

Shame

M. W. Bassford, 5-5-13

One of the oddities of the media coverage of the Boston bombings has been an interview given by the uncle of the alleged bombers. Among other things, he said that they had brought shame on the Chechen community in the United States. As columnist John Kass observed, that stood out because “shame” isn’t really part of our cultural vocabulary. My wife noted that in her social-work classes, she is instructed to avoid making her clients feel guilty or ashamed.

Even though modern-day America seems to have a shame aversion, the Bible doesn’t. In the NKJV, “shame” and its variants appear 45 times in the New Testament alone. That doesn’t make it a central Biblical theme, but it does make it an important one. Because our culture doesn’t have much use for the concept of shame, we have all the more reason to pay attention to it in God’s word. This morning, then, let’s consider shame and its ramifications.

Sources of Shame

Even though there’s too much Biblical material on the subject to cover in one sermon, we’re going to do our best to survey the subject, and that survey begins with a study of the sources of shame. Before we get even that far, though, we have to ask **WHAT SHAME IS** in the first place. In this regard, one of the most illustrative texts in Scripture is found in 2 Samuel 10:4-5. David has sent several men to represent him at the funeral of the old king of the Ammonites, the new king has taken them and, among other things, shaved off half their beards. The men are ashamed of this, and David allows them to stay out of the public view until their beards have grown back.

Even though we might think this story is funny today, it does give us some insight into the Biblical concept of shame. In particular, it highlights a couple of important differences between shame on the one hand and guilt on the other. Biblically speaking, guilt is a legal term. It is an objective finding that we have violated God’s law. Shame, on the other hand, is subjective. It’s something that we feel. Second, only our own wrongdoing can make us guilty. By contrast, we can feel shame not only for what we’ve done, but for what someone else has done to us, as in the case of the half-bearded unfortunates of 2 Samuel 10, or because of what someone connected to us has done, as with the uncle of the Boston bombers. Shame, then, is the humiliation we feel when some deficiency or disgrace in our lives is revealed.

Scripturally speaking, there are several different standards that can, or at least should, make us feel ashamed. The first of these standards is **THE STANDARD OF THE COMMUNITY** in which we live. We see Paul remarking on the shameful behavior of the Corinthians with respect to this standard in 1 Corinthians 6:4-5. Apparently, the brethren in the church there had gotten into the habit of suing each other, doubtless to the great amusement of all the unbelievers in the city. We can almost hear the snide remarks, “Yeah, sure, they talk a good game about love, but they’re hauling each other into court left and right!” The heedless conduct of these Christians brought disgrace on them and on their Lord.

Even today, friends, we must make sure that we conduct ourselves honorably before outsiders. Even if our society wouldn’t use shame language to describe it, there are still things we can do that would make our neighbors look down on us. We can’t be the ones who leave our garbage cans sitting on the curb for two days before we finally get around to bringing them in. We can’t allow our yards to become a haven for dandelions and waist-high weeds. We can’t open our windows on a warm spring night and then spend the next two hours screeching at our spouses. In short, we must always be mindful of the way we are presenting ourselves so that we don’t cause others to disregard us.

A second potential source of shame is **NATURAL LAW**. Paul makes this point in Romans 1:26-27. Before I explore this passage, let me define my terms. The Bible does not use the word “homosexual” the same way our society does. In modern America, a homosexual is someone who feels urges toward another of the same sex. Even if he has never acted on those urges, he is still a homosexual. In Biblical terms, however, only the practice of homosexuality can make one a homosexual, and one can stop being a homosexual the same way one stops being a thief—by abandoning the practice. The Scripture does not condemn someone for experiencing homosexual temptations any more than any of us are condemned for experiencing temptation. It is only when we give in to those temptations that sin occurs.

However, this text makes abundantly clear that the practice of homosexuality is indeed a sinful and shameful practice. Paul’s argument here is not based on the standards of the community to which he is writing. First-century Rome was fully as tolerant of homosexual behavior as twenty-first-century America is today. Indeed, our society is daily becoming more like the society in which the gospel was first preached. Instead, Paul argues on the basis of natural law. He indicts homosexuality as shameful because it is unnatural. The human body itself teaches us that the man is the proper partner of the woman, and the woman is the proper partner of the man. Simply because the people around us today do not recognize this truth does not make it any less true, nor does their approval make the conduct less shameful.

Third and last, we should experience shame when we violate **GOD’S LAW**. Once again, this is an idea we see in the book of Romans, in Romans 6:20-21. There are some truths that Scripture identifies as taught by nature, but to learn others, we must turn to God’s word. For instance, Jesus’ discussion of marriage, divorce, and remarriage in Matthew 19

begins with the words “Have you not read?” The Pharisees could not have learned from nature that a man who divorced his wife and married another committed adultery, but it was something the word should have taught them.

Also, note that the Romans here are still ashamed of things they did before they came to the Lord. This highlights another difference between guilt and shame. As soon as we obey the gospel or pray for forgiveness, our guilt is erased instantaneously. However, the memory of our evil act remains, so we likely continue to feel shame for what we’ve done. This is what a lot of Christians are talking about when they say, “I can’t forgive myself.” There is no quick, easy way to leave that feeling of shame behind. As far as I can tell, the Biblical solution is for our shame to motivate us to become a different person than the one who committed those evil deeds, whether that regeneration occurs through baptism or more fervent discipleship. If we don’t change our lives, if we remain the same person who did those things, then yes, we should continue to feel shame. On the other hand, though, when we find ourselves in this position, it’s important to remember that our subjective feeling does not indicate the objective reality. Simply because we continue to feel shame does not mean that we remain guilty. If we have fulfilled God’s terms for forgiveness, we are forgiven.

Jesus and Shame

Before the Lord’s Supper, let’s consider our Lord in the light of this overall topic. Let’s examine Jesus and shame. First, the Scripture points out that the cross on which Jesus hung was **A SHAMEFUL CROSS**. At least, that’s what Jesus’ enemies intended. Consider the vignette recorded in Luke 23:35-36. When the Romans crucified Jesus, they didn’t put Him inside a warehouse or in an empty courtyard. Instead, they set the cross on a hill by a busy road. This wasn’t an accident; instead, it was part of the punishment. Crucifixion wasn’t meant simply to inflict physical pain. Instead, it was intended to cause psychological torment also. Here Jesus was, exposed, naked, dying the painful death of a condemned criminal, before the eyes of the entire community. His most bitter enemies showed up to add to the torment by goading Him, mocking Him for the apparent rebuttal of His claim to be the Son of God. Surely they hoped that He would try to answer them, so that they could laugh at His rejoinders as the final evidence of His powerlessness. In short, His crucifixion was supposed to make His final hours as intensely shameful as possible.

In many ways, this mockery was the most miserable part of Jesus’ death. As human beings, we can bear up under intense pain if we believe that we are suffering honorably. Think, for instance, of a soldier who is severely wounded in combat. He can still draw consolation from the respect and care of his brothers in arms. However, if we are dying, and other people show up to jeer at us and spit on us and tell us how glad they are for our suffering, that’s horrible!

Nonetheless, all those who sought to shame Jesus on that dark day failed, because Jesus **DESPISED THE SHAME**. Read with me from Hebrews 12:2. Remember, shame is a subjective feeling, not an objective fact. Ultimately, we are the ones who determine whether we are ashamed, and Jesus refused to make that determination. When His tormentors mocked and railed at Him, He refused to lower Himself to their level. He didn’t return reviling for reviling. He refused to acknowledge that His suffering and death was a shameful thing, because He knew it wasn’t. Sure, His own nation might have rejected Him, but He knew that His obedience brought honor to God, and that if He endured, He would be rewarded. In the end, that’s what happened. Despite the malice of His adversaries, Jesus was raised from the dead, exalted, and given the name above every name. Today, the very crucifixion that was meant to put Him to shame has become the event for which we give Him the most honor. Jesus despised the shame and triumphed over it.

However, even though Jesus’ enemies failed in their efforts to shame Him, there is one group that can succeed in **PUTTING HIM TO SHAME**. If we as His disciples so choose, we can bring shame to the name of Jesus. Look with me at Hebrews 6:4-6. When we claim the name of Christ for ourselves, when we put Him on in baptism, we join ourselves to Him, and He joins Himself to us. From that point forward, everything we do reflects on Him. When we worship and serve Him, we add to His glory. We show that He’s important. However, when we reject His will to practice lawlessness, we bring Him shame. We treat the honor of our great King as a contemptible thing.

This shame may be in the eyes of the world, when the people around us see that our conduct doesn’t line up with our profession of faith. However, even if our sin is secret to those on earth, all the heavenly beings and the cloud of witnesses described in Hebrews 12 still know what we’re up to. They know if we are honoring God in public but dishonoring Him in private, and I’m sure that the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places do not hesitate to point out to Jesus the shame we are bringing Him. In every case, we give His enemies occasion to blaspheme.

If we continue to bring shame to ourselves and to our Lord, we leave Him only one choice. We force Him to be **ASHAMED OF US**. Indeed, Jesus promises us that this will happen in Luke 9:26. Sometimes, parents are forced to do this with their children. That child has chosen to live in such a disgraceful way that they can no longer bear to have his name associated with theirs, and so they disown him. They write him out of the will, they no longer invite him to family gatherings, and generally declare to the world that he is no longer their son.

In our walk with Christ, we can drive Him to the same point. Our sin and the shame that we bring Him become so great that He can no longer bear to be associated with us. We lose the inheritance of life that we are promised through

Him, we will not be permitted to enjoy eternal fellowship with Him in heaven, and He will declare on the Day of Judgment that we have no part in Him. If we deny Him, whether with our lips or our lives, we compel Him to deny us.

All of this gives us a great deal of food for thought as we partake of the Lord's Supper. First, we must remember that the crucifixion was not merely a painful death, but a shameful death, and yet a death that Jesus willingly endured because of His great love for us. Because of the power of God, He triumphed not only over death, but over shame, and as the trophies of His victory, He claimed us to be His holy people and glorify Him.

However, in taking us for His own, Jesus also took an enormous risk. He entrusted us with His glory, and the way that we obey or disobey either glorifies or shames Him. To me, this is an extraordinarily sobering thought, that my sin brings disgrace to the name of Christ, but it's true. This morning, let each of us ask ourselves how we have been treating the honor of our Lord. Do we make that honor more glorious, or do we blacken it with the shame of our sin?

Shame and the Christian

During the final part of our lesson this morning, we're going to examine the interaction between shame and the Christian. Don't worry; it won't be as bad as it sounds! First, the Scripture teaches that we should **LIVE HONORABLY**. Consider the words of Paul in Titus 2:7-8. When I was learning to drive, my dad always encouraged me to practice defensive driving. In other words, I was supposed to pay attention to my surroundings, notice the possible threats, and position the car in such a way that if one of those possible threats became a real threat, I could avoid it.

What we should get from this text is that we should practice not just defensive driving, but defensive living. We should live each day as though someone were watching for improprieties in our conduct. We should speak as though someone were searching through our words, looking for a reason to condemn us. That way, when enemies of the gospel ARE looking for an excuse to attack it through us, they won't be able to find anything they can use to shame us. Instead, any accusations they come up with will be so flimsy that they bring shame on themselves by making the attempt. Because we are Christians, we need to hold ourselves to a higher standard. That way, we will always be good examples.

As part of this, we must **RENOUNCE SECRET SIN**. Paul emphasizes this in 2 Corinthians 4:2. One of my favorite words is the word "integrity". It has a couple of different meanings that all lead back to the same characteristic. For instance, the hull of a ship can be described as having integrity. It means that the hull is still in one piece and hasn't fallen apart. Likewise, a man can have integrity, and this means that his character is all one piece. In any situation, he is still the same person and behaves in the same way. The temptation to secret sin is a great threat to our integrity. We behave righteously when others are watching, but wickedly when they aren't. Internet pornography is the obvious application here, but porn use is far from the only secret sin. We also compromise our integrity when we cheat on our taxes, when we slack at work if we think we can get away with it, when we talk differently about a man than we do to him, and a hundred and one other things beside. Much of the time, we will lie to ourselves about how this activity isn't really bad, about how we're justified in doing it, etc. Well. . . if it isn't really bad, then why are we hiding it? That's not the way that people who have integrity live. Besides, "secret sin" is a fallacy anyway. Others usually find out, and God knows from the beginning. Instead, we should seek to live so that there is nothing in our lives of which we would be ashamed.

Sometimes, though, life presents us with a situation in which one choice will shame us in the eyes of those around us, and the other will shame us before God. In a situation like that, we must **PUT GOD FIRST**. Consider Peter's discussion of this in 1 Peter 4:15-16. Here, he commands Christians who faced persecution to despise the shame of that persecution like Jesus did, because in their willingness to suffer, they glorify God. Today, none of us have angry mobs howling for our blood because we are disciples of Christ. However, we still face situations where God expects us to do something that the people of the world find shameful. Peer pressure is a form of shame, and it often poses a particular problem for younger Christians. When our friends push us to come to drinking parties or dress immodestly or practice immorality, we've got a choice to make. Would we rather be ashamed in front of our friends, or be ashamed before God?

For all of us, this is perhaps most relevant in the area of evangelism. When asked why they won't tell others about Jesus, Christians will often answer that they are afraid. I've said that before myself. Really, though, what we experience isn't fear. We're not concerned that someone will kill us or steal all of our possessions once we talk about Jesus. Instead, the problem is shame. We worry that our openness about our faith will diminish us in the eyes of others, that we will be labeled as the office Jesus freak, that we'll come across as pushy or rude. It's often easier to remain silent than it is to face gaining such a negative reputation. The question, though, remains the same. Before whom would we rather be ashamed? Before our co-workers? Before the other moms in the PTSA? Or before God?

There are also times when we must be as willing to **USE SHAME** as to endure it. Paul points out one of those times in 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15. To me, this passage makes the most sense when it comes to my actual, flesh-and-blood brother. Andy is an honorable man, but let's say that he decided to leave his wife and kids to take up with another woman. He would still be my brother. I would still love him. However, if I had opportunity, I would sit him down and let him know that I was deeply disappointed by his decision. I would tell him that he needed to leave his adulterous relationship and go back to the wife of his youth, if she would have him back. If he refused, I would tell him that I

couldn't have anything more to do with him, because there are some things that I will not tolerate in members of my family. In later years, I would seek to persuade him as I had opportunity, but things could not be the same between us.

Note also that things would go differently if in addition to dumping his wife and kids, my brother had decided to cut ties with all his relatives. I wouldn't bother having that conversation. There's no leverage in threatening to disown somebody who has already disowned you. If he made clear that he had no concern for me, I wouldn't waste my time.

I think it's appropriate for us to treat the members of our church family the way that we would the members of our real family. Too much of the time, I think that we're afraid of having tough conversations with straying Christians because we don't want to make them feel bad. Well. . . they're crucifying afresh the Son of God. They should feel bad! That sense of shame ought to be a powerful inducement for them to return to faithfulness, and if they don't feel it, we need to remind them about it. Likewise, we need to show by our conduct that their behavior is unacceptable. On the other hand, if a brother turns his back on the Lord and the church altogether, efforts to make him ashamed are pointless. Shame is only an effective tool if a fallen-away Christian still has a connection to us such that he can be shamed.

Of course, there's only one moment when shame or its absence truly matters. Above all, let's **REMEMBER THE END**. Let's look at 1 John 2:28. Although I've never experienced it myself, I understand that most people are afraid of public speaking. They don't want to be up there in front of everybody like that. However exposed we may feel when we're up on stage, that's nothing to our level of exposure on the Day of Judgment. On that day, everything we have ever done will be revealed, and the audience will not be other men, but our Creator. What He says to us about ourselves will either leave us singing with joy or cringing with shame, and we will spend all of eternity in that state. How terrible it would be to give an account for a life of which we must be ashamed! How wonderful it would be to hear the words "Well done" for our faithfulness in keeping covenant! Right now, our lives are in our hands. Whether we choose to abide in Jesus, or not to abide in Him, our decision will determine our eternal fate. Let's live now so that when we stand before the throne of judgment, we won't have reason to be ashamed.