will not be ashamed; be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more. For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called.” (Isaiah 54:1–5)

I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the LORD; let the humble hear and be glad. Oh, magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together!

I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed. This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him and saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.

Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him! (Psalm 34:1–8)

# Chapter 11

## “THEIR FACES SHALL NEVER BE ASHAMED”

“**S**o now faith, hope, and love abide, these three” (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Your task, up to this point, has been to have hope. Forget about wishful thinking. It is just a vapor, as you already know. But allow hope to take root. Hope is a steely confidence that God is in this story of shame and he is up to something good. Like Isaiah, you might not understand the details of how the Lord will put shame to death, but he has revealed his character to you and that is enough. Contrary to your expectations, he has a unique affection for the marginalized and discarded.

Let’s spend a little more time with the prophet Isaiah. After all, his vision of God’s throne room was just the beginning of his prophetic work. With this beginning, we should anticipate that he has more good and important things to say to those familiar with shame.

He does have some bleak moments. He predicts hard times—very hard times. But on the far side of that darkness would be light, and it would come by way of a Servant-King, whom we know to be Jesus. The accent is on *Servant*. This Servant would be despised and rejected (Isaiah 53:3) yet, somehow, in his disgrace he would absorb our shameful acts and the consequences of shameful acts done against us. The Servant would identify with us and call on us to identify with him. Isaiah wasn’t precise about how this would happen, but he was very clear about the results: just imagine the very best thing possible.

## THE SERVANT-KING IDENTIFIES WITH US

**“Sing, O barren one.”** If sexual abuse is the leading cause of shame today, barrenness was its counterpart then. It was very public. Everyone knew you were barren, incapable of having children. You must have done something very bad, your neighbors would think, to deserve something so bad. (Do you see how it is like sexual violation today? Even if your neighbors don’t think bad things happen to bad people, a person filled with shame does.) Without any children, you have no one to inherit your land and your name would be lost from the face of the earth. It was a deep shame.

But whatever this Servant-King did has the barren woman singing. She is breaking out into spontaneous song. Her joy is bursting out—it can’t be contained. Somehow, without having given birth, she needs a bigger tent to hold her family. Her land is going to spread out to the horizon. Her descendants will be so many and so strong that they will take over the land now inhabited by enemy nations.

Many children and lots of land—it couldn’t get any better for the ancient Israelite. God’s blessing is writ large here. Everyone could see it. The recipient would be held in the highest esteem. And the barren woman didn’t have to do a thing. She simply got connected to the actions of the Servant.

Now it’s time to apply your imagination. Can you retell this story with modern images? You are being asked to imagine shame’s opposite: honor, glory, renown. Think in terms of prizes, awards, medals, being chosen for an important position, and all of it happening in public.

When I was in junior high, feeling my awkwardness and rejection along with everyone else, I enjoyed playing basketball at a nearby court. I especially enjoyed the times I was shooting by myself because when I was playing with other guys, I couldn’t avoid the reality that I was a mediocre player. When they left, I became The Man. The Man always had the ball

when the game was on the line. He rarely missed. If he did miss that last-second shot, he was fouled, so he still had an opportunity to be the hero. If The Man missed two foul shots, the ref noticed that an opposing player had gone too early for the rebound, so The Man was given another foul shot, and so on until all was well. The crowds would go wild! The honor, of course, didn't last. The next day I would go back to school. But that late afternoon session on the court could certainly be sweet.

Granted, this was the imagination of a juvenile, though even today I am not immune to juvenile fantasies. What makes them juvenile is that they barely approximate the glory we receive in Jesus. Like children asking if they serve chocolate in heaven because they can't imagine a good place without it, we too make small steps toward understanding honor and glory.

**“Fear not, for you will not be ashamed; be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced.”** Remember the stubborn persistence of shame? It seems to get worse over time. Well, Isaiah says a plan is in place to bring an end to shame. Do you remember how shame seems to be etched on our souls? Isaiah says that shame will be gone without a trace.

Whenever God says, “Fear not,” we can be certain he is doing something. Though the situation might seem overwhelming to us, our Heavenly Father knows better. Everything is in hand. Deliverance is already happening, so we need to keep our eyes open. Our fears have typically already decided that the worst is about to happen. Catastrophe is upon us and there is no hope. But “Don't be afraid,” when spoken by the Lord, is a promise that the end will be different from what we predict.

Are you listening? Yes. Are you swelling with joy like the once-barren woman? Probably not. Some things seem too good to be true, and you keep hope heavily guarded until you are certain it is safe to release it. But listen. These are not the words of a sunny optimist who wants to make you feel good



but can't really deliver. These are the very words of God, who is the Truth and only speaks the truth.

Listen. Hope. You don't even need a great imagination. Admit that God is full of more goodness than you once thought, and watch these stories of hope unfold. That is enough for now.

**“For your Maker is your husband.”** Shame usually works through associations. That is going to be a very important part of this story. If there is a horse thief in the family line, you must be at least three or four generations away to avoid being embarrassed by his actions. One generation removed and you will feel shame. The closer the relationship, the greater the contamination you feel. Even someone who robs your house can leave you feeling dirty and violated because the robber came close and stole items that were personal. The connection, even with someone you don't know, makes you feel violated.

But not everyone can identify a bad connection that causes them shame. What about the teenage boy who felt different from his peers? While other boys were talking about girls, he had no interest in them, at least not in the way the other boys did. When classmates exerted their machismo he didn't get it. His emerging same-sex interest made him feel disconnected from everyone.

Sometimes we can feel shame because we have *no* connections. This young man felt cut off and alone. He was desperate to be connected to something or someone, but there was nothing. He was alone among family members, alone in church, alone among boys, and alone among girls. Human beings were not intended to be isolated, without any associations. To be identified with nothing is a curse.

Notice the connection between nothing and worth. I remember a fundraiser in college where different male students were auctioned off to

clean, cook, or do whatever someone needed. I was asked to participate, but I declined with a lame excuse. My real reason was that I didn't want tangible evidence that I was worth nothing. I didn't want to be associated with nothing. I would have entered the fundraiser if I were part of a package deal that included the entire dorm, but to stand alone and possibly have my nothingness proclaimed was just too risky. Imagine being auctioned off when the auctioneer has to lower the initial bid from \$200 to \$100 to \$50 to \$10 to \$1, until some kind soul "redeems" you from the humiliation.

*Nothing* is bad.

Why is poverty shameful? You are worth nothing.

Why might orphans experience shame? They have nothing besides themselves with which to identify. They are unwanted. They have no apparent worth to anyone else.

Why do some who are rich fear the ignominy of death? Their association is with their money, which is another way of saying that they trust in nothing. Death will sever their only hope for honor.

Why might *all* of us feel like nothing? In Scripture, those who worshiped idols attached themselves to nothing because idols have no substance. They are empty, deaf, dumb, and blind. Idols are "wind and confusion" (Isaiah 41:29), and those who worship them know nothing and are worthless (Isaiah 40:17; 44:9; 44:18).

*Nothing* was the situation in Israel. The people worshiped idols and shared in their nothingness. They were alone and rejected: Isaiah called them a wife deserted, though Israel was the one who did the deserting. Now they were unloved, and love is what forges most of our good associations with others.

When you get the gist of God and his holiness, you suspect that this is when something dramatic will happen. It has all the ingredients: shame, isolation, desperation, the utter futility of making resolutions to change. It was the perfect time for God to enter into a relationship so close that it is identified as marriage.

Marriage is the closest association we can have. Just ask a new (or old) husband who has unsuccessfully tried to sneak out of the house looking like a slob. (Not that I do that *too* often.) The reputation of one spouse directly affects the other. With this in mind, Israel was in store for the most dramatic reversal possible. She would go from being identified with nothing to being the bride of the Creator God, and *she would not have to cleanse herself first*. He would take care of that. That was the Servant's job.

Here is the story that propels so many movies. The poor, neglected commoner becomes the beautiful princess and then queen. The commoner was disgraced and shamed until everything changed in a moment, with a simple question: "Will you marry me?" The only difference is that, both in the movies and in real life, the attention is all on the bride. We barely know the name of Cinderella's prince. But in Isaiah's prediction, all eyes are on the Maker, the Lord Almighty, the King, the *Holy One*. The bride is glorious *because* of her husband. Her husband is the Holy One, and she now participates in that holiness. Shame was associated with another life, another person.

So the cause of shame can be from our associations *or* the absence of them. The cure for shame will *always* be found in how we become connected to God.

**"Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed."**

There is a time in the wedding service when the bride and groom face each other. It is a moment heavy with meaning. The bride and groom are turning away from all others and have eyes for each other alone. They are face-to-face. In a similar way, your life changes when a king turns his face toward you. It means he is going to act favorably on your behalf. When *the* King turns his face to you, it means that blessing is on the way. It means he is committed to you and will be faithful as you live under his protection.

The worst curse? That the Lord would hide his face or turn away (Psalm 27:9).

The greatest blessing? “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you” (Numbers 6:24–25).

We, in response, seek his face (2 Chronicles 7:14). We turn away from emptiness and nothing and turn to our Maker and Husband. In the case of shame, we turn away from the actions or people that once defined us and turn to the Holy One. That turn is a loaded action that means “I do.” It is a statement of our allegiances.

That young man with the same-sex interest already feels as though he can’t turn to the Lord. He is too different, and he has bad thoughts. Lauren Winner, in her book *Girl Meets God*, writes that when God says he is coming to clean up our lives, our instinct is to tell him to wait until we have cleaned up our own lives. It is an understandable instinct, but it is deadly. We, of course, will never clean the house well enough for the coming of the Holy One. In response, Jesus says he has come *because* the house is messy. “[Jesus] said to them, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners’” (Mark 2:17). “Sinners” are both the guilty and the shamed.

I am pushing you. Your challenge so far has been to listen and allow hope to rise. As you have listened, you already are turning to Jesus. Now consider

being more intentional. Jesus gives you reason to turn and face him.

It sounds simple, but if you caught your shame from someone else, the shame-provoking person or event doesn't easily relinquish its hold on your soul. You experience a magnetic pull toward him or her. And in some strange way, you might be reluctant to turn away from that one constant in your life, the feeling you are familiar with, the feeling you tell yourself you know how to manage. But turn anyway. Turn towards life and light and the King's face. Be sure to talk to someone if you feel paralyzed in your old ways. Ask for prayer because this is no ordinary choice. It is a deeply spiritual act that needs a divine hand to point us in the right direction.

Our King has been pleased to have us walk together in our struggles. That is the way he designed his kingdom. So continue your protest against shame. Shame says, "You are alone; don't tell anyone." In protest, believe that the King is with you and that he brings you into a community. As one expression of your newfound radiance, you could say to a friend, "Help. Could you pray for me?"

Everything changes when you simply turn toward him. You might have noticed that spouses, over time, sometimes start looking like each other (though I am grateful that my wife has been spared this fate). It probably has to do with the same diets, similar exercise regimens, about the same amount of sun—things like that. The biblical version of this principle is much better: the less attractive spouse starts to look like the more attractive one. In other words, our Maker doesn't start looking more like us as he turns toward us; we look more like him. He looks glorious; we begin to look glorious too.

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. (Exodus 34:29)

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

God turns to you as a sign of his favor. You, in response, turn toward him and begin to reflect his beauty. Other people begin to realize that you are with the King. You are starting to look beautiful, like the glorious King.

Welcome to shame's opposite. Turn and find acceptance, honor, worth, even glory.

The next task is to discover the identity of this despised and rejected Servant (Isaiah 53). Somehow, he is the Author of all these benefits.

### For Discussion

1. At this point there should be visions dancing in your head. What are they? Are they being shaped by God's words? If not, why?
2. Can you identify any of the *nothing* you once reflected?
3. Do you know how to turn to your Maker? How do you do it?

# Shame, Honor, and Jesus



Everything Scripture says about shame converges at Jesus. From his birth to his crucifixion, the shame of the world was distilled to its most concentrated form and washed over him. He was despised, insulted, naked, a friend of sinners, and abandoned by those who knew him best. The crucifixion was not the tragic end of an otherwise charmed life. It was the logical conclusion of the shame he voluntarily accumulated from the moment of his birth. The task in the first section was just to listen and give hope a fighting chance. Now the job is to work, and “this is the work of God, that you believe in him in whom he has sent” (John 6:29).

What is the way out of shame?

Start with Jesus.

Look outside yourself to Jesus, who has been both highly honored and deeply shamed.

Somehow, you must be associated with him.

You associate yourself with him by faith.



# Chapter 12

## A SHAMEFUL START

**S**he had been rejected by her biological parents. Her legal guardians were no better. They had placed impossible expectations on her and crossed sexual boundaries. The story was easy to add up: she was nothing. When words failed to describe her life, she chose self-starvation as a way to express herself.

And then, suddenly, she started eating and came alive. Magic! Where dozens of friends had failed to make a difference, one person succeeded. What did he do that was so powerful?

He asked her to marry him.

As you can guess, her problems didn't disappear, but she was different. The engagement and subsequent marriage had connected her to love, acceptance, and the reputation of another. And he was simply a human being who would love her imperfectly. Imagine if the fiancé had a perfect love and was of inestimable worth. Your task is to know the better Lover and trust in him.



Jesus is an incongruous combination—a Servant-King. We have no parallels or comparisons. The Latrine-washing President? The Homeless Queen? No wonder so many people reading Isaiah's prophecies thought that the Messiah and the Servant were two different people. No wonder Jesus

went unrecognized for so long. Kings simply don't live as he did, which is great news for common people who are familiar with shame.

Yet there is no mistaking that he was the King. He came from the royal line of David; at birth he was announced as the King of the Jews; his coming was accompanied by dreams and heralded by angels, and a royal envoy preceded him. All these are unmistakable signs of royalty, yet the King "made himself nothing" (Philippians 2:7).

"That guy is a big zero." It is an old-fashioned phrase, but you get the point. Jesus identified himself with things and people considered to have no value. That incongruity, that combination of servant and king, is where you find hope for your own rejection and contamination.

He understands Nothings because he chose to be one. He elevates Nothings when they associate themselves with him.

Follow the life and death of King Jesus and you get the sense that everything is reversed. The outcasts and unclean are accepted; the reputable people with power are declared pitiful outsiders. The Nothings are his children. He prefers the Zeroes. The Servant-King is on the move, making everything the way it was intended to be.

## **ROYAL BLOOD**

Yes, Jesus was royalty. Your life actually depends on it. To discard shame, you must be connected to someone highly honored. To this end, both Matthew and Luke highlight his royal lineage. Yet Matthew also makes a point to include Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth, embarrassing limbs on the family tree that others might want to prune. One became pregnant by her father-in-law, one was an outsider and prostitute, the other was an outsider who was reduced to nothing. Plus, they were all women, who didn't have much worth to begin with in those days.

Matthew was making a point about the King. These were all women whose sin and shame would no longer define them. Instead, because of God's mercy, they were honored as part of the Davidic line and ancestors of the Messiah. Now *that* is divine power! What king is powerful enough to reverse shame and replace it with honor? A fiancé who was a good man was able to interrupt shame in an anorectic woman but, as in any human connection, it was only a temporary fix.

### **THE RIGHT PLACE OF BIRTH**

If you wanted to bolster your reputation during the New Testament era, you would be sure to speak about your impressive genealogy. Next, you would point out that you were raised on the right side of the tracks. (Notice how Paul used his connection with Tarsus to his advantage in Acts 22:3.) Scripture follows this culturally accepted strategy when it sets out to prove that Jesus was the Messiah, but it does so with irony and a wink. Jesus was indeed of royal blood, but Matthew highlights the dark side of the family tree to show that Jesus was no ordinary king. Given this irony, we would expect his birthplace to have a few wrinkles in it too.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a small suburb of Jerusalem that was nothing to boast about. But there was a prophecy that one would come from it “who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days” (Micah 5:2). So far, so good.

But it is downhill from there. The persecution that accompanied his birth forced his parents to flee to Egypt as outcasts. Exiles have no privileges or reputation. And of all the places to go into exile, Jesus was taken to the land that had once enslaved his people. It would be like a Jew fleeing to Germany to escape persecution while the memory of Nazi atrocities was still alive.

Financially, things weren't much better. When Jesus was circumcised, his family offered two pigeons, the required offering only for the very poor (Leviticus 12:8; Luke 2:22–24).

After Egypt they set off to Nazareth, a town in Galilee or, as Isaiah dubbed it, “Galilee of the Gentiles” (Isaiah 9:1 NKJV). That is about as far as you can get from Jerusalem, the prestige address of the day. Attach “of the Gentiles” to anything back then and you would evoke a snicker or a sneer. The Gentiles were unclean and if you came in contact with them, you too were unclean. But this is where Jesus grew up. It is the town that was identified with him (John 7:41). He probably had the regional accent.

The best you can say about Jesus' geographic origin is that he was a commoner. Common and poor people saw him as one of their own, while the ruling class thought he should stay in his place.

## **DREAMS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS**

Scripture is giving Jesus' credentials to you. He is a commoner and an outcast who knows you and identifies with you, so you can identify with him. He is also the King who takes you to the heights of honor and privilege.

Famous births come with signs, dreams, and pageantry. Once again, expect the incongruous with Jesus. Expect to be surprised. Yes, angels singing about birth is about as good as it gets. Jesus was certainly the King of kings. But the angels sang to shepherds, men with the lowliest of occupations. Perhaps because of their vagabond lifestyle, their testimony wasn't even accepted in a court of law. The King is making a huge statement here. He makes his home with the outcasts.

You find the same incongruities in the other announcements and dreams. The angel Gabriel tells Mary that she will give birth to the Son of the Most

High God. But the angel adds that Mary will be pregnant before she is married, which was very shameful in that day.

The Son of God was born to a woman who had to be ritually cleansed after she was contaminated by his birth (Leviticus 12:2). Furthermore, he was conceived when Mary was unmarried, which meant that going to Egypt was a blessing. By the time she settled in Nazareth, people were no longer adding up the months between her wedding day and the birth of her eldest son.

This is how King Jesus chose to be introduced to the world. He is the Holy One who took on human flesh and opted for the most rejected place on the social ladder. He alone could cleanse, but by the end of his life most people didn't even want to go near him.

## **ENVOYS AND AMBASSADORS**

Important people have messengers or ambassadors that go before them. A king doesn't just show up. He is properly announced: "The king is coming. Make way for the king." And these ambassadors must be impressive as the king's representatives. They will stand out from the crowd, with uniforms, medals, banners flying. Before the king makes his formal appearance, someone makes sure that all the arrangements are just right.

Jesus had an ambassador who was so important that his birth was also accompanied by angelic appearances and wondrous signs (Luke 1). But John the Baptist was a harbinger of no ordinary king. His uniform was a primitive coat of camel's hair; his royal foods were locusts and wild honey. He was very popular among the poor and common but foretold the worst for the ruling class: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Luke 3:7). His message to all was, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2).

As Jesus' ambassador, his ministry offered cleansing as symbolized by baptism (John 1:26). Listen to the envoy and you will learn much about the King.

You should hear in all this that the King identifies with outcasts. The message couldn't be clearer. You have heard it before and you will hear it again. There is another message too, though less obvious at this point. Throughout the Old Testament there is a constant refrain: human beings need cleansing, acceptance, and covering. The method of cleansing was spelled out in detailed rituals. These rituals, however, were not going to be the final word. God was only using them to teach his people that sin and contamination were serious problems and he alone could remedy them.

Now, with John and Jesus, he is unveiling more of his plan, and it is a radical one: an unclean, shamed person could experience cleansing simply by confessing his or her own sin. You could do this at the temple in Jerusalem or you could do it out in the Judean wilderness. If you were contaminated by others, you were cleansed and accepted. Only your own sins could separate you from God and others.

Noticeably absent from John's message is any mention of pigeons, goats, lambs, or any other sacrificial food or animal. Unclean people brought nothing to John the Baptist. They confessed that they had no perfection in themselves and no sacrifices that could truly wash away their sin and shame. A new era was coming.

The Servant-King: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve" (Matthew 20:28). Jesus was the Lamb-King (John 1:29), the Outcast-King, the Naked King. You cannot compare Jesus to anyone. He is not what you or anyone else expected. The self-sufficient and power brokers were deaf and blind; they didn't get Jesus. But the Nothings understood. They considered

him one of their own. Even more, he considered them among *his* own. If you are a nothing, you too should understand.

### For Discussion

1. Are you starting to see how the kingdom of heaven where Jesus reigns is very different from what you expect? What kind of king would you have predicted?
2. Why is a Nothing-King exactly what you need?
3. What are you hearing so far?

Are you looking outward?

Look to Jesus,  
who identified with you  
so you would identify with him.



# Chapter 13

## THE BOUNDARY VIOLATOR

“**G**et out of here!” That’s what someone tells you when you have done something wrong. That’s what an angry parent says—it is anger laced with contempt. That’s what people said to the unclean. The law said that unclean people had to go “outside the camp” both because everyone wanted you out and because “the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp” (Deuteronomy 23:14). You don’t get near the Holy One when you are contaminated.

“The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.” (Leviticus 13:45–46)

If you wanted to go to the bathroom, you went outside the camp. How fitting. Keep the unclean away from both the clean and the holy. Put them with the refuse. That’s the way it was supposed to be, which isn’t news to you. You knew that before you knew anything about Old Testament law. But you missed something very important: this separation between unclean and holy was only the beginning of the story. It was a setup for what was to come.

What was to come, however, would have been hard to predict. Even with the shame associated with Jesus at his birth, no one imagined that the King would be crucified. At worst, discerning followers were anticipating a rags-

to-riches story. A throne that ruled over the despised Romans and their miserable occupation was the only possible outcome. But once you identify the servant theme of Isaiah, in which the Suffering Servant would be disgraced and deemed worthless (Isaiah 53:3), and merge that with the mixed messages surrounding Jesus' birth, then the events of his life and death make complete sense. The King would identify with the shamed and destitute, and he would *become* shamed and destitute with them.

For it is for your sake that I have borne reproach, that dishonor has covered my face. I have become a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my mother's sons.

For zeal for your house has consumed me, and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me. (Psalm 69:7–9)

#### **THE PURPOSE STATEMENT OF THE KING**

Jesus' mission was clear from the start. Some people have life verses that guide their lives. Though *all* Scripture points to Jesus, he too had a life verse:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (Luke 4:18–19, quoted from Isaiah 61:1–2)

The poor and the prisoner were Jesus' constituency. These were the worthless and forgotten of the day. The blind were no better. Let's assume that Jesus' disciples were a little more enlightened than most, so that their perspective on the blind would have been relatively charitable. Yet when

they passed a blind man, even they asked Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2). The blind were definitely numbered among the outcasts.

Jesus’ mission was to pursue those who were outside the camp—far outside. His message was strictly good news. So if you are familiar with shame, you should be hearing good news and expecting even more. The same can’t be said for the smug elite of Jesus’ day. Jesus, like John before him, had a number of harsh warnings for them. But if you feel like nothing, Jesus is continuing his mission of crossing the boundary between clean and unclean, and he crosses it to reach you.

He doesn’t mind repeating his intentions either. When John the Baptist sent some of his followers to ask Jesus if he was really the Messiah, Jesus responded with his mission statement. It was unequivocal proof to John that the wait was over, the Messiah had come.

“Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” (Luke 7:22–23)

His congregation of beloved misfits was growing. It even included Gentiles and women.

### **THE SAMARITAN WOMAN**

John 4 relates one of the best known stories in Scripture. Even if you don’t understand the cultural background, you can’t miss the way Jesus reaches out to an outcast. He meets a Samaritan woman who had gone through a number of men and was now living with someone who was not her husband. Even as

late as the 1970s this would have raised eyebrows. In Jesus' day it was scandalous. This woman was familiar with shame, and she had probably given up trying to redeem her reputation.

You may know some of the cultural barriers between Jesus and this woman.

- Men simply did not talk to women in public. That in itself was enough to make this a shocking story to first-century readers.
- Jews did not associate with Samaritans. Samaritans were mongrels whose Jewish blood had long ago been contaminated by Gentile invaders. Most Jews skirted around Samaria if they were traveling from Jerusalem in the south to Galilee in the north.
- Jews did not contaminate themselves by eating or drinking with non-Jews, but Jesus accepted a drink from her and offered her an even better one.

Jesus was crossing boundaries: Jerusalem to Samaria, male to female, full-blooded Jew to despised outcast. The fact that this woman was of low worth in her own community means that no one can ever say, "Oh, that's her, but Jesus would never act that way toward me."

If *you* say that or even notice a hint of it in yourself, you are still a little woozy from your shame. You are going through the motions because it feels safer. The task of believing is more difficult than it seems. Consider saying a hearty "Amen"—"Lord, I believe what you say"—before you go much further.

If the extreme features of this story aren't enough to persuade you that Jesus can deal with your shame, here is a little more. When a president comes into office, he or she will make a one-hundred day push to put a personal stamp on the national agenda. The apostle John, who recorded this

event, is making a similar point. This is one of the first public acts of King Jesus. He wants to be known by it. The King is staking his reputation on it. There is nothing random about this meeting with the Samaritan woman. Jesus intentionally violated the boundaries of shame and, in so doing, chose to defile himself.

When John tells a story, he is always thinking about the reader. He wants us to identify with the people Jesus meets; he wants us to answer the questions Jesus asks. As you read this book, I occasionally ask “Are you listening?” or “Do you believe this?” as a way to keep us both alert. John is more sophisticated. Like a fine novelist, his details about people draw us in because he wants us to respond to each story. So let’s go along with John on this one.



You (like the Samaritan woman) are walking to a well—alone, of course.

*“Will you give me a drink?”*

You didn’t expect this. You didn’t expect anyone else to be drawing water at this time of day.

Jesus is taking the initiative toward you. He speaks first. It is so unexpected that it feels wrong. You are taken aback. Just in case he forgot normal protocol, you remind him that you are from the other side of the tracks. If someone were to see Jesus with you, his reputation would nosedive.

His request for a drink goes right over your head. You are too startled by the fact that he is speaking to you as if you were a regular person. But when you think about it, the fact that he asks you to do something for him is even more amazing. If an important person asks you to help, it is an honor.

*“You must not know who I am,” Jesus says. “I am the boundary-crosser who liberally gives the gift of God. If you really understood who I am, you wouldn’t be ashamed to ask me for living water.”*

Jesus invites you to ask for something. He wants to give you something, but a worthless person doesn’t even have a category for that. You pull back and act as if he is talking literally. You talk about not having enough buckets.

*“Really, I want to give you something. Believe me, as good as this water is, I can give you something much better. Think of it as water that will leave you permanently satisfied. Living water.”*

You finally hear him, sort of. You don’t know the details of what he is saying, but you want it. Jesus is making quite an offer, especially to someone who feels destitute and unclean. Water gives life, and if you have plenty you can wash yourself with whatever is left.

Shock has passed. Hope has kicked in.

You barely realize what just happened. It is called faith. You just turned in Jesus’ direction and you are listening. You want what he offers. And all this is a gift from the Holy Spirit. Not everyone wants what he gives—the elite seemed uninterested or offended by Jesus—but desperate people learn more quickly than most.

*“I will certainly give it to you. First, go get your husband and be sure to come back. I’m not going anywhere.”*

The mood suddenly changes. Before he said this, you spoke to Jesus by saying, “Sir.” You were polite, respectful. But he has gotten uncomfortably close with his comment about husbands. You freeze. Your instincts take over. Your response is quick, terse, and defensive. He is knocking on the door of a dark and shameful place, and you don’t want to go there.

*“Oh, and don’t worry. I know about your past—all the details. I know your many lovers by name. I know you are living with a man you aren’t*

*married to. I knew all that before I spoke to you.”*

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My daughter had a car accident that was her fault. She wasn't hurt, but it was going to cost us money. Before she arrived home, we heard the news from a friend who had seen my daughter and her friend walking away from the damaged car.

My daughter was most concerned about how her mother and I would respond. She dreaded the thought of explaining it to us. When she came in the house, we could see her trepidation, so we spared her the storytelling.

“We know what happened with the car. It's okay.”

In an instant she realized we didn't look mad. We weren't going to send her to prison or do whatever worst-case scenario she was anticipating. We still loved her just as we did before the accident. It had to be a high point in her life.

You, like the Samaritan woman and my daughter, don't have to go into the details of your life's shameful events either. Before you can construct a strategy to cover them up, Jesus says, “I know what happened to you,” or “I know what you have done.” Immediately, you can tell he doesn't reject you, expose you, or pull back to avoid being contaminated by you. He just says, “Be sure to come back.”

But old habits die hard. You don't trust people messing with the fine china of your past, so you move the topic off you and onto religion. It's an age-old diversion.

“With so many denominations and religions, who is to know what's true?” It's a silly thing to say, but this entire conversation has been shocking from start to finish, so an odd response here and there is understandable. Maybe you anticipate that Jesus is going to tell you to go to church more, so

you mention something about hypocrites. Either way, you still don't get who Jesus is. You are just scrambling to avoid your shame.

*“What is most important is that you look away from yourself to the true God. No matter who you are or where you are from, you will be able to know him and worship him. And when you worship him, it means you are accepted into his presence.”*

When in doubt, look at the Lord. Lift up your eyes (Numbers 21:4–9). That will be something it will take all your life to master, but what better time to start than now? Still, you can't imagine being an invited worshiper of God.

Someday. Maybe. Hope rises, but it is so foreign you don't know what to do with it. You *certainly* don't want to get too excited and be disappointed yet again.

“Yes, Jesus, someday.”

*“I—the one speaking with you right now—am the true God.”*



This is the last word. Jesus always has the last word, and it is always a good last word. It is always about him and it always takes you by surprise with his love and acceptance. What is your response? John's message is clear: worship him.

What does *worship him* mean? It means everything. It means you turn away from the stagnant pools where you once drank. For the Samaritan woman, it meant she would align her lifestyle with his kingdom. In technical terms, she would repent. She would turn away from acts of death to receive living water, and she would love it. For the young man struggling with thoughts of same-sex attraction, it means that he says to Jesus, “You are not like anyone I have ever known. I trust you.” For the anorectic woman, it



means that she no longer puts all her trust in her husband's love but trusts in Jesus alone, who is the only one capable of bearing the weight of her tremendous emptiness and need.

Meanwhile, there is lot going on in this story. Jesus just revealed his heart to you, and that is something a friend does to a friend. Do you feel your shame when you are with a dear friend? You are not thinking, *What will she think about me?* Instead, you feel at home, even if you never knew a real home.

And there is more to come. Living water sounds very good, but it isn't enough. What good is quenched thirst and a bath when you are isolated and outside the camp? The horror of shame is the isolation. Even though isolation is temporarily safe, it isn't the way you were intended to live. So if this water is going to be *really* good, it must be more than water. A little later John tells us that this is the case. The living water ultimately points to the Spirit who would be given to all who believe in Jesus. This *Holy* Spirit (John 7:39) had already begun his work in the Samaritan woman. The Spirit's presence in *you* is the real living water. The Spirit himself goes outside the camp and never leaves you, but I am jumping ahead of the story.

For now, know that this unclean, exposed outcast is connected to the King. Shame is no longer her husband.

## For Discussion

1. What does it mean to receive living water?
2. What does it mean to worship God? How does that get to the heart of shame? (When you worship, you identify yourself with the one you worship.)
3. How will you worship God?
4. Will you let him come near? Will you let him speak to you?

What is the way out of shame?

Listen.

Be surprised.

Believe.

# Chapter 14

## WHEN GOD TOUCHES THE UNTOUCHABLES

**J**esus succeeded spectacularly in his goal of associating with outcasts. By the time he gathered the twelve disciples, he was already known as a “friend of tax collectors and sinners.” He pursued the dregs—those who would make you unclean—and he ate with them, a huge misstep in Hebrew society.

“Friend of tax collectors.” Tax collectors were the servants of Rome, so they were unclean whether they were Jew or Gentile. But Jesus made one of them—Matthew—a part of his inner circle.

“Friend of Sinners.” *Sinners* meant “the really bad (or different) people who are not us.” They included people who were known by their sins: Joe the Divorcer, Jane the Adulteress, Jim the Thief. And they included those who were physically handicapped or abused: Jack the Blind, Jane the Molested. “Sinners” had everyone gossiping. But Jesus sought them out, and they sought him out. He was their friend, and happy to touch them.

As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he rose and followed him.

And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and *sinners* came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples,

“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and *sinner*s?” (Matthew 9:9–11, emphasis mine; also see Matthew 11:19; Luke 15:1–2)

Remember Isaiah’s vision of the King? It was a frightful event filled with rumblings, smoke, and the refrain, “Holy, holy, holy” (Isaiah 6). The most shocking feature of the scene was the seraphim, a representative of the King, coming on the King’s behalf to touch Isaiah’s tongue with a live coal, which symbolized his purification. The people of Israel had come to expect God to be close—but not too close. Certainly, no one expected to touch God or be touched by him. Certainly no one would eat with God. But Isaiah was pointing to the time when God would come closer than we could imagine. And who could have imagined he would insist on touching the untouchables?

#### **THE MEANING OF TOUCH**

Every day we touch other people. How many? Dozens? If you live in a city and take public transportation, you touch hundreds of people. But there are different kinds of touches. The inadvertent touches are meaningless. You might apologize if you accidentally bump someone; otherwise, you don’t even think of all the unintentional contact you have with other human beings.

I have a friend who is as far from touchy-feely as you can get. He likes his space. His emotional range is . . . restricted. When a surgical procedure went badly, he landed in the hospital for over three weeks. During that time he had a small but steady group of visitors. I don’t think a day passed without someone stopping in to visit and pray with him. But after he recovered he couldn’t stop talking about one particular visitor. It was an older man. I don’t remember how they knew each other—probably a friend of a friend.

This man came in the hospital room, sat on the bed, and held my friend’s hand. He held it for what would normally be considered an uncomfortably

long time. He just sat there and held his hand. This older man was the first person to touch my hospitalized friend in weeks. And while my friend was telling me this story, tears were rolling down his cheeks. Naturally, that made me want to hug him, but I decided to save it for the next time he was in the hospital.

We hear about a baby's need for human contact. Apparently that need extends to crotchety middle-aged men too, though mere skin-to-skin contact will not do. We want *purposeful*, meaningful touch, not the professional touch of someone taking our blood pressure or inserting a new IV.

I remember the first time I touched my wife. I might have touched her fifty times before I actually touched her, but none of them counted. The first time I touched her with intent, I took her hand, and I think she touched me back. When you love someone, you touch them.

For those who feel untouchable, have you noticed that your shame fades away when someone else touches you intentionally, in love?

Yet not all touch is good. There is another kind of touch that is purposeful and intended to harm. If you have been cruelly hit by someone who is supposed to love you, something happened in that touch. You were shamed. If you were touched sexually by someone you didn't want to touch you, you discovered one of the laws of intentional touch—it lingers much longer than the physical act. It can create an association that is hard to break. In fact, it cannot be broken apart from a good touch that erases and replaces the old.

## **OLD TESTAMENT TOUCHING**

Scripture is all about touch, though you might not see that in an initial reading. In the Old Testament, touch can seem very confusing. Some of it can be very good. For example, if you are a priest and you touched the consecrated altar (consecration is the God-given method of making

something holy), the holiness rubbed off on you and you were made holy, at least temporarily (Exodus 29:37). In a later story, some Israelites were burying a man and hurriedly threw his body into Elisha's tomb to avoid a band of robbers. As a prophet, Elisha had been set apart by God to serve him, so he would be called holy. As soon as the dead man's body touched Elisha's bones, the dead man immediately came to life and stood up (2 Kings 13:21). Touch, indeed, could be a good thing.

Picture Aaron the high priest, laying his hands on the scapegoat—an actual live goat—and confessing over it the people's wickedness. Somehow, God ordained that in Aaron's purposeful touch, sins would be transferred from the people to another living creature. In this case, the transfer was a great blessing to the people. The goat, not the people, would carry the weight of the sin (Leviticus 16:20–22).

Picture the prophet Elisha, spread-eagled over a dead boy. It seems as if it took *a lot* of touching to raise the dead.

When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. So he went in and shut the door behind the two of them and prayed to the LORD. Then he went up and lay on the child, putting his mouth on his mouth, his eyes on his eyes, and his hands on his hands. And as he stretched himself upon him, the flesh of the child became warm. (2 Kings 4:32–34)

In the Old Testament, touch was usually a good thing, but you still had to be careful. When God came to Mount Sinai to meet with his people, they had to ritually wash or consecrate themselves according to God's directions. Even then, if one uninvited person touched the mountain, he or she would be put to death with stones or arrows. No one was allowed to touch that person (Exodus 19:10–13). Years later, when the ark of God was recovered from an

enemy and returned to Israel, it teetered when one of the oxen pulling its cart stumbled. Uzzah instinctively reached out to steady the sacred object and died immediately (2 Samuel 6:6–7). Touch could be a very dangerous thing.

There are ways to make sense out of these events. For now, it is enough to know that touch has a deeper meaning. Get touched at the wrong time by the wrong person and you at least became unclean. Perhaps you'd even die. Get touched at the right time by the right person, and you come to life.

### **THE PURPOSEFUL TOUCH OF JESUS**

The New Testament specializes in good touch. With Jesus there is a lot of touching going on, and it is all good. Don't be distracted by the crowds pressing in on him. Keep an eye out for the intentional touch he invites from and extends to his favorites: the lame, blind, leprous, discarded, and sinful.

When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. And behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. (Matthew 8:1–3)

There were many people pressing in on him, but Jesus made time for the leper. Men and women like him were Jesus' people. Then, instead of healing this man simply by saying a word, he purposefully touched him, though *touching* was completely unnecessary. All it accomplished was to make Jesus himself ceremonially unclean. Jesus could have avoided this but it was part of his plan.

As you consider this story, stop for a minute. Bring it close. Make it personal to you. Every person who knows shame should be captured by this

story. All you need in order to make it your own is to feel utterly worthless and deserving of rejection.

Let the leper lead you. When you encounter a New Testament story, the heroes are typically the tax collectors, unclean people, and neighborhood failures. They understand Jesus. Take your cue from them. This man is one of the first heroes you can emulate.

Can you say, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean”? It doesn’t count if you nod your head with the leper but can’t say it out loud.

Can you say it? I know it isn’t easy. But this leper is one of the first heroes in the new kingdom inaugurated by Jesus. You are being asked to follow in his footsteps with something similarly heroic. Of course, his heroism is a gift. The Spirit of the living God gave him the power to say such a thing. You will need that power too.

Can you say it? If not, ask God for help or . . . just say it! If you can say it, be amazed that God has come close to you and given you more power than you know.

Next, do you believe it? Do you believe that Jesus responds, “I am willing, be clean”? At this point we should begin to expect such things. This is central to his mission statement. Do you believe what he says? If not, be careful. You are giving more authority to your worthlessness than you are to Jesus, and when you make it personal like that, it is a scary thought. You are essentially saying that Jesus is not telling you the truth. You are saying that Jesus’ touch is less powerful than Elisha’s. So believe.

Now back to Jesus, the Touching-King. He touched the eyes of a blind man and he could see (Matthew 9:28–30; 20:34). He touched Peter’s sick mother-in-law and her fever left (Matthew 8:14–15). He was touched by a disgraced woman, and he praised her for understanding that he was the Approachable King who cleansed by forgiving sins. In forgiving her sins he



took away her deepest shame (Luke 7:36–48). In a curious variation on this touching theme, Jesus approached a deaf and mute man, placed his fingers in the man’s ears, spit on his finger, and *touched the man’s tongue* (Mark 7:31–35). There is no denying his willingness to get down and dirty after that. Before long, all the sick and demon-afflicted tried to touch him “for power came out from him and healed them all” (Luke 6:19).

Best known of these stories was the woman who had been sick with twelve years of bleeding. She was clearly unclean and untouchable.

As Jesus went, the people pressed around him. And there was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and though she had spent all her living on physicians, she could not be healed by anyone. She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment, and immediately her discharge of blood ceased. And Jesus said, “Who was it that touched me?” When all denied it, Peter said, “Master, the crowds surround you and are pressing in on you!” But Jesus said, “Someone touched me, for I perceive that power has gone out from me.” And when the woman saw that she was not hidden, she came trembling, and falling down before him declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. And he said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.” (Luke 8:42–48)

There was lots of jostling and bumping in this crowded village—lots of inadvertent touch. The woman’s touch, however, was highly intentional. It is no wonder that the woman was embarrassed when her action was made public. The law prohibited her from touching others but desperation makes you do things you otherwise wouldn’t do. As it happens, desperation is one

of the main ingredients of faith. Faith means you need healing, you can't do it yourself, and you are confident that Jesus is the hands-on Healer.

Hmm. Are you willing to contaminate the King? Are you desperate enough? Do you know he invites you to touch him? These are not easily answered questions. Scripture is offering you a second hero, or heroine in this case. She is the first to be called a person of faith. Imitate her actions, hear the questions Jesus asked, and confess publicly with her why you touched him. And don't worry about making him unclean. He is the Holy One, and holiness trumps uncleanness.

Faith is your response to Jesus. He makes the first move. He makes a beeline toward you. Then you do something. When he moved toward the leper, the man said, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean" (Luke 5:12). Another man with leprosy threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him (Luke 17:16). This woman touched him, and in that touch she acknowledged that Jesus was the One sent from the Father. He was, in fact, "the LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious" (Exodus 34:6).

How will you respond? "Yes, Lord, I believe" is fine, but you can see that early men and women of faith put their own personal flourishes to their response.

Before you move on from this story, Luke connects it to one more. The two stories are linked by "while [Jesus] was still speaking . . ." (Luke 8:49). In the first story Jesus was touched by the bleeding woman; in the second he intentionally touched a corpse. The result: Jesus was contaminated, a woman was healed; a dead girl was given life, stood up, and got something to eat. Apparently, Jesus' touch and his invitation to us to touch him back are essential parts of the Good News.

## **TOUCH AND POWER**

When Jesus touched or was purposefully touched, there was a lot happening. He was showing his solidarity with outcasts. He was identifying with them. Of that there is no doubt. When you see people purposefully touching, you know they are at least good friends. But if that's all Jesus did, it would have been a nice but empty gesture. The outcasts would have felt temporary comfort but no real change in status. So there was much more happening. The accumulating references to "power" give it away.

With every intentional touch there was a transaction being made. "Power" goes out from Jesus to the person who was touched. Splice together various Scriptures and you will see that power is a loaded term that includes

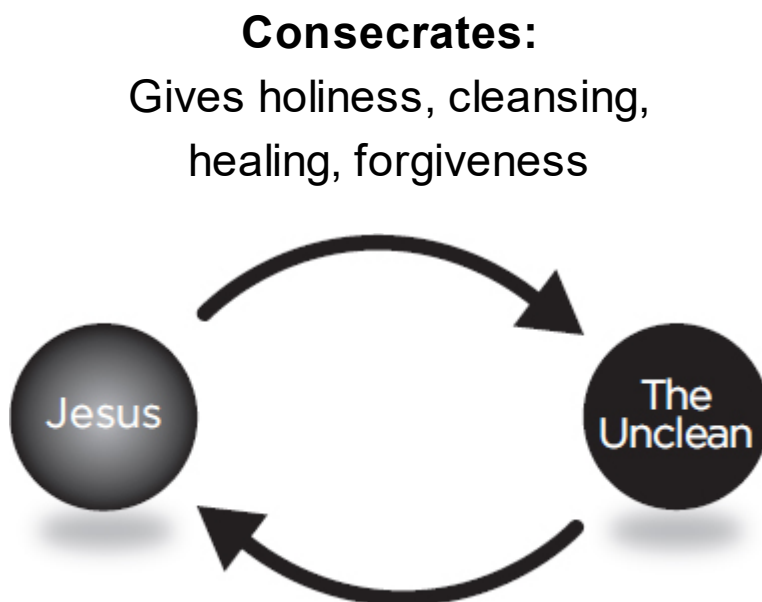
- holiness conferred (consecration)
- forgiveness of sins
- cleansing and purification
- healing
- identification with Jesus' status.

Meanwhile, the unclean person gave something to Jesus, the scapegoat. He or she gave

- sins
- shameful acts
- victimization and its contamination
- disease.

**This is the gospel: God touches us.** All the talk about cleanness and uncleanness points to this divine touch. This is what the universe itself was waiting for. It is an unbalanced transaction that displaces our shame and replaces it with holiness. The apostle Paul put it this way: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the

righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). With our touch, Jesus becomes our scapegoat. In his touch, Jesus takes our sin and absorbs our shame (Psalm 69:9; Romans 15:3), and we receive his righteousness. If you prefer symmetry in your relationships, in which you give a gift of similar value to the one you receive, you have not yet touched Jesus.



**Contaminates:**  
Gives sin, shame,  
uncleanness

**This is faith: we reach out and touch the Holy One.** Faith means we believe that the kingdom of heaven has come to us in Christ. It means we believe there is hope in Jesus and only in him. It means we believe that rescue, healing, covering, acceptance, and cleansing are possible, and possible only in Jesus. Faith—or touching Jesus—means saying, “Jesus, I need you.”

It sounds easy but, like all things spiritual, faith is evidence of supernatural power at work in us. Left to ourselves, we instinctively turn

inward rather than put our trust and confidence in Jesus. You know this instinct. We call it self-protection, though it is more accurately called unbelief.

Shame has a natural affinity with self-protection and unbelief. It hides from others, feels undeserving of anything good, and believes it will contaminate whatever comes close. But look at what happened when Jesus came. Unclean people suddenly were filled with hope. Instead of hiding from the world, they became indifferent to the derision of the relatively clean townspeople and boldly went out to see Jesus. When they saw him, they felt compelled to touch him because they understood that their salvation was near. They came alive!

Watch them as they sit in the filth of their daily lives. Watch them as they hear rumors of someone who cares *and* has power. Watch them stand up when they receive news that Jesus is approaching. Watch their steps quicken when they hear the crowd. Watch them become an unstoppable force when they see him. Don't get in the way of someone who is both desperate and hopeful when the King is near.

These are the men and women of faith.

Join them. Don't be one who happens to bump into Jesus in a crowded marketplace. Instead, join those who purposefully touched him.

Please, join them.

## For Discussion

1. You have undoubtedly known cruel touch. Have you ever experienced meaningful, personal touch that temporarily broke through your shame?
2. Have you ever run from Jesus' touch? Why?
3. Have you ever run toward him to touch him?

What is the opposite of shame?

Being touched by the right person.

# Chapter 15

## A NEW CODE OF HONOR

**W**hen you are touched, you are changed. Zap. It happens in a moment. But it can take some of us quite a while to catch up with what Jesus did.

Think of shame as the center of your old culture, with all the manners, rules, and prohibitions that cultures and religions can have. It identified your caste, gave you guidelines for relating to clean people, and even provided information about what was to come. Go through the culture's archives and you are sure to find documents that begin "Cursed are," as in "Cursed are those who have vile thoughts," "Cursed are those who are unloved."

Here is your task. You are learning how to live in a new kingdom even while you have vivid memories of the old one. When you begin living in a new culture, it always feels awkward. There are times you crave your old ways, but a blending of the two cultures is impossible. You must believe that the culture to which you have been transported is better than anything you can imagine, though, admittedly, your imagination is not very refined yet.

Jesus inaugurated a new kingdom so radically different from what people expected that the documents of the land had to be updated. The old documents were the Ten Commandments, which are certainly good as far as they go, but there was much more to say when the Messiah appeared. So, while Jesus was gathering followers and touching as many people as possible, one of his first actions was to enlarge and clarify the culture in which his followers

would live. He was going to explain how the kingdom of heaven worked. So he gave us the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5—7).

The scene is a pastoral hillside but, in retrospect, we know that Jesus was leading a revolution. He is re-enacting the giving of the Ten Commandments. In this re-enactment Jesus is both God himself, who gave the law, and Moses, the prophet who gave the law to the people.

He begins with a preamble to set the tone for his kingdom. Throughout the Old Testament there are expressions that begin, “Blessed is the . . .” (e.g., Deuteronomy 33:29 (NIV); Psalms 1:1; 32:1; 34:8; 84:5–6). You might have heard them, but they were never part of the culture in which you lived. Now Jesus says that the way of this new kingdom goes through these Beatitudes.

On Sinai, Moses went up to the Lord alone. No one else was permitted even to touch the mountain. On this new “mountain” a crowd had already gathered—they were given open access and Jesus went up the mountain to teach them. The people were already on the sacred mountain. This new giving of the law replaces the story of Moses’ meeting with the Lord at Sinai and vastly improves on it.

Here is how it begins:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:3–10)



Jesus has an agenda. He aims both barrels at the old culture's thoughts about shame and honor.

Personal popularity and the approval of the masses is not honor.

Riches and the prestige and influence that accompany them? No, honor could never rest on something so hopelessly superficial.

How about rule keeping? That has always been a convenient way to separate the honorable from the dishonorable. No, that is a constitution for the self-centered, self-dependent, and self-righteous, not for the kingdom of God.

Jesus is permanently rearranging the societal structures of shame and honor. He begins with "blessed," which is a loaded word. It includes deep satisfaction but also has social implications: the blessed are honored, their status is enviable, they are obvious recipients of divine approval and favor. Replace "Blessed are" with "How honorable are"<sup>7</sup> and you will see what I mean.

## **THE SERMON OUTLINE**

There are eight beatitudes that can be divided into two parts, much like the Ten Commandments were given on two tablets. The first four *honorable*s concern how we relate to God; the second four how we relate to people. The first, and its mirror, the eighth, share the same benefits—"theirs is the kingdom of heaven"—and are in the present tense. These are benefits we have now. The others we have now, in part, and in the future we will have them in full. You might see hints of them now but you can be sure they will be fully realized somewhere up ahead.

## **HONOR AND FAVOR AS WE RELATE TO GOD**

The first beatitude commends the poor in spirit. It picks up on Jesus' mission to preach good news to the poor and afflicted (Luke 4:18).

“How honorable are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

You can't miss the word *poor* in what Jesus said. It may have been the first time in history that honor and poverty appeared together. He wants us to think about the poor, who are the original congregants for this sermon. Then, with the poor in view, Jesus wants us to go deeper. He would be less than fair if only the destitute could be part of the kingdom of heaven, but poverty *of spirit* is available to everyone. The poor in spirit are those who live with the keen awareness that they must depend on God for everything, both spiritual and physical needs. The poor are often poor in spirit, and the poor in spirit are often poor, but it is dependence and spiritual neediness that are especially in view.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains the poor in spirit with *nothing* language.

It means the complete absence of pride, a complete absence of self-assurance and self-reliance. It means the consciousness that we are nothing in the presence of God. It is nothing, then, that we can produce; it is nothing that we can do in ourselves. It is just this tremendous awareness of our utter nothingness as we come face to face with God. That is to be poor in spirit.<sup>8</sup>

Shame is *felt* before other people, but its deepest answer lies in the way we live before God. In this first beatitude our eyes are directed to that primary relationship with God. While nothingness before other people feels like a curse, nothingness before God is something to which we aspire. It is a blessing. It is honorable. It is the way we were created to live.

“Jesus, help me” is one of the most honorable things you can say. The person who has something doesn’t ask for help. The spiritually destitute person has nothing, and that is what God requires of us. Before God, you have nothing you can offer him. All your good deeds mean nothing. We are, after all, unclean and he is holy.

This is a new spin on *nothing*. Don’t forget, you are in a new kingdom and things are not as they seem. The first thing God requires of you is nothing. Bring your contrition, penance, and self-debasing and you bring something. Just bring nothing. It is the hardest thing for humans to bring to the Lord.

You could say it this way: “How honored are the spiritual beggars. They are approved by God and inherit his kingdom.”

Try to think the opposite of the way you normally do. In contrast to the people who build personal kingdoms that fade away in a generation or two, spiritual beggars are publicly praised. They are citizens of heaven itself, the most honorable of cities, the ultimate right side of the tracks. Since they have depended on the King instead of themselves, they share in what is his. This means they have everything, and it will all last.



Nkosingipile is a poor, twenty-two-year-old man from Swaziland, one of the poorest countries in the world. He is bright but his family can’t afford education. He would be a good husband, but the price of a bride is prohibitive. He has nothing. So what makes him so attractive?

He doesn’t have to be first. When there are free shoes available—shoes he needs—he lets others go first. By the time he can select something, there is nothing left. He is more appreciative when you pray for him than when you offer him material goods. Spend time with him and you will agree that

humility and thankfulness are deeply embedded in his soul. Poverty of spirit is just plain beautiful. He is quietly strong, and if you met him you would want to be more like him. You would think he is great. You can't miss it: he has received divine favor.

He also is an expert in the second beatitude.

“How honorable are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

The book of Job revealed the old system's view of those who mourn. They, or somebody close to them, must have done something very bad to be under God's judgment. The irony, of course, is that Job was one of God's favorites. His suffering was actually a badge of honor.

Shame agrees with the world's long-held interpretation of suffering and mourning. You must have done something really bad to experience something so bad. No mourner feels favored or honored. But think of people you have known. Even without this beatitude we would be very tempted to be suspicious of anyone who doesn't cry at least once a month. An alive, compassionate person will cry. Tears say, “I am undone.” Could we say anything else more authentically human? Tears say, “The world has reneged on its promises. It promised satisfaction but delivered injustice, loss, and pain. It is not the place where I can put my hope.” Could we say anything else more wise? Such a person is an “aching visionary,”<sup>9</sup> worthy of emulation.

Once the Suffering Servant entered human history, mourning became an integral part of the kingdom culture. Since Jesus experienced sorrow and pain, he raised the status of mourning. Yet be certain of this and be sure to tell others: There will be comfort. Keep your eyes open and you will find it today (2 Corinthians 1:3–7), and there is much more to come.

Poverty of spirit and mourning—these are badges of honor in God's kingdom. They come *almost* naturally to people who experience shame. The

next one isn't quite as natural, but it is well within your reach. If you have been victimized, you must hear this one.

“How honorable are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

Jesus is citing Psalm 37:11 but the entire psalm is in view. You really should read it. If you have any question that bad things happen to God's children—those he loves dearly—this psalm should put your questions to rest. The psalm starts, “Fret not yourself because of evildoers.” In this, Jesus is making it clear that you may well experience shame because of the evil of others. This sounds simple but I have known many men and women whose shame was clearly at the hands of an enemy, or a loved one who acted like an enemy, yet they somehow believed that they themselves were at fault. Many lies can swirl around victimization. Psalm 37 can help you see clearly.

If people acting as enemies contributed to your shame, the psalmist then takes you on a path of meekness: “Trust in the LORD,” “Be still before the LORD,” “Refrain from anger.” The meek do not rail against the Lord in their persecution. They might not understand why something has happened to them—it is hard to understand how God's love and our own suffering coexist—but the meek don't demand answers. Instead, they trust God because of who he is, what he has said, and what he has done. They wait. They walk before the Lord in humble obedience. They know his ways can sometimes be veiled, but there is much they do know. For example, they know that the persecuted meek will inherit the earth, the Lord will be their stronghold, and they will see the legacy of the wicked perish.

Jesus is not just identifying those who know shame in this beatitude, he is guiding them. Most shamed people know poverty of spirit. You don't have to learn that. And you certainly know about mourning. But *meekness* might not describe you. Instead, you might insist on understanding rather than trust.

Your questions to God might verge on the angry and accusing rather than the submissive. Maybe you aren't shaking your fist at the Lord, but you don't exactly trust him. Our instinctive response to shame is to take matters into our own hands. We withdraw; we self-protect.

None of us is an expert in meekness. We do not naturally trust Jesus when we feel threatened. So God has given us guides like Psalm 37. That psalm and all other psalms about trust in the midst of oppression ultimately point to the Lamb of God, Jesus himself. His life was punctuated by "Not my will but yours." Jesus was the fullest demonstration of meekness. If this is the way of the King, this is the way of honor.

Already, after just three beatitudes, we discover that each one is worthy of prolonged meditation. Though meekness is more challenging than the others, *none* of them comes naturally. Poor is easy; poor in spirit takes a lifetime of grace from God.

The next tenet of this new kingdom does not come naturally either but, like the other beatitudes, shame gives you insight that others might not have.

"How honorable are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

Who has hunger and thirst? The poor. Jesus still has the poor in mind, which means he has you in mind. Any mention of the poor includes all those who live with shame. Now that he has your attention, he takes your experience of being empty and points you to something better. Just as Jesus took *poor* in the first beatitude and extended it to *poor in spirit*, here he transforms hunger and thirst into something much more. Our hunger and thirst point to our deepest need: to live "by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" (Deuteronomy 8:3).

At first, that doesn't sound very filling, but this is by no means a bait-and-switch where you expect one thing (real food) and are given something of lesser value (spiritual food). The truth is that you expect one thing (real food) and are given something of infinitely greater value (spiritual food). If you have doubts, know that this food has already been tested by royalty. Just look at Jesus. One of his first royal acts was to travel out into the desert where he went without food, feeding only on the words of his Father, and he was satisfied (Matthew 4:1–4).

What does it mean to feed on the words of God or hunger and thirst for righteousness? It means you want justice and right living throughout the world. Peace can come no other way. But that desire is first for yourself—that *you* would live according to the words of God. Specifically, it means that during the especially difficult times of life—the times you are in the desert—you would trust in your God and seek to do his will above all else.

Obedience in small things will be your aim in this new kingdom. When circumstances or emotions overwhelm, you will think, *How can I live for my Father now?* The answer will usually be “Love the person in front of you” or “Be faithful with the responsibilities right in front of you.” As you grow in this skill, you will discover contentment and honor. Your *goal* is not contentment and honor. Your goal is to be associated with Christ and his kingdom, even in difficult times. Life in the kingdom, however, has perks that are deeply satisfying. When you follow Jesus, you will know true honor.

These first four beatitudes draw attention to our relationship with God. The message of the kingdom must begin with that relationship for it to sound like good news.

Here is the challenge. Your shame is about human relationships. What do other people think of you? Where can you fit in? Even now you could wonder, what does God have to do with this? The things God says are good,

but they don't seem connected to the deeper issues. For example, if you are a public failure, it is good that parents or friends love you, but that love doesn't touch the rejection you experience. The love doesn't take away the failure.

The acceptance of the King, however, coupled with the knowledge of how to live before him, will diminish the power of shame. Other people might not yet recognize that your public failure has been replaced by kingdom humility and honor, so you still might hear a few mocking voices. But those voices can't reach as deep, and they certainly won't last.

### **HONOR AND FAVOR AS WE RELATE TO OTHERS**

The message of the kingdom always begins with what is most important—that we live before God. Then it tells us how that relationship guides our relationships with other people. After identifying the honorable way to live before God, the “Honorable” continue with the way we relate to others.

“How honorable are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”

Let's consider the back story to this pillar of the kingdom. Mercy is for the miserable, so this beatitude assumes there has been suffering in your life. It also assumes you have tasted mercy, because only when you receive mercy can you offer it. Once you receive mercy, you can spot a miserable person from one hundred paces and you are compelled to offer comfort. Then, as you show mercy, you receive even more yourself. You experience more of the mercy and approval of God and the cycle continues: give mercy, receive mercy, give mercy, receive mercy. . . .

It starts with knowing mercy from your merciful God. Then you offer to others what you have received. It is a shocking development when you think



about it. A shamed person feels unworthy to offer encouragement. You don't want to risk contaminating someone else. But the way of the kingdom says that those who need mercy are uniquely qualified to show mercy. Neediness—spiritual neediness—is a critical and valuable kingdom asset!

So keep your eyes open. Move toward someone whose misery touches your heart. It should be easy. “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). In so doing you will be entering this cycle of mercy given and mercy received.

Now to an *honorable* that seems impossible.

“How honorable are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

Whoever is pure in heart, raise your hand. Only in heaven itself would you expect an entire class to raise their hands on this one.

You already know that the kingdom is for beggars who have nothing. Begging seems within reach. Now the rules seem to change; suddenly you have to be perfect! Before you lose hope, remember where you have been. *News from the kingdom of heaven is always good news.* It is surprising, and it is especially *good* and surprising to those who feel unworthy. With that in mind, don't move away from this particular beatitude until it sounds good to you.

One good message from this beatitude is that *pure* is possible for the poor in spirit. How can that be? When you assemble the pieces you have so far, you know that pure is possible because you are *purified* by Jesus. Pure is something that is done to you. You receive it by faith through the gentle yet powerful touch of Jesus. When you call out, “Jesus, help! Have mercy,” that is faith. Faith assures you that the Holy One has come and made you holy, and *holy* means pure.

Now this newfound purity has to do something. We are purified for a reason. The natural expression of a purified heart is undivided loyalty to God. After all, apart from Jesus we are contaminated outcasts who are putting in time on death row. How can we *not* express our whole-hearted commitment? *Pure* evokes images of metal that has been purged of impurities. Pure gold is just gold, nothing else. In a similar way, a pure heart does not divvy up faith so that some rest in Christ while a large percentage is invested in money, personal prestige, and reputation.

One way to express a pure heart is to act with integrity. For example, someone with a pure heart will not say one thing in front of you and another behind your back. The love or compassion he or she demonstrates will be genuine.

In Jesus' teaching, a pure heart contrasts with the mixed motives and hypocrisy of the Pharisees. These men, who were honored by the people, would act right according to the customs of the day but their behavior was not attached to pure hearts. Instead, their goal was to protect and enhance their own status. They thought that if they washed their hands properly, they would be pure (Matthew 15:1–15). Jesus countered their hypocrisy by reminding them (and us) that purity is expressed first by a heart that clings to God and the purity he gives. Purity first comes when we acknowledge our impurity.

Next, purity comes from being purified. We already know that from Isaiah and the coal touching his lips. He acknowledged his impurity and was purified.

Then, as we trust in the one who purified us, we grow in purity. Our Christ-purified hearts emit Christ-like behavior. So purity is possible.

Notice the honor attached to purity: the pure in heart see God. You can live face-to-face with the King. There is no greater honor. You see God, he

sees you, and all is well. Meanwhile, you express your increasingly purified heart in genuine love and mercy, pursuing peace more than personal rights. Purity and peacemaking are kingdom partners.

“How honorable are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”

You have known fractures and enmity in relationships, and sometimes you feel helpless to do anything about them. At other times you don't *want* to do anything. But if you have known God's power in such a way that you, an outcast, have been accepted, you will want to invite others to peace with God and peace with other people.

Peacemakers renounce violence and vigilante strategies. They renounce them even at the level of their imaginations. They don't wish evil on others in private but play nice in public. It sounds impossible, especially if you have had an enemy. But it makes complete sense when you remember that you were an outsider and an enemy when Jesus brought you in and said, “Peace to you.”

*How* you actually function as a peacemaker is not always easy to determine. But we know this: shamed people feel powerless, and what could be more powerful than being an agent of peace in the midst of war? What could be more powerful than disarming someone with love? Peacemaking is, indeed, an honorable profession.



If anyone knows shame, it is the wife of a cocaine addict. Her husband chose a drug over her. A drug—not even another human being. Now add the accessories of betrayal—the lies, empty promises, lost jobs, mysterious disappearances of her jewelry, all done in full view of family and friends.

Peace seemed impossible, but she knew God's peace and she always looked for opportunities to express it.

After a few months of his sobriety, she had a sense that he had gotten high, so she asked him about it. Apparently, he had made some changes because this time he told her the truth, even though he knew it might cost him what was left of his marriage.

He never could have predicted her response: "What will we do about this?"

*"We"!* Peacemakers pursue unity in relationships. They think in terms of "we," not only "you."

It was the last time he got high, and that was ten years ago.

Peacemaking is a powerful and honorable profession, indeed.



Yet peacemakers are not always successful. Neither peacemaking in particular nor a kingdom lifestyle in general will always win you points with others. In other words, the way of honor is not by expert peacemaking but by being connected to the King.

"How honorable are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus' early disciples had some idea that there was honor in being associated with him. Why else would they leave relatively stable jobs for a life of temporary poverty? At one point, as their minds wandered to their future seats of honor, there was some maneuvering to determine who would have the most prominent place when the kingdom of God was fully inaugurated on earth (Matthew 20:20–28). It took a while before the disciples understood that their notions of shame and honor would be

reconfigured by this King and his kingdom. The powerful and honored of this world, unless they join Jesus and take his path of meekness, will experience shame; the shamed in this world will be lifted up and honored.

Apparently, following the King of the universe doesn't enhance your social standing. In some situations you will have less status. Don't expect health, wealth, and prosperity. Instead, expect comfort and hope during trouble, and expect strength during persecution. Make no mistake; these new codes of the kingdom are all about approval, acceptance, and honor. What could be more honorable than being personally known by the King? But this final beatitude is a tip-off that, in this phase of the kingdom of Christ, much of the world won't value your royal connections.

What can you do with all this? The culture identified by the Beatitudes should sound intriguing, but at this point intriguing is not enough. There is a difficult task at hand. While it makes sense that your relationship with the King changes everything, that reality can feel too remote in everyday life. Your task, then, is to adopt God's retelling of reality: honor is found only in knowing the King and saying, "I am with him." The Beatitudes indicate that this new understanding of reality will be sorely tested. Jesus will *not* place you into a higher caste in the eyes of other people, and that's a very good thing. If he immediately made you healthy and wealthy, you would follow him because *you* were exalted, not him, and any system that exalts us is doomed to fail.

Think the opposite of how you normally think. That will most likely keep you on the right path. For example, while everyone around you is jockeying for power and prestige, set your sights on the opposite. It's easy. Just become like a child.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”  
(Matthew 18:1–4)

### For Discussion

1. There is a lot here. How would you summarize it?
2. Do any particular beatitudes catch your attention? Consider these more carefully. Why are you attracted to them? How would you illustrate them? How can you live in light of them?
3. What is it about being a child that is so admirable in Jesus’ kingdom? How are you growing to become a child? How are you hesitant to become one?

Who are the real outcasts?

Those who stand in arrogant judgment.

Those who are tearless in the face of misery.

Those who care more about honor from men than approval by  
God.

We, instead, kneel to receive mercy and serve the forgotten.

# Chapter 16

## NEW BOUNDARIES FOR A NEW KINGDOM

**W**hen Jesus overturned cultural conventions and stretched religious boundaries, he was reclaiming land that had been in enemy hands too long. As King, everywhere he went, every step he took, he staked his claim to that land. The land, after all, was originally his, but usurpers and pretenders had been on the throne.

You saw Jesus reclaim kingdom territory when he went to the sick, the demon-possessed, the Samaritans, the tax collectors. That assured you that he reclaims you too. He also reclaimed days of the week when he said he was Lord of the Sabbath (Matthew 12:8). He even extended his kingdom to those who had already died, like Lazarus and the son of the widow of Nain.

He went to places that were dark and brought light.

But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. (Isaiah 9:1–2)

If you feel spiritually destitute and needy, Jesus draws boundaries that *enfold* you, not boundaries that exclude you.



And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” But when he heard it, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Matthew 9:10–13)

Yet Jesus *did* draw boundaries, and they do exclude some. In examining these boundaries, our goal is not to point fingers at those who are on the outside. Instead, since the nature of this new kingdom is so contrary to what we normally think, our goal is to be students of the truth.

#### **WHO IS EXCLUDED? THE ANTI-BEATITUDES**

The Beatitudes reveal those who are honored in the kingdom of God. This kingdom manifesto can also be turned on its head to reveal the true outcasts.

Dishonored are the self-satisfied.

Cast out are those who are unmoved or amused by the misery of others.

Contaminated are those who shake their fist at God—and keep at it.

Naked and ashamed are those who hunger for earthly riches and honor more than the righteousness of the King.

Dishonored are those who refuse generosity to the needy.

Dishonored are the hypocrites who know what is culturally “nice” but are intent only on self-seeking goals.

Dishonored are those who divide people with their anger or gossip.

Dishonored are those who refuse to taste shame for the sake of Jesus' name.

This can leave anyone feeling a little shaky, and for good reason. If you have been shamed by the actions of someone else, you can see that God is now speaking to that person, and what he says isn't pretty. Unless perpetrators follow the Beatitudes and become people whose faith is in Jesus, they will remain outside the boundaries of the kingdom of God.

But there is another reason we could be thrown off-kilter: we might find *ourselves* in these anti-Beatitudes. Having humility—or being poor in spirit—means knowing that *you* can be arrogant and indifferent toward others. You might even do a little fist-shaking at God.

“So am I an outcast after all?”

Please know that there is something unmistakable about real outcasts—those who trust in themselves. They couldn't care less about Jesus' accusations. Watch what happens when Jesus gives dire warnings to the leaders, the self-righteous, and the “acceptable.” They are “clean in their own eyes but are not washed of their filth” (Proverbs 30:12). They either walk away unaffected or they get angry at Jesus and devise plans to kill him (Luke 11:53–54). If you could care less about these anti-Beatitudes, then you are, at this moment, a true outcast. If the anti-Beatitudes step on your toes and hurt a little, or provoke a hint of anxiety, then you are not an outcast.

#### **WHO CAN EXCLUDE? NO MORE CONTAMINATION BY OTHER PEOPLE**

The boundaries of Christ's kingdom are taking shape. They *include* the outcasts, failures, poor, poor in spirit, and those without earthly honor, all of whom claim a childlike neediness for Jesus himself. The boundaries *exclude* those who identify with the world's guidelines for inclusion: wealth,

reputation, power, and personal honor. The wealthy can, indeed, be included in the kingdom, but only as they discover that they are poor in spirit and are led to show mercy to fellow beggars. The wealthy have reason to be concerned. The poor understand that childlike humility and neediness are part of the kingdom, but the rich, important, and powerful are at a decided disadvantage. They are to be pitied because they have so many reasons to trust in themselves. These developments shake the very roots of ancient and modern expectations.

Role reversals. The opposite of what you think. The wealthy as disadvantaged. The powerful as powerless. And we are just getting started.

But hold on for a minute. Many people experience shame because other people—powerful people—imposed shame on them. Are we just using word tricks to make us feel better?

We can't minimize injustice and sinful oppression. What we can do is understand that the oppressors' days are numbered, and the end of their power begins now. *Other people can no longer contaminate or bring shame on you.* God himself has entered human history in order to change or at least clarify how real life now works. In the new kingdom, we still can experience shame for what we have done, but other people no longer have the power to touch us and contaminate. They can still victimize, but they can't drag us away from the Holy One. By faith we have a connection to Jesus that no perpetrator can sever.

Contamination, Jesus announced, can only come from what *you* did, not from what others did to you.

“Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness,

slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.” (Matthew 15:17–20)

This is huge. No longer will you be contaminated by coming in contact with something unclean or by not measuring up to cultural standards of righteousness. When Jesus spoke these words, cleanness and acceptance were governed by dietary laws: the people you ate with, how you washed before you ate, and what you ate. Eat with the wrong people and you are out. Eat with the right people in the wrong way and you are out. Eat with the right people in the right way and you are in. These categories were used to separate people, but that was *not* what God intended. Rather than dismantling these laws bit by bit, Jesus as King had the authority to do what he thought best, so he proclaimed an immediate and irrevocable change.

In essence Jesus is saying this: No longer can anything outside a person render him or her unclean. Food can't. The company you keep can't. The sins of your father or mother can't. The oppression of the Romans can't. The things that make you unclean are the things that come out of your own heart. *Only* those things can make you unclean. You will be hurt by other people, and such hurt may even intensify in the short term. There remain perpetrators and victims. But perpetrators will never be able to contaminate you or make you an outsider with God. On the contrary, those who experience injustice are always on the heart of the Father in heaven. Meanwhile, the perpetrators who seem so strong and above the law are excluded from the kingdom. Unless they turn from their wickedness, they will experience dishonor and shame.

At the beginning of the biblical story, shame resulted from sin (contamination from the inside) *and* being sinned against (contamination from the outside). The causes were merged because both were associated with people, things, or activities that were against God and his intentions. We

knew that sin and victimization were different because we knew God responded very differently to each of them. But by joining them together, God was reminding us that contamination is a very real problem that only he could remedy. Now the two are uncoupled. Jesus has come to the oppressed and rejected and touched them. They may still be second-class citizens in the world's eyes, but Jesus has honored them. It is just a matter of time before everyone knows.

No one can find favor or honor with God through religious washing or culturally prescribed dietary regulations. In fact, if you rely on these activities, you are in deep trouble because you are actually avoiding God. Only God can make you truly clean. But here is the amazing news: (1) Only our own sin can contaminate us; (2) No one has the power to make us sin; and (3) God is quick to forgive when we turn to him. When the inside is clean, the outside is clean.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.” (Matthew 23:25–26)

As with most kingdom legislation, there are far-reaching applications for what Jesus said, yet his words also raise some important questions.

**What keeps me from becoming unclean by those who touch me?** If you say you are under Jesus' reign, if you trust him to rescue you instead of trusting your own devices (such as amassing accomplishments, avoiding alcohol, observing rules about eating, etc.), you have most certainly been touched by him. When you get touched by Jesus, you get what is his. If you are touched by someone with a virus, you get sick; if you are touched by

someone unclean, you become unclean; but if you are touched by the Holy One, you become *holy*. Holiness is contagious and more powerful than any contamination. You are now a saint—a holy one by marriage, if you will—and holiness beats uncleanness. The unclean can tarnish the clean but it can't affect the holy.

“Once washed always washed” is another way to put it. Jesus said, “The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean” (John 13:10). This is the bath version of the Samaritan woman's living water. Drink the living water and you will never thirst again. Take one bath in the living water and receive the cleansing that comes with being identified with Jesus. You are done! You still sin and still need daily washing, but dirty feet do not nullify the enduring effects of the bath.

**What do I do with the uncleanness I bring on myself?** Yes, you still will become unclean. You will become unclean because, though Jesus will be faithful to you, you will at times turn away from him. The difference is that you don't have to wait for Jesus to walk by and touch you. He already has done this and that touch made you his. Instead, you acknowledge your wrong and turn from it.

Be sure to hear those key words, “for my own sake.” The Lord says to us, “I, I am he who blots out your transgressions *for my own sake*, and I will not remember your sins” (Isaiah 43:25, emphasis mine). You will feel unworthy to be forgiven. Everyone does, and everyone is. So if you want to be forgiven for your own sake—for your own reputation and because of your own worthiness—you will never be forgiven. Instead, the Lord says he will forgive us because such grace and mercy draw attention to *his* glory and honor. And who are we to detract from this premier means by which God displays his honor?

The human criteria for forgiveness? Just feel unworthy of it.

The human response to forgiveness? “Jesus, thank you.”

**Am I ready to begin distinguishing the sins of others from my own sins?** Are you getting better at making these distinctions? First answer this question: Do you believe it honors God when you trust him to forgive and cleanse you?

The question could be asked in other ways. Do you believe he is pleased when you acknowledge the truth about your own sin? Do you believe he is quick to forgive? Do you believe his mission has been to seek out the unwashed and invite them to follow him? If you can say yes to these questions with at least a hint of enthusiasm, you are better prepared to sort out your sins from the sins of others.

This step can be complicated because the sins of others can cause you to sin (Luke 17:1). Sometimes your sin and your victimization become one ugly ball of brokenness. For example, sexual violation can introduce violence and perversion into our sexual imaginations. Such thoughts can bring deep shame, and the imagined acts are clearly wrong. The way through consists of *both* learning the kingdom boundaries of sexuality—learning to turn from perverse imaginations—*and* recognizing that the thoughts exist because of past victimization.

It’s a tricky balancing act—the other person did it *and* I am doing it—but when things get complicated, look for simple guidance. In this case, it is “Lord, have mercy.” Mercy then comes to us as a cleansing for both guilt and shame.

Other situations are less complicated. In those, we distinguish between what we have done and what others have done. When we are in doubt, wise people can help us with those distinctions. Then we concentrate on owning what belongs to us instead of examining the sins of others and what belongs to them.

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He is just plain angry. It comes out with his wife and it comes out daily. With others his anger is muted into borderline condescension and sarcastic humor. There is no excuse for his tirades and demeaning words toward his wife. His anger is against God and against her. Yet we are complicated people who are typically a bundle of sin and suffering, sin and shame. As you know him better, you discover that his father was largely absent and he could never measure up to his mother's standards. She was sweet, Southern, and could effortlessly ravage him with a smile on her face. (You would bet that her own victimization at the hands of her husband was vented toward her son.)

Good news for this man must speak both to his sin of anger and to his mother's prolonged rejection. He must be forgiven *and* learn how to forgive. He must know that there is cleansing for sin, and acceptance—with delight—for those who have been treated as outsiders. He must know that his Father in heaven is very different from his mother.

If you speak to him about his anger alone, he will become defensive. He is not going to accept one more shameful burden, which is the way he perceives any acknowledgment of sin. And this is where sin and shame can get confused. For him, they both feel bad. They are tied together in such a way that any mention of sin will intensify his shame, and any talk about shame will make him feel like a worse sinner. But as we are being led down a path that offers more and more clarity on spiritual realities, we discover that sin and shame are not the same.

"Have you noticed that you get a little testy when I talk about your anger?"

He laughs at the understatement, which is a good sign.



“It is as if you are carrying this incredible load of criticism and you can’t take one more ounce of it.”

“Yeah, that’s what it feels like.”

“Okay, here is what we are after. Our goal is to take burdens off. You live like an orphan who is so alone, and you have good reasons for living that way. But there is a deeper reality—God-with-us. Jesus is the one who takes our burdens. So let’s start taking them off.”



Jesus is the burden-lifter (Matthew 11:30). If we feel as if Jesus just adds new burdens, we are mistaking him for someone else (Matthew 23:4). He lifts the burden of sins, and he lifts the burden of oppression and being an outcast. Now there is no reason to be defensive. We can even make the words of the psalmist our own.

Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!  
And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way  
everlasting. (Psalm 139:23–24)

Nothing to hide. Imagine that.

#### **BEWARE OF THE “REALLY BAD SIN”**

So far so good. You can’t argue with the ways of Jesus and how he redraws the boundaries of the kingdom. Or can you? Shame is notorious for allowing you to make a good start. You have Jesus in view and hope rises. Then, in an instant, without any warning, BAM! You find yourself in the gutter again. One sign of growth is that when this happens, you get back up, ask Jesus to wash your feet, and retrace your steps.

During this growth process, you might discover that you believe there are two categories of people: those who do normal sins, which are forgivable, and those who commit really bad sins, which might be forgivable but only after you . . . you don't know what you have to do to be forgiven.

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It was either suicide or confession. He decided to postpone suicide and see how his friend would handle his confession. He wasn't going to blurt out everything, just a few pieces in order to check his friend's reactions.

"I have been feeling really depressed recently."

"Really, what's happening? Tell me about it."

His friend passed the test, so he offered more.

"When my sister was four years old and I was six, we played 'doctor,' and I touched her genitals. I can't stand the guilt anymore."

"What do you think we should do?"

There it is: *we* again. His friend passed the second test. The suicidal twenty-five-year-old was just getting started. After he completed his confession of shameful thoughts and behaviors, his friend knew exactly what to do.

"I know you know what I am going to say, but we have to say it: forgiveness of sins extends to these things. We *must* know that and believe what God says. Jesus didn't bear the punishment and pain of little sins but of *all* sins. We have no choice but to believe, and believe boldly."

There was much more to do and say. Had he sinfully touched others since he was a six-year-old? In this case, only in his mind. Did he have a perverted sexual imagination? Yes. But it was the imagination of a person who was self-condemning and defiled rather than the imagination of a predator.

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If shame is attached to your sin, it means you think your sin is really bad. Today I noticed a reluctance to pour out my life for other people. That is sin, but a sin that is relatively common. I knew I was guilty, but I didn't feel shame. When we feel shame over our own sins, it is usually because we think those sins are really bad, whatever "really bad" means. Usually it means not quite forgivable or forgivable only *if* we are really sorry and prove it over time. But who knows how much time that will take?

Scripture anticipates this stumbling block in a few different ways. One is that the most prominent characters in Scripture have done the "really bad" sins—things like murder (Moses, David, and Paul), adultery (David again), and the blatant denial of Jesus (Peter). They were all forgiven.

Add to that list Martin Luther's good friend George Spalatin. Spalatin was a pastor who had made a scandalous error. In response, Luther said, "Join *our* company of hard-boiled sinners."

Therefore my faithful request and admonition is that you join our company and associate with us, who are real, great, and hard-boiled sinners. You must by no means make Christ to seem paltry and trifling to us, as though He could be our Helper only when we want to be rid from imaginary, nominal, and childish sins. No, no! That would not be good for us. He must rather be a Savior and Redeemer from real, great, grievous, and damnable transgressions and iniquities, yea, from the very greatest and most shocking sins; to be brief, from all sins added together in a grand total.<sup>[10](#)</sup>

Listen to Luther's mentor, the apostle Paul. In his letter to the Galatians he is adamant that Jesus' death paid for everything, *especially* the really bad

sins, and he is more than a little ticked off if you disagree. If you try to argue that your sins are worse, he will argue right back that *he* is the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:16). Paul is clear. You stand forgiven and holy before God because Jesus took the penalty for your sins on himself (you touched him) and gave you his holiness (he touched you). If you live as though that forgiveness needs a small boost from your own grief or good works, then you don't understand what he did. You could read Galatians with this theme in mind.

Just when you believe you have been accepted in Jesus, you can so quickly lose your way. At those times, analysis isn't your answer. Instead, turn your eyes away from the complexities of your own soul and read about Jesus. Clarity often returns. The next chapter is an example of how to fix your eyes on Jesus.

## For Discussion

1. There is a lot in this chapter. What stands out to you?
2. How would you identify the boundaries of the kingdom of Christ? Are you inside those boundaries or outside? How do you know?
3. What versions of modern-day penance are you aware of? What versions do you use?
4. Have you experienced clinging to the truth one moment and slipping into the depths of shame the next? Do you have a strategy for those times?

They all left him and fled. (Mark 14:50)

# Chapter 17

## MARK 14: SHAME, BETRAYAL, AND ABANDONMENT

**W**hile Jesus was defining the boundaries of his kingdom, he continued to move through the world, accumulating the sin and shame of the unclean. In doing so, he struck a fine bargain: “I take your guilt and shame, and you receive my righteousness and holiness.” This is the technical way of saying, “You receive my acceptance.”

Where was Jesus taking this burden? He would soon obliterate it at the cross. But, before that, Jesus certainly bore its weight. For example, he was no longer the people’s hero. Instead, he was now the outcast. By the time Jesus got to the cross, you could count on one hand the number of people who were willing to be associated with him.

Jesus took the weight of guilt and shame. You no longer have to bear it.

Here are sections of just one chapter from the gospel of Mark that show the results of Jesus’ bargain with us. Our shame fell on him. Watch how uncleanness, rejection, and, soon, nakedness pile up on him in concentrated form. Never again can you think that Jesus doesn’t understand.

And he is carrying shame far away.

### MARK 14

It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest

him by stealth and kill him, for they said, “Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people.” (vv. 1–2)

The leaders want to kill him. That certainly qualifies as being rejected and on the outs.

And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. There were some who said to themselves indignantly, “Why was the ointment wasted like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor.” And they scolded her. But Jesus said, “Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.” (vv. 3–9)

If we didn’t catch who his people were before, we get another opportunity here. Simon the Leper and a woman, most likely a woman with a poor reputation—they are the ones who understand Jesus and are drawn to him.

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray [Jesus] to them. And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him. (vv. 10–11)

There it is—fulfillment of one of the most tragic verses in all Scripture. “Even my close friend, someone I trusted, one who shared my bread, has turned against me” (Psalm 41:9). Have you ever been betrayed? Jesus experienced that before you.

And Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away, for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’ But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” Peter said to him, “Even though they all fall away, I will not.” And Jesus said to him, “Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.” But he said emphatically, “If I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And they all said the same. (vv. 27–31)

Which is worse—betrayal or denial? To be betrayed by a friend is shameful, but it also exposes the selfishness in the betrayer. The shame ultimately falls on the betrayer. But denial! To be denied labels you as the most severe form of nothing. You are such a nothing that the person closest to you denies he or she even knows you.

And they went to a place called Gethsemane. And he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” And he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch.”

. . . And he came and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were



very heavy, and they did not know what to answer him. And he came the third time and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough; the hour has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand.” (vv. 32–34, 37–42)

Though this moment of fatigue seems minor compared to betrayal and denial, it is another expression of Jesus’ value to the disciples. His pain was evident. Death was all around. And they didn’t rally to prayer. If the leaders had been after them, you can be sure they would be wide awake.

And immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man. Seize him and lead him away under guard.” And when he came, he went up to him at once and said, “Rabbi!” And he kissed him. And they laid hands on him and seized him . . . . And they all left him and fled. (vv. 43–46, 50)

“They all left him and fled.” Everyone. Shame isolates, and this is isolation *in extremis*.

And they led Jesus to the high priest. And all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together. And Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. And he was sitting with the guards and warming himself at the fire. Now the chief priests and the whole Council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree. And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this

temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.” Yet even about this their testimony did not agree. (vv. 53–59)

The procession of accusers began. One-by-one they pointed, stared, and blatantly violated the commandment to not bear false witness. They accused the law-giver himself. God was on trial; the world was judge and jury. And this was the path that Jesus *chose* as the way to rescue the shamed. The path he chose to rescue you.

And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, “Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?” But he remained silent and made no answer. Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” And Jesus said, “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.” And the high priest tore his garments and said, “What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?” And they all condemned him as deserving death. And some began to spit on him and to cover his face and to strike him, saying to him, “Prophecy!” And the guards received him with blows. (vv. 60–65)

The shamed are powerless, so they should be able to recognize the King, who voluntarily gave up all power. Jesus is now being treated as a useless and despised animal.

And as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came, and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, “You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus.” But he denied it,

saying, “I neither know nor understand what you mean.” And he went out into the gateway and the rooster crowed. (vv. 66–68)

The connection to Jesus’ trial is unmistakable. The irony is palpable. Peter is now the one being put on trial, and here comes the judge. She is ferocious. Don’t mess with her. The power of life and death hangs on her very word. Those young servant girls can be ruthless. Don’t we all have our breaking points?

And the servant girl saw him and began again to say to the bystanders, “This man is one of them.” But again he denied it. (vv. 69–70)

Peter had a chance to recover from his pitiful response, but he simply confirmed his earlier answer, though this time with a steely edge.

And after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, “Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.” But he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, “I do not know this man of whom you speak.” (vv. 70–71)

## For Discussion

1. Are you persuaded that Jesus experienced shame?
2. What difference does it make to you that Jesus experienced these extremes of rejection?

What is shame?

The Son of God, while on a rescue mission of love, was  
misunderstood  
insulted  
betrayed  
denied  
mocked  
spit on  
cursed  
abandoned  
stripped  
crucified.

# Chapter 18

## THE CROSS

**A**ll good things seemed so distant. She had good friends, family members who loved her, and a young daughter who was her joy, but all good things felt so temporary. The moment one of these was out of sight, it was as if she was overtaken by amnesia. She quickly reverted to her normal mode of living as the unworthy, wrong, black sheep. She experienced the same thing at church. Lively worship songs made her feel better, as did a good sermon, but once she walked out of the sanctuary, nothing remained.



The cross is the best and quickest summary of what God says to unworthy people. The question is, how can it take root in our hearts and stay there? It already feels far away. We can't visit it or touch it. The first step is to understand it and make it something we talk about. So, in this chapter, look for features of the cross you can talk about with others.

The rejection Jesus experienced on the way to the cross was nothing new. This is the way human beings have always treated God. For example, soon after God rescued his people from Egyptian bondage, they held him in contempt (Numbers 14:11), which even the pagans never did with their lifeless idols. This attitude was not accidental and occasional, but intentional and constant. In Isaiah God laments, "All the day my name is despised" (52:5). Though the cross and everything leading up to it violate our sensibilities and we are rightly aghast, the reality is that human beings have

never liked God very much. At the cross, the nature of God was most fully revealed. As a result, human contempt was also most fully revealed and brought to a laser-like focus and intensity.

Shame is very much on display in Jesus' crucifixion. When he predicted his own death to his disciples, he made sure to explain that it would be infused with mocking, a public flogging, and spitting (Mark 10:33–34). Witness this hatred and rejection and it will change you.

First we saw only our own shame. Now we see that Jesus' shame was deeper than our own, and we were among the scorers.

First we saw only our own alienation and rejection. Now we see that Jesus' alienation and rejection was at the hands of the entire world, ourselves included.

First we saw only contempt and self-contempt. Now we see that all human contempt was focused on Jesus—and we participated.

No matter how stubbornly resistant to change your shame might be, witnessing extreme shame like this will move your shame to second place in your thoughts. This doesn't mean it disappears, but it makes a difference when your shame is number two on your list rather than number one. It makes a huge difference. When Jesus and his shame occupy our attention, our own shame becomes less controlling.

Let us “fix our eyes on Jesus” (Hebrews 12:2 NIV). Fix your eyes on the one who absorbed shame and then announced that its reign was over. At least you will no longer feel alone.

Now it's time to consider the cross. No doubt you already have, but you probably haven't thought much about the shame of the cross. To start, we will look at the events that took place prior to the cross and during the crucifixion. Then we will ponder the *meaning* of those events.

## WHAT HAPPENED

The story of Jesus' humiliation can begin anywhere, but wherever you begin, the story must include what he prayed immediately before his arrest.

“My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” (Matthew 26:39)

“This cup” was the cup of God's wrath (Job 21:20; Isaiah 51:17, 22). It was a cup that would leave its victims staggering and disoriented. All the wrath that God had stored up over the centuries, as his patience superseded his anger, was now going to be let loose. Jesus was not pleading for less physical suffering or for a release from the decision between Father and Son to go to the cross. He was humbly asking the Father for clarity of mind in the midst of his physical and spiritual ordeal. The cup could leave him reeling, and Jesus needed all his wits about him.

His request was also for the Father's continued presence. The cup symbolized separation from God. It represented God turning his face away, which meant that the person drinking it would be under God's curse rather than his blessing. The cup indicated that God would pour out his wrath and judgment, and this was no ordinary judgment. The cup was kept for heinous and contemptuous rejections of God. Since Jesus became thoroughly identified with sin, he would receive its wrath and judgment in our place. This meant he would experience the worst kind of rejection and alienation from the Father, and he would do this for us.

It is one thing to die. It is another thing for an innocent person to die for a guilty one. It is something much more that Jesus would take on himself all the curses the world deserved in concentrated form. This meant that his relationship with his Father, the one thing that had sustained him throughout

all the previous insults and rejection, was about to be removed. Moses knew he could not lead the people through the wilderness unless God was present. Without his Father's grace and mercy, Jesus had to wonder if he would be able to take one more step, let alone make it all the way to the cross. So he prayed.

The result was that he *was* strengthened. His mission came into full view (John 18:11), and he was able to see the divine plan to the end.

From that point on, the gospel accounts communicate two unmistakable points. They press these points until we are undone by them: Jesus experienced incomparable shame, and he experienced it at the hands of *everyone*.

The Son of God is put on trial! "God in the dock," as C. S. Lewis wrote. It was nothing new, but it was both preposterous and contemptuous. In this classic reversal of reality, we do not stand before him, but the King stands before us. We question him; he doesn't question us. The irony of it all! While the name of the Lord was constantly blasphemed by men, Jesus is now accused of being a blasphemer (Matthew 26:65). Talk about a primitive form of defense—projecting your guilt onto another. Could it be any clearer that Jesus had come to the anti-kingdom, where everything was the opposite of the way it was intended?

The mocking was nonstop. Accusers took turns kneeling before him, feigning homage. That was their clever way to accent the absurdity of a powerless, poor man claiming to be king. Some slapped him as a way to insult him. Others went with the closed fist. All this was at the hands of his countrymen.

Then "the whole company" (Luke 23:1) took him to Pilate, who was the representative of the Gentiles. In the Hebrew mind the world consisted only of Jews and Gentiles, so now the entire world had gathered. Jews and



Gentiles never united in anything, but they were one in their stand against Jesus. The insults and mocking continued. Added to Pilate's trial was the half-naked flogging, which alone could kill.

Then the world spit on him. The Jews spit on him during their kangaroo court (Matthew 26:67), and Jesus was spit on while he appeared before Pilate (Matthew 27:30).

Meanwhile, though he was offered wine to limit the pain, he refused it. He had already prayed to have all his faculties when the cup of wrath was poured out, and it was being poured out.

Once at Golgotha where he would be crucified, the people continued their festival of shame, not knowing that their attempts to heap shame on the Creator God were the most disgraceful acts in human history. You could hear the laughter of the mockers—it had a near-carnival atmosphere. It must have hit its peak when they stripped him naked, the ultimate indignity for a Jewish man.

There were a few beatitude-keeping women who would stand with the King. You could identify them because they were mourning. They were the handful of honorable ones left in the world, and there were *only* a handful.

With time getting short, the scene was dense with abuse. Notice how Matthew goes through every people group in his list of abusers. Even those sentenced to die with Jesus mustered up the energy to mock him. These robbers were suffering the shame of the cross but identified Jesus as someone worse than themselves. Even these crucified ones found a way to make Jesus an outcast.

And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”

So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way. (Matthew 27:39–44)

The account of Jesus’ actual death is brief. By midday it was dark: the Light, after all, was being extinguished. From the cross Jesus appointed someone to care for his mother (John 19:26–27). Then he cried out in his God-forsaken state (Mark 15:34) and said, “It is finished.” Maybe a Gentile centurion was converted (Mark 15:39). Those are the basic events.

Is it possible to believe that God is deaf to the shamed? Is it possible to think he is indifferent to your cries? Is it possible to believe God has distanced himself from you?

Now *you* have to do something. Mock or mourner—those are your choices. Acknowledge that you are among the mourners, and tell someone.

## **WHAT IT MEANS**

Even without delving into the meaning of the cross, the cross still hits you hard. *Anyone’s* story of shame can hit you hard. But some deaths have more meaning and weight than others. A man is gunned down in his prime because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. A woman is mistakenly given the wrong medication and overdoses. These are horrible deaths but they seem senseless. They serve no larger purpose. Other deaths are more meaningful. We believe that a soldier who dies trying to rescue his buddy has died a heroic and meaningful death. And if that soldier died to save *us*, his death has unending meaning for us.

With this in mind, the death of Jesus was crammed with meaning. All the letters of the New Testament peer into this event and discover that there was more to it than anyone thought. The universe itself turns on this event. It was the beginning of the new covenant, the new way God would bring people into the boundaries of his kingdom.

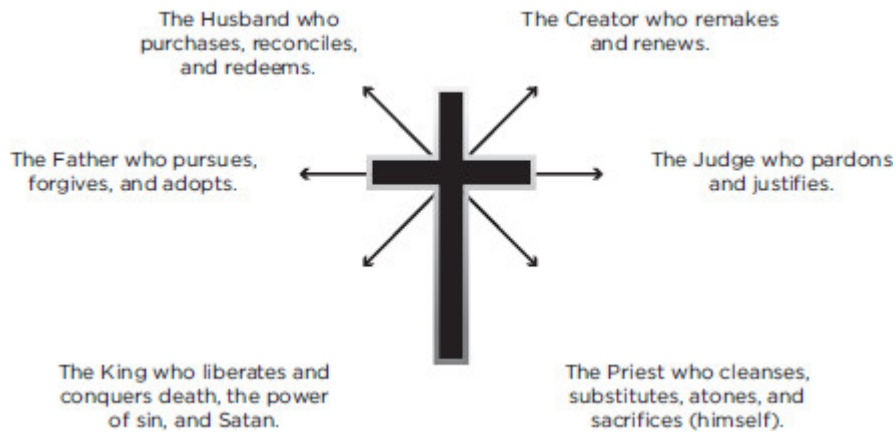
I recently attended an annual meeting I had attended for years. I entered the room, sat down, took out the agenda, and reviewed some handouts. Those were the actual events. There was nothing especially significant about them. But to me there was more to that meeting than those individual events because this would be the last time I attended that meeting. To me it was very significant. What made it more interesting was the fact that some people there knew it was my last time and others didn't. There were hugs, smiles, and sadness from those who knew. People lingered, not wanting to let go of a handshake. For those who didn't know, it was business as usual.

The facts of this meeting were ordinary, probably boring. It looked like hundreds of other meetings. But the meaning of this event, at least to me and a few others, made it especially significant.

Crucifixion was always gruesome, but it wasn't always meaningful. Somebody did something very wrong and he was publicly humiliated and killed. It didn't need to be explained. The cross of Jesus, however, bursts with life-changing meaning.

**God multi-tasking.** Everyone has multiple roles. A woman can be a wife, mother, daughter, neighbor, painter, administrator, friend, and more. God too has multiple roles: Father, Son, Spirit, Brother, Servant, King, Priest, Judge, Warrior, and many more. Since the cross of Jesus is the climactic event of God's reign, we would expect all these names to join together and bring added meaning to it, and they do. Of particular relevance for us are those that

clearly express his relational love and cleansing power, such as Father, Husband, and Priest.



**Father.** The most notable father in Scripture is the patient and loving father of the prodigal son (Luke 15). It is because of the cross that this father, who clearly stands for the Heavenly Father in this parable, can run to embrace his swine-contaminated, contemptuous son. The basic features of the story are familiar.

We do not like the Father. The son's request to run off with his share of the inheritance was, at best, deeply disrespectful.

We become contaminated. In this case, the son experienced the worst contamination, literally living like a pig.

We are turned back to the Father. Like the son, we come to our senses. We begin to see him accurately as the accepting, reconciling, forgiving Father. We say to the Father, "I am not worthy to be called your child."

The Father runs toward us, even while we are a long way off. When he sees us, he embraces and kisses us. He seems oblivious to the stench of pigs. THIS is intentional touch, by both Father and son.

The contrasts couldn't be more blatant: disrespect and contempt by the son, enthusiastic acceptance by the father. But the father isn't done. With acceptance comes honor.

“But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.” (Luke 15:22–24)

The robe of distinction to cover nakedness, a ring to give the son the authority of the father, and a party—father and son would have fellowship over a meal. The son received honor. The honor was not earned, which is a good thing because such honor can be too easily lost. Rather, it was ascribed. Honor was given to the son because he was reunited with the honorable father.

It all sounds so easy, and it is—for us. But the story omits the details of how reconciliation and acceptance were actually accomplished. What the son didn't yet know was that justice had been done while he was away. To understand that story, we have to merge the story of the prodigal son and the story of the cross. That is how we more fully understand everything in Scripture: the stories of disobedience to the laws of Moses are merged with the perfect obedience of Jesus on our behalf; the endless stories of unfaithful kings are merged with the story of the faithful King; the feeding of the five thousand is merged with the Lord's Supper, which was made possible by his death. In the case of the prodigal son, Jesus had taken on himself the penalty for the son's mutiny. Jesus drank the full cup of the Father's wrath so that the son could share a cup of wine with his father.

The cross brought reconciliation. That means it restored our relationship with the Father (Romans 5:9–11). Jesus died to “bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18). We now have access to our God and Father, and we may approach him, having “access with confidence” (Ephesians 3:12). This is a far cry from the running and hiding that began the story of shame.

Adoption is an intimate way to describe this event. When the judgment of God was poured out on Jesus, it removed the legal hurdle that prevented adoption. Now, having been reconciled with the Father, we have become his children with all the associated rights, privileges, and responsibilities (Romans 7:14–17; Galatians 3:26–29; 4:1–7).

Don’t forget that the Father in the story of the cross is the King. When you align yourself with Christ’s sacrifice, the garment he places on you is attractive but, even more, it is royal. It is a sign of honor. You go from nothing to royalty. It leaves your head spinning, but in a good way. You can say with the apostle John, “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are” (1 John 3:1).

**Priest.** The story of the cross is also about the temple, with its priests and the people who brought an endless procession of sacrifices and offerings. The Old Testament temple was where God met with his people, and everything in the temple was intended to establish and safeguard that relationship. The priests were “appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins” (Hebrews 5:1).

The gifts and sacrifices purified and cleansed the worshiper. The agents were usually oil, water, or blood. The most common means was blood. The unclean person brought a sacrificial animal. The worshiper would lay a hand on the animal as a way of identifying with it. Then the priest would kill the animal, sprinkle blood in the places prescribed by God, and the person

would be pronounced cleansed, at least for that moment. Tomorrow would bring new opportunities for contamination and sin.

There were variations on this sacrificial theme. There were actually five different sacrifices prescribed in the Old Testament. The grain offering and fellowship offering were offerings of thanks, so no animals were slaughtered. They each included a meal, which symbolized fellowship with God. The other sacrifices—the burnt offering, sin offering, and guilt offering—all shed blood. These blood sacrifices were offered both when the worshiper was guilty of sin *and* when the worshiper was contaminated or defiled by something unclean. The blood sacrifices were for both sin and shame.

Why blood? There are at least two reasons.

Blood was shed as a way to demonstrate the great cost of reconciliation with the Holy One. Blood represented Jesus' death.

Shed blood was sprinkled as a way to demonstrate that cleansing was much more than mere washing. Water could wash. Blood represented life. "The life of the flesh is in the blood" (Leviticus 17:11). That's what the worshiper needed: true, spiritual life to replace the soul-deadening effects of shame.

Here is what happened at the cross. Jesus entered the temple area and revealed that he was the perfect and final priest; even more, he was the entire temple. All the temple symbols suddenly came to life. He was the wash basin, the Water of Life. He was the bread of the Presence, the Bread of Life. He was the candlesticks, the Light of the World. He was the perfect priest, the Great High Priest who would offer the sacrifice, and he was the sacrifice itself, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Everything in the Old Testament temple was gathered together and fulfilled in Jesus.

If you are reluctant to come to this Priest, remember that he is one of us. “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:15–16).

If you think your High Priest couldn’t wash you well enough, remember that he is not one of us. Everyone knew that a goat couldn’t substitute for a person, and everyone knew that one unclean person couldn’t substitute for another. The sacrifice had to be perfect in order to be acceptable to the Father, and Jesus lived a perfect life. And the life had to be royal to reconnect us to the King. Only Jesus’ perfect and voluntary sacrifice is enough (Leviticus 17:15; John 19:34). His life was taken for us, and his life is given to us.

Feel free to walk among these spiritual realities expressed in physical symbols. The Priest has come by, touched you, and sprinkled his blood on you. That means you are consecrated, holy, belonging to God. Now not just forgiveness, but fellowship, is completely secured. “It is finished,” Jesus said, and there is nothing left to do. He only needs to sprinkle you once. The temple is now closed. The perfect and final Priest has retired. He no longer makes sacrifices. Instead he is seated on the throne (Hebrews 10:12).

If this sounds technical and ritualistic, you are missing the story. It is all very intimate.

We are brought into the temple, the place of God’s presence.

We lay hands on the Lamb of God. Our sin and shame are transferred to him as he identifies with us.

When the sacrifice is completed, the Priest sprinkles cleansing blood on us, and the temple curtain that separated us from the most holy areas



of God's presence is torn from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51). The final barrier between God and us is gone.

We are invited to a fellowship meal, which we now call the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23–26).

Once you lay hands on the Lamb, everything changes.

**Husband.** Let's move from the temple and back again to the family. Any name of God can bless you and enrich your understanding of the cross. The most intimate of all, however, is Husband. Human husbands exist because God is The Husband.

The prophet Ezekiel tells the story of an unclean, abandoned child with a wretched lineage who was left out in a field to die (Ezekiel 16:1–14). The child was Israel, so the child was you. If you know Jesus, the rescuer of Israel and the world, and if you have ever been on the outs, the child is you. This is God's story, in which he reveals more of his character. He is the same today as he was then. It is also your story.

Others saw the child lying there but no one took pity. Given what we now know of God, we can guess what happened next. Indeed, he came, brought healing, nurtured the child, caused her to grow into a beautiful woman, and married her. "I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord GOD, and you became mine" (Ezekiel 16:8).

The marriage was bad from the start. The wife was given everything the husband had, but there was no keeping her at home. Despite this rejection, the Lord said, "Yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant" (Ezekiel 16:60).

Hosea provides the longer version of this story, a story of the husband's public humiliation. First his wife conceived a child by someone else; then she left her husband, though he was still supporting her. Through all this, the

husband's love remained strong. When her way of life finally landed her in a slave market, the husband bought her back and made her his own. He redeemed her.

Meanwhile, the world was watching. The Husband had made a promise to his wife, and he keeps his promises. Everyone knew that. But surely an honorable man can't simply say, "All is fine, come back whenever you want." He would no longer be honorable, and he would set a precedent that would make him loathsome to all other shamed spouses.

What the world witnessed was something of incalculable, infinite, immeasurable cost. There was the price to buy her from the slave market, which was nominal. But then there was the price for making an unclean person holy. That is beyond all human ability. The price is the death of the perpetrator or a worthy substitute. The Old Testament was clear that blood had to be shed. The Old Testament was also clear that the blood of animals was an object lesson that pointed to something more permanent.

At the cross, we see what the Husband really did for his wayward wife. He died for her. When he died, she died along with him. She was identified with Jesus. When he was resurrected, she was made alive with Jesus. She is no longer the same person. Her shame is no longer attached to her. Both justice and love have been served. "I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy" (Hosea 2:19).

At the cross Jesus poured out his blood for his hard-hearted wife. With his blood he cleansed her, and we are beginning to understand that cleansing goes deeper than shame. It goes deep enough to make us new. Now, when the world looks at the wife, she no longer brings shame to her Husband. She is not the same woman who was flagrantly unfaithful. She is not the same

woman who was neglected in the slave market. She is a different person because she shares her husband's beauty. All accusers are silenced.

Now what? We live out of the love, cleansing, and purification we have been given. We live like the new people we are. To this end, we look for someone to love as we have been loved.

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. (2 Corinthians 5:14–15)

These are some of the behind-the-scenes explanations of the cross. While many saw a gruesome but forgettable event, you have been taken into God's confidence to see that the full character of God, all the story lines of Scripture, and the hopes of unclean people all come together in the cross. These stories of Father, Priest, and Husband are just a sample. There are many others.

Shame has been interrupted.

How can you keep the cross in mind? Part of the Holy Spirit's mission is to cause us to remember (John 14:26). So pray and then keep your eyes open for times you remembered—and believed—what happened for you at the cross of Jesus Christ. Next, talk about the cross whenever you can. The apostle Paul certainly did. Read about it.<sup>11</sup> Ask others to talk about it. There is nothing more important.

## For Discussion

1. Have you read through the actual events of the cross? How do you respond to them?

2. How are you doing at finding yourself in Scripture? Is the story of the prodigal son *your* story?
3. Can you give an illustration of “access” so we may approach God with freedom and confidence (Ephesians 3:12)? Do you believe you have access to the Father through Jesus? Can you put that into words for someone else?
4. What questions do you have about the priestly perspective of the cross?
5. What questions do you have about the story of the Husband and wife and how reconciliation and renewal have been secured at the cross?

He said also to the man who had invited him, “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”

When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, “Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” But he said to him, “A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.’ And another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.’ And another said, ‘I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.’ So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, ‘Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.’ And the servant said, ‘Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.’ And the master said to the servant, ‘Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.’”  
(Luke 14:12–24)

# Chapter 19

## “COME AND EAT”

**E**ating together still means something. Share a meal with a neighbor and your relationship changes. It is warmer, more familial. I remember a woman from our church who struggled mightily with depression, but something about her was different. She seemed more relaxed. Her face looked alive. Why?

“A family has been inviting me for a meal on Sunday afternoons.”

After all the help and encouragement she had received from others, isn't it typical of the kingdom of God to use something ordinary, like a weekly meal, to bless her? In this era of fast food, we still know that a leisurely meal with good conversation is about as good as it gets.

If a meal means something now, how much more important it must have been in the agricultural economies of the Bible. In those days everyone was in sync with the rhythm of planting and harvest. A drought and poor yield were cause for anxiety. A good crop was a time for celebration.

Now, to this meal-conscious culture add complex food regulations used to separate the clean and unclean, both food and people. As a Jew, you had to be acutely aware of what you were eating and whom you were inviting for dinner.

New Testament meals were loaded with meaning, even more than our own. But, then and now, a meal said, “Welcome. We want you to feel like one of the family.”

## EATING WITH GOD

When people are asked which historical figure they would invite for dinner, Jesus usually makes the list, and he is probably the only person on the list who would accept the invitation. There are many stories of people eating and drinking in the presence of the Lord.

Abraham had bread and wine with Melchizedek. Melchizedek was an enigmatic figure, yet he was at least a representative of Jesus (Genesis 14:18). After the golden calf debacle, God invited Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel to Mount Sinai where they ate and drank (Exodus 24:9–11) with God. And the people of Israel had a table set before them every morning when they were given manna in the wilderness. None of these, however, compares to a breakfast Jesus shared with a few disciples on the shore of a calm lake (John 21).

The story is an epilogue. It could be that the apostle John thought he had finished his Gospel and decided later to add this story. Like most epilogues, it was carefully chosen. It took some past events, updated them, and tied up a few loose ends.

Prior to this breakfast, Jesus had been raised from the dead and appeared to the disciples at least twice. On this occasion, Peter and some of the other disciples had been fishing through the night, and Jesus was making them breakfast. It is hard to understand why the disciples would spend time fishing while the universe was getting a new king, but Jesus offered no rebukes.

If you joined the story at this point, the beach scene would seem ordinary, except for an odd conversation in which Jesus repeats himself three times. But if you were an insider, you would quickly recognize that Jesus was remembering, even re-enacting, three different events for the disciples. His intent was to fill those past events with more meaning and thereby complete them.

**Catching fish.** The first event Jesus reenacts on the beach was an earlier fishing episode. It took place on the same lake, maybe at the same place, early in Jesus' public ministry. He had been teaching a large crowd by the water's edge when he noticed that Simon's boat was empty (Luke 5:4–11). At his command, Simon cast off with Jesus on board and set the net—in the same place—one more time. Soon the net was bursting at the seams with fish.

Jesus' point? "From now on you will be catching men" (Luke 5:10). That was the last time Peter and the others had fished, until now. Now, as Jesus appeared on the beach after his resurrection, he was going to make the same point in the same way.

One reason Peter was fishing was that he had nothing else to do. The Holy Spirit had not yet been given. But more important, Peter was, at least in his own mind, *persona non grata*, unwelcome and ashamed because he had blatantly denied Jesus three times. He had to be thinking that there would be no fourth chance.

The connection with Peter's initial call to be a disciple couldn't be clearer: A long night of fishing. No catch. A request to try again. A boat overloaded with fish. Then, finally, someone recognizes Jesus for who he really is.

What was the punch line? "Catch men, Peter, not fish." The message was incongruous in the first story—poor, uneducated fishermen becoming the Messiah's disciples. Now it seems even more so—a poor, uneducated fisherman, fresh off three denials, being commissioned by the victorious King. But when you understand this King and this kingdom, it makes perfect sense.

The King prefers his ambassadors weak and needy, and those qualities are at the top of an unworthy person's resumé. Do you feel like you don't belong, like you blew it beyond belief? Then you get the job.



The outrageous nature of this calling is what makes it so believable. No one could make up such a story. We might be able to imagine Jesus reluctantly accepting Peter, but only after Peter did a few years of penance at the bottom of the kingdom's corporate ladder. No one could imagine full acceptance coupled with a most honorable mission.

**Burning charcoal.** The second event Jesus has in mind is only echoed here. When Peter denied Jesus, he did it around a charcoal fire (John 18:18). When Jesus was on the beach he prepared the fish on a *charcoal fire*, the same Greek word.

Smell is a curious sense. It is hard to evoke smells from memory. We can remember and imagine past scenes and past sounds, but it is hard to arouse an old aroma. (The exception is my grandmother's pine cushion. I smelled it so often and it was so strong, I can evoke it at will.) It is hard, that is, until we actually re-smell it. Then our memory comes alive. It drags us into the past, where the smell and the people or places attached to it remain in rich detail.

There is no reason to think that Jesus was trying to evoke the night of denials. Peter doesn't need any help with that. More likely, Jesus was offering Peter a new memory for the smell of charcoal. From this moment on, whenever fires were being lit, Peter would remember the fire at the beach and the welcome of the risen Jesus.

Our God is the God of fourth chances. Some loose ends are being tied up. Are you applying this to yourself?

**Eating fish.** The third event Jesus references is the feeding of the five thousand. Fish and bread were provided then; fish and bread are provided now. Jesus used a specific word for fish here; he used the same word in the feeding of the five thousand.<sup>[12](#)</sup> The word appears nowhere else in the New

Testament. And the fact that fish are coupled with bread on this beach makes the connection to that past event certain.

The feeding of the five thousand is arguably Jesus' most significant miracle. Every gospel writer records it as a turning point in Jesus' public ministry. He was popular before this miracle but many fell away from him afterwards. To further spotlight this miracle, Jesus chose to perform it near the feast of Passover (John 6:4). There are only three events in the gospel of John that are identified with Passover: Jesus expelling the moneychangers from the temple, this one, and the crucifixion. Anything mentioned alongside Passover is automatically a noteworthy event.

The miracle carried a clear message: "Like the Israelites in the desert, you have been given bread from heaven to eat. Now trust me, the Bread of Life." In fact—and this is the reason why many people left—Jesus told people to feed on his flesh and drink his blood. It was a hard saying, no doubt. The disciples themselves were mystified by it. They grumbled among themselves about this almost-offensive saying. But Jesus was not going to allow people to settle for an inexpensive meal. The time had come to reveal the deeper truths of the kingdom.

The phrase echoed King David who said, after three brave men risked their lives to get him some water, "Shall I drink the lifeblood of these men? For at the risk of their lives they brought it" (1 Chronicles 11:19). David did not want to profit from the sacrifice of these men. Jesus, on the other hand, *invites* us to profit from his sacrifice. If you shun his blood you are saying you don't need what he offers. Drink his blood and you are saying that his death brings life. The miraculous feeding had been an object lesson. Jesus was saying, "If you want to follow me, be prepared to identify with me in death." This wasn't the message most people wanted to hear.

Now, in this early morning on what must have been a peaceful shore, with just a few men and no crowds, Jesus gave an invitation to a meal. He was revisiting the time when the disciples were confused about his interpretation of the feeding miracle, and he was bringing closure to the mystery. In what was the first post-resurrection Lord's Supper, the risen Jesus invited the disciples to identify with him in his humiliation and exaltation. He provided a very costly breakfast, but all the disciples needed to bring was nothing.

*Empty* is the way some people describe shame. Those who have nothing are always empty. We can add that word to the others—*naked, unclean, outcast, unworthy*—to identify the scope of our experience of shame. We could cram everything possible into shame and this one breakfast would speak to them all. The empty are satisfied. They have everything they could ever need.

**Speaking in threes.** After breakfast Jesus took Peter aside, probably for a walk on the shore. Peter had seen Jesus at least once since he had risen, but we have no record of a private conversation. This had to be a little awkward for him. The scene was heavy with the overtones of Eden and God walking through the garden. The difference was that Peter knew enough about Jesus not to hide. There aren't good hiding places on a shoreline anyway.

“Simon, son of John, do you truly love me?”

“Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

“Feed my lambs.”

So far the conversation was going well, considering the alternatives. But Peter didn't quite get it.

Jesus then initiated the same exchange. Then he initiated it again. Who knows when Peter finally understood what was being reenacted, but the cadence is unmistakable.

Let's say my mother took me, her junior-high-aged son, in the car to do an errand. Let's say she just happened to drive toward a street where I had said something horrible to her. As we got closer to the place of infamy, the pieces of past shame began to assemble themselves in my head, but just before they came together as even a fully formed feeling, she said something out of the blue.

"Do you love me?"

"Yes, Mom, I love you."

"And, son, I love you."

It's a do-over. She would be making a powerful statement that the cruel words of the past are forgiven. All is well.

We don't know if Peter grasped how Jesus' three-fold commission went head to head with Peter's three-fold denial. But Peter must have had some reaction to Jesus' cadence. At that time anything associated with the number three had to evoke a visceral response.

But Peter's fears had already been assuaged by the invitation to breakfast. Jesus always says I love you first (1 John 4:19). We always respond to his initiative. On the beach the initiative was "Come and eat breakfast," which was an invitation to fellowship. It was a statement by Jesus of *shalom*, of peace in his relationship with Peter. All was well.

"Do you love me?" It is the same as "Do you believe in me?" but more personal. For the apostle John, who was there on the beach that day, the theme of love soon dominated his thinking.

"Do you love me?" The perfect question. You can't have a detached, intellectual response. This has more in common with marriage than a pop quiz.

"Do you love me?" By the third time Jesus asks the question, he is asking it of you too. There is absolutely no shame powerful enough to bar you from

Jesus' breakfast. If Peter wasn't excluded, you aren't either. But you have to answer the question. Jesus has already said I love you. Perhaps you have never responded before. Out loud, anyway.

Think about it. Do you love him? Don't let the question fade until you say, "Yes, Lord, I love you."

Can you give your reasons why you love him?

Yes, it does sound like a marriage ceremony. "I do" or "I love you" is how we become associated with the honor and holiness of Jesus.

**Feeding sheep.** Up to this point Peter had just been going through the motions. Someone on the outs has no purpose. He went fishing when he should have been bursting at the seams with good news. But then he was invited to breakfast. What more could anyone want? He is invited by the person he disgraced, and he was invited to love the person he disgraced, because Jesus already loved him first. This goes beyond forgiveness. It goes all the way to honor. Jesus is asking Peter to be faithful to him. Then Jesus, the Good Shepherd, entrusts Peter with the honor of being an under-shepherd. Peter is given a mission, and it couldn't have been more important.

From shame to acceptance.

From acceptance to commissioning.

That is the way of the kingdom.

**"Come and have Breakfast."** We are in the gospel of John, and John likes to bring you into the story. When you share a meal with someone, especially when that person is treating, your relationship is changed.

Jesus says to you, "Come and have breakfast." Do you have any reluctance? If so, the problem is no longer your shame. Jesus is the answer to

your shame, and you know that. The problem could only be that you don't like God.

Still, he invites you, "Come and have breakfast."

### For Discussion

1. What does it mean to be invited to breakfast with the King? Don't forget that this King knows everything. Nothing about you is hidden from him.
2. How do you respond to "Come and have breakfast"?
3. How do you respond to "Do you love me?"
4. What does it mean to "feed my sheep"?

What is honor?

An invitation to the King's table and, as if that isn't enough,  
an intimate stroll with him on the beach after dessert.

# Chapter 20

## THE WAY OF THE KINGDOM

**T**here is still much to do, but we have identified a basic rhythm of life with the new King in the new kingdom. It goes like this:

Put your shame into words.

Turn to your Rescuer.

Know him.

Be associated with him.

Get your feet washed.

Persevere—get ready to fight.

Turn toward others: Love.

### **PUT YOUR SHAME INTO WORDS**

The hopeless avoid and deny; the hopeful take on seemingly impossible tasks. Since you aim to be among the hopeful, it's time to pursue the impossible. You don't have to know everything. If you did, you would trust in yourself and that would end in disaster. All you need to know is the next step.

So don't shy away. Put words on the shameful event.

What happened?

How do you still carry it with you?

How do you feel like an outcast?

How do you feel exposed?



How do you feel dirty?  
Do you feel worthless, like nothing?  
How have you tried to manage these experiences in the past?  
Has Jesus ever been part of how you managed shame?  
How does your shame affect your relationships with other people?  
Whom do you avoid?  
How do you cover up?  
How do you try to make up for being so bad? For example, do you say yes to everyone, like a slave who is never good enough? Do you avoid the Lord as a way to say, “I’m not good enough to come to you yet”?  
How does your shame affect your relationship with God? Is anger mixed with your sense of unworthiness?

Write. Talk. The goal is to take shame out of the shadows. As you find words, you are communicating in the presence of the personal God who hears and speaks. Since he already knows you completely, this step is decidedly low risk. What is less clear, and potentially more risky, is how to speak about this to other people.

Your shame might already be public. For example, you may have failed in work or a relationship, or your sins may have been brought out into the open. But what about sexual sin, either perpetrated or suffered, that is still private? What about secret sins that are out of the ordinary? What about victimization that has left indelible scars but no one besides the perpetrator knows?

The principle is the same: when in doubt, go public. Speak to *someone*. “Does God help those who ask him to cover up their sin and protect them from its consequences?”<sup>13</sup> This question was asked by a man caught in sexual sin. What if your shame came from the actions of another person? If you speak to the Holy Lord but won’t speak to mere human beings, don’t you

think it's possible that your shame remains very much alive? It will offer many persuasive reasons to stay silent. But since the kingdom of God brings all things to the Light, you should speak to someone as a way to express your confidence in Jesus Christ.

## **TURN TO YOUR RESCUER**

Shame argues for silence, but its most serious deception is its insistence that our problem is with the judgments of people more than the judgment of God. Though we can certainly *feel* our shame before people, our deepest shame is before God. Only then is it before other human beings.

First before God, then before others. One, then two. The order makes a difference. First turn to the one who delights in rescuing you. The turn toward him may seem like a small matter, but it is called faith and it joins you to God. When you are connected to Someone of highest honor, you are less controlled by the rejection of mere mortals. When you dine with the King, being snubbed for a lunch date by someone you like may hurt, but it can't destroy. When you work for your loving Father, you may fail and others may notice, but you can be sure your Father's plans for you will not be hindered. He will make you useful and fruitful. He will even use your apparent failures as a way to impact the world.

So, first things first. Turn to Jesus, the one who rescues you from shame.

**Know him.** Your about-face toward Jesus might be less than enthusiastic. You know shame is killing you, and you only turn to him because you are running out of options. You might even think God bears some responsibility for your shame. That's not the greatest way to start a relationship, but you will find that God is willing to respond to the slightest interest on your part.

His response is to make himself known. Faith is not a blind leap over a cliff. It is trusting and resting in Christ alone. It comes as you are persuaded of your need and his faithfulness, love, and power. The entire Bible, and most of what we have done so far in our attempts to scorn shame, is about knowing God.

Real honor is to intimately know the exalted God.

Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.” (Jeremiah 9:23–24)

**Be associated with him.** When you know God, you put your trust in him. You can express that trust in a number of ways.

“You are the true King. I’m with you from now on.”

“I trust you rather than my own self-protective and self-defeating strategies.”

“Have mercy on me, a sinner.”

“Jesus, you are alive, and you are my Lord.”

“You are the God of compassion and mercy. I know you are willing. So am I.”

“Touch me and I will touch you.”

“You are mine and I am yours.”

There is no one formula, but you get the idea. This is something you must do. You only receive the benefits of a particular country when you renounce

any other citizenship and pledge your allegiance to your new, adopted country. You only receive the benefits of Jesus when you pledge your allegiance to him. If you have never turned to Jesus, or if Jesus is only a last resort—emergency number in an otherwise Christ-less life—then you must begin by being connected to him. There is no other way to deal with shame. The initial connection is called conversion. Like marriage, you only do this once. You can and will be an imperfect spouse, but your allegiances are public and clear.

One helpful feature of marriage is that it is public, documented, and legal. When I married, there were people present, we signed legal papers for a license, and we exchanged rings. With Jesus, that ceremony is called baptism. It is public. It is the legal document and the ring all in one. It is tangible evidence that the promises of God are true and fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is the public evidence that union with Christ is accompanied by purification. When you have doubts, you can cite your baptism, or God can cite it as evidence that you belong to him. We'll talk more about baptism later. In the meantime, call yourself a Christian. It means that you are taking Christ's name as your own. You belong to him, and he belongs to you.

People who feel worthless tend to doubt that anyone, especially the Holy God, could tolerate them for very long, so they quickly doubt their connection to the King. Such doubts are pernicious. Let them linger unchallenged and they will harm your soul. Passivity, the most dangerous symptom of shame, must not have the last word. Ever.

Along with being baptized, your best combat strategy is to remember that the shamed and outcast King has a particular affection for all things deemed loathsome by others. We could put it this way: you aren't very good at talking back to shame, so let the King have the last word. Why does he have such

affection for you? He simply does. He has a long history of choosing the underdog (Deuteronomy 7:7). But there is more. He is honored when he includes outcasts. No other king would do such a thing. By his choices the Holy God sets himself apart from all others. By his choices he makes it clear that no one can boast.

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Corinthians 1:27–29)

The kingdom of honor is one in which we all boast in the Lord.

**Get your feet washed.** In a desert environment where everyone wore sandals, you expected to get dirty—and *you* should expect to get dirty. You no longer get dirty by the sins of others, but you still sin. As a mark of maturity you will see more of your sin, and you will see that your sin is actually disrespect toward Jesus. Yet mingled with the grief of insight is your joy in knowing that conviction of sin is evidence of the Spirit's work within you. Your awareness of sin is, in fact, a badge of your new citizenship. The Spirit himself is the one who convicts you of sin. And, of course, the Spirit who convicts is the same Spirit who assures you that you are forgiven.

Your biggest challenge in getting your feet washed is that Jesus is doing the washing. I don't like *anyone* washing my feet because they get dirty and are ugly. I might let my wife wash them because she has seen them and has become immune to their sight and smell. But let a VIP wash my feet? No way! I might be willing to pay someone to wash my feet, but if Jesus is

getting out the towel and coming in my direction, I would be sorely tempted to sneak out the back door.

Peter offers a better response.

[Jesus] came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, do you wash my feet?” Jesus answered him, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.” Peter said to him, “You shall never wash my feet.” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.” Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” Jesus said to him, “The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean. . . .” (John 13:6–10)

People familiar with shame are willing to wash feet, but they are uncomfortable with other people washing their feet. They are better at serving than being served. Well, get used to being served.

You should be encouraged to know that Peter had already been washed. It happened when he left his fishing nets and followed Jesus (Matthew 4:20). He certainly didn’t follow very well, but his willingness to follow was evidence of his faith in Jesus, and his faith was evidence that he had received a full bath. Peter, along with the other imperfect disciples, was already clean (John 15:3). It is called conversion, regeneration, or our new birth.

The foot washing symbolizes the daily cleansing we all need from sin and the contamination that accumulates with daily life. This cleansing is also called confession and repentance. Peter doesn’t understand the symbolism at first, but he is still a fine guide. When we are face-to-face with the Servant-God who kneels to wash our feet, we *should* experience a moment’s reluctance. How could this be? We are too undeserving. We find ourselves sitting at the intersection of the uncomfortable and the embarrassing. But we

allow ourselves no more than a moment's reluctance. When we realize we can't cleanse ourselves and our lives depend upon it, we say, "Bring it on! Wash me everywhere. Thank you! I love you."

The new code of honor says that uncleanness is what comes out of us more than what touches us. Since sin still lingers in every heart, we can be sure that something unclean will be coming out every day. With the knowledge of forgiveness of sins in hand, consider the pattern of the Lord's Prayer with its daily confession of "debts" (Matthew 6:12). It's best to focus on the foot washing needed for the last twenty-four hours.

**Persevere—get ready to fight.** With purification comes renovation. The Spirit comes and gives us a new heart.

"And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." (Ezekiel 36:26–27)

Change, however, is hard. We all know that. Once again, there can be no passivity, no "let go and let God." We were once dead; now we sense that we are coming alive. Dead people can't engage in a battle, but the living must. And when it comes to shame, the battle is even harder than you think.

First, you have to battle your own hesitations, doubts, and preference for the familiar. You might not like shame, but it is home. The alternative—the way of the gospel—is humbling because we receive free and lavish gifts we don't deserve. Given a choice, we might prefer misery to what we perceive to be indebtedness. And don't forget, sometimes we don't turn to Jesus because we just don't like him. Jesus, we believe, has let us down, and that

authorizes us (we think) to trust ourselves. Such thinking might make sense until the light of the gospel comes into view. Then our independent ways look foolish and deadly.

Second, you have to battle the world around you and its views of honor and shame. You hear these old rules every day: Earn honor. Flaunt it. Stand in judgment over those who have less. Protect yourself and what you have; the poor will simply squander any generosity. When there are threats to your self-esteem, deny them.

Third, as if those adversaries aren't enough, you have to battle the false kingdom. Satan himself has a personal investment in keeping people entrenched in shame. Satan might seem to be a pre-modern fabrication, but if you have known shame, you know that the pull to remain in it has been from a personal power. How else can you explain your zombie-like returns to shame even when you have discovered a way out?

Yes, you have an enemy. His strategies are not immediately apparent, but once you identify him you can recognize his schemes. His goal is your death. All his strategies work to that end. That's why we have targeted hopelessness; it has Satan's fingerprints all over it. He seeks to persuade you that there is no way out of your prison of shame. If you get your hopes up, you will just get hurt more. Your goal is to make mischief against Satan.

Be suspicious of the times when you feel stuck. They could be a sign that you are committed to Satan's lies. Can you identify those lies? Most of them cluster around some version of "God is not good."

Sometimes sheer fatigue will be the signal that the kingdom of death is close at hand. You are tired of the fight and you want a break. Be suspicious here too. No doubt you *may* be fatigued, but you also might be saying, "God's ways are too hard. I just need a break." If so, add this to the rules of engagement: no days off. A brief rest break is the same as saying, "I am going



back to where everything is familiar.” It is comfortable for a moment, but you know it leads to death.

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“I hate myself. Everyone would be better off without me.” It wasn’t a threat of suicide. It was more a statement of fact. And it was enough for her friend to jump into action.

“Hold it. You know that’s not true. Do you hear what you are saying? That’s a lie. There is no way you can stop there. We can’t let misery and hopelessness have the last word.”

Silence. While her friend was ready to fight on her behalf, the one who spoke about hating herself was unmoved.

Her friend continued, “I know that what happened to you is hard. But now it is much bigger. You are not just dealing with what he said to you; you are now in a spiritual battle.”

“Maybe, but I am too tired for this. I am tired of fighting.”

“Well, you are going to get more tired of me bugging you. Let me start the fight by speaking some truth from the Bible.”

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“Persevere” is the rallying cry of the kingdom of Christ. Persevere in the grace and power that comes from the true King.

#### **TURN TOWARD OTHERS: LOVE**

The path away from shame leads outward, first toward God, and then toward other people. First you put words on your shame; then you listened to what the Lord said to you in particular. Then you believed and trusted, and trust,

you will find, leads to action. Now you have reason to move toward other people rather than away from them. You were clothed and cleansed so there is no reason to hide. You have something good to say so you want to share it. And you are commissioned by the King so you are not speaking on your own behalf. This simple step outward is in direct defiance of the isolation and hiding so essential to shame.

Scripture identifies this path in different ways.

Love God; love your neighbor. (Luke 10:27)

Trust Jesus and obey him. (Psalm 37:3)

Put your faith in Jesus; express it in love. (Galatians 5:6)

You will still notice the residue of shame. The difference is that it will be more than counterbalanced by the honor of being associated with the King and his purposes. When you falter (and you will), you can re-read the Gospels and learn again about the shamed King whose entire ministry was marked by the scorn and contempt of the people.

Then you get creative. The way of love, the way of the cross, has endless variations. You will need wisdom to know how to love because it can look different with each person and situation. When in doubt, don't get too fancy. Just lift your head up and look around. Who is in front of you? Who is in need? Who is on your heart?

These steps are simple, but not easy. They are not like adding  $2 + 2$ . They are more akin to the journey taken by the writer of Psalm 23. He was headed for the temple in Jerusalem and he knew the way, but he also knew that the path would be difficult. There would be times of refreshment, times in the desert, and times when death was so close it cast its shadow over him. In other words, he couldn't go it alone. He had to be led and protected by the Shepherd.

Shame's instincts are to go it alone. You can't rely on anyone else, and God certainly isn't pleased with you. You have to earn your way back into the community. These are some of the lies that attach themselves to shame. In response, humility—not humiliation—is the order of the day.

Humiliation says, "I am not good enough to receive help."

Humility says, "Yes, I need a shepherd."

Humiliation is hopeless. You have no advocate. There will be no peace.

Humility clings to hope. The Shepherd has said that Jerusalem is up ahead and you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever (Psalm 23:6).

. . . until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest. Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places. (Isaiah 32:15–18)

So we live with hope in the Father, Son, and Spirit and in the many promises they have made to us.

## For Discussion

1. Of these steps, which do you find most difficult?
2. Since there is a difference between knowing and speaking, speak when possible. How would you identify the satanic strategies that are sometimes effective in your life?

# Honor, after Jesus

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First, you listen. Then you believe in Jesus, who invites you into his honor. Then you discover an entirely new life in which you feel like you are starting with a clean slate.

This new life will have its perplexing moments. Sometimes the best guideline is to do the opposite of what you would normally think. Just assume that the kingdom of heaven is upside down and backward—meaning that it takes our upside-down world and turns it right-side up. That’s certainly what this new life with Christ required for the disciples who wrote Scripture.

How are we to live when the summary of our new life is “Christ and him crucified”? That was *the* question for the early church and it is the question for us today. We might as well ask how we are to live when the one we trust in was humiliated, naked, outcast, and unclean. With this as our starting point, be prepared to have your understanding of shame turned on its head. Then, be prepared to act.

The LORD bestows favor and honor. (Psalm 84:11)

# Chapter 21

## HONORED BY GOD

**T**he world is turned upside down as soon as you enter the kingdom. Jesus takes you through a gate that says—and this is amazing—HONORED. It is the only way in.

Shame for one woman I know gives way when it's her birthday. For those few hours, shame is elbowed out from the center of her life. Friends call her. She usually gets a gift or two. Someone at work keeps track of birthdays, so either a cake or cupcakes show up at lunch. She is honored.

Birthdays can be a big deal. For children, they are the days when they eat whatever they want, receive gifts, celebrate with songs, and feel like royalty from sunup to sundown. On my birthday I still get to choose my dinner and dessert menu and my family treats me most kindly, even if I am a grouch. Of course, tomorrow is someone else's birthday and I leave the limelight, but it certainly can be nice while it lasts. I, for one, am not above using "It's my birthday" as a way to garner a little more patience and mercy from others.

Birthdays can feel peculiar, though. We receive kindness we do not deserve. Who are we to receive special treatment, especially when we know we don't deserve it? Who are we to be honored for doing nothing more than being born?

Well, get accustomed to that feeling because, like it or not, there is only one way into the kingdom of God. You must receive honor—honor that is extravagant and eternal.

God has honored you. The gospel is the story of how he did it. At the heart of the story is the word *servant*. Jesus Christ became *your* servant.

There is no honor in being served by paid help. The servant is only doing a job; it is fee for service. Employees don't have to like their bosses, or servants their masters. But what if someone *volunteers* to serve you? Jesus freely placed your interest above his own. His desire was to elevate your status; in the process he lowered his own. He gave you the royal treatment: he works, you benefit. And you must accept this treatment.

Jesus made himself nothing in order to be your servant, and servants live to enhance the status of those they serve. God honored you. No wonder the apostle Paul was immune to the shame of the world. No amount of worldly shame could diminish the honor God had bestowed on him. Indeed, "the LORD bestows favor and honor" (Psalm 84:11), but we never thought he would come down off the throne, willingly become our servant, and serve us all the way to the cross.

When Jesus voluntarily became your servant, he lowered himself *and* elevated you. Yes, you might feel laid low initially. When you first see your sin clearly, you feel like you come crashing down to earth. You acknowledge that you have no status or accomplishments to offer the King. But when you stop to think about it, there was nothing especially humiliating in that. You simply stopped pretending you were God. You finally acted like the human being you were created to be: you turned from your independent, isolated ways and connected to Jesus.

It is a sign that you are moving when you see your sin and don't immediately go back into the gutter. Sin is a fact. To be blind to it is shameful. To see it is normal and human. To confess it to the Lord and see that he gladly accepts you rather than turns away? That shows you are connected to him and becoming more like him.

So the beginning of life with Jesus Christ, even when it means seeing your own sin, is honor, not humiliation. When you are served by Jesus and connected to him, it can be no other way.

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“It’s comfortable.”

No matter how I took aim at her worthlessness and shame, they were immovable objects. She *looked* tired and a little distant, but I couldn’t help feeling like I was in a tug of war with King Kong. I was trying to take her shame away, but she was determined to hold on.

“Okay, I give up . . . for now.”

That’s when she said, “But it’s all I know. I don’t know who I would be without it. It’s comfortable.” My mind drifted to prisoners, freed from German concentration camps, who walked around aimlessly, not knowing where to go.

This shame can’t be trusted. What I mean is that your shame can speak with confidence yet lie. Shame is not your real home. I’m not so sure you feel comfortable with shame, but I know you believe you deserve it. The truth is that you are being given a gift. When people give us a gift, they don’t want us to say, “I don’t deserve this.” “Thank you” is enough. Could you say it right now?”

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God honored us—it is too much to take in. Even now, it probably makes you squirm. It certainly does me. Most people who know shame are horribly uncomfortable with the idea of receiving honor. It is hard to be honored when you don’t feel very honorable. When you work hard and do well, no one



minds a little recognition. But screw up and receive praise? That can be hard to take.

Yet this is the way of God's kingdom. It's called *grace*. Leave your discomfort at the door and get used to it. Be amazed. Just say, "Thank you." This is the only door; there is no back alley through which you can enter. There is no gate that says, "Second class, enter here." If you want Jesus, you must be willing to accept the honor that goes with the relationship. Your royal status—ascribed to you, not achieved—has been unveiled.

So why is that entrance so difficult? What causes us to be uncomfortable with, or even resistant to, this grace and honor? No one resists a fat lottery check or a free item at the market. Get a freebie and it makes our day. Maybe that's because there is no apparent sacrifice or love behind it. But in this case, when we look the Gift-giver in the eye, know the extravagance of the gift, and notice we have nothing to offer in return, we can feel a bit sheepish. Yet we can't enter the kingdom with embarrassment that lasts more than ten seconds. Any more time than that and we will turn away from the Gift-giver, and *that* just can't be.

For me the problem, again, is my residual pride. I can feel like scum and still resist grace. That's an odd combination, but we are odd people. Part of me would actually prefer a reprimand, a scowl, or at least an opportunity to slip in without anyone noticing. I would feel then that I had somehow paid for my failures. Who wants to feel like they are in someone's debt? But the old upside-down way of thinking is being righted.

In the kingdom of God, our eyes are turned away from ourselves and onto the glory of the King. In this simple redirection we have the pleasure of thinking less often about ourselves. If Jesus is highly honored because he gives us such a great gift, then bring it on! I'll gladly accept it.

Have you ever fought with a friend over a dinner check? Here's an approach that nearly guarantees you will get the check. "You don't understand. It would be my honor to pay. You would rob me of that honor if you insist on paying."

If you prefer to avoid the spotlight, that's fine. You don't have to give an acceptance speech. When you enter the kingdom, all eyes are *not* on you. They are on Jesus himself. They are on his love, his sacrifice, his perfection, his suffering, and his holiness. God has determined to bring glory to himself by serving us. The utterly unprecedented act of the cross puts him in a category by himself. There are no human parallels. So, as odd as it might sound, accept this honor for Jesus' sake and for his glory. His glory is that his love is boundless; it exceeds any love we could possibly imagine. When he honors you, his servant-love is unmistakable.

The result: you will want to honor him through voluntary service. You will feel compelled by gratitude to serve others. The honor we are shown by the Servant initiates a cycle in which we joyfully follow his lead.

It's time to practice saying "Thank you."

## For Discussion

1. How, even when we experience shame, can we be prone to play God?  
Do you ever trust in your own evaluation of yourself rather than God's?  
That is an example of playing God. You are saying you are the ultimate judge of truth and lies, not him.
2. What are some of the honors God bestows?
3. You have heard about Jesus as the Servant, but has that familiarity left you unmoved? Talk about Jesus your Servant until you believe it.
4. If this is true (and it is), how will it change the way you live?

[Jesus said,] “I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:49)

[Jesus] breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” (John 20:22)

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. (Acts 2:1–4)

# Chapter 22

## “YOU WILL RECEIVE POWER”

**I**n order to live out your honored status in Christ, you need help. And help, indeed, is what you get. So, along with “Thank you,” get in the habit of saying “Help” as often as possible.

The cross was behind him and Jesus was eating with his disciples again. It was during the forty days between his resurrection and his ascension. The topic was the Holy Spirit. In just a few days, after Jesus ascended, the Spirit would come and life as it was then understood would be changed forever. Power was coming.

And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now . . . . But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” (Acts 1:4–5, 8)

Power—that’s what you need. The shamed have none of it. They always seem to be on the losing end. They experience oppression and neglect. They are nothing. But even more, you need power for God’s truth to come alive in your soul. Too often God’s words of truth to a shame-filled soul don’t penetrate or last. As soon as hope appears, it is vaporized. You need God’s power so his words of truth can take up residence in your life. You need power to believe, power to act.

Jesus ascended and the Spirit was given. This is a moment in history that affects you right now. (You already know how the past can affect you negatively, but this is a *good* way the past affects you.) Jesus had promised that he would never leave his people alone. He promised that when he left the Spirit would come. If you know anything about the Spirit, you might as well nickname him “Power” because when he is present things happen (Acts 1:8).

The death and resurrection of Jesus inaugurated the new kingdom; the coming of the Spirit made it all visible. The people of God had dwindled to a handful of women. Now, with the coming of the Spirit, the numbers multiplied daily. Fearful disciples suddenly became bold, even in the face of death. There were enough miracles to prove that Jesus’ work was continuing, and continuing through imperfect followers. Forgiveness of sins was in the air. Out-of-control lives were brought back within the boundaries of self-control. And shame, for those who were willing, was forever changed.

### **THE SPIRIT AND WATER**

“Power,” that is, the Holy Spirit, was always central to God’s plan. He was promised long ago, and he was promised when people were a spiritual mess. In other words, no matter how bad you think you are, there is no chance that God will renege on his promises now.

People make promises when there is mutual trust. Wedding vows are the best example. They come only after a period of dating or courtship, when faithfulness can be displayed and verified. You want to have confidence in the other person’s fidelity. Not too many people would knowingly walk down the aisle while their prospective spouse was in the process of trashing the relationship. But this is exactly what God does. He makes promises knowing that his people are either fearful or unfaithful. His story is about *his*

faithfulness and our unfaithfulness. So you can't exclude yourself from these promises. They are delivered to people who are decidedly unworthy.

“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” (Ezekiel 36:25–27)

**The Spirit and water promised by Ezekiel.** God says, “I will sprinkle clean water on you.” You can add “Water of Life” or “Cleansing Water” to the names of the Spirit. This sprinkling is with no ordinary water. The Spirit himself is the water.

At the very heart of shame is the absence of relationships, the absence of being known, personal isolation. With this in mind you again get the feeling that God's words to you are all about shame. For example, many religions have cleansing rituals, but the cleansing given by the true God is fundamentally about him uniting himself with you. His world is intensely personal. You are cleansed by the person of God so that the Spirit of God can dwell with you.

The time is coming, Ezekiel said, when you will be ceremonially sprinkled and be clean through and through. That time has come.

Remember that there are two kinds of cleansing. One happens once and lasts a lifetime; the other is the foot washing we need every day. Ezekiel is talking about that initial once-and-for-all cleansing. No matter how we became unclean, whether by the acts of other people or by our own, we know there must be a cleansing that reaches far beneath the skin. This is that cleansing.

Shakespeare's Macbeth understood the depths of defilement. He needed cleansing from two murders, and he knew water was ineffective. He said,

“Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather the multitudinous seas incarnadine, making the green one red.”<sup>14</sup>

His wife, an accomplice to murder, also found that her acts left her permanently bloody.

“Out, damned spot! out, I say!—One: two: why, then, 'tis time to do't.—Hell is murky!—Fie, my lord, fie! a soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?—Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?”<sup>15</sup>

Water alone can't wash our souls, but the Spirit can. Inner transformation is exactly what the Spirit does. It is part of consecration and it is God's work, not yours. So Scripture counters the futility of washing ourselves with the Lord's promise that even murderous hands can be cleansed.

“Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.” (Isaiah 1:18)

All you have to do is nothing, but nothing, as you know, is very hard to do. The gifts of God to you are getting more specific. Received rightly, they change you.



An African woman had just been given a scarf. It was a ten-dollar item you could buy at a thrift store for two. But she didn't look like she had been given a two-dollar scarf. She looked transformed in her own demure way.

Why the change in her? You didn't have to guess.

"This is the first time I was ever given a gift."



When you understand that God gave you the gift of himself, you discover another kind of shame: you are being treated in a way that is much better than you deserve. You are being cleansed and accepted, and no one deserves such a gift.

When you receive an extravagant gift and have nothing to give in return, you can be a little embarrassed. You feel . . . *unworthy*, though it is a very different *unworthy* than you ever experienced. When you receive an extravagant gift from someone that you yourself shamed, you will feel something closer to shame than embarrassment. That is pride talking. We are concerned more about ourselves than we are grateful for the mercy and grace of the other person. But with our pride ousted, humility has the freedom to take our eyes off ourselves and appreciate the greatness of the giver. Humility simply says, "Thank you."

And, of course, there are even more gifts.

**The Spirit and water promised by Jesus.** Jesus had the "Water of Life," a.k.a. the Holy Spirit, in view whenever he spoke about cleansing and water. He said to Nicodemus, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). Next, he offered living water to the Samaritan woman (John 4). Though he doesn't specify to her the connection between the Spirit, water for drinking, and



water for cleansing (John 4); he will make that connection clear just a little later.

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive . . . (John 7:37–39)

The apostle John spelled it out: The living water is the Spirit.

Can you see it? The gifts are mounting up. In Ezekiel you see the priest sprinkle the water of cleansing on you, and the water of cleansing is the Holy Spirit. Even more, the Spirit doesn’t just wash off. Instead he seeps into you, going all the way to your heart to become the identifying center of your life. The progression from unclean to holy is complete. You are clean inside and out, and you are consecrated. How could it be otherwise? The Spirit lives within you.

Jesus adds that the Spirit *in* you gushes out from you. There is nothing surprising here. God is generous. When the Spirit is given to you, you get a lot of the Spirit. Jesus is splicing Ezekiel’s prophecy with a later vision when Ezekiel watched the temple spring a leak (Ezekiel 47:1–12). In that vision, Ezekiel was brought to the temple and observed water coming from the Holy Place, where God dwelled with his people. The water was coming out in a stream, flowing outside the temple gates, starting as a trickle but gathering momentum so that it kept getting wider and deeper as you followed it—deep enough to swim in—with life springing up wherever the water went.

No little sprinkling here. There is no chance that any part of you will go unwashed. It’s time for a swim. Usually in Scripture, large amounts of water

symbolize danger. Water was where you could drown. But now, for the first time, you are invited to swim without fear of drowning because this water is safe. The water is life itself.

The gusher coming from the temple is the Spirit. You are invited to dive in. When you do, you will find complete cleansing. Places in you that were dead will come to life.<sup>16</sup> Then, once you go about your daily business, a mini-gusher comes out of you, enabling you to bless and bring words of life to other people. No more hiding and avoiding. You have been given a mission and you have the power to accomplish it.

The cleansing Spirit has washed you, brought you into the community of God, and authorized you to bless others. You are no longer the beggar but the giver.

## **THE SPIRIT AND THE TEMPLE**

And there is more still. Since a scale version of the Spirit-gusher comes out of you, *you* are the temple of God.

Keep the story in mind. The cleansing Spirit, who had been *with* the people in the Old Testament, was waiting for the perfect sacrifice to be made by Jesus. Once that sacrifice was verified as effective and complete, and once Jesus returned to heaven as the reigning King, the Spirit was released. Attach yourself to Jesus by faith and the Spirit washes over you and fills you. The Spirit is *in* you. Even more, since God is generous and lavish in the way he gives himself, you can expect the Spirit to overflow from your heart. *You* are the temple in Ezekiel's vision.

God never intended to make a beautiful but lifeless building his permanent residence. The Jerusalem temple was fine, but it wasn't much good for people who lived a few days' walk away. No matter how beautiful a building it was, people are more appropriate temples. God always planned

to dwell in living tabernacles, tabernacles with legs and arms that would represent, love, and serve him.

Yet who could qualify for such honor? Only God in the flesh.

Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?” But he was speaking about the temple of his body. (John 2:19–21)

Jesus was *the* living temple, the place where God himself was present. Jesus was the Holy of Holies, the very heart of the temple, the place of his throne on earth (Ezekiel 43:7; Revelation 21:22). There you found the Ten Commandments, which Jesus kept perfectly. There you found the manna, the Bread of Life. Everything about the temple pointed to Jesus.

But where you find Jesus, you can expect to find his people because his people are united with him. The first inkling that we were connected to the tabernacle or temple was when we examined the clothing of the priests (Exodus 28). Look closely at this clothing and you will discover that it is suspiciously similar to the tabernacle itself. As the Holy Place was surrounded by the beautiful tent God had designed, so the priest was surrounded by that tent in miniature, his priestly garments. He was, indeed, a walking tabernacle, consecrated by God.

As we are joined to Christ by faith, we too become walking tabernacles. The apostle Paul understood this when he wrote, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?” (1 Corinthians 6:19).

You could easily get overwhelmed by all this, as when you ask someone for directions and they give you more detail than you want. By the time the person gets to “You will pass the house with two pink azaleas where you

take a soft left after the second right at the fourth light,” you remember absolutely nothing. When you hear one or two directions, you might remember; hear a lot and you hear nothing. In other words, don’t let this montage of spiritual gifts leave you dazed and stuck.

Whenever possible, put these new realities into speech. Talk about them. Tell your friends what you are learning. When you live in the kingdom of God, you will notice that public proclamations are highly valued. We are a community that learns from one another, so you owe it to the rest of us to speak these realities. And you will discover that your confidence in God’s words to you will grow as you proclaim them.

## **THE SPIRIT AND YOU**

This is just a sample of the things the Spirit does, but it should be enough to persuade you that you are clean in Christ. If you doubt that just watch these new realities cascade down on you. In Christ you have been drenched by the cleansing Spirit. You have been sent swimming in him. That certainly is enough to cleanse you.

You have also been reclaimed as a living tabernacle. Where idols once reigned and tainted associations separated, the Spirit has come to stay. His holiness overcomes any uncleanness within you. The Holy Spirit cleanses you once and for all; you have gone from uncleanness to cleanness. Cleanness, however, can still be common and not holy. That’s why the Spirit’s residency is also important. It shows that God’s intent is to make you his own. You, who were once common and unclean, have now become holy and clean. Now, instead of contaminating others, you can touch them and somehow sanctify them. Your presence in the lives of other people is more powerful than you think. You can, in some real way, make them holy. Your presence announces God’s unique interest in the other person.

I observed this on a human scale when I married. My parents did not meet my wife until a month after our wedding, but the moment they met her they loved her. My parents loved me; I loved my wife; so my parents loved my wife. They were linked to me; I was linked to her; so they were linked to her.

This does not mean that those who are linked to us immediately belong to Christ, but it does mean that they enjoy an enviable position. At the very least, they have daily opportunities to witness the Spirit within another person. In a real way they too have been set apart.

The apostle Paul gave a concrete application of this. In ancient Israel there were strict taboos against marrying people outside Israel. Such a marriage brought pagan contamination into the home and defiled any Israelite. After Jesus ascended, the early church encountered similar relationships: one spouse put his or her faith in Jesus but the other one did not. A possible application of Old Testament principles to this situation was to advise the believer to divorce the unbeliever, thereby breaking the link to the unclean person. The apostle Paul, however, used different logic. If the unbeliever was willing to live with the believer, Paul advised the believer to stay because the believer—the holy one—can spread holiness to others in close association with him or her. With Christ in you, by way of the Holy Spirit, you can touch other people.

If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. (1 Corinthians 7:13–14)

So get out there and start touching. This is the era of action. If you have said “I love you” to Jesus, you have all the benefits that come with your new relationship. You also have the responsibilities. In other words, you have purpose. You have a reason to live. You claim all the benefits of Jesus Christ and he claims you. Just as Jesus moved toward you in love, you move toward others on his behalf.

And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us. (1 John 3:23–24)

There is nothing burdensome in this purpose. It is hard but invigorating. Imagine that you are the new Isaiah. You have been purified by the King. He lives in you by his Spirit, and he gives you a mission.

### For Discussion

1. One reason to discuss these matters with others is so that you can put words on what you are learning. You will find that when you put truth into your own words, you will understand it better and believe it more. Have you found this to be true?
2. How do you picture your own cleansing?
3. How do you imagine being a living tabernacle?
4. What difference does it make that you are not improved but *transformed* by the Spirit?
5. If you want to read further, consider 1 Peter 1. He reasons with you this way: God has made you holy, so be holy.

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:37–38)

# Chapter 23

## THE SACRAMENTS

If you actually *felt* the cleansing water it might help. By faith, it seems, you can only imagine it. But sometimes you don't need an imagination. Since Jesus was seen, heard, and touched (1 John 1:1) you can expect tangible symbols of the cross and its effects. That's what we are given in baptism and the Lord's Supper.

The biblical story of shame draws you irresistibly to these sacraments.<sup>17</sup> Baptism is the sign of cleansing, acceptance, union with Jesus, forgiveness, and empowerment from the Spirit. "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). The Lord's Supper is the invitation to "come and eat," which assures us that we are no longer outcasts.

These sacraments are necessities for life. Baptism is something you do once, because you are cleansed once and for all. The Lord's Supper is repeated, for some yearly and for others daily, because you can't have too much of a good thing. You can't *need* too much of a good thing.

Baptism proclaims that we need purification. It comes to us only by receiving the benefits Jesus secured for us at the cross. "He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). The Heidelberg Catechism puts it this way:



Christ has instituted this outward washing with water and has promised by it that I am just as certainly washed with his blood and spirit from corruption of my soul, that is, from all my sins, as I am washed outwardly with water that commonly washes away the filth from my body.[18](#)

Once again, God zeroes in on people who are familiar with shame.

If you were baptized as a child, there is no need to feel like you missed out on the significance of this event. Baptism expresses our need and the goodness of God. What better way to express your need than to come as an infant? You weren't rescued and cleansed at that moment, but someone appealed to the goodness of God for your cleansing and regeneration. As you have come to witness both your need and God's goodness, you lay hold of his promises. You say yes, you are needy, and yes, the water of baptism symbolizes the cleansing blood of Jesus, the only solution capable of truly cleansing you. Those yeses are your faith. You rest in what Jesus has done, and you keep resting.

If you were baptized as an adult, you came as a needy child who acknowledged that only in Jesus could there be cleansing and forgiveness of sins. In this statement of faith you received the benefits of the cross. You were joined to Jesus in his death and resurrection, and the visible sign of baptism assures you that what Jesus did was very real. In your baptism, the cross and resurrection were brought into the present and applied to you. Now you rest in what Jesus has done, and you keep resting.

Baptism is a gift to you, whether you remember the event or not. It is like a wedding ring. I know a young man who had a concussion from a car accident. For a few hours, he couldn't remember any events from the previous year, including his wedding. When he regained consciousness on a hospital gurney, pants cut off to check for injuries and wife at his side, he felt

a bit exposed. He knew he had been dating the woman next to him, but he wasn't certain of anything more. Then he noticed his wedding ring and just smiled. He figured that she had seen more than cut pants, and it was all legitimate. (And he is fine now.)

That's what you do with baptism. When you have doubts and questions, you keep looking back at this God-given sign and smile.

If you haven't been baptized and you have put your faith in Jesus rather than in yourself or anything else, then act quickly. "Believe and be baptized" (Mark 16:16; Acts 8:13). Become part of a church where "Christ and him crucified" is central and ask to be baptized. Why go around without a ring? This is a way God brings grace and assurance to you. It says you have been purified and you now belong to him. You can actually feel it.

#### **THE LORD'S SUPPER: FELLOWSHIP FOR THE OUTCASTS**

The Lord's Supper is the second sacrament instituted by God for our benefit. It can also be called Communion, which emphasizes our sharing the meal with Christ and each other; the Eucharist, which emphasizes the thankfulness that accompanies the meal; and "breaking bread," which was the first designation used by the early church.<sup>19</sup> Like baptism, it is all very sensory, adding the senses of taste and smell to the tactile experience of baptism. God does everything possible to show you the reality of what he has done for you.

Since it is so important, this sacrament doesn't simply burst on the scene unannounced. It was anticipated for centuries. The Hebrew Passover was celebrated with unleavened bread, and the bread of the Presence was always on the table in the early tabernacle (Exodus 25:30). Old Testament sacrifices often included a fellowship meal, and Jesus was explicit that the miraculous feeding of the five thousand pointed to a greater miracle.

“Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.” (John 6:54–56)

To say that only his blood is able to accomplish forgiveness of sins and fellowship with God is a hard saying. We have to make his blood our own.

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” (Matthew 26:26–28)

The Lord’s Supper is very simple. We are proclaiming the Lord’s death and all its benefits until he comes again (1 Corinthians 11:26). But who is able to comprehend these benefits? This is a simple fellowship meal without enough actual food to last you through the day. Still, it so overflows with meaning that it has the potential to be richer every time you come.

For example, this meal reaches into the past to bring into the present the supper Jesus had with his disciples. Simultaneously, it is a heavenly fellowship meal that brings the future glory of the heavenly banquet to us.<sup>[20](#)</sup> At that heavenly meal, we have oneness in the family of God. There are no misfits. While the world distinguishes between rich and poor, the kingdom of God does not. Money in no way adds to one’s status before the Lord. Tragically, the Christians in Corinth ignored this direct implication of the gospel and distinguished rich from poor, even during the Lord’s Supper. Since the rich provided the meal, they assumed that they had first dibs on everything. Meanwhile, the poor were left waiting, humiliated, oftentimes

coming to a table where everything had already been eaten and drunk (1 Corinthians 11:17–22).

May it never be, said the apostle Paul. Those who make such distinctions eat and drink judgment on themselves. Communion is a time when we recognize that we were all once outside. Now, in Christ, we have been purified, clothed, and beloved.

Expect things to happen at the Lord's Supper. Cleopas and (most likely) his wife were walking home on the day of Jesus' resurrection. They knew Jesus had been crucified but had only heard rumors that his grave was now empty. These events left them sad and perplexed. As they were walking, Jesus appeared and started walking with them, though he didn't reveal who he was. He explained how the events of that day were the climax of all the Old Testament Scriptures. Only later did Jesus reveal that he himself was the fulfillment in the flesh.

They urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him . . . . (Luke 24:29–31)

Jesus broke bread and their eyes were opened.

Are you displeased with yourself? Do you notice nothing in yourself? Have you heard the invitation to come? Will you RSVP that you, indeed, are coming? "Come . . . eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food" (Isaiah 55:1–2). You need this meal.

For Discussion

1. How are baptism and the Lord's Supper God's gifts to those who live with shame?
2. What will you meditate on the next time you take Communion?
3. Do you want evidence of God's care and cleansing? Point to your baptism. Do you need peace when you experience condemnation? Point to your baptism and the Lord's Supper and have your confidence in Christ built up.

You *were* unacceptable before God and other people.  
Now you are acceptable before God,  
    though you might be unacceptable before others.

Is that okay with you?

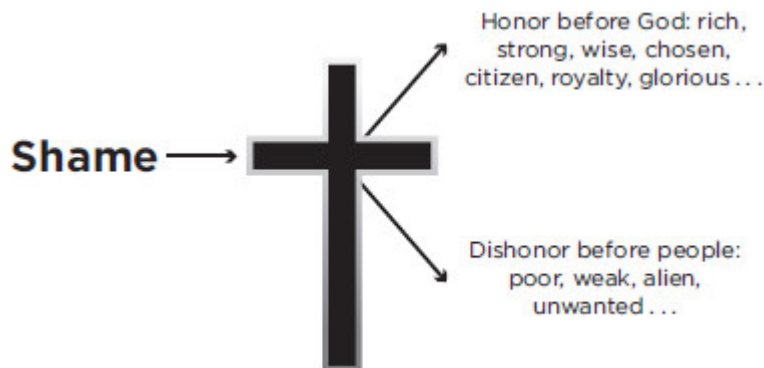
# Chapter 24

## RICHES, STRENGTH, AND BEAUTY

**O**ur upside-down world is being righted. When we see with eyes of faith (which means we see clearly and we see more), we discover that things are not necessarily as they seem. Our feelings are not always reliable judges of deeper realities when the dishonored have, in fact, received honor.

Here is what happened. You have been joined to Christ by faith and what is his is now yours. You have responded to his invitation to a meal—literally so—as you have celebrated the Lord’s Supper. Power has come. The unclean are holy. Real reality is coming into view. You are becoming comfortable in a new world that may be the opposite of what you expected. Incongruities abound. “Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation” (James 1:9–10). Such words no longer sound like riddles.

Full disclosure: the upside-down world is being righted in our relationship with the Lord, but it can still feel upside down in some of our everyday human relationships.



## HONOR BEFORE GOD

C. S. Lewis had a sense of what happened to us. “It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship.”<sup>21</sup> He is writing about you. Because of Christ you are now, and you are becoming, honorable and beautiful.

**Poor to rich.** If you had asked members of the early church what happened to them, you would get some version of rags to riches. They had been taken out of poverty and its nothingness and had come to possess everything (2 Corinthians 6:10). They had riches in Christ (1 Corinthians 4:8) and a glorious inheritance waiting for them (Ephesians 1:18) in Christ.

These riches were no mere figures of speech. There was no “in Christ *it is as if* you are rich.” The Beatitudes spoke about inheriting both the earth and the kingdom of heaven. Since these belonged to Jesus, they belonged to those who identified themselves with Jesus. As evidence of this reality, the early church was marked by generosity. Paul said to them, “You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God” (2 Corinthians 9:11). The church gave beyond what it could afford because they loved others. They were no longer anxious about fiscal ruin; they knew that everything belonged to their Father, so everything belonged to them. When you know that a huge trust fund is coming, you can afford to be generous.

A possible application: you could tithe as a way to express your liberation from shame, nothingness, and worthlessness.



**Slavery to royalty.** Related to the transition from poor to rich is the one from slave to free and from free to royal. This too was very real for the early church. For example, since we have been given all the status we could ever want or need, the apostle Paul told actual slaves who turned to Christ to stay as they were. If freedom was offered, fine. Take it. Otherwise, they should stay as they were (1 Corinthians 7:20–23). In writing this, Paul was not advocating slavery. He was simply stating a deeper truth: we are royal offspring regardless of how people may treat us. We have freedom in Christ that can't be taken from us. How other people treat us is a small thing compared to the honor of being in the royal family and functioning as royal ambassadors.

Be careful how you apply Paul's comments to slaves, though. New Testament slavery, as Paul speaks of it, was not the same abusive institution we associate with the term. The application is the same as what James said earlier: take pride in your high position.

How could you do that? You could talk about what you have been given in Christ. Better yet, you *must* talk about it. If you haven't yet spoken, be encouraged to know that there are important and good steps in front of you.

What else? I watched my two-year-old granddaughter sashay in my direction, floating, as much as a two-year-old can float. She wasn't looking directly at me because royalty rarely makes full eye contact. I knew I was supposed to see something, but . . . ah—the ribbon in her hair! That's it!

"Ruby, your ribbon is beautiful." Her grin indicated that I got the right answer.

I am not necessarily saying that you should do a little parading yourself, but why not? If that seems strange, maybe you could stand a little straighter. Royalty doesn't mind being noticed.

**Weak to strong.** Poor is the new rich; weak is the new strong. How could it be any other way? Jesus “was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God” (2 Corinthians 13:4). We follow his lead.

For the apostle Paul, weak especially meant physical weakness or disability. For us, it could include pain or any physical problem that reminds us that our body is not up to snuff. It could be broadened to include anything about us that, physically or mentally, doesn’t measure up to worldly standards—and who can’t identify a long list of such defects? Think “failure.”



A forty-two-year-old woman is no longer who she once was. She was strong; now she is weak. She was bright, in control, a multitasker *par excellence*, the go-to person for all difficult projects. Then she had a head injury that changed everything. She spoke haltingly, could remember only if she wrote it down, and wasn’t able to make a meal. She was dependent on her spouse, children, and friends. She once had competence and prestige; now she had none of that.

But if you know the priorities of the kingdom, you would see much more. You would find humility, meekness, mourning with hope, and someone who clutches on to Jesus for every step. Therefore, you would see beauty, grace, and honor, because anyone who desperately clings to Jesus is beautiful. Though you might not be tempted to worship her, you certainly would want to emulate her.

She is beginning to say with Paul, “When I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10). She hasn’t come to the place where she can boast in her weakness, and she doesn’t know how her weakness will shame the strong (1

Corinthians 1:27). But she keeps clinging to Jesus with what feels like the tiniest seed of faith, and she still looks glorious and strong.

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**Foolish to wise.** Wisdom has always had a certain prestige. Wise people are the guides for us all. They are the consultants, the intellectuals. Apparently, God does not call many followers from that group (1 Corinthians 1:26). Instead, most of us were just regular folks or worse. There was nothing particularly wise about us. But we are ordinary no longer. God has now determined that all wisdom must proceed from the cross. If we don't start there, then it isn't wisdom, which rules out most of the intelligentsia and cultural elite.

Have you ever heard wisdom from small children (Jeremiah 31:34)?

"Jesus loves you" are the perfect words when you are sad and despairing.

"Daddy and Mommy, you are both being bad." These words were humbly offered by a six-year-old to parents trapped in a foolish cycle of finger-pointing.

"Jesus died on the cross to forgive me." This is a statement of faith by a young child. Little did she know she was declaring the mysteries of the universe! She was bringing shame and scorn on the wisdom of the world.

Meanwhile, adults have a harder time. Though the wisdom of God subverts all earthly forms of wisdom, we know it still sounds foolish to friends and neighbors who don't believe. The possibility of rejection can throw us right back to the old upside-down world. Yet the cross reveals the heart of God himself. Our aspiration is to be proud to know him and the deep truths of the cross.

Here is a way to demonstrate that wisdom. All wisdom is established in the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 1:7). When you fear something, you are controlled by it. So to fear the Lord means to be controlled by him, not by our independent interpretations of reality. With this in mind you could say, “I know that shame still wants to control the story of my life. But the Lord is over all. He is the one who tells me what to think and whom to believe.” Then you can list what the Lord has said.

**Ugly to beautiful.** Some things never change. Intellectual expertise has always been respected; beauty has always been praised. And in our newly righted world, where Jesus preferred the less noble and less wise, we suspect he also favored the less attractive.

Have you ever thought about Jesus’ physical appearance? If you think about the paintings, he was a relatively handsome Dutchman. But if you think about a prophetic description, “he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53:2). To put it diplomatically, he didn’t look like much, and sleepless nights filled with prayer vigils probably didn’t help.

If Jesus didn’t have a beautiful physical appearance when he was a frail human being, we shouldn’t expect one either, at least not yet. This is not to demean physical beauty, but we live in an era when some things are fading away, and physical beauty is ephemeral at best. If we live long enough, we won’t be beautiful. And if we happen to have it for a moment, we will be sorely tempted to trust in it (Ezekiel 16:15).

Instead, the kingdom of God values the things that last. For example, Paul writes, “While bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come” (1 Timothy 4:8). The eternal is always more beautiful than the

temporal. Even automobile prices follow that principle. The things that last have the greatest value.

Read about the wife of noble character (Proverbs 31). You will find words like *worth, strength, dignity*, and *blessed*. The praises keep mounting and her honor raises the status of her entire family. With all these words, you are certain that she is beautiful because true beauty is magnificent and praiseworthy. A beautiful one has renown and splendor.

Her beauty, of course, is her inner person. “Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised” (Proverbs 31:30). The kingdom is at it again. It undercuts the wisdom of the world yet makes complete sense. Who could deny that beauty is fleeting? The surgical efforts to postpone it are like building sand castles to hold back the tide. And who could deny that godly character is magnificent and beautiful? This woman’s industry, generosity, and love are captivating.

The apostle Peter reiterates the obvious.

Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear—but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious. (1 Peter 3:3–4)

Okay, we get the message. Real beauty is lasting, inner beauty. But that doesn’t get you a date and it doesn’t make you feel any better about yourself. We have all been teenagers who spent a lot of time looking in the mirror, displeased with what we saw. On this point we know the right answers but they seem irrelevant.

No doubt this is where the clash of cultures is most severe. The world has gradually adopted physical beauty as a primary value. The kingdom of

God exposes that value. Though we will all experience physical beauty when we see Jesus face-to-face, godliness is the greatest earthly beauty.

Many of us are straddling the fence. We've heard enough celebrity bios to know that beautiful people think they are ugly and are mired in low self-esteem, so we know that a little nip and tuck isn't the answer. But it is one thing to be physically beautiful and think you are ugly; it is another to be average or below average and know it. We wonder if a celebrity's self-loathing is a bit self-indulgent or part of a deliberate style. We suspect they really know they look good and feel pretty good about it. But then we come back to reality and remember that shame doesn't discriminate. It can't be whitewashed with physical beauty. What a confusing mess!

There are no easy steps on this one. We have to aggressively adopt the values of the kingdom with the help of anyone willing to give it. Personally, I still appreciate the motto, "When in doubt, repent." I repent of believing that God is not enough. I repent of wanting a little glory to come my way.

Here is the truth: in the kingdom, the rules have changed. The majority opinion on beauty has been exposed as silly. There is a deeper, more lasting beauty that comes as we learn the character of God and imitate him. God is beautiful, so we would expect to find beauty reflected in his people.

Who are you? You are a mirror, turned toward Jesus so you can reflect his glory. You are looking better every day.

**Useless to missional.** One feature of the transformation to true beauty is that you have a job. You have purpose. The truly beautiful person wakes up and has a day full of good things. She isn't merely busy. Anyone can do that. She is fruitful. Life is meaningful.

There is meaninglessness to shame. You are nothing, you do nothing. If you are stressed and driven, you are only trying to delay the full brunt of life's futility. Deep down, the shamed feel unworthy of any divine mission.

That's why the talk on the beach between Jesus and Peter was so important. After Peter's denials and Jesus' resurrection, Peter was forgiven. That was critical, but there was more. Next, Peter was offered fellowship over a meal, which ensured the restoration of a relationship. Then Peter was given a mission: "Feed my sheep."

Scripture is clear: if you have come to Christ, you are chosen. Look it up; it's everywhere in Scripture. God chooses the unworthy. Now, if he chose you, he chose you for a purpose. Jesus said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide" (John 15:16). And lasting fruit is praiseworthy.

Do you feel ill-equipped? When God chooses you, he gives you the abilities you need. He prepares you and gives you everything you need for the job.

If you feel like your gifts are from the bottom of the gift barrel, that's a lie. Everyone in the body of Christ is necessary and the gifts that seem less preferred are, as you would expect in this right-side up kingdom, given special honor.

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. (1 Corinthians 12:21–25)

All these gifts serve God's core mission of humble, sacrificial love. You don't have to wait to identify your gifts. Just open your eyes and see who is in front of you. With practice, you can begin strategizing ways to love others. If you have a sense that your mission is getting too random and haphazard, ask others for prayer and guidance. You could also write out a mission statement. Jesus' mission was very clear. He could articulate it at any time. Paul was the same way. He identified his mission statement differently at different times, but it always had the same basic idea.

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. (2 Corinthians 5:14–15)

Remember the importance of talking about these things? This would be a fine time for it. The goal is bigger than your personal welfare. That goal is rarely sufficient to motivate those who feel worthless. Instead, your mission is to speak the truth in love, and who could say no to such a mission?

**Shame to honor.** All these transformations embellish the turnabout from dishonor and shame to honor and glory. They add to the ones we already know:

naked to clothed  
unclean to holy  
outcast to beloved

Of all these, the change from outcast to beloved seems to be especially on God's heart. Unwanted to chosen, outcast to fellow citizen, "not my people" to "my people," enemy to friend, abandoned to adopted, rejected to



married, isolated to united with Jesus and his people—these are just a few of the ways Scripture speaks to the very heart of shame. It is as if all the other transformations serve the purpose of God having fellowship with us. He cleanses and clothes us so that we can enjoy him and he us.

To be a Christian is to live one's life not merely in obedience to God, nor merely in dependence on God, nor even merely for the sake of God; it is to stand in conscious, reciprocal fellowship with God, to be identified with Him in thought and purpose and work, to receive from Him and give back to Him in the ceaseless interplay of spiritual forces.<sup>[22](#)</sup>

All these changes are the benefits of the cross of Jesus Christ. In keeping with God's lavish nature, they pile on top of each other. You will discover many more.

### **DISHONOR BEFORE PEOPLE**

There is more to the story. In the Sermon on the Mount we saw that Jesus talked about mourning, being persecuted because of righteousness, being insulted, and being falsely accused. One of the most obvious results of following Jesus is that your stock goes up before God but plummets before other human beings. Don't come to Jesus if your goal is to be more popular. You are, after all, associating with an executed criminal of a despised race.<sup>[23](#)</sup>

One of the precious features of the gospel is that your unbelieving friends, in the best of circumstances, will think you are a bit off. *No one* will think more highly of you. You won't become more physically attractive, you won't get a massive raise, and (this is not good) you won't fit in. The cross is still foolish to those who don't believe. What is precious about this is that it

safeguards us from seeking honor in ourselves rather than finding honor in our association with Jesus.

There is a myth circulating that Jesus came to make us the envy of the world. We will be more successful, more respected, and more popular. Jesus, after all, took sin and shame on himself. Now we get to enjoy all the benefits.

There are traces of truth in this. Jesus said, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). We are discovering some of that fullness but, since we have seen how the kingdom of God is the reversal of the upside-down world, we expect the kingdom to redefine *full* in a way that is different from what we know in the world, and much better.

The reality is that Jesus took us from the pigsty of shame to have fellowship with him. This means we will walk with him to places he went. If you love someone, you want her to share in your life. You take her to visit places that were meaningful. Who would want it any other way?

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). This doesn’t simply mean that there will be a few bumps in the road. It means we are volunteering to walk a path that looks shameful to the world, but that explodes with glory and honor when we walk it with the right person.

“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” (1 Peter 2:6)

## For Discussion

1. Do you have a mission statement yet? Is it written?
2. Of the transformations that have taken place because you now identify with Jesus, which ones are particularly meaningful to you? Which ones are particularly hard for you?

3. What steps could you take on the ugly-beautiful dimension? What are ways to stay focused on spiritual realities?
4. Explain 1 Peter 2:6.

If there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself *nothing*. . . . (Philippians 2:1–7, emphasis mine)

# Chapter 25

## THE APOSTLE PAUL ON SHAME

**H**onor before God, dishonor before other people. The apostle Paul believed this was the essential structure of kingdom life.

Jesus honored the outcast. Paul was filled with joy because Jesus had elevated the lowly, which included him.

Jesus *was* an outcast. You could almost see the wheels turning in Paul's mind as he strove to *become* lowly in the world's eyes. His desire was to imitate the shamed King, though it would make him dishonored among the Jews and leave him suspect in the new church.

It all followed from how he summarized the gospel. The short version is “nothing . . . except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). There was no boasting and lots of talk about shame, though this shame would be in solidarity with Jesus. Paul was persuaded that everything in life must be interpreted through the cross, the pivotal event that is despised by the world but is the power and glory of God to those who are being saved.

Paul's longer gospel summary emphasizes Christ crucified and exalted.

[Jesus,] though he was in the form of God,  
did not count equality with God  
a thing to be grasped,  
but made himself nothing,  
taking the form of a servant,  
being born in the likeness of men.

And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to the point of death,  
even death on a cross.

Therefore God has highly exalted him  
and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:6–11)

The way up is down. Are you interested in honor? Take the path that says “Nothing” or “Worthless.” Of these things Paul was certain. He made the cross the center of his theology in a day when the cross—humanity’s ultimate shaming device—was in its heyday. With this in mind, you can bet that Paul was going to welcome shame, maybe even boast about it. So, just when you were leaving shame behind, there it is again. You are taken from one kind of shame to another.

That needs some explanation. You have been taken from shame to honor. Of that you can be sure. When you are attached to the King by faith, all is well before God. Honor and glory are obvious results of the permanent cleansing we have received by the blood of Jesus. If you doubt that, you doubt the perfection of Christ’s sacrifice for you. The reality is that you have your place in the throne room of the King right now because your life is connected to the living Lord.

Before other people, however, it is a different story. Here you *have* gone from shame to shame. In their eyes, you were nothing before and you are

nothing now. The world believes that Jesus hasn't changed anything. Apparently others haven't noticed that you have a place at the King's table.

No problem, said Paul. Now that godly honor and worldly honor are clearly separate, part of two different kingdoms, Paul is unaffected by the world's rejection. In fact, since Jesus sought the world's dishonor, Paul essentially said, "Bring it on! Bring on the cross-centered life."

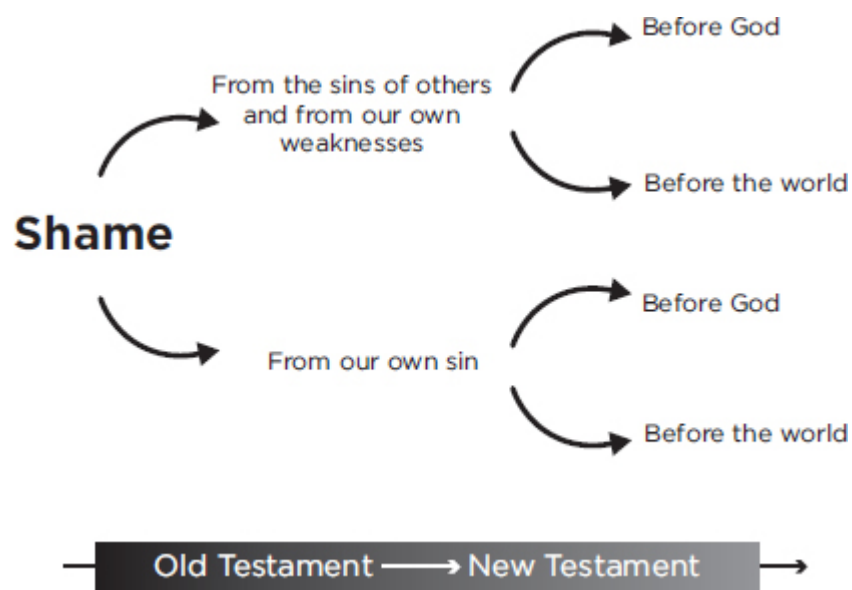
### **MORE SPECIFICS ABOUT SHAME**

As the biblical story of shame and honor progresses, Scripture gets more specific and makes finer distinctions. Initially, shame appeared because of what we had done. We associated ourselves with things other than God himself and the results were hideous. Later, we understood how shame could be caught from someone else. It still came from our associations, but sin was a *voluntary* association and contamination from being sinned against was an *involuntary* association. Shame was from our sin *and* from being sinned against. Additionally, in the Old Testament people didn't distinguish too clearly between shame before God and shame before other people. The two seemed to go hand in hand. Unclean people were usually unclean before God and others, though there were exceptions. For example, Hagar was cast out by Abraham's family, but accepted by God.

Things are different now. When Jesus came we began to see more clearly. Shame from our sin was detached from the shame that comes from being sinned against. It is the *voluntary* associations that contaminate or cleanse, not the involuntary ones. And Scripture added one more distinction. Now we also distinguish between our reputation before God and our reputation before other people. Our reputation before God is of much greater consequence. This distinction is critical. Otherwise, if you are waiting for

your stock to go up with other people, you will be sorely disappointed. It's time to make these distinctions your own.

Let me make one other important clarification. Shame divides into shame from our own sins and shame from the sins of others. But shame from the sins of others is enlarged to “shame from the sins of others *and from our own weaknesses*.” In the Old Testament, there were hints of this category when it talked about skin diseases. These were not due to a person's sin. They were, at least in part, simply the result of bodies that were weak—imperfect and prone to disease and disability.



Scripture makes more precise distinctions within shame over the course of biblical history.

By the time we get to Jesus, those with physical weaknesses might be insulted by people but they are accepted by the Lord. To this category of weakness we could add anything associated with our creaturely limitations. *Failure* typically falls into this category. We can fail because of our own sin, but *most failure is simply a consequence of being a creature and not the*



*Creator.* We are limited and finite. We make mistakes. We can't do everything perfectly. We can't even do things as well as our friends and neighbors. The fact that we don't compare well to other people is not a sin. It is a result of limitations we all experience. These are not a problem before God, but they certainly can preoccupy us if we are concerned about status and reputation.

Which categories identify your particular shame?

### **SHAME FROM OUR OWN SIN BEFORE GOD**

This first category is the most important one since it is with us for eternity. However, it is usually the one that troubles us the least. One of the goals of this book is to raise the profile of our shame before the Lord. Why? Because if this shame is not seen as a problem, its radical cure will carry little weight.

And the cure *has* been radical. When we associate with Jesus Christ by faith, we receive immunity from *real* shame. Real shame comes when we dishonor the King or anything associated with him, such as his people. Those who hold the cross in contempt, who are wise in their own eyes, will be shamed (1 Corinthians 1:27; Philippians 3:18). Even those who insult or oppress God's people will be shamed. Insult the royal children and you insult the King himself. Those who oppose God and his people will be defeated, and defeat is shameful.

Its cure is summarized as forgiveness of sins. Though at first this might seem to be an ineffective rebuff to our shame, nothing could go deeper. Sin separates us from the Lord, and separation is at the very heart of shame. With sins forgiven, nothing now separates you from him. He belongs to you and you belong to him.

We will have our moments of real shame. When we follow Christ but persist in our sin, we dishonor the King and will therefore experience shame. However, beyond that there is always the offer of forgiveness, the power to fight sin, and a restoration to fellowship in which the shameful event is not even remembered by the Lord.

If you experience a hint of this shame, be encouraged. Those who are associated with the King care about that relationship. Those who are not associated with him don't care.

Just be careful. If you get stuck in this type of shame, check to see if you are minimizing the cross, as if it were not enough to cleanse you. Or consider the experience from another angle. Perhaps you have truly sinned, but your present problem is that you are more worried about your reputation before other people than your standing with God. Or perhaps you have failed, which is different from sinning, and your concern is your status before others.

#### **SHAME FROM OUR OWN SIN BEFORE THE WORLD**

The second type of shame is fading quickly: the world doesn't care too much about our sins. The world cares more about our income and appearance. But there are a few exceptions. For example, "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you" (1 Corinthians 5:1–2). Even the world considers some sins scandalous—such as child abuse, sexual violation, sometimes even adultery. And if you are a Christian leader and your sins become public, you will experience the rejection of the world. With public leaders any exposed sin can become fodder for talk show jokes, the modern form of stocks and pillory.

When sins among Christians catch the world's attention, shame is unavoidable, appropriate, and good. Such sins become an opportunity to ask, "Are my allegiances really with Jesus?" If so, we find he is quick to forgive, though the sting of shame before the world will linger.

Offenders want to run and hide, and who wouldn't? They face the complicated situation of forgiveness and release from shame before the Lord and lasting shame (albeit temporary) from the world. Here again, the goal is to know that their status before the Lord outweighs their status before other people. He is the God who turns toward you and keeps coming toward you until he touches you and makes you clean.

### **SHAME FROM THE SINS OF OTHERS AND FROM OUR OWN WEAKNESSES BEFORE GOD**

This third occasion for shame is the one that has received most of the attention up to this point. Victimization, neglect, physical disability, intellectual disability—these are the root of so much of our shame. In response, we believe that we must be bad and that we have no right to seek anything from God. God, however, responds differently—with mercy and compassion. Mercy and compassion. That is how he revealed himself in the beginning, and he is the same today. Even more, his compassion is never merely empathetic feelings and kind regard. His love is always expressed in action. When we experience shame because of the actions of others, the sheer scope of God's compassionate and merciful actions takes too long to recount.

For example, it turns out that all the shepherd passages in Scripture have you in mind.

"Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" declares the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of

Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: “You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the LORD. Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the LORD.” (Jeremiah 23:1–4)

Scripture has clear categories of victim and perpetrator. Perpetrators are the ones with the power. They are the leaders of the people, husbands of wives, parents of children, or anyone who uses his or her strength for personal advantage. God’s words here are frightening to perpetrators and comforting to victims.

What about shame before the Lord because we feel like failures? God has spoken clearly on this point. He has determined that his kingdom will move forward through the actions of weak people whose achievements are largely invisible to the world. Some of the heroes of the kingdom are tax collectors who do their work honestly, widows who give generously out of their poverty, and broken people who trust in Jesus rather than themselves and aspire to love others more deeply.

#### **SHAME FROM THE SINS OF OTHERS AND FROM OUR OWN WEAKNESSES BEFORE THE WORLD**

This next category is where we experience most of our shame. We experience shame before the world because of our failures or the sins of others. The apostle Paul wrote with conviction about this.

**Paul despised the world's view of shame and honor.** Paul knew that shame and honor reside in our connections, and this led him to an inevitable conclusion: Connect to Jesus and we discover honor. Connect to anything else and we live in shame.

The world and its cultural elites always try to connect to anything other than Jesus. It certainly has its laws about who is acceptable and who isn't. In Paul's time, there were elite Jews and elite Romans. Each group had its own version of shame and honor. For the Jews, the shameful were the unclean, sick, childless, sexually unfaithful, blind, bleeding, poor, uncircumcised, pagan, and anyone connected with Rome, such as tax collectors. For the Romans, the shameful were the poor, those who didn't worship Caesar, manual laborers, teachers without an entourage, untrained speakers, and non-Romans.

These were human designations, not God's. They rested on human merit rather than God's grace, and you could be certain that pride, division, and conflict would follow. To paraphrase a few of Paul's thoughts on this:

The world's view of status is shameful!

It will end up on the rubbish heap of history.

It will be condemned.

Listen! You are free! How can you live under these defiled codes that are killing you?!

Yes, he was ticked off. Paul was speaking loudly because the world's view of shame can be found everywhere, including within the church. Paul was sure that some of our paralyzing shame is because we are living by worldly standards. He wanted us to have none of that. You can find this theme in nearly every letter he wrote, but none as clearly as his letter to the Philippians.

Philippi had much in common with today's celebrity culture of see and be seen. As a result, Paul's letter to the church included a direct assault on that culture and its insidious influence. He took on all comers, both Jews and Gentiles.

One of his strongest salvos was fired at the decaying religious (though not cross-centered) view of honor. Itinerant Jewish-Christian preachers were teaching that circumcision was required for membership in the church. Though this might seem like a small (and strange) thing, it was an occasion for people to take pride in their works rather than in Christ. It was celebrity culture with a religious veneer. Through circumcision you could earn status and reintroduce the old worldly system of the Haves and Have-Nots. Jews would be able to one-up their Gentile brethren. If you want to get Paul angry, suggest to him that Christians must be circumcised to be acceptable.

In response to these preachers, Paul first presented his own resumé, which would be sure to impress these teachers, and then he trashed it.

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more:

circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel,  
of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews;  
as to the law, a Pharisee;  
as to zeal, a persecutor of the church;  
as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found

in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. (Philippians 3:4–9)

Imagine how your life might be different if you adopted Paul's résumé. The great reversal: an upside-down world being righted. Worldly honor is passé. It is part of a fading kingdom. Honor in Christ is the only true honor.

Even the Philippian church had to be shocked by what Paul said. A flawless pedigree, a status symbol in the world of his day, was worth no more than rubbish. Substitute *excrement* for *rubbish* and you see that Paul was serious. Accomplishments are just something else to trust in. If you trust in your accomplishments and the opinions of the world, you might as well trust in excrement. Even worse, trust in your accomplishments and you become like the thing that holds your trust. That truly is disgusting.

Human beings were never intended to find their reputations in their accomplishments. That is not the way we have been created.

Here are the new details about shame:

- There is eternal or long-lasting shame that the world experiences before God when people trust in their own accomplishments.
- There is temporal or fading shame that Christians experience when they trust solely in the accomplishments of the shamed Messiah and therefore aren't acceptable to the world.
- The eternal is always more valuable than the transient and temporal.

Here are the new details about honor:

- There is the momentary fame and honor that comes from being recognized by others.

- There is the glory of living for Christ now, being known to him by name, and reigning with him face-to-face forever.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul was especially concerned about how the church, which includes us, responded to the world's version of shame. He knew it was a powerful weapon. Who hasn't felt the sting of worldly rejection? So he wasn't done quite yet. He was going to do whatever it took to disarm it.

So get out your list of worldly failures and worldly rejection, and then listen to Paul's arguments. Let him persuade you to cancel them once and for all.

### **Paul purposefully accumulated worldly shame to make a point.**

When Paul was around, you never felt isolated by the shame the world heaped on you. He decided to accumulate some worldly shame to show that it was powerless. If King Jesus did it, he wanted to do it. We might be tempted to think that because Jesus suffered we don't have to. Paul thought differently. "If Jesus made himself nothing in the world's eyes, I want to do the same. I want to fully embrace being nothing before the world."

There are many different ways to imitate Jesus, and Paul did not say we should begin a headlong pursuit of shame. Shame is sure to find us, so there is no need to pursue it. But when it does find us, Paul wants us to know that honor before God outweighs whatever shame we experience before mere creatures.

It all sounds easy, but Paul knew that what God says about shame and honor is at war with what the world says. We can think clearly about it one minute and be mired in the rejection we feel the next. To teach us about reality, Paul was willing to go to extremes. He said that worldly shame has



lost its power. It's dead. It's stupid. It might sting a bit here and there, but in Christ we have immunity to worldly rejection.

Even Paul's introduction to his letter to the Philippians undermines the fading rules of Roman and Jewish honor. He identified himself as a slave of Christ Jesus (1:1). That was certainly not a way to introduce himself to an eclectic group of status seekers, and he was just getting started. He then announced that he was in jail (1:7) and made sure the church understood that the shame of incarceration had only furthered the cause of the gospel. The old ways of the world were being defeated. Attempts to defeat the church with worldly shame simply strengthen it, and the stronger church shames the weaker.

Paul wanted the church to be prepared for suffering and shame. If they were surprised by it—if they thought the cross removed every kind of shame—they might be prone to doubt and unbelief. But if Paul could demonstrate that the world's rejection is sure to come *and yet* is powerless, then the suffering church would be encouraged. Far from being rejected by God, they would see with Paul that they were living out and extending the gospel story.

Suffering had already hit the Philippian church, which is the same as saying that *shaming* had hit the church. Suffering *was* shame at that time, and it would be called shame today because Philippian suffering included rejection, poverty, and perhaps martyrdom. Paul wanted the church to be confident that they were not going through shameful suffering alone. He wanted them to know that their suffering, like his own, would only magnify the glory of Christ.

So Paul chased after worldly shame and humiliation as a way to show that it has no power anymore. He worked with his hands, took no money from patrons, adopted a form of speech that was low-class, and boasted only in his weakness and suffering. Knowing Paul, he also wanted to accumulate an

unmatched amount of the world's shame so no one could say, "But he didn't have the shame I carry from the deeds of others."

**Paul welcomed worldly shame as a way to know Jesus better.** As Paul experienced rejection, insults, mockery, imprisonment, and beatings that brought him within inches of death, he discovered something that left him wanting even more of the world's derision: he came to know Christ better.

When you share something with someone, you experience a new bond in that relationship. For example, I enjoy body surfing. When I saw a picture of the President of the United States body surfing (with very impressive form on an overhead wave), I felt as if I knew him better. Suddenly, I had a connection with him. If I ever had a chance to speak with him I would say, "Nice wave you had in that AP photo." Then we would share a knowing wink as a way to seal our special brotherhood.

Now extend that superficial illustration to something more deeply felt. For example, if you were rejected by your father and experienced the sting of being unwanted, one day you will have an "aha" experience. You will remember that Jesus voluntarily chose to take on sin and the Father's rejection that accompanied it. *You know something of what that was like!* You can relate to Jesus. Now you know Jesus a little better. You had experiences similar to his. You will talk to him about it, and something personal will pass between the two of you, maybe a knowing look or a brief smile, or maybe an outright hug with tears. The insight, no doubt, will leave you humbled. You will be learning firsthand that there is nothing better than knowing Jesus.

This was Paul's joy in suffering and shame: "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:10–11).

Notice how this affects your shameful past. It will still hurt at times, but shame will lose its power. The very event that made you an outcast is the one that gives you insight into the mind of Christ.

As you enjoy that new knowledge of Jesus, you will soon remember something that will leave you humbled in a way that only sacrificial love can. Jesus chose the path of shame for you and because of you. He invited you to lay hands on him so he could absorb your shame and put it to death.

Notice the progression:

You experience shame and isolation.

Jesus is with you in your shame.

Jesus takes on your shame.

Your shame helps you to understand his shame.

You are humbled, not humiliated.

## For Discussion

1. If you want to hear about these matters from the apostle himself, read 2 Corinthians through the lens of shame and watch how Paul pursues it.
2. Notice the freedom Paul has. He does not have to make himself look better to other people. He is very satisfied with a resumé that says, “I am nothing, Jesus is everything.” If you are on a job interview, the interviewer wants to know your skills and accomplishments, and you should offer an honest overview of your strengths. You won’t say, “I am nothing, Jesus is everything.” But if you live out this great reversal, in which your reputation is of less importance and Christ’s reputation is of utmost importance, you won’t be controlled by the interviewer’s decision.
3. Can you illustrate how a shared experience can cement a relationship? Can you see the bridge between your shame and Jesus’ shame? How do

you know Jesus better?

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1–2)

# Chapter 26

## DESPISING SHAME

It's time to follow Paul, who followed Jesus.

Jesus despised shame (Hebrews 12:2). That doesn't mean that the topic of shame pushed his buttons and left him angry. *Despise* in this context can be translated as "to look down upon," "to be unconcerned about," or "to give no mind to."

Question: Since there are at least four different types of shame, to which one is Jesus referring? He was focusing on shame from the sins of others and our own weaknesses as it is experienced before the world. It was the shame that was heaped on him by other people.

Jesus absorbed the shame of the world and despised it by never being controlled by it. Jesus looked down on shame. He attributed no worth or influence to it; he treated it as an outcast. Shame never distracted him from his mission. It simply was not an issue. With the Son of God, certain of his connection with the Father, shame for the first time in history had lost its power.

Rejected by the leaders? Those self-righteous leaders weren't his people. Their opinions never took him off-message. Spit on by the world? His concern was their shame more than his own. Naked? "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

Paul understood that despising shame, or indifference toward shame, was one of the great gifts of the Spirit. He was determined to enjoy it. Before God, Paul knew he needed cleansing and righteousness. As a result, the

forgiveness of sins and a life connected to Jesus brought him nonstop joy. Before other people, he constantly tested out the gift of despising shame. When he floated his new resumé, which was essentially blank except for the name of Jesus, he knew it would bring shame. But he was enthusiastic about anything that would demonstrate the power of God, and his indifference toward shame certainly did that.

Paul couldn't be clearer: our problem is not the judgments of people. Our true problem is before God. Once we are secure in that relationship, disdain from mere humans loses its sting. Now let's get more specific and apply his teaching.

## **SHAME BEFORE GOD**

First, a few reminders about shame before God. The main culprit here is guilt over our sin. We are unpresentable because of what we have done, because it is (we think) worse than what other people have done or worse than what we would expect from ourselves.



A thirty-four-year-old woman had two lesbian relationships before she followed Jesus Christ. After she became a Christian, she was persuaded that those relationships were wrong, and she vowed never to be in another one. That changed when she started going to lunch with a female coworker and the relationship turned sexual. She quickly confessed this to some friends and to an elder in her church, but she was ashamed to turn to the Lord. She had vowed she would never do this, and she had broken her vow. How could she turn to the Lord now?

Well, she could turn very easily. She had cast off her royal garments and her gracious God would put them back on. She had dirtied her feet and they needed washing. She had left the boundaries of the kingdom of God and needed to return to “the LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6). She could simply follow in the steps of King David and make Psalm 51 her own.



In our sin, we *should* be ashamed. We *have* dishonored the Lord. But our shame is far outweighed by our need for mercy and by the Lord’s disposition to be generous and free with his mercy. All this woman must do is be served once again by the Servant-King who still washes feet. She must trust in the Father of prodigals and Peters who invites us to participate in his plans for the world.

The story is over, or so it would seem. Mercy needed, mercy given, relationship with God restored. But she still felt ashamed. She just couldn’t believe she was forgiven and accepted.

This is where our spiritual life gets interesting. We are back to that thorny problem we have in accepting a lavish gift when we have nothing to offer in return. Grace *is* uncomfortable. It carries overtones of embarrassment. “No, no, I can’t accept that.”

“No, I can’t accept that. I am unworthy” *sounds* noble and religious, but we know better. A starving person doesn’t refuse free food. Desperate people accept gifts. Don’t let religious-sounding reluctance fool you. When you plead “unworthy” and refuse to be served by God, you place your judgment about yourself above God’s. You say you would prefer to go it alone, and you imply that your unworthiness goes beyond the scope of God’s



mercy and grace. You must think that God cleanses you only from ordinary sins, not from the spectacular ones.

Let's learn from the tax collector. He certainly felt unworthy before God and other people. If you feel unworthy, let him be your guide.

The tax collector had gone to the temple to pray, and "standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'" (Luke 18:13). Do you see the difference? He cried out for mercy.

If you want to beat your chest because of your grief over sin, you can do that. But you must continue to follow the tax collector's example and cry out for mercy, which you are sure to receive. Crying out for mercy is a basic expression of faith in Jesus Christ.

"Lord, I am unworthy. Thank you for your great gift of mercy and grace and even honor. Thank you. Thank you." To say that is both noble and spiritual. Then get about the business of growing in joy. There can be no shortcuts here. If you experience shame before God, a desire to run and hide from him, you have no more important matters to consider.

If you are still stuck, check for hidden sins or sins you have confessed but are already planning to commit again. With hidden sins, track down a wise person and bring that sin into the light. That will at least get you moving in the right direction. With confessed but cherished sins you plan to repeat, the issue is not shame before God but its opposite: shamelessness.

Nothing to hide—that's what we are aiming for.

O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways . . . . Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! . . . Search me, O

God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting! (Psalm 139:1–3, 7, 23–24)

These are the words of someone who was imperfect, but not ashamed. King David, the author of the psalm, certainly did some shameful things, and he was even shamed by the actions of his children. In response, David did the only thing he could possibly do: he ran *toward* the Lord. For him it was obvious. He was an unclean outcast and there was only one person he could turn to for mercy. He was desperate for cleansing and fellowship. There was no other choice.

These are the instincts you are developing. When you experience shame before God, run toward him.

## **SHAME BEFORE OTHER PEOPLE**

Now we're ready to despise shame.

Jesus was indifferent to shame. He preferred the company of outcasts, touched unclean people, and never defended himself against the wildest accusations. We know much about his inner world—his love, compassion, grief—and we have no hint that he paid attention to shame.

It *is* possible to despise shame. We have the Spirit of Jesus.

Paul had a rougher go of it. Before the world of non-Christian Jews, he seemed unconcerned about shame, even though he was known as the apostle to the Gentiles (Romans 11:13). (A Jew's Jew was the "apostle to the Gentiles"? Any reasonable person who didn't know Christ would consider that epithet the ultimate indignity. Paul, however, was honored.) Shame from the world was not a problem either. But shame from the church? That was a

different story. When it came from fellow believers, the ridicule was harder to take. What pastor would want to hear that his speaking amounts to nothing?

For they say, “His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.” (2 Corinthians 10:10)

When you love others much more than they love you, who wouldn’t struggle with hints of shame?

I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less? (2 Corinthians 12:15)

Paul was even willing to resort to a little sarcasm as defense.

But granting that I myself did not burden you, I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by deceit. (2 Corinthians 12:16)

But in spite of the endless disrespect, he still spoke with boldness and always put the interests of the churches above his own. If he was shamed but they thrived, he had genuine joy. It is possible to despise shame, though you can expect it to be more challenging if you feel shame from people in your church.

**Shame from our sin before the church.** It is one thing to feel judged as a failure by the world. It is another to feel the sting of judgment in the church. Ugh. How doubly painful!

The world can invade the church. That is a sad reality of our era. A perfectly safe place won’t exist until the kingdom of Christ is fully in place. In the meantime, we can’t harden ourselves. The church is the prime venue God uses to accomplish his purposes. It is a mixed bag, to be sure, and we can find that same mixed bag in our own hearts. Just as Scripture exhorts us

to look at the mess in our own hearts before we look at the mess in someone else's (Matthew 7:3–5), we are wise to look first at themes in our own hearts before we look at the mess in our church. That should keep us plenty busy. Another rule of thumb is this: look more carefully for mercy and grace in the church than for sin. Keep your eyes open for the activity of the Spirit and you will see it.

The paradox of life in the church is that it is the place where we hear about grace and forgiveness, *and* it is the place where our sins feel most exposed. Part of the reason we feel more exposed is that a church cares about sin but the world could care less. Get caught embezzling and your neighbor might not know about it, but people in your church will. My own recent brush with shame was *only* experienced in the church. No one else knew and no one else cared.

If my carpentry skills were put under scrutiny and they fell far short of community standards (which they certainly do), I would be completely indifferent to my failure. I know I am not a carpenter—my wife is better at it than I am—and I don't care if everyone else knows. I could say the same thing about a thousand other abilities (or disabilities in my case). But it's different when people put my counseling skills under scrutiny, and put me in a situation where people in my church are saying, "How could he ever have done that when he is supposed to be a decent counselor?" Then I care.

Questions about my counseling came up in a public church meeting, and guess who was the first out the door, even before the meeting was over? Yes, I snuck out the back door and didn't want to go back in again. For the next six months all I had to do was drive by the church and I felt as nauseous as a chemotherapy patient. Back in my neighborhood, however, all was well. Even if the neighbors had known the details of that meeting, they wouldn't have changed their opinion of me.

In my case the example of Jesus didn't help me. He was sinless. I felt no camaraderie with the apostle Paul either. He was above reproach. So I felt even more alone.

When in doubt, think King David again. He was clearly beloved by God, uniquely so. He was singularly honored by God in that he was brought into the kingly line of the Messiah, though he was not the logical choice for king even within his own family. His life was very fruitful though he was a very public scoundrel. Adultery and murder are shameful sins on anyone's list.

If you experience shame in the church from your own sin and you haven't yet made Psalm 51 your own, now is the time to do it.

**Shame from the sins of others and from our own weaknesses before the church and the world.** Now on to matters that *should* be a little easier. How are you doing with the shame you experience from the sins of others or from your own weaknesses? That shame could be before either the church or the world.

Before whom do you still experience shame?

Parent

Family member

Employer

Neighbor

Spouse

Ex-spouse

Perpetrator

Church

What has contributed to your shame?

Job

Possessions  
Body type  
Exposed sins  
Talents and abilities  
Past abuse  
Extensive failures  
Personal or family achievements

Failure is a common reason for shame. A fifty-five-year-old woman was overheard saying, “I am a failure at everything.” All of a sudden you could see the people nearby stop their conversations. They weren’t looking for new bits of gossip. They were hoping to hear answers.

Like so many other problems, failure was once the domain of adults, but it has inched downward in recent years. Now you hear about it in kindergarten. For too many, failure and shame are already well established before children can count to one hundred.



A thirty-eight-year-old father and husband was outgoing, energetic, and well-liked. Marriage was a struggle at times. Though his wife knew she was loved, she tired of her husband’s half-finished projects and endless stream of enthusiastic plans. His business had its ups and downs like most small businesses, and his lack of organization didn’t help. But he was able to keep it afloat with frenzied spurts of activity. He was perpetually upbeat until anyone mentioned something about school. Then he was overtaken by flashbacks of rejection, of being a misfit, of being disciplined when he should have been understood. His buoyant nature was not a cover-up, but it certainly wasn’t the whole man. What about the half-finished projects? He

would say he had a tolerance for disorder and he could even joke about it. You would assume he was a relaxed, self-confident man. Yet that was only a persona. He might have seemed easygoing to most people, but each unfinished project and complaint about his disorganization was etched in his mind. Who was he, at least from his perspective? A failure. Others saw it in his occasional flashes of anger.

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Sometimes it is not one critical event that leads to shame. It is just as likely to come from a steady accumulation of derisive words, neglect from those who are supposed to love you, and the selfish actions of others. This father and husband was still shamed and controlled by the words of teachers, parents, and fellow students who said that his tendency to leap from one thing to another didn't fit the more methodical structure of the classroom. You might not have a defining moment, but you can remember a representative one that is a symbol for thousands of others. Drip, drip, drip. Give these enough time and they will erode solid rock.

If you grew up in a home where there were drugs or alcohol, unpredictable anger, daily criticism, or a message that you were unwanted, then you know this shame.

If you are a minority and had some message every day that you were not like the majority, you know this shame.

If you were overweight compared to those around you (which means you could actually be too thin in areas where anorexia is the norm), then you know this shame.

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Jen grew up with an alcoholic father. She can't remember most of what happened to her, but she does remember being sexually violated by an adult neighbor and being told to "never say such things" when she told her mother. When a chance to get married came, she took it, only to receive years of belittling from her husband. After fifteen years he left her for another woman. Who knows how long he had been seeing her? Now a Christian, Jen is devastated over a brief dating relationship that ended abruptly for no stated reason.

Her problem, of course, is not the recent rejection by someone she barely knew. But that rejection was a moment that summarized so much of her life. The weight of everything she had experienced was compressed into that one event.

"I have no value." She speaks on behalf of all those who identify with failure. In her case it could be translated this way: "I am not sure what God says, but whatever it is, I don't think it would help. The only thing that would help is to be valued by another person—the right person."



Her response is common and understandable, but that doesn't make it less lethal. She is on a course that will allow shame to completely swallow her. We already know that "God doesn't make junk" will not help her. God's affections are of less value to her than the affection of another person.

There is only one way out, and at first she won't like it: she must rest in her association with Jesus rather than find value in her association with a mere mortal. Her past has made her vulnerable to being a value junkie. A kind word from a respected person and all is well. A snub from someone to whom she wants to be special leaves her alternating between anger and despair, with the emphasis on despair. She wants something tangible *now*.



What she has in Christ feels distant and spiritual, which to her means he is not tangible or close. She doesn't feel like she is asking too much. She just wants to be valued by a person for once.

The kingdom of God, however, sets different goals: to be hurt rather than crushed; to know the God who will be her Shepherd when others have failed; to find delight and honor in her association with him; and to consider how to love wisely.

Jesus never minimizes the shame we experience or the hurts of life. But along with his cleansing and covering, he reminds us that the shame of worldly rejection is temporary. Things that are temporary have little value. "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us," the writer of Hebrews encourages, "looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who *for the joy that was set before him* endured the cross, despising the shame" (Hebrews 12:1–2, emphasis mine). Jesus always interpreted hardship in light of the end of the story, and at the end of the story we will be without shame.

Paul understood this way of life. He too was always looking ahead. Those who brought shame on him were creatures, nothing more. Their insults and violence would come to an end, and then they would appear before God. Paul knew that, in the end, he had Jesus Christ himself.

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.  
(Philippians 3:8)



A fifty-year-old man, divorced twice, estranged from his three children, barely surviving on unemployment, and with no prospects for another job, faces thoughts about suicide every morning. His failures are obvious to those who know him. He believes he has no future. His first thought upon waking up is that suicide would benefit everyone. Then he gets his bearings. He belongs to Jesus. His life is no longer his own. When he looks to the future, he finds it is secure in Jesus. When he is really conscious of the spiritual, he believes he will have Jesus, so he will have everything. That will be plenty. It is the end of the game that counts, not the score after the first half.

“I am not my own, I am bought with a price” (1 Corinthians 6:19). With that, he shaves, gets dressed, leaves the apartment, and looks for opportunities to love other people and ask about jobs. His present mission and his future association with Jesus keep him going in a world that reminds him every hour that he doesn’t measure up.



**Pursuing shame?** The apostle Paul had a strategy to pursue worldly shame, and on this point he did not expect us to follow his example. But he does raise a question: People familiar with shame do not want to put themselves in harm’s way ever again. Does despising shame mean we put ourselves in vulnerable positions?

What if there is the possibility for physical or sexual violence? No. Missionaries have done such things and they are examples to us of despising shame, but we are not obligated to follow their example. Life is good and we seek to preserve it. Injustice is evil and we work to end it.

What if we could be insulted and criticized? Yes, there might be ways God calls you to love people that will put you in the line of fire. Most likely, there *will* be those opportunities. If you don’t have them, you should be

concerned that you have lost your way because the path we take with Jesus will include rejection and insults. When they come since self-protection is no longer our primary goal, we move toward people rather than away from them. (Self-protection never protected us anyway.) Wisdom, not fear, is the rule. You might bring a friend with you to offer a helpful perspective if things get difficult, and you might take small steps toward the person rather than large ones. But as Jesus moved toward us even when we showed him contempt, we move toward others. It is part of our mission.

No withdrawal, no isolation. We have been around the block enough times to know that those numbing strategies have short-term benefits but, in the end, are not the way human beings are intended to live. The alternative is to know that Jesus has turned his face toward us, which means that he shows us favor. That enables us to turn our face toward others. We need wisdom to know how to do that, and there are times when it will hurt. Hurt, however, is not your enemy. Hurt is not the same as shame. Hurt puts you in solidarity with Jesus himself.

The writer of Hebrews envisions a wonderful procession. We are following Jesus, but we are not headed toward the pearly gates and streets of gold. Instead, for now, we follow him outside the city gates, where others dump their refuse, where Jesus died. We go to share his disgrace (Hebrews 13:11–13).

Every biblical writer is telling us the same thing: die to old standards of shame. Anything less and those old worldly standards will own us. Come alive to the great reversal accomplished at the cross. Then you can take pride in your lofty position.

**For Discussion**

1. Are your prayers sounding more and more like “Help” and “Thank you”?<sup>24</sup>
2. Have you read Psalm 51. How does it speak to your shame?
3. Consider writing a new resumé like the apostle Paul’s. Here is my own rough draft.

**Shame from what I have done.** Yes, the list is a long one. Moral failure galore, some public, others private. I would not be eager to have my sins announced to the world. But here is what I can say about them: no condemnation because my condemnation was taken by Jesus. I now belong to him and eat at his table, which means I have been washed. If you know some of my list, that’s okay.

**Shame from what has been done to me.** This list is shorter. I had fine parents. I have often been hurt by others but rarely humiliated.

**Shame from not measuring up to worldly standards.** The list is long here. I have a long list of failures, and I feel as though everything I do is infused with mediocrity. But as I think about it, these failures are condemned because my standards have been adopted, with minimal revision, straight from the world. Thank God. These failures are not his. They are gradually being thrown on the trash heap.

**Accomplishments.** I have a long resumé I give out to those who ask for it. From a worldly perspective it is respectable. I have been very grateful to be able to write, counsel, and teach. By faith I trust that the Spirit even allows me to be fruitful, though I question that at times. I don’t *think* I take my accomplishments too seriously. I see weaknesses in everything I do. But I suspect that there is still something in worldly accomplishments that I clutch at. Ugh. Embarrassing. Ridiculous. I don’t like center stage, but I wouldn’t mind being recognized occasionally while I am sitting in the back row.

**Objective.** To know Christ, to die to the standards of worldly success, to be free from concerns about rejection and humiliation, and to make Christ known. To review this and refine it every day.

Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. So they said to him, “You also are not one of his disciples, are you?” He denied it and said, “I am not.” (John 18:25)

# Chapter 27

## “DON’T BE ASHAMED”

I was the only Christian sitting around a table when a prominent physician began a rant against all things religious. With the exception of the person ranting, everyone knew I was a trained religious person and they were waiting to hear what I was going to say.

“Nietzsche said, . . .” I began.

I don’t know if others noticed, but I was name-dropping. I thought it would be more prestigious to be associated with a German philosopher than with Jesus. I was ashamed, which was the one good thing I could take from a wretched experience.

There is one more type of shame that deserves special attention. It is unique to those who follow Jesus. You won’t find anything like it in any world religion.

Have you ever been ashamed to be associated with Jesus? Have you ever been just a little embarrassed to take a stand with Jesus, especially in front of formidable people who are smarter than you?

Listen. Jesus is not ashamed to be associated with you.

Respond. Don’t be ashamed to be associated with him.

### **JESUS ISN’T ASHAMED TO BE WITH YOU**

It is good and right when people of high reputation enjoy people of low reputation. I remember when a group of excited teens, one with a brand-new

car, stopped by to pick up a good friend. Who could resist? But this friend insisted he had something more important to do. He was having a catch with his younger sister, who was too young to understand the sacrifice her brother was making. A lesser person might have been embarrassed to choose a younger sister over a ride in a new car, but this brother was doing exactly what he wanted to do. He was not ashamed. He was actually proud to be associated with his sister.

Jesus is your older brother. His contagious holiness has made us holy, and he is pleased to have a catch with us, no matter who is looking. He is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters (Hebrews 2:11). At one time you might have been oblivious to the sacrifice he made by that choice, but not now. “Thank you” is again in order.

#### **DON'T BE ASHAMED TO BE WITH HIM**

We can recount stories of the lowly befriended by the esteemed, and we can quickly recognize that these stories are pleasant because they echo the gospel. Yet we all scratch our heads trying to find the opposite: the unworthy being ashamed to be identified with the honorable and worthy. That one stretches the imagination.

The disciples were happy to identify with Jesus even though it meant being vagabonds increasingly at odds with the Jewish elite. Whatever questionable status these disciples had was offset by their conviction that Jesus was going to do something great and they were going to be part of it. Also, in terms of sheer numbers, the disciples were on the winning team when you consider Jesus' grassroots popularity.

But there must be something about religious trials, prisons, and crucifixions that make people squeamish. When any of these agents of shame gets close, everyone runs. The disciples certainly did. When they first met



Jesus they were willing to forsake everything for someone who was noble, pure, and about to change the world. But once his influence waned and he seemed destined for death rather than victorious revolution, the disciples scattered and denied him. This remains our human instinct.

In the Old Testament you could say that human beings didn't like God very much. In the New Testament, it is worse. The apostle Paul wrote about how we could be ashamed to be associated with Jesus and with those (like Paul himself) who were in shameful circumstances because of their solidarity with him.

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, . . . for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me. (2 Timothy 1:8, 11–12)

Notice that Paul looks off into “that Day.” This is important. Since Paul seems to be so far ahead of us in the way he approaches shame, we want to track any clues that reveal his mind. *So keep the end in sight.* This is a simple teaching, but it is completely unnatural to us. Shame specializes in the past. It always looks back at the shameful event and its ever-present consequences. The mind shaped by the kingdom of Christ, however, puts future joys front and center. From that vantage point it interprets the past and compels us to live for Christ in the present. We will talk about this more in a moment.

What we want to do now is hear Paul's plea, “Do not be ashamed,” because we *can* be ashamed of Jesus and those associated with him. We all struggle here. Even Paul asks for prayer for these things (Ephesians 6:20;

Colossians 4:4). What he says is stinging and shameful for us all. We can all identify with a celebrity's entourage. We hope to receive perks—the parties, exclusive clubs, and media prestige. When the celebrity doesn't benefit us, we find another celebrity.

We are happy to publicize connections that might raise our perceived value; we distance ourselves from those whose reputations might lower it. And every Christian has, at some point, shied away from his or her connection to Jesus Christ.

Is Jesus enough? The question flits around during times of love, health, and plenty, but it is *the* question in times of loss, sickness, and insecurity. Is Jesus enough?

When we get married we say “I do” easily. But every married person is a little naïve about “for better or worse.” Up to that point in the relationship, there has probably been very little “or worse.” Once it knocks on the door, it tests the relationship.

Will poverty threaten the relationship because you thought marriage promised wealth?

Will physical disability threaten the relationship because you thought marriage meant you would be served rather than be a servant?

Will boredom threaten the relationship because you expected to be entertained?

Is the other person enough? Will you be faithful when there are trials?

These questions play out in every relationship, even in our relationship with God himself. Do we follow Christ because of the perceived personal advantages or because he is the Lord and there is no other? Will we be faithful when we experience hints of rejection because we are joined to Jesus?

These are hard things. They identify our human instincts that crave status and worth. We want to find something *in ourselves* that can be celebrated. If we find value in an association, it is so we can receive an advantage from that association.

We loathe worthlessness, and for good reason. We have a primal sense that we exist for something better and, indeed, we do. We are created in the King's image and created to be with him. But there is a reason we oppose worthlessness that is much darker: we want worth in ourselves, *apart* from our relationship with Jesus. When this other reason dominates, all the talk about the glory of the King and the reflected glory we experience as we are joined to him by faith is meaningless. Our hearts are searching for something else. The only solution is to turn away from putting our trust in something other than Jesus, which is actually nothing, and turn back to the Lord. It is called repentance, and it is the way to clarity and rest.

So we go back to Paul's admonition, "Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord" (2 Timothy 1:8). At this moment, Jesus is *not* universally honored, so you will get mixed reactions if you testify about him. Some reactions include being called stupid, closed-minded, or worse. In this world that is still upside down we can take great pride in those insults.

Uh-oh, we are getting close to Paul's strategy of pursuing shame. That isn't our goal. We are, however, pursuing people, and as we pursue those who don't follow Jesus, we expect things to get messy. When that happens our mission is to quickly bring God's interpretation to our wavering hearts and interrupt shame before it gathers momentum.

But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it

with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. (1 Peter 3:14–17)

## For Discussion

1. Do you notice the new direction? What was once only about our own shame now includes the way we dishonor God by occasionally wanting to separate from him. Do you notice any blessings attached to this new emphasis? For example, it makes our struggle with shame just a little less critical and makes our relationship with the Lord more central.
2. When have you been ashamed to speak about Jesus? When have you not been ashamed?
3. Have you ever experienced insults because you publicly identified with Jesus?

Who would brag by showing pictures of  
personal weakness,  
the achievements of others,  
Jesus and the cross?

# Chapter 28

## BOASTING

I saw a television program about a celebrity who was going home to visit his parents. I stayed with it because I have children and grandchildren I am proud of and I enjoy watching other parents who are proud of their brood. Sure enough, the young man knocked on the door and soon everyone was crying, including me. The parents loved their son, and they were certainly proud of him. This pride, however, was not the arrogance that lurks in us all. The parents weren't boasting in their personal achievements. They were enjoying the success of someone they loved, which means I am innocent when boasting about my grandchildren.

And notice this: shame and boasting don't go together. When we boast about family or anyone else, we feel no shame.

It is time to do a little boasting.

### **BOASTING IN OUR WEAKNESS**

There are at least three kinds of good boasting. The apostle Paul again is our guide. When his reputation was sinking he indulged in a fair amount of boasting about his accomplishments. Since we already know he does most everything in an unexpected way (just remember his resumé), we anticipate that his boasting will not follow the traditional forms.

But whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they

Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. (2 Corinthians 11:21–30)

He started well. “Hebrew,” “Abraham’s descendant”—he was in the “in” group. Then his boasting went downhill. This was a very peculiar style of boasting. Paul’s reputation was on the line, but that wasn’t his primary concern. The issue for him was the nature of the gospel itself. If Paul wasn’t trustworthy and divinely commissioned, neither was his message.

Because his was a unique situation, we might not boast exactly as Paul did. Nevertheless, his perspective is intriguing and helpful for us as well. For example, Paul teaches us that weakness is not as bad as we think. By weakness Paul refers specifically to physical hardships that came because of his association with Christ. But since Jesus is by this time no longer a failed revolutionary but proclaimed as the Lord God himself over the Roman “lord” Caesar, weakness is the new strength.

Very few can boast as Paul did. His weaknesses, which were perceived as marks of shame, certainly exceed our own. But we are all familiar with weakness. In its narrow form, weakness is physical. More broadly, weakness is anything that reminds us we need help.

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At a recent small group meeting a woman asked for prayer. Her high-school-aged daughter was pregnant, her health was shaky, her finances were tight, and she had been convicted of her lack of gentleness after a quarrel with a friend. She wasn't drawing attention to herself. She wasn't apologizing for burdening others with her concerns. She simply was needy and asking for help.

Her requests were ordinary, but I felt as though I was in the presence of greatness. I tend to shy away from asking for prayer until I am nearly completely undone, but she did not. She had the courage to acknowledge her weaknesses and, in that, she pointed all of us to Jesus.

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“Help” is one of the most human responses we can have. It is the essence of faith. It is the essence of prayer. It is also a direct assault on shame's tendencies to hide and self-protect. If you can't ask for help, you are assured further isolation. Ask for help and you are among the honorable.

“Help” is the first thing we say to the Lord. “Thank you” is the second. Then we say them again and again.

## **BOASTING IN OTHER PEOPLE**



A second way to boast is to promote the honor of other people, as Paul does in this job reference for Timothy.

For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. (Philippians 2:20–22)

Like funeral eulogies, job references are occasions to speak well of someone. Typically we say good things about the person or we don't say anything at all. We think about someone's strengths, gifts, and character qualities, and we seek to enhance the person's reputation. Thus, when you fill out a job reference, you often end up with a deeper appreciation for the person you wrote about.

Scripture commends this. One of the Ten Commandments says, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16). Implied in this command is the responsibility to *enhance* our neighbor's reputation. We avoid gossip and slander, which tears down others so we can look a little better. Instead, we practice sharing good reports.

This is not saying, "I am a miserable wretch and you are so superior to me." Instead this is, "I have been honored so now I want to honor others." The honor God bestows on us initiates a cycle. He honors us; we honor him and other people. It is irresistible. We treat others the way we have been treated. We have been honored; we want to honor others.

Humans were created to "outdo one another in showing honor" (Romans 12:10). Students of human nature will tell you that people will crawl over each other trying to get to the top, but if you look closely, you find that we actually care about others. The more human we become, the more natural it becomes to care for others.

Jesus came as the self-sacrificial God who rescued us by taking our sin and shame on himself. Jesus was also *The Man*, the true Image of God, who demonstrated what it means to be truly human. As we follow him we become who we were always intended to be. God's commands reveal the character of God *and* the human condition as God originally intended it. This is why Scripture says God's commands are not burdensome (1 John 5:3). It is not burdensome for a border collie to herd or a gray whale to breach. It is not burdensome for humans who were created to show honor to actually do so.

In other words, when you honor others above yourself, it should feel . . . honorable. It should feel fully human in the best sense of the word. It should feel right and good.

The key word again is *servant*. Once honored by The Servant, we voluntarily take the lower position and serve.

And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9:35)

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. (1 Corinthians 9:19)

The greatest among you shall be your servant. (Matthew 23:11)

Whoever would be first among you must be your slave. (Matthew 20:27)

Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. (Philippians 2:3)

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. (Galatians 5:13)

So off we go as servants looking for ways to honor others. We want to give them the royal treatment we ourselves have received. Here are some possibilities:

- Pray for blessing in someone's life. That means you pray for the best for the person, which gives you an opportunity to consider what really is best.
- Confess to God ways you have not wanted the best for someone. Confess how you have wanted the person to eat a little humble pie. If you have given negative reports about someone as a way to make yourself look better and the other person worse, confess that to the Lord.
- Spread good news about someone. Think of ways to enhance his reputation.
- Find ways to show respect. You are, after all, serving people who are created in God's image. You could listen more than talk, ask for advice, and learn from them.
- Consider admiring another's achievements when he touts them and you are tempted to list yours to teach him a lesson. People who speak about their own greatness do not feel very great.
- Learn about someone. What are her interests and needs? What is important to her? Ask how she is really doing.
- Bless someone else by giving up your agenda in some areas of your life.

When our creativity wanes, we review ways God has served us in Christ; we pray for more of a servant's heart; we ask others for their ideas; and we keep in mind that we are free servants. Free servants can speak openly from their hearts. They can confront when it is in the best interest of the other person. They can say hard things when others might be afraid for their own reputations and keep silent. As finite creatures with various responsibilities, they can say no to some opportunities to serve. Sometimes it is in the other person's best interest to say no.

There is one more thing about honoring others. The rule is that you have received honor from God, so now give honor. A corollary is that when you

give honor, you receive honor. That is the fruit of honoring others. It's another basic operating principle of the kingdom. So, as you grow in honoring others, keep an eye out for the way God lifts you up. As he does you are inspired to honor others even more and the cycle continues. Be honored, honor, be honored, honor—that's life in the kingdom of God.

## **BOASTING IN THE LORD**

Now let's see boasting at its very best.

Thus says the LORD: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD." (Jeremiah 9:23–24)

**Speaking to the King.** Have you ever told God how great he is? My prayers can slip into brief thanks for what he has done and then move on to requests. To speak of his greatness, however, takes work. You have to reflect on his greatness, perhaps read Scripture to help you along, and then speak it to him. It all sounds straightforward until you realize that we typically pray when we have a problem, and we want to pray about that problem as quickly as possible. Prayer is hard; speaking to the Lord about his greatness is even harder.

When you entered a king's presence in biblical times, it was customary to recount his splendor and mighty acts. If that was the tradition with a human king, how much more with God himself? Since God's greatness is endless, we don't rely on the fifteen minutes of hymns on Sunday morning as the only

way to speak of his greatness, especially since those fifteen minutes can be a combination of speaking to the Lord, speaking to other people, and enjoying Christian music. Instead, our goal is to become expert in the Psalms so we can speak them to the Lord. Later, as we develop the heart of a psalmist, we can write our own psalms to him.

The Psalms themselves drift back and forth between speaking *about* the Lord, which is intended for him to overhear, and speaking to the Lord directly.

The LORD is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples.

Let them praise *your* great and awesome name! Holy is he!

The King in his might loves justice. *You* have established equity; *you* have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.

Exalt the LORD our God; worship at his footstool! Holy is he! (Psalm 99:2–5, emphasis mine)

Since your goal is to be as personal as possible, and since shame has a history of avoiding the Lord, emphasize speaking *to* the Lord. Key words from Scripture that can guide you include *worship*, *praise*, *magnify*, *exalt*, *extol*, and *glory*. These are all terms of boasting and giving honor. *Glory*, in particular, expresses God’s fame and greatness.

Can you make the connection between your shame and boasting about the Lord? Though praise is the most natural thing a human being can do, it is also *the* way we despise shame. Look where you are. You are in the presence of the King and you are not dead, which means he has sanctified you. He has made you holy. You are no longer alone. You are reciting the nature of reality itself: your King and Father is greater than anyone or anything. No doubt your face will reflect some glory. “Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed” (Psalm 34:5).

**Speaking about the King.** Now go from speaking to God to speaking about him in your personal relationships. How long does it take for someone to know you are associated with Jesus, assuming you are not wearing a religious T-shirt? We tend to let our deeds speak on our behalf. Most people want to avoid a bombastic style that doesn't really engage others in conversation. Interjections of "praise the Lord" in secular company tend to be awkward anyway. We prefer a context in which we can speak meaningfully. But when you look at Scripture, it seems as if boasting is hard to contain.

Let's assume that every Christian wants to boast more and better about Jesus. We could ask someone to hold us accountable for speaking about Jesus, but that rarely seems to have a long-term impact. A better way would be to ask people to pray that we would know Jesus in such a way that we *must* speak.

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the LORD, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness. (Psalm 96:11–13)

What is the ruckus about? Answer that question and you will find yourself boasting about the Lord. If creation itself can't keep silent, then thoughtful human beings who have the Spirit of God in them will also speak, and speak more eloquently, than the rest of creation.

Creation can be quite articulate about the Lord. Even the most skeptical will stare in awe at crashing waves or majestic mountains. They won't hear the message of the true God in those utterances, but they will have a sense that the universe is as it should be: they are small, there is something bigger

than themselves, and that is good. Creation sets the bar high, but we can be even more articulate.

**Obedying the King.** We want words and deeds to travel together. To this end we boast about the King with our actions as well. This can be summarized as simple obedience.

Obedience means we have kept the law; disobedience means we have broken it. Speaking for myself, that sounds boring! It is at least impersonal. For most of us the law consists of endless codes in dusty libraries. Here is where boasting and honor deepen our understanding of obedience. Examine your own sin through the lens of honor and it becomes profoundly personal.

In our sinful anger, for example, we are saying that our wants are more worthy and valuable than God. Our schedule or comfort is more important than God. Our desires are more important than God's. Though we might not say it out loud, sin says that our interests are above God's. We are of greater worth than he is. If his interests happen to coincide with our own, we will obey. Otherwise, nothing and nobody is higher than we are.

When the Israelites were in the desert with little hope of food and water, they began to grumble against Moses and Aaron as they pined for Egypt. Was that understandable? Maybe. Utterly dishonoring to God? Absolutely. They didn't even call out to the Lord for help, which is the most common way to honor him. When we pray we acknowledge that he is greater than we are. When we turn to our own strategies, we treat him as second rate and assume that we have more resources than he does. When we sin we hold God in contempt.

The LORD said to Moses, "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?" (Numbers 14:11)

How long will the people treat the Lord with contempt? How long will they bring shame on the Lord God? Yes, in our sin we dishonor God. In our arrogance we bring shame on him. With the knowledge that disobedience is not merely breaking a law but is demeaning the Lord God, we set off to honor and boast about him. Here is a start:

- Pray “Help.”
- Pray “Thank you.”
- Confess the ways you have dishonored him.
- Enjoy obedience.

Obedience when no one else is watching can be a particularly fine way to boast in the Lord. Like children obeying parents when no one is home, our faithfulness pleases the Father and expresses his greatness. We are saying that he is not like humans who only see us when we see them. He is the God who sees everything, including the imaginations of our hearts.

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. (Ephesians 6:5–6)

*Servant*, yet again. We are not oppressed slaves but voluntary servants, and servants live to please the master and extend his fame. When you identify yourself as a servant of the Lord, you are actually being a bit presumptuous because the title is a high honor. Moses was called the Lord’s servant by the Lord himself (Numbers 12:7–8). Joshua, though initially called “the son of Nun” (Joshua 1:1), was given that high honor only at the end of his life. “After these things Joshua the son of Nun, *the servant of the LORD*, died, being 110 years old” (Joshua 24:29, emphasis mine).



You might prefer to be identified as a child rather than a servant. You could be the child who boasts about his or her Father being stronger than any other father. You are, indeed, a child of God as evidenced by your faith in Jesus, and that would be a fine way to honor him. Better yet, you could be a chip off the old block and honor him by imitating him and representing him. But, for me, to be a servant of the Lord is a high honor. I am a child, accepted and loved, and I rest in that, but having witnessed how the Father has honored us, I want to be sure to do more than rest. *Servant*, an exalted title since Jesus chose it, quickly reminds me that I have voluntarily and enthusiastically given all the details of my life to the Lord God for his purposes.

Father, who are we that you should serve and honor us? “What is mankind that you are mindful of them?” (Psalm 8:4). Though I am no better or worse than other human beings, before you I really have nothing. There is nothing valuable in me. Lukewarm and erratic faith doesn’t amount to much. But you served me, and through that you gave me life, unity with yourself, and the highest honor. Teach me the exalted way of the servant, so I can serve you freely.

May the Lord give us success as we set out to honor and boast about him.

## For Discussion

1. Can you identify some of your weaknesses? Can you imagine how you would boast in them?
2. What are concrete ways to honor other people?
3. Now be specific. How will you show honor to another person? Who? When?

4. How might the perspective of honor and boasting in the Lord change how you live?
5. Are you alert during worship? What are you thinking? Do you closely follow the lyrics?
6. Take time to write a brief psalm that speaks *to* the Lord.
7. Take time to write a brief psalm that speaks *about* the Lord.
8. How long does it take for someone to know you are associated with Jesus, assuming you aren't wearing a Jesus T-shirt?
9. What is your prayer?

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession. (1 Peter 2:9)

# Chapter 29

## BRIDES AND BANQUETS

**W**hen you read a passage of Scripture once, it can soon blend into the background. But if you read it for a few months, it changes your life. It is God's word *to you*, and it is good news. That's what you are trying to do with God's words about shame. You want his words to ashamed people to be his words to you.

### GOOD NEWS NOW

Here are words to you from the apostle Peter:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:9–10)

How do you think you would have heard this passage if you had read it on the first page of this book? Would you consider it a good word for someone else, but not for you? Been there, done that? But once you take some time to put words to your own shame—words like *outcast*, *unclean*, *naked*, *worthless*, *nothing*—the passage comes alive. Now, don't even *think* of glossing over this passage. It is a summary of everything that has been said so

far. The words couldn't be sweeter. Prestige, purpose, reasons to boast in the Lord—they are all there, for you.

Yet life's accumulation of rejections, snubs, demeaning words, and the sense that we are second-class even to other Christians can temper our enthusiasm. Sometimes life just seems too hard. But remember, there are two kinds of hard: an "I am alone in this" hard and a "Lord, have mercy (and he will)" hard. The "Lord, have mercy" kind is the way it should be, and it's the way it is on this earth. If you take away the hassles of life, there is no reason to say, "Help." But in this life, saying "Help" continues to be among the foremost ways we honor our Father.

The Christian life is a two-stage process. What we have already received is the lion's share. The great promises have found their fulfillment in the cross and resurrection.

"And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." (Ezekiel 36:26–27)

Right now we have power, joy, union with Christ through faith, forgiveness, cleansing, covering, and holiness. Some of these benefits may seem outweighed by the problems of everyday life, but they are real. They are spiritual in that they are permanent. If they feel distant we shouldn't follow our feelings and assume that they actually *are* distant. Instead, we should take the opportunity to grow in our enjoyment of these benefits. We have the Spirit, the Word, the testimony and teaching of other people, and at least a little time left. Our goal is to have spiritual momentum that takes us into heaven in such a way that perfection is not that much of a shock.

Attaining that goal won't come easily. Hope was once a curse to you. It was just another occasion for disappointment and grief. Maybe you tried a kind of spiritual anorexia in which you starved your wants or needs and tried to become a self-contained, independent unit, but it didn't work. Now it is time to feel hunger again.

O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. (Psalm 63:1–3)

These words might not speak on your behalf, but they can—they must. If you think they can't, that is *not* shame talking. It is hopelessness, indifference, and a heart that is getting hard. These are completely understandable, but they are also a whopper of a lie.

A warning about “a heart that is getting hard” is not the nicest comment to slip into a book's final chapter. But please understand why I give it. There is a paralytic quality to shame that leaves you powerless, unable to put up the least resistance. It leads you to believe the lie that Christ's words to you are mere words, *which they are not*. They are words of power that heal the sick and raise the dead. When people encounter the gospel, limbs suddenly begin to move and death gives way to life. So, when you hear these deep truths and still think you are paralyzed, understand why. You have been motionless for a while and your muscle memory says you can't move. But your memory is lying. You *can* move; you can hear, believe, and declare.

If you are passive and hopeless, take a more radical approach. Adopt the topsy-turvy, surprising culture of the kingdom of God. In that kingdom we aren't shy about looking at our hearts and identifying *resistance* where we

once found only powerlessness. The warning about being hard-hearted can be a reason to hope.

Just a minute. Warnings can be hopeful? Indictments that we are wrong can be hopeful? For too many of us anything that comes close to “you’re wrong” is another occasion for shame to flare up. It usually comes packaged with anger, yelling, and rejection. There is nothing hopeful about that. But remember that we are having a conversation within the borders of the kingdom of heaven, and everything is different. Confession and “Please forgive me, I was wrong” are normal elements of kingdom life. They show that you belong. When you get a little more settled into this “holy nation” of ours, you will discover that the confession of your resistance actually opposes shame. It preempts shame’s strategy of accusing and judging with the Spirit’s strategy of revealing sin and forgiving.

Now consider Psalm 63 again. It is a quest in which you are guaranteed success. In this psalm the psalmist is in the wilderness. When we are in the wilderness, the input from our senses spells hopelessness. All the evidence points toward isolation and a slow death. But you are *not* alone. The psalmist is with you, and so is Jesus himself, who spent some hard days in the wilderness and has already quoted this psalm.

In order to make the psalm your own, acknowledge that you have spent plenty of time in the wilderness. The wilderness is the classic biblical image for life’s troubles. The next step is to thirst for the Spirit rather than the mirage of worldly acceptance. That is more challenging. But when you have found that worldly acceptance and achievement are empty, you are more willing to look for new water supplies. You can learn to desire Jesus Christ.

Imagine: “Your love is better than life.” Shame cannot live long in that environment.

Please hear this final barrage of hope. The remnants of shame still cling to us, but they are losing their grip. We still fail. In our relationships, we can be rejected, ignored, and discarded. We can be betrayed by our spouses. We are the targets of anger, which is almost always demeaning. But we are growing. Our interest in how we treat others is threatening to overtake our concern about how others treat us. We are learning where to turn when shame comes knocking. We are learning to turn to the one who adopts outcasts and never minimizes our pain. That simple act honors God and undercuts shame's strategy of turning us inward.

You have briefly met a number of people in this book. There are a few who persist in the path of shame. You could probably identify which ones they were. They would say that they have yet to hear anything good. They might show up at church, but at root, they are angry with God and not quite willing to give that up. It is hard to be connected to someone with whom you are angry.

Remember "I suck"? It was a motto that drove one woman into depression and would leave her there for months. She listened to the truth, though there were times when she had to work like crazy to do it. What left her shame entrenched for so long was her sense that she was responsible for almost anything bad that happened to those she loved. She was the cause of any disappointment, poor report card, or disobedience. Anyone can self-impose that obligation, but she came by it honestly. Her parents stayed on that message for most of her time in their home: yes, our daughter is the one at fault.

Step-by-step she persevered. There were no flashy insights. She sought help, began to read Scripture in earnest, sprinkled in some confession for unbelief and the desire to run away, and stayed with it until the news began to



sound good. She can still find the old motto, but it is no longer her very essence. “I suck” is now a scar that continues to heal.

Everyone else? Don’t get me started. How can you not be blessed by men and women who are willing to listen to the truth? Some days the truth sounds like mere words. Other days they are either too withdrawn or, yes, angry to hear anything. But they turn around, come back, ask for prayer, and continue to grow. No longer does failure, sin, or victimization keep them in shame’s purgatory. For them “Help” is becoming the language of the kingdom rather than the language of darkness and shame. There were times when I would comment on how I saw power and the beauty of Christ in them, and they ignored me. Now, they actually listen. Sometimes they are surprised and grateful. Sometimes they can identify the work of the Holy Spirit in themselves. They are living proof that “he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6).

Meanwhile, as the kingdom of heaven breaks into our hearts more and more, we all wait for heaven itself.

## **GOOD NEWS TO COME**

You can be confident of this: “I shall look upon the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living” (Psalm 27:13). We live with our eyes open and expect to see daily evidence of the Lord’s goodness. But hope extends well beyond the land of the living. After all, no matter how much goodness you now see, you still face death, the ultimate indignity. It is the ultimate powerlessness. So hope must extend past the goodness we see now and take a hard look at death itself. Once examined, death loses its sting. If you take your cue from the apostle Paul, death is now a mere bump in the road. It doesn’t even slow us down. More accurately, death is shamed by the defeat it was handed at the

resurrection of Jesus Christ. Death and its accomplices, curse and condemnation, are vanquished.

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”

“O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:54–57)

From there it is on to see the face of Jesus. That might still sound intimidating since he is perfect and knows you inside out, but keep track of what you know. Jesus was and is the fullest expression of God’s character. Jesus is where everything God has ever said converges and receives its fullest interpretation.

Here is what you know. His interest was in those who needed a physician, not those whose resumés were in the top ten percent. He is the one who invites you to a meal. If you are a street urchin, alone and marginalized, you are invited (Matthew 22:2–14). If you have nothing at all to bring, that is the price of admission. Anything else would detract from the King’s honor.

He served you, which means he honored you. He severed the connection between you and all things shameful, and in its place established an unbreakable bond with you. Unbreakable. “Fear not, for you will not be ashamed; be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more. For your Maker is your husband” (Isaiah 54:4–5). Whatever concerns you might have about being seen and exposed are outweighed by these realities.

I must add that God’s anger is also part of this picture. If you read Scripture, you encounter it often. But that is the way it should be. Who would

worship a god who is passive when there is so much injustice? When the strong oppress the weak, self-interest reigns, abuse is tolerated, and the poor are neglected, there are plenty of reasons to be angry. The world is not the way it should be. As a result, God's people rejoiced when he was angry (see Psalms 56; 59; 79). It meant justice was on the way. It meant that oppressors would soon know they were mere men and not gods, and their oppressive ways would come to an end. Those who are familiar with shame can't fully rest until they know that God will bring perfect justice.

Then you get on with the eternal business of joy. The main events of heaven are banquets and weddings. The menu is even better than charcoal-grilled fish. "Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food" (Isaiah 55:2). Everything in Scripture anticipates this banquet. Your soul will be at rest, fully satisfied, yet always ready for more. Who doesn't have a little more room for food that is especially good?

The best banquets celebrate a wedding. When the apostle John was given a peek into eternity, he saw the people who belonged to God "coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Revelation 21:2). This is the culmination of the Tailor's work: a wedding garment. God himself made the garment and prepared the bride. All we did was get dressed up and start looking forward to this event.

The bride, as we learn, is the church. We are not brides but *a* bride. The consummation of our unity with Christ is something we experience together. In a culture like ours where the individual is primary, we aren't used to thinking of ourselves as one body or one bride. To have other people sharing our husband with us might not sound especially good at first either, but this news couldn't be better for those who know that isolation is a curse. John is witnessing the fulfillment of a prayer Jesus prayed just before his crucifixion.

“I do not ask for these [the twelve disciples] only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.” (John 17:20–23)

Heaven overflows with loving unity. Right now we have unity and fellowship with the Lord, though our fellowship with humans like ourselves can be a little shaky. But heaven is perfect unity with God and all his people. There will be no power structures, no cliques, and no jealousies because there will be no more sin. If any one person would actually be honored, we would all rejoice because we would all participate in that honor. Heaven is a team event with the attention focused on the Bridegroom.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” (Revelation 21:3–5)

Let the boasting begin because these events are certain. The death and resurrection of Christ made them our own.

And for now, we wait. But it is a curious waiting. When children wait they go through predictable stages: they must have it now, they start

complaining, they believe that whoever is making them wait doesn't love them, they get into a snit, and then they forget about the promise and the thing they were awaiting. Though we can easily contact the child within, we are learning a new way to wait. Like everything else in the kingdom of God, waiting has been turned right-side up. It has partnered with hope and will no longer disappoint. Now we join communities of believers in which we remind each other of the truth every day (Hebrews 3:13). We follow the one who, for the joy set clearly before him, endured and despised shame (Hebrews 12:2). We hear the Lord say it will only be a very little while until "the coming one will come and will not delay" (Hebrews 10:37). And we keep at it until we, along with all the saints, "wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:7). We do battle with present shame by remembering the end of our story.

Identify shame, hear God's words and believe them, take a journey past death into eternity itself until your soul is full and you are confident that joy has the last word. Then come back to the challenges of today. It sounds like one big loop, but once you get back to everyday life, everything looks different after you've had a glimpse of heaven. You know who wins.

Everyday life now has meaning, even in the details. When you believe what God has said rather than lies, you are doing valuable work. When you choose hope over despair, your choice has lasting significance. When you get out of bed and persevere in ordinary obedience because you are representing the King, your labor is noticed even by heavenly beings (Ephesians 3:10). When you pursue holiness because you are holy, you find honor that lasts.

*Today.* This is where the action is. How will you live as a chosen member of a holy nation? It can be summarized as faith expressing itself in love (Galatians 5:6), though you will bring your own personal touch to the details. Just start where you are. Every single response you make to Jesus

Christ, from hearing and believing to public declarations, has lasting value. No longer is your life “in vain.”

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:58)

And whenever possible, insert “Help” and “Thank you.”

### For Discussion

1. Go slowly through 1 Peter 2:9–10. Talk about it and be sure to mention that “proclaim the excellencies of him” is the same as “boast about him” or “honor him.”
2. How can you learn to be thirsty?
3. Have you had times—or even moments—when you experienced unity with other brothers or sisters?
4. Does the loop make sense to you? It turns out that you have something in common with Isaiah in the Old Testament and John in the New Testament. Both had visions of heaven.
5. How can you contribute to the unity and hope of your church community?
6. You are a work in progress. Are you asking for prayer? When you do, what specific teaching from Scripture can summarize your request?
7. We end with “today.” With honors bestowed on us by God himself and glory to come, we are less distracted by shame and drawn to a mission—today, now. Can you list a dozen or so examples of what you can do today? Go ahead and act on one or two of them.

# NOTES

- [1.](#) J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (New York: Ballantine, 1965), 117.
- [2.](#) Carlos Acosta, *No Way Home: A Dancer's Journey from the Streets of Havana to the Stages of the World* (New York: Scribner, 2007), 89.
- [3.](#) Andre Agassi, *Open: An Autobiography* (New York: Knopf, 2009), 248.
- [4.](#) Thomas Travisano, ed., with Saskia Hamilton, *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008), 673.
- [5.](#) David Dow, *The Autobiography of an Execution* (New York: Hachette, 2010).
- [6.](#) There are exceptions. Strong as an ox, graceful as a gazelle—these comparisons between a human and an animal are compliments. But no one would want to elect an ox as the next president or marry a gazelle.
- [7.](#) K. C. Hanson, “How Honorable! How Shameful!”: A Cultural Analysis of Matthew’s Makarisms and Reproaches, *Semeia*, 68, 81–111.
- [8.](#) D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 50.
- [9.](#) Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 85–86.

10. Martin Luther, quoted by C. F. W. Walther in his “Twelfth Evening Lecture, December 12, 1884” (<http://lutherantheology.com/uploads/works/walther/LG/lecture-12.html>).

11. For example, consider C. J. Mahaney, *Living the Cross-Centered Life* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2006).

12. Craig L. Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness*, New Studies in Biblical Theology series, vol. 19, D. A. Carson, ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 125.

13. Earl and Sandy Wilson, Paul and Virginia Friesen, Larry and Nancy Paulson, *Restoring the Fallen: A Team Approach to Caring, Confronting and Reconciling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP books, 1997), 21.

14. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act II, Scene ii.

15. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act V, Scene i.

16. Other Scriptures assure us of the connection between cleansing, the Spirit, and forgiveness of sins. For example, “You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:11). “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,” (Titus 3:4–6).

17. The word *sacrament* suggests a sacred oath that God has made with us and we receive by faith. Through these sacraments God’s promises are made evident to us.



[18.](#) Lee C. Barrett III, trans., *The Heidelberg Catechism: A New Translation for the Twenty-first Century* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2007), 84.

[19.](#) The Catholics call it *Mass*, which is a shortened word from the expression, “Go—you are sent out.” From Tom Wright, *The Meal Jesus Gave Us* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 36.

[20.](#) The idea that the Lord’s Supper bridges past and future comes from Wright, *The Meal Jesus Gave Us*.

[21.](#) C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 14–15.

[22.](#) Geerhardus Vos, “Hebrews, the Epistle of the *Diatheke*,” in R. B. Gaffin, Jr., ed., *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1980), 186.

[23.](#) By *despised* I am referring to the Roman opinion of the Jews in New Testament times.

[24.](#) See Anne LaMott in *Traveling Mercies* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), where she lives out of these two responses: “Help me, help me, help me” and “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

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