



LIE #1: GOD USES SHAME TO CORRECT ME AND CHANGE ME.

- What is shame?
- Where does it come from?
- Does it serve any purpose?
- Is it a sin?
- What does the Bible Say?

All of these need to be answered before we can approach the concept that God could use it as a growth tool.

Bible says:

Romans 9:30-33 slide #2

What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; ³¹ but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. ³² Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, ³³ as it is written,

“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame.”

Stumbling Stone:

[Psalm 118:22 NKJV](#)

The stone *which* the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone.

[Isaiah 8:14 NKJV](#)

He will be as a sanctuary, But a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense To both the houses of...

[Isaiah 28:16 NKJV](#)

Therefore thus says the Lord God: “Behold, I lay in Zion a stone for a foundation, A tried...

[Matthew 21:42 NKJV](#)

Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The stone which the builders...

Offense:

33. **Offence** (σκανδάλου). See on **Matt. 16:23**.

²³ But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance^a to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

Bible says:

Isaiah 49:23 slide #3

*Kings shall be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers. With their faces to the ground they shall bow down to you, and lick the dust of your feet. Then you will know that I am the Lord; those who wait for me **shall not be put to shame.**”*

Bible says:

Romans 10:11 slide #4

¹¹ For the Scripture says, “**Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.**” ¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. ¹³ For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

Bible says:

Romans 5:1-5 slide #5

*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ² Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³ Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ **and hope does not put us to shame**, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*

Where does shame come from? slide #6

Sufferings –> endurance –> character –> hope does NOT = shame...what does?

What is Shame?

Defining Shame: slide #7

SHAME, *noun*

1. A painful sensation excited by a consciousness of guilt, or of having done something which injures reputation; or by of that which nature or modesty prompts us to conceal. *Shame* is particularly excited by the disclosure of actions which, in the view of men, are mean and degrading. Hence it is often or always manifested by a downcast look or by blushes, called *confusion of face*.

Hide, for *shame*,

Shame prevails when reason is defeated. *Rambler*.

2. The cause or reason of shame; that which brings reproach, and degrades a person in the estimation of others. Thus an idol is called a *shame*.

Guides, who are the *shame* of religion. *South*.

3. Reproach; ignominy; derision; contempt.

Ye have born the *shame* of the heathen. [Ezekiel 36:6](#).

4. The parts which modesty requires to be covered.

5. Dishonor; disgrace.

SHAME, *verb transitive*

1. To make ashamed; to excite a consciousness of guilt or of doing something derogatory to reputation; to cause to blush.

I write not these things to *shame* you. [1 Corinthians 4:14](#).

2. To disgrace.

And with foul cowardice his carcass *shame*. *Spenser*.

3. To mock at.

Ye have *shamed* the counsel of the poor. [Psalms 14:6](#).

SHAME, verb intransitive To be ashamed.

To its trunk authors give such a magnitude, as I *shame* to repeat. *Raleigh*.

Webster's 1828 Dictionary

What is shame: slide #8

SHAME Feelings associated with (but not limited to) failure, public exposure, disgrace, embarrassment, social rejection, ridicule, and dishonor.

Seal, D. (2016). [Shame](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, L. Wentz, E. Ritzema, & W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Lexham Press.



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Ancient world/Tribal World

Shame attached to our public reputation:

- Honor is to be protected at all times.
- You had to be discovered or found out to experience shame. No disclosure = no shame.
- Shame = Ad(ade). Short cut word to quickly communicate when someone is bringing shame into the community.
- Circle theory.
- Disgrace for yourself is one thing, bringing it upon the entire family is totally another. [Eye injury from basketball = impaired. Might affect the children. Not marriable.]

American:

- Condemning
- Shame: An action being made public to bring condemnation/guilt to stop it.

The New Testament contains numerous words relating to shame. Two of them, *aischynē* and *aidōs*, were quite distinct from one another. *Aischynē* usually referred to the kind of shame someone felt after committing an act the community saw and frowned upon. The person felt *aischynē* and was condemned by the community. *Aischynē* is what we think of when we think of the misuse, improper use, or negative use of shame. The New Testament has another word, *aidōs*, which usually describes the sense of shame people felt *before* transgressing a boundary. Like Arab *haya*, this sense of shame helped to steer them away from sin.

Richards, E. R., & James, R. (2020). *Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes: Patronage, Honor, and Shame in the Biblical World* (pp. 174–204). IVP Academic.

What is shame?

Where does it come from?

Does it serve any purpose?

Two examples: Individual focused community and interdependent/we community.

Matthew 1:19 slide #9

And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to **shame**, resolved to divorce her quietly.

Luke 13:10-17 A Woman with a Disabling Spirit slide #10

¹⁰ Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. ¹¹ And behold, there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. ¹² **When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, “Woman, you are freed from your disability.”** ¹³ And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God. ¹⁴ But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people, “There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day.” ¹⁵ Then the Lord answered him, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it? ¹⁶ And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?” ¹⁷ As he said these things, all his adversaries **were put to shame**, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him.

- Do we want to live in a world without shame?
- Is “shame on you” an abusive statement?
- Can one be honorable without having a sense of shame?



Where does shame come from?

Hosea 4:6-7 slide #11

*My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge;
because you have rejected knowledge,
I reject you from being a priest to me.
And since you have forgotten the law of your God,
I also will forget your children.
⁷ The more they increased,
the more they sinned against me;
I will change their glory into shame.*

- Lack of knowledge (rejected knowledge)
- Forgotten the law of our God
- Is this God shaming us?

Where does shame come from?

1 Corinthians 15:34 slide #12

³⁰ Why are we in danger every hour? ³¹ I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day! ³² What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." ³³ Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals."

Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your **shame**. [Living as the world...Not LIVING sharing Christ.]

Philippians 3:19 slide #13

Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their **shame**, with minds set on earthly things. [Focusing on earthly things]

Titus 1:10-11

¹⁰ For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. ¹¹ They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach. [Teaching their own gospel. Not bible following]

1 Peter 3:16 slide #14

having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to **shame**. [Those who slander the reputation of the godly]

1 John 2:28

Children of God

And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in **shame** at his coming. [Not abiding in Christ]

Is shame the result of sin?

Can shame be removed?

Is it just a supernatural dispensation?



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Is shame a sin?

Proverbs slide #15

- 10:5** He who gathers in summer is a prudent son, but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who brings shame.
- 13:5** The righteous hates falsehood, but the wicked brings shame and disgrace.
- 14:35** A servant who deals wisely has the king's favor, but his wrath falls on one who acts shamefully.
- 17:2** A servant who deals wisely will rule over a son who acts shamefully and will share the inheritance as one of the brothers.
- 18:3** When wickedness comes, contempt comes also, and with dishonor comes disgrace.
- 19:26** He who does violence to his father and chases away his mother is a son who brings shame and reproach.
- Shame was a key value in warfare. A warrior who fled from battle was viewed as a disgrace—out of fear of shame, a soldier would fight to the death rather than put his personal safety above the city's safety (DeSilva, *Honor*, 25). However, once defeated, shame still could be present.

Seal, D. (2016). [Shame](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, L. Wentz, E. Ritzema, & W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Lexham Press.

What is shame? What names is it given in Scripture?

Key Terms for and Examples of Shame in the Bible

Nouns such as “dishonor” and “disgrace,”

Verbs like “scorn,” “despise,” “revile,” “reproach,” “rebuke,” “insult,” “blaspheme,” “deride,” and “mock.”

Seal, D. (2016). [Shame](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, L. Wentz, E. Ritzema, & W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Lexham Press.

The use of Shame towards Jesus: slide #16

Matthew 20:17-19 Jesus Foretells His Death a Third Time

¹⁷ *And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, He took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way He said to them,* ¹⁸ *“See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death ¹⁹ and deliver Him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and He will be raised on the third day.”*

- **Matthew 27:29** and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they **mocked** him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!”
- **Mark 15:20** And when they had **mocked** him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him. [Mt. 27:31;
- **Mark 15:31** So also the chief priests with the scribes **mocked** him to one another, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. [Mt. 27:41;
- **Luke 18:32** For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be **mocked** and shamefully treated and spit upon.



Summer of Lies

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- **Luke 22:63** Now the men who were holding Jesus in custody were mocking him as they beat him.
- **Luke 23:11** And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and **mocked** him. Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate.

Seeing how scripture defines SHAME, would your Heavenly Father use that as a weapon against you? Would He use that as a tool to form you? Would He allow that as a way to develop you?

What is shame?

Where does it come from?

Does it serve any purpose?

Is shame a sin?

What does the Bible Say?

Proverbs 3:12 slide #17

*For whom the Lord loves He corrects,
Just as a father the son in whom he delights.*
for the Lord reproves him whom he loves,
as a father the son in whom he delights. ESV

What does this correction feel like?

CONVICTION:

3198. **יָאָחַז, yāḵāḥ:** A verb meaning to argue, to convince, to convict, to judge, to reprove. The word usually refers to the clarification of people's moral standing, which may involve arguments being made for them (Job 13:15; Isa. 11:4) or against them (Job 19:5; Ps. 50:21). The word may refer to the judgment of a case between people (Gen. 31:37, 42) or even (in the days before Christ) to someone desired to mediate between God and humankind (Job 9:33). The word may also refer to physical circumstances being used to reprove sin (2 Sam 7:14; Hab. 1:12). Reproving sin, whether done by God (Prov. 3:12) or persons (Lev. 19:17), was pictured as a demonstration of love, but some people were too rebellious or scornful to be reprovved (Prov. 9:7; 15:12; Ezek. 3:26). In Genesis 24:14, 44, the word referred to God's appointment (or judgment) of Rebekah as the one to be married to Isaac.¹

Do we mistake CONVICTION for SHAME?

slide #18

Conviction → Guilt + No repentance = Shame

Conviction → Guilt + Repentance = Forgiveness

- Is shame connected to sin?
- Is it a result of sin?
- Is it the human choice side, consequence (?) that bridges us into evil?

¹ Baker, W., & Carpenter, E. E. (2003). In [The complete word study dictionary: Old Testament](#) (p. 446). AMG Publishers.



What is PAUL doing? Approving of?:

1 Corinthians 6:5 slide #19

*When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? ² Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? ³ Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! ⁴ So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? ⁵ **I say this to your shame.** Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, ⁶ but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? ⁷ To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? ⁸ But you yourselves wrong and defraud—even your own brothers!*

Is Paul shaming them?

- Is Paul not just convicting them and pointing the consequence they have already earned themselves?

Do we mistake CONVICTION for SHAME?

Conviction → Guilt + No repentance = Shame

Conviction → Guilt + Repentance = Forgiveness

What is shame?

Does it serve any purpose?

What does the Bible Say?

Where does it come from?

Is it a sin?

Jesus' handling of shame: Peter

Matthew 26:30-35, 69-75 slide #20

³⁰ And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. ³¹ Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' ³² But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." ³³ Peter answered him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." ³⁴ Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." ³⁵ Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" And all the disciples said the same.

slide #21

⁶⁹ Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." ⁷⁰ But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you mean." ⁷¹ And when he went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." ⁷² And again he denied it with an oath: "I do not know the man." ⁷³ After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you." ⁷⁴ Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately the rooster crowed. ⁷⁵ And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

Mark 16:1-8 slide #22

When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ² And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³ And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" ⁴ And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large. ⁵ And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. ⁶ And he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you." ⁸ And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.



Summer of Lies

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John 21:15-19 slide #23

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶ He said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” ¹⁹ (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.”

Did Jesus shame Peter?

What Jesus did: slide #24

Proverbs 10:12

Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.

1 Peter 4:8

Above all, keep loving one another earnestly[deeply], since love covers a multitude of sins.

Is shame not valuable when it is put upon by and “outsider” but valuable when it is illuminated by our tribe? [Shame v.s. allowing conviction (not stopping it) to permeate]

“Arman taught me it was important to use indirect speech and not to accuse directly. (In the West, we would think the problem is that the man hasn’t confessed his sin. In the East, they see the problem as broken relationships.)”

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slide #25

#1: GOD USES SHAME TO CORRECT ME AND CHANGE ME.

ASK:

After examining the biblical evidence, can God use shame to correct us, to change us?

No.

- Because shame is, in itself, its own human and supernatural **consequence** of sin.
- Shame, in our culture, is seen too often as abuse. God does not abuse.
- Shame comes as a consequence of our choice to not repent. Condemnation.
- **God brings conviction. The rest is up to us.**

slide #26

(God’s supernatural law) Conviction → (Man’s human response) Guilt + (Man’s spiritual response) No Repentance = (Man’s human response) Shame

(God’s supernatural law) Conviction → (Man’s human response) Guilt + (Man’s spiritual response) Repentance = Forgiveness (God’s supernatural response).

What is shame?

Does it serve any purpose?

What does the Bible Say?

Where does it come from?

Is it a sin?



NOTES:

Paul encourages the Thessalonian church to:

2 Thessalonians 3:14

If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed.

Is Paul shaming them? Or ???

Did God choose to “shame the wise”?

1 Corinthians 1:27 *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;*

Matthew 1:19

Here, therefore, to expose Mary to public shame (Wyc., *publish* her; Tyn., *defame* her).

Matthew 1:19

A compound of the same word (**παραδειγματίζω**) appears in Heb. 6:6, “They crucify the Son of God afresh, and *put him to an open shame.*”

Matthew 16:18

Prophecy declared that the dead should arise and sing, when Sheol itself should be destroyed and its inmates brought forth, some to everlasting life, and others to shame and contempt (Isa. 26:19; Hos. 13:14; Dan. 12:2).

Luke 9:26

The feeling expressed by this word has reference to incurring dishonor or shame in the eyes of men.

Luke 9:26

Thus in the use of the kindred noun **αἰσχύνη**, *shame*, in the New Testament.

Luke 9:26

In Luke 14:9, the man who impudently puts himself in the highest place at the feast, and is bidden by his host to go lower down, begins *with shame* to take the lowest place; not from a right sense of his folly and conceit, but from being humiliated in the eyes of the guests.

Luke 9:26

Thus, Heb. 12:2, Christ is said to have “endured the *shame*,” *i.e.*, the public disgrace attaching to crucifixion.

Luke 9:26

Literally, of course, the glorified Christ cannot experience the sense of shame, but the idea at the root is the same.

Luke 13:17

Rev., more correctly, *were put to shame.*

Luke 14:9

Emphasizing the shame of the reluctant movement toward the lower place.

Acts 5:41

41. They were counted worthy to suffer shame (**κατηξιώθησαν ἀτιμασθῆναι**).

Acts 15:20

“The association of *fornication* with three things in themselves indifferent is to be explained from the then moral corruption of heathenism, by which fornication, regarded from of old with indulgence, and even with favor, nay, practised without shame even by philosophers, and surrounded by poets with all the tinsel of lasciviousness, had become in public opinion a thing really indifferent” (Meyer).

Jude 13

Shame (**αἰσχύνας**).

Jude 13

Lit., *shames* or *disgraces*.

John 3:20

In earlier classical Greek it signifies *to disgrace* or *put to shame*.

1 John 2:28



Summer of Lies

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From sin and fear, from guilt and shame.”

1 John 2:28

Lit., “be ashamed *from* Him.” The fundamental thought is that of *separation* and *shrinking* from God through the shame of conscious guilt.

1 John 5:21

If God’s holiness shames our sinfulness, and God’s perfect wisdom dwarfs our folly, nevertheless, perfection is the only safe refuge for the imperfect.

Revelation 3:18

Stripping and exposure is a frequent method of putting to open shame.

Revelation 16:15

15. **Behold—shame.**

Revelation 16:15

Shame (ἀσχημοσύνην).

Romans 5:5

Rev., *putteth not to shame*, thus giving better the strong sense of the word, *to disgrace* or *dishonor*.

Romans 7:24

Meyer paraphrases correctly: “Who shall deliver me out of bondage under the law of sin into moral freedom, in which my body shall no longer serve as the seat of this shameful death?”

Romans 11:4

Various reasons are given for the use of the feminine, some supposing an ellipsis, *the image* of Baal; others that the deity was conceived as bisexual; others that the feminine article represents the feminine noun ἡ αἰσχρόνη *shame* Heb., *bosheth*, which was used as a substitute for Baal when this name became odious to the Israelites.

Romans 11:36

Shame and suffering and exile—their land left desolate, and they themselves weeping by the waters of Babylon—this was the process to which they were now called on to submit.”

Romans 11:36

Such faith shall not put them to shame.

1 Corinthians 4:14

14. **To shame** (ἐντρέπων).

1 Corinthians 4:14

Lit., *as shaming*.

1 Corinthians 4:14

The verb means *to turn about*, hence *to turn one upon himself*; *put him to shame*.

1 Corinthians 6:5

5. **To your shame** (πρὸς ἐντροπήν ὑμῶν).

1 Corinthians 6:5

Lit., *I speak to you with a view to shame*; i.e., *to wove you to shame*, as Rev. See on ch. 4:14.

1 Corinthians 11:22

In thus shaming their poorer comrades they imitated the heathen.

1 Corinthians 12:23

See on *honorable*, Mark 15:43; *shame*, Apoc. 16:15.

2 Corinthians 4:2

Rev., more correctly, *shame*.

Philippians 1:20

Rev., better, giving the force of the passive, *shall be put to shame*.

Philippians 2:8

Hence the *shame* associated with the cross, Heb. 12:2.

Colossians 3:8

Rev., *shameful speaking*.

1 Thessalonians 2:2

Having been shamefully entreated (ὕβρισθέντες).

Galatians 6:2



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The primary reference in *burdens* is to *moral* infirmities and errors, and the sorrow and shame and remorse which they awaken in the offender.

Galatians 6:8

3, 4: “And thou didst sow (ἔσπειρας) shamefully (αἰσχρῶς) and didst reap (ἐθερίσας) miserably (κακῶς).”

1 Timothy 1:13

He was ὑβρισθεὶς *shamefully entreated* at Philippi (1 Th. 2:2).

1 Timothy 1:13

Christ prophesies that the Son of man shall be *shamefully entreated* (ὑβρισθήσεται, L. 18:32).

1 Timothy 2:9

In earlier Greek, as in Homer, it sometimes blends with the sense of αἰσχύνη *shame*, though used also of the feeling of respectful timidity in the presence of superiors, or of penitent respect toward one who has been wronged (see Homer, *Il.* v. 23).

1 Timothy 2:9

In the Attic period, a distinction was recognised between αἰσχύνη and αἰδώς: αἰδώς representing a respectful and reverent attitude toward another, while αἰσχύνη was the sense of shame on account of wrong-doing.

1 Timothy 2:9

It is one of a large class of words, as steadfast, soothfast, rootfast, masterfast, handfast, bedfast, etc. *Shamefaced* changes and destroys the original force of the word, which was *bound* or *made fast* by an honourable shame.

2 Timothy 2:5

The *corona triumphalis* of laurel was presented to a triumphant general; and the *corona obsidionalis* was awarded to a general by the army which he had saved from a siege or from a shameful capitulation.

Hebrews 6:6

Here in the sense of *anew*, an idea for which classical writers had no occasion in connection with crucifying.* Ἐαυτοῖς *for themselves*.

Hebrews 6:6

Put him to an open shame (παραδειγματίζοντας).

Hebrews 10:11

See also *clothed with shame*, and with *cursing*, Ps. 35:26; 109:18.

Hebrews 12:2

In exchange for this he accepted the cross and the shame.

Hebrews 12:2

The heroic character of his faith appears in his renouncing a joy already in possession in exchange for shame and death.

Hebrews 12:2

The passage thus falls in with Philip. 2:6–8.*

Hebrews 12:2

The shame (αἰσχύνης).²

The Salvation Equation: {Grace > Atonement} Man can now respond: + Repentance + Faith → (and God answers) Conversion + Regeneration + Justification + Adoption → Sanctification

“For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.” 1 Peter 1:23

GENESIS 3

3 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made.

He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You¹ shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’”² And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden,³ but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’”⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die.⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”⁶ So when the woman saw

² Vincent, M. R. (1887). *Word studies in the New Testament* (Vols. 1–4, pp. 15–539). Charles Scribner’s Sons.



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

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,^[b] she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. ⁷ Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

⁸ And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool^[c] of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. ⁹ But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?"^[d] ¹⁰ And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." ¹¹ He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" ¹² The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." ¹³ 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."

¹⁴ The Lord God said to the serpent,

"Because you have done this,
 cursed are you above all livestock
 and above all beasts of the field;
on your belly you shall go,
 and dust you shall eat
 all the days of your life.

¹⁵ I will put enmity between you and the woman,
 and between your offspring^[e] and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
 and you shall bruise his heel."

¹⁶ To the woman he said,
"I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;
 in pain you shall bring forth children.
Your desire shall be contrary to^[f] your husband,
 but he shall rule over you."

¹⁷ And to Adam he said,
"Because you have listened to the voice of your wife
 and have eaten of the tree
of which I commanded you,
 'You shall not eat of it,'
cursed is the ground because of you;
 in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;

¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
 and you shall eat the plants of the field.

¹⁹ By the sweat of your face
 you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground,
 for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust,
 and to dust you shall return."

²⁰ The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living.^[g] ²¹ And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.

²² Then the Lord God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—" ²³ therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴ He



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

CONVICTION:

3198. יָכַח *yāḵāḥ*: A verb meaning to argue, to convince, to convict, to judge, to reprove. The word usually refers to the clarification of people's moral standing, which may involve arguments being made for them (Job 13:15; Isa. 11:4) or against them (Job 19:5; Ps. 50:21). The word may refer to the judgment of a case between people (Gen. 31:37, 42) or even (in the days before Christ) to someone desired to mediate between God and humankind (Job 9:33). The word may also refer to physical circumstances being used to reprove sin (2 Sam 7:14; Hab. 1:12). Reproving sin, whether done by God (Prov. 3:12) or persons (Lev. 19:17), was pictured as a demonstration of love, but some people were too rebellious or scornful to be reproved (Prov. 9:7; 15:12; Ezek. 3:26). In Genesis 24:14, 44, the word referred to God's appointment (or judgment) of Rebekah as the one to be married to Isaac.³

3637 כָּלַם [*kalam* /kaw·lawm/] v. A primitive root; TWOT 987; GK 4007; 38 occurrences; AV translates as "ashamed" 12 times, "confounded" 11 times, "shame" seven times, "blush" three times, "hurt" twice, "reproach" twice, and "confusion" once. **1** to insult, shame, humiliate, blush, be ashamed, be put to shame, be reproached, be put to confusion, be humiliated. **1A** (Niphal). **1A1** to be humiliated, be ashamed. **1A2** to be put to shame, be dishonoured, be confounded. **1B** (Hiphil). **1B1** to put to shame, insult, humiliate, cause shame to. **1B2** to exhibit shame. **1C** (Hophal). **1C1** to be insulted, be humiliated. **1C2** to be put to shame, be dishonoured, be confounded.

3638 כִּלְמַד [*Kilmad* /kil·mawd/] n pr loc. Of foreign derivation; GK 4008; AV translates as "Chilmad" once. **1** a city of Assyria mentioned in conjunction with Sheba and Asshur. *Additional Information:* Chilmad = "enclosure".

3639 כְּלִמָּה [*kālimmah* /kel·im·maw/] n f. From 3637; TWOT 987a; GK 4009; 30 occurrences; AV translates as "shame" 20 times, "confusion" six times, "dishonour" three times, and "reproach" once. **1** disgrace, reproach, shame, confusion, dishonour, insult, ignominy. **1A** insult, reproach. **1B** reproach, ignominy.

3640 כְּלִמּוּת [*kālimmuwth* /kel·im·mooth/] n f. From 3639; TWOT 987b; GK 4010; AV translates as "shame" once. **1** shame, disgrace, ignominy.⁴

3637. כָּלַם *kālam*: A verb describing to be disgraced, to be ashamed; to blush. It refers to an act that humiliates a person (2 Sam. 10:5); or an abuse or attack of words (Job 11:3). A person's own character or behavior can cause shame (2 Sam. 19:3[4]; Jer. 14:3). In some of its causative uses, it refers to disgracing or shaming someone (1 Sam. 20:34; 25:15; Prov. 28:7); or it may indicate the mistreatment of animals (1 Sam. 25:7). The Lord's help for His servant was enough to preserve him from disgrace or confusion (Isa. 50:7). The word is used of a formal sentence and a time of social disgrace (Num. 12:14). In Judges 18:7, it takes on a sense of not lacking or being in want; it was a prosperous land in every way.

3639. כְּלִמָּה *kēlimmāh*: A feminine noun referring to disgrace, shame, humiliation. It has the meaning of embarrassment, i.e., Israel would eventually be ashamed because of its attempt to gain protection from Egypt (Isa. 30:3; cf. 45:16; 61:7). It has the sense of shame or humiliation through judgment (Mic. 2:6). It is referred to figuratively as a covering, clothing (Ps. 35:26; 109:29). It is often found in Ezekiel with the verb *nāśa'*, rendering the phrase to bear, to carry, to endure ignoring or shame (Ezek. 16:52). A word or rebuke can humiliate a person (Job 20:3).

3640. כְּלִמּוּת *kēlimmūt*: A feminine noun meaning shame, humiliation. It is used of disgrace to be brought upon false prophets because of their false claims in God's name (Jer. 23:4⁵

Isaiah 61:1-7

³ Baker, W., & Carpenter, E. E. (2003). In *The complete word study dictionary: Old Testament* (p. 446). AMG Publishers.

⁴ Strong, J. (1995). In *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon*. Woodside Bible Fellowship.

⁵ Baker, W., & Carpenter, E. E. (2003). In *The complete word study dictionary: Old Testament* (p. 510). AMG Publishers.



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
² to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
³ to grant to those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.
⁴ They shall build up the ancient ruins;
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.
⁵ Strangers shall stand and tend your flocks;
foreigners shall be your plowmen and vinedressers;
⁶ but you shall be called the priests of the Lord;
they shall speak of you as the ministers of our God;
you shall eat the wealth of the nations,
and in their glory you shall boast.
⁷ **Instead of your shame there shall be a double portion;
instead of dishonor they shall rejoice in their lot;
therefore in their land they shall possess a double portion;
they shall have everlasting joy.***

Disgraced.

The opposite of honor.

- Only works with the public person.
Does it affect the private?

SHAME Feelings associated with (but not limited to) failure, public exposure, disgrace, embarrassment, social rejection, ridicule, and dishonor.

How Was Shame Viewed in the Ancient World?

Generally speaking, **shame was a core value in the biblical world** (Pilch, *Introducing*, 49). Greeks, Romans, and Judeans all considered shame to play a pivotal role in their cultures (Neyrey, "Shame of the Cross," 115). This perspective can be difficult to understand in modern societies, where shame is largely regarded as a private problem. "Guilt" might better describe the corresponding modern value (Pilch, *Introducing*, 49).

Shame Served Several Important Social Functions



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

In the ancient world, **shame was connected to one's public reputation**. It refers to a person's internal experience of disgrace, fearing that others will see how he has dishonored him/herself, often resulting in a preventative attitude that one must remain out of sight in order to avoid **being disgraced** (Lemos, "Shame and Mutilation," 227). **If someone violated the societal expectations but was not discovered, there was no shame because the deed was not done before the eyes of the public.** However, even if one remained out of public scrutiny, shame still followed when God's law was disregarded (Hos 4:6–7). Shame was the result of sin, but it was removed on the day of liberty and restoration (Isa 61:7).

Shame was seen to play a healthy role in society, encouraging people to be sensitive to their honor in the eyes of others. Shame promoted positive behavior (Judg 3:24–25). Thus, an honorable individual always had a sense of shame (Pilch, *Introducing*, 53). Consequently, shame enabled dignified living among other people because it involved acceptance of and respect for the rules of human interaction (Malina, *New Testament*, 44). A shameless person disregarded these rules. With this in mind, shame is mentioned in Proverbs 10:5; 12:4; 13:5; 14:35; 17:2; 18:3; 19:26; 25:8; 25:9–10; 28:7; 29:15 (Pilch, *Introducing*, 61).

Shame was a key value in warfare. A warrior who fled from battle was viewed as a disgrace—out of fear of shame, a soldier would fight to the death rather than put his personal safety above the city's safety (DeSilva, *Honor*, 25). However, once defeated, shame still could be present.

Techniques such as enemies being thrown at the feet of the victor were aimed at bringing dishonor or shame on the person. For example, Joshua orders his captains to "put [their] feet on the necks" of the defeated kings (Josh 10:24). This gesture provides a public display of physical dominance (Matthews, "Making Your Point," 22) and dishonors the defeated kings. The Psalms contain numerous prayers requesting shame to come on the supplicant's enemies (Pss 6:10; 35:4, 26; 40:14–15; 39:8).

Key Terms for and Examples of Shame in the Bible

Shame factors into many passages throughout the Bible and can be indicated by a range of words. These include nouns such as "dishonor" and "disgrace," as well as verbs like "scorn," "despise," "revile," "reproach," "rebuke," "insult," "blaspheme," "deride," and "mock."

Shame was a significant factor in the crucifixion of Jesus. Although the Gospels record in varying degrees the physical torture of Jesus, they all emphasize the **attempts to shame Him**. These techniques include:

- spitting on Jesus (Matt 26:67; 27:30; Mark 10:33–34; 14:65; 15:19);
- striking Jesus in the face and head (Matt 26:67; 27:30; Mark 14:65; 15:19);
- stripping off Jesus' clothes (Matt 27:28);
- ridiculing Jesus (Matt 27:28–29, 31, 41–43; Mark 15:18–20, 31; Luke 23:11, 35–37; John 19:2–3, 5);
- insulting Jesus (Matt 27:44; Mark 15:32, 36).

Selected References for Further Study

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DAVID SEAL⁶

Chapter 3

SHAME ON YOU

The Lie: God Is a Shamer

From the beginning it has been God's purpose for this world to be one of emerging goodness, beauty and joy. Evil has wielded shame as a primary weapon to see to it that that world never happens.

—Curt Thompson, *The Soul of Shame*

See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame.

—**Romans 9:33**

⁶ Seal, D. (2016). *Shame*. In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, L. Wentz, E. Ritzema, & W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Lexham Press.



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

He was born to a smothering mother who coddled him and a tyrannical father who beat him. He was sickly and frail as a child but had feelings of contempt for weakness in other people. Growing up, he got along poorly with others and seemed incapable of having close relationships. Although intelligent, he was lazy, stopped working hard in school when classes became difficult, and was poorly equipped to handle feedback or correction from others.

As a young boy, he sang in the church choir and thought about becoming a priest. When he was eleven, his younger brother died and he became even more withdrawn and morose. His father strongly disapproved of his interest in art and forced him to go to a technical school to become a civil servant like himself. His father died when the boy was fourteen, and his personal and academic life suffered even more. His mother allowed him to drop out of school when he was sixteen and supported his moving to Vienna to pursue his dream of being a famous artist.

He applied to the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna and was rejected. When he applied again, he wasn't even given the chance to retake the exam. He worked only when he was hungry, lived in squalor, and sold postcards of his paintings to make money. He had little sense of direction and did whatever minimal amount of work he had to do to get by.

He seemed at one point to have recovered quite nicely from the mistreatment, setbacks, and humiliation he had experienced. He moved to Munich when he was twenty-four, joined the army, and fought in World War I. As a soldier fighting for his beloved homeland, he felt a renewed sense of purpose in life, overcame his fears, and was decorated for bravery. After Germany's defeat in World War I, he rose to prominence in an up-and-coming political party, gained significant influence and power, and ultimately became the chancellor of Germany. He restored Germany's economy, rebuilt its military into an unstoppable fighting force, hosted the Olympic Games, helped his country regain its self-respect, and in 1938 was named *Time* magazine's "Man of the Year." His name: Adolf Hitler.

How are we to make sense of this? What factors come into play when someone turns out to be as evil as Hitler? Is there something involved that is especially important in determining why all of us turn out the way we do? There is and it has a name: shame.

Shame is a powerful force in all our lives. It doesn't care if we are successful, powerful, wealthy, attractive, popular, talented, or world-renowned. Shame is defined many different ways, but for our purposes it is an ingrained sense of being unworthy of love and at fault anytime we're mistreated, as well as a belief that it is not okay to be an imperfect human being who makes mistakes. Feelings of shame are always knocking on our souls' doors and have a huge impact on how we treat ourselves and others. What we do with our feelings of shame, whether we destructively give in to them or constructively learn to handle them, is one of the most important choices we make in life. We don't have to look any further than the life of an Adolf Hitler to see that.

All of this leads us into the next lie that some believe about God: He is a shamer. When we view God as a shamer, we think of Him as a malevolent force in the universe with a stick in His hands, waiting for our next mistake so He can administer a spiritually and emotionally painful beating. When we see God that way, we turn Him into a sadist who loves inflicting pain on us for the wrongs we do. Seeing God this way leaves us feeling unsafe with Him, causing us to run away.

If God isn't a shamer, what is He? If God isn't the one rubbing our noses in our mistakes and shaming us for having made them, what is He doing to help us overcome the deep-seated feelings of shame so many of us carry around? Let me take you into one of the most powerful examples in the Bible about how God deals with shame.

THE DISOWNING DISCIPLE

It was an incredibly emotional meal. Jesus had poured His life into His disciples for three years, and they were about to have their last supper together. Once the meal started, Jesus painfully told the Twelve, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me" (Matt. 26:21), something that understandably shook everyone up.

Upon hearing this, the disciples "were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, 'Surely you don't mean me, Lord?'" (v. 22). Peter, outspoken and a little too full of himself as usual, said to the Lord, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will" (v. 33). Jesus's reply to Peter came back quickly and unflinchingly: "'Truly I tell you,' Jesus answered, 'this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times'" (v. 34). Peter, in denial about just how flawed a human being he really was, replied, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you" (v. 35).

After the meal was over, Jesus went with His disciples to Gethsemane, knowing He was going to be betrayed there. Judas, who had already sold Jesus out for thirty pieces of silver (v. 15), arrived with an armed crowd. He greeted Jesus with a kiss, a signal to the mob to arrest Him. Jesus was taken away, and "all the disciples deserted



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

him and fled” (v. 56). No wonder it says Jesus “was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem” (Isa. 53:3).

Jesus was taken to Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest, and “Peter followed him at a distance” (Matt 26:58). The Jewish ruling council, determined to find Jesus guilty so they could have Him put to death, arranged to have people give false testimony. Peter was outside in the courtyard while all this was happening. Three different times, people went up to Peter and said he was a follower of Christ. Fearing for his own skin, he vehemently denied it. Finally, “he began to call down curses, and he swore to them, ‘I don’t know the man!’” (v. 74).

At that very moment, a rooster crowed. Peter was immediately reminded of the painful prediction Jesus had made earlier that evening. As Jesus was being taken away by the religious leaders to be condemned to death, “the Lord turned and looked straight at Peter” (Luke 22:61). After denying he knew Jesus, something he had sworn he would rather die than ever do, Peter locked eyes with the very man he had disowned. Then Peter “went outside and wept bitterly” (Matt. 26:75). More accurately, he wailed in anguish. In that unbearably painful moment, Peter experienced shame’s full force. He was lost: betrayer, liar, phony, alienated, utterly alone. Fortunately for Peter and all of us who follow Christ, the story doesn’t end there.

After His death and resurrection, Jesus had an intimate face-to-face conversation with Peter in a shame-cleansing effort to repair the rupture in their relationship. Christ sought out Peter to free him from the crushing sense of shame he felt because of what he had done. In his encounter with Peter, Jesus asked Peter three times, “Do you love me?” (John 21:16), to get him to honestly examine whether he was all in as a follower no matter the cost or whether he was still looking out for himself by playing to the crowd.

Peter affirmed his love for the Lord each time he was asked. Jesus responded each time by challenging Peter to take care of His “sheep,” His followers He was about to leave behind. The purpose of Jesus’s encounter with Peter was twofold. First, He wanted to help Peter overcome the shame he was carrying around about having denied knowing the Lord. Second, He wanted to reinstate Peter as a disciple. How gracious and loving it was of the Lord to minister to Peter this way.

Peter was never the same after that. Whereas Judas ended up hanging himself for betraying Christ, Peter went on to be the leader of the disciples; preached the sermon at Pentecost, where three thousand people put their faith in Christ; took the good news of Christ’s arrival to the Gentiles; established churches; rejoiced in being “worthy of suffering disgrace” for the name of Christ (Acts 5:41); wrote two letters included in the New Testament; and went from being an impulsive, overly emotional, approval-seeking former fisherman to being a courageous, self-controlled, and faithful follower of Jesus Christ.

It is believed that Peter died the same way Jesus did: by crucifixion. Tradition has it that Peter did not consider himself worthy to be crucified the same way Jesus had been and asked to be crucified upside down. Can you imagine how deep Peter’s love and devotion for Christ had become that he didn’t even feel worthy of dying the same way the Lord did? That is what happens when we allow God’s love to cleanse our shame and get us back on the right path.

GOD CLEANSSES OUR SHAME

The Father of Lies would have us believe that God wants us to live our lives drenched in shame. He wants us to view God this way so we, like Adam and Eve, will run and hide from God rather than enjoy His presence. Hiding from God only serves to deepen the shame we feel and turn our lives into unholy messes.

What does God do to help us break free from shame? If shame is a life-threatening cancer on the human soul, how does God go about using spiritual chemotherapy to eradicate it?

God Creates Us in His Image

As earnestly as Satan tries to shame us into feeling we are unworthy of love, God works even harder to help us see He made us in His image and that His works are wonderful. Psalm 139 says,

You created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well. (vv. 13–14)

What does it mean to be made in the image of God? It means we are spiritual beings, have a mind, are creative, possess free will, communicate, have emotions, are moral beings, have personality, and are made to love. Obviously, we don’t possess any of these qualities to the same degree God does, but we bear His image in all of these amazing ways.



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

I remember a poster from years ago that said, “God doesn’t make junk.” If we truly understand what it means to be fearfully and wonderfully made in God’s image, we can’t go on thinking of ourselves as unlovable, worthless, disgusting mistakes. Feelings of shame like that cannot coexist with the fact that God made us in His image. Sooner or later, we have to decide if God makes mistakes or masterpieces, junk or jewels. If we think God makes mistakes, we will treat ourselves and others badly. If we think God makes masterpieces, we will treat ourselves and others kindly and carefully as priceless works of art.

God Adopts Us into His Family

Imagine having grown up as a pauper and the king of the country you live in knocks on your door. The king has an offer: “I’d like you to become a member of the royal family.”

You stand there shocked that the king sought you out and made such an incredible offer. You might even think that someone is playing a practical joke on you and that everyone is laughing behind your back. After all, why would the king want to adopt a good-for-nothing loser like you? Surely the king, if he really is the king, has much more important matters to attend to.

This offer is the one God makes to all of us, and it is no joke. God offers to adopt you into His royal family because He doesn’t want one single person to remain a pauper. And for those of us who accept His offer, we are now family members and have, as it says on my diploma, “all the rights and privileges thereunto appertaining.” Once you are in the royal family, the King withholds nothing from you.

What’s more, once you are in the royal family, the King and all His servants help you learn how to conduct yourself like royalty. All the King’s horses and all the King’s men help put you back together again so that you can carry yourself like royalty. In other words, God doesn’t just adopt you into His family and leave it at that; He dedicates Himself to helping you live in the highest and most dignified way possible.

So how can you walk around thinking you are an unlovable and worthless pauper when you are a member of the royal family?

God Spiritually Enriches Us

The world we live in tends to focus on having as much money as possible and all the things that go along with it. Even in some churches, a “prosperity gospel” is preached, portraying God as wanting to bless “your best life now”: a lot of money and a great lifestyle. Some of these “health and wealth” ministers will try to convince you that God wants *His* people to be the ones who have the mansions, Learjets, vacation homes, expensive jewelry, designer clothes, and luxury vacations. If you don’t have these things, you must not be praying enough, giving enough, or faithful enough.

God removes our shame not by making us *materially* rich but by making us *spiritually* rich. When we put our faith in Christ, we go from being spiritually impoverished to being spiritually wealthy, with all the benefits that go along with the change: reconciliation with God, the Holy Spirit inside us, spiritual gifts to be used to minister to other believers, and supernatural help to understand the deeper things of God. We had an incalculable amount of spiritual wealth deposited into our bank accounts when we were adopted into the family of God. The financial wealth that the world’s richest person possesses pales in comparison with the spiritual wealth we have in God.

God wants to remove our feelings of shame by helping us see that we have the kind of wealth that truly matters, wealth that goes far beyond the glittering earthly trinkets the world is so consumed with obtaining. Make sure you remember this the next time you’re around someone who is wealthy in the world’s eyes so that you don’t feel envious, resentful, or ashamed. Your wealth is not of this world; it is far more valuable. You are a multibillionaire spiritually and don’t need to hang your head in shame anymore.

God Strengthens Us

It is one of the bigger paradoxes of Christianity: when we accept how weak and inadequate we are in our own power, we end up with a deeper sense of how strong and powerful God is. Paul acknowledged this when he said, “When I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:10). Far too many of us turn to personal power to deal with life, only to see ourselves fail time and time again. A popular definition of *insanity* is “doing the same thing over and over while expecting a different result.” A lot of us are insane in that we keep trying to handle life’s challenges with our human strength and keep getting the same bad result.

I don’t say this to elicit sympathy or pity, but ten years ago I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Left up to my own spiritual, emotional, and physical resources at the time, I wouldn’t have dealt with this situation very well. If I had relied on my own power, I would have denied the seriousness of the situation, raged at life for being so cruel, or curled up in a fetal position and hoped it would all go away. But in a way I had never quite experienced before, I felt the power of God working in me throughout the treatment of my cancer and sailed through it with flying colors.



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

It was not my strength or power that helped me through this medical crisis well; it was the strength and power of God.

All of us tend to turn to our own strength to cope with the tough times in life. Paul was right: when we admit to being too weak on our own, God can demonstrate His strength through us. He cleanses our shame by making His power available to us, a power source that nothing else can match. We need to stop the insanity of buying into personal empowerment teachings and start tapping into the strength and power that created the universe, parted the Red Sea, and brought people back from the dead.

God Gives Us a New Heart

We live in a world that focuses not only on wealth but also on physical beauty. The “beautiful people” are often seen as having it all: gracing magazine covers, modeling the latest fashions, and selling costly products. The world we live in is obsessed with appearance. That may be why the apostle Peter warned us, “Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight” (1 Pet. 3:3–4). The world we live in places far more emphasis on outer beauty than inner beauty.

God is not that way. God doesn’t care one bit how physically attractive you are. When you are given spiritual rebirth by God, He provides you with a new heart and spirit that are drop-dead gorgeous. As we read in Ezekiel 36:26, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” Before spiritual rebirth, we had an ugly inner nature that couldn’t help but do ugly things; after rebirth, we have a beautiful inner nature that can’t help but do beautiful things. Paul was referring to this exchange when he said, “If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Cor. 5:17).

God cleanses your shame by making you beautiful inside. Don’t hang your head in shame anymore about whatever external beauty you may lack. How you look on the outside is superficial and shallow nonsense and doesn’t mean a thing. Hold your head up high about the internal beauty God blessed you with.

God Makes Us Part of His Plan

Christ made His purpose for coming to earth crystal clear: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). When we were “born again” (John 3:3), God adopted us into His family and we were automatically included in His plan to redeem the world. Upon our conversion from spiritual death to life, we became part of the most important reclamation project the world has ever known. There is nothing else—getting married, having children, receiving an education, earning a living, or even leading the country—that is more important than being a member of God’s family and included in His plan to seek and save those who are lost.

Not only does God cleanse your shame by making you part of His plan to save the lost, but He also equips you to do the work by empowering you with spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:6–8; 1 Cor. 12:4–11, 28). There is some disagreement about the number of spiritual gifts, but most agree that the list includes

- • Serving—helping those in need
- • Teaching—explaining the Word of God and how it applies to people’s lives
- • Exhortation—encouraging others to obey what God says
- • Giving—sharing one’s financial, material, and emotional blessings with those in need
- • Leadership—presiding over others to steer them in the right direction
- • Mercy—being compassionate and sympathetic toward others to help relieve their suffering

God supernaturally empowers all Christ followers with one or more of these gifts so we can properly play our roles in the greatest rescue mission of all time. So the next time you are tempted to hang your head in shame, know this: God adopted you into His family, made you a part of His grand plan to seek and save the lost, and equipped you with spiritual gifts that enable you to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19–20).

We have just explored a number of things God has done to free us from living a life of shame. Now that we are in Christ, it is up to us to take God at His word about all this. In light of the fact that these amazing things are true, we can lift our heads, step boldly and confidently into our lives each day, and be excited about how God will use us in the greatest adventure the world has ever known.

CASE IN POINT: ALLEN

Allen sought counseling at his wife’s urging. He had recently been laid off from his job and wasn’t handling it well. She was concerned about how depressed and apathetic Allen had become. Unmotivated to find another job, he had starting drinking more and sitting on the couch every day playing video games.



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

As I got to know Allen, it saddened me to hear about his background. Neither of his parents had finished college because his mom had gotten pregnant with Allen's older sister. His parents dropped out of school to get married, find jobs, and raise their newborn. Without college degrees, both had to work relatively low-paying jobs, something that led to conflict over money. A second child, Allen's older brother, came along a couple of years after their first child's birth, and their situation got worse financially and relationally.

Allen's parents fought often, and he had no clear memories of their being kind or loving toward each other. They went through a bitter divorce when Allen was ten. After his father moved away to start a new life, Allen's mother told Allen that she and his father had not planned on having any more children after their second. They weren't sure if their marriage was going to make it, but she became pregnant with Allen during one of their separations. She didn't use the word *mistake* directly, but Allen got the distinct impression his conception had been unplanned and unwanted.

Allen was brought to tears during our sessions when he recalled how badly his older brother had treated him. His brother repeatedly called him ugly, stupid, a loser, and even worse. And his brother's cruelty didn't stop at verbal attacks; it was often physical. Allen remembers frequent episodes of his brother hitting him, knocking him down, and even spitting at him.

Given what he experienced growing up, Allen struggled for a long time to see God as being any different from his family members. Allen grew up viewing God as mean, rejecting, disgusted by his existence, and disinterested in a close relationship. Though Allen felt drawn to God from an early age, he didn't feel He was the least bit drawn to him. In his heart, Allen felt he was a mistake God had made.

Losing his job pushed Allen over the edge. All the old messages came back, this time with a vengeance: you're a loser, you're never going to amount to much, you're stupid, and no one wants to have anything to do with you. He felt that being let go meant he was not valued and that the company realized they had made a mistake in hiring him.

Thankfully, Allen was blessed to have a loving and caring wife. Allen is pretty sure that were it not for her, he would have thrown in the towel years ago and drunk himself into an early grave. She finally convinced him to get help, and Allen courageously made an appointment to see me for counseling. He also started attending a church-sponsored recovery program, joined a men's group, and met with one of the elders at his church to help him deal with his situation.

In our work together, Allen and I talked about the feelings of shame he carried with him from childhood: the shame of having parents who chronically fought and acrimoniously divorced, having a father who left and never came back, being told he was a mistake, and having an older brother who viciously and repeatedly attacked Allen's psychological and physical sense of self. We spent hours scraping out the wounds he suffered when he was young and turning to what God had to say about his innate worth and value.

The most powerful truth in Scripture for Allen was that he had been "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps. 139:14). Allen had never thought of himself that way, and he spent a lot of time meditating on that concept. As he studied and meditated on being created in the image of God, Allen began to see himself more accurately and positively. He began to believe he was not the mistake his mother had suggested he was nor the loser his brother had called him countless times. Over time, Allen stopped listening to the denigrating voices in his head and began listening to the uplifting voice of God.

Although he still has his bad days where the old voices yell in his ear, Allen is a different person. He knows God well enough now to understand that He makes people in His image and doesn't make junk, mistakes, idiots, or losers. When the old voices return, Allen fires back with the truth of who he is in God's eyes: a "new creature" in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17 KJV). Allen sees that he is a member of the family of God, no longer a pauper begging for table scraps but rather a child of the King. And he understands that God has made him to be part of His plan to redeem the world.

Allen recovered from the disappointment of losing his job and eventually found another. More important, he knows God more intimately and strives each day to view himself through His eyes. Allen understands that God helps us heal from painful relational wounds and the feelings of shame they cause. Allen takes God at His word that "a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out" (Isa. 42:3).

FINAL THOUGHTS

Ever since Adam and Eve disobeyed God, humankind has been coated in shame. God has done all He can to cleanse us of our shame, the greatest expression being Christ's death on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. No one pays a price that high for something unlovable, unworthy, and undesirable. Beyond cleansing our shame by His death on the cross, God made us in His image, adopted us into His royal family, made us spiritually rich, empowered us



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

with His strength, exchanged our old ugly nature for a beautiful new one, and included us in His great adventure. After doing all that, how could any of us continue to think of God as a shamer?

To stay on course studying and meditating on God's Word, go to appendix A and choose a verse that argues that God is not a shamer and study it for all its worth. Read books and commentaries on what that verse means and listen to any sermons you can find on it. Do whatever you can to allow God to more deeply internalize what He says about you.

To overcome the lie that God is a shamer, I suggest the spiritual discipline of confession. Scripture challenges us to "confess [our] sins to each other and pray for each other so that [we] may be healed" (James 5:16). If we are not honest with others about the sinful things we do and the character defects we struggle with, Satan has a greater opportunity to keep us in bondage to self-condemnation and shame. Richard Foster put it well when he said, "The Discipline of confession brings an end to pretense. God is calling into being a Church that can openly confess its frail humanity and know the forgiving and empowering graces of Christ." In counseling, we say, "You are only as sick as your secrets." To overcome shame, we have to quit hiding and covering up. We have to be courageous enough to share our struggles and let the grace and support of others help us heal.

Saint Alphonsus Liguori wrote, "For a good confession three things are necessary: an examination of conscience, sorrow, and a determination to avoid sin." First, we must go before God and allow Him to prod our consciences about the things that require His forgiveness. Second, we must experience genuine remorse about having sinned and having hurt the heart of God. Third, we must ask God to help us have a strong desire to live holy lives.

God is no shamer. He came to set you free from shame, cleanse you with His love and grace, reinstate you into His family, and make you part of His great adventure. No, God is no shamer.⁷

10

HAVING SHAME

It Is Good for Everyone

"A member stole a book from our church library." It seemed an odd way to end an evening meal. I was enjoying coffee by the sea in Beirut with my friend Arman. "The book is not worth a lot," Arman continued, "so the cost of the book is not important, but this could split the church." This Armenian pastor-friend now had my full attention. How could a five-dollar book split a church? "This situation is serious," Arman explained, "because there is the potential for accusations or exposure, and this will bring shame on the man. If the shame is too strong, it will destroy the relationship between him and the rest of the church, and one of our church families could be lost." He was a shepherd worried for a sheep.

I wanted to help. "How do you solve this?" I asked. "Do you ignore the missing book?" "You can't ignore a stolen book," Arman smiled, "but it would need to be handled delicately. I will find a way to meet him. I will talk about other things. Then I will say, 'Oh, someone has stolen a book from the church, and I am worried that the neighborhood will think we have no morals and everyone in our church will get a bad name. So I just hope that whoever stole the book will bring it back soon.'"

Arman had two problems. He was worried that a sheep would get lost, but also that the entire flock would get a bad name.

Arman taught me it was important to use indirect speech and not to accuse directly. The man knew he took the book. He also knew that Arman knew he took it. So why beat around the bush? Shame. The man would see that his deed was pulling the entire church into disgrace. His sin was not limited to himself. He would feel shame because "he is we." He could imagine the flock's faces. They would be shamed because of him. But the man also would see that Arman, his pastor, was being careful to use indirect speech and to not accuse him directly. Arman would be reminding the man that his sin was affecting the entire group, and Arman would also be demonstrating respect and love by dealing with the situation in a kind and sensitive way. The man would not be forced to admit (or deny) the deed. **(In the West, we would think the problem is that the man hasn't confessed his sin. In the East, they see the problem as broken relationships.)** The man would see that Arman was providing a way to return, to restore the relationship, with the minimum amount of shame. His sin would be covered by his caring pastor: "~~love covers over all wrongs~~" (Prov 10:12). Peter reminds his leaders, "~~Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins~~" (1 Pet 4:8).

The next Sunday the book was there. The man was shamed but not disgraced. Nobody else knew about the matter, because love had covered the transgression. The pastor didn't directly accuse him but instead protected him

⁷ Thurman, C. (2017). *The lies we believe about god: knowing god for who he really is*. David C Cook.



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

from humiliation. Arman said, “We use the tool of shame because it is the best tool to use in this situation. If I label him a thief, he must fight or flight. Both would ruin the relationship. I don’t shame him to condemn him, but to restore him.” It worked. The man was repentant, and the church was protected. My Indonesian pastor-friends would approve: everyone saved face (preserved honor).

WHY WE GET SHAME WRONG AS INDIVIDUALISTS

People in the ancient Mediterranean world likewise used shame, just as they used honor, as a tool to enforce and reinforce their collective group’s values. The biblical writers were well aware of the power of collective shame. Sometimes they use it, and sometimes they challenge its misuse. In both cases, Westerners may struggle to see what’s happening. Many English-language theological dictionaries don’t even have an entry on *shame*. Those that do lump it together with honor and imply shame is bad, the opposite of honor.

While there is a lot about honor that we don’t understand well as individualists, we at least have some reasonably good language for it, and it’s all positive. Shame, however, is categorically bad in modern Western culture. In another book I describe worldview as an iceberg, most of which is underwater. Some parts are deeply underwater, nearly completely out of sight; yet, they are still there (and sometimes the part that sinks the ships). “Shame as wrong” is likely one of those ideas that is deeply submersed in our Western worldview. To even question the idea probably riled you up. I have often heard Western ministers encouraging Christians to “let go of shame.” Most Western Christians would assert that it would be wrong to shame someone else. The problem is Paul does it: “I say this to shame you” (1 Cor 6:5). He encourages the Thessalonian church to shame a disobedient member (2 Thess 3:14). Even God chose to “shame the wise” (1 Cor 1:27). Our culture tells us shame is bad, and yet God is doing it.

While Western culture rejects shame as *always* inappropriate, many of us grew up in an individualist culture where guilt is used to reinforce values. Consequently, we see an immediate and—in our view—obvious connection between sin and guilt. Growing up, the message was, *When you sin, as a Christian, you should feel guilt*. In fact, many Bible dictionaries even include “Sin, Guilt” as a single article. One scholar writes that Paul “makes very little use of the ‘guilt’ terminology in the psychological sense, but it may be fairly said that many of the things he says about sin include the thought that sinners are guilty people.” To this theologian, it seems obvious that Paul is thinking about guilt, even though Paul rarely writes it. This is because, to us, sin and guilt are connected. But guilt is just our cultural tool. Easterners have other cultural tools. The Spirit uses all of them to convict sinners to repent. Yet the obvious link that biblical cultures saw with sin was shame. Daniel says, **“We and our kings, our princes and our ancestors are covered with shame, Lord, because we have sinned against you” (Dan 9:8)**. Shame was an important aspect of both the Old and New Testament worlds. It’s important to note that while Bible dictionaries published in the West have extensive articles on guilt, they have very little on shame, even though Daniel, David, and Paul use shame language.

SHAME, SHAMED, AND ASHAMED: MUDDLED ENGLISH AND MUDDLED UNDERSTANDINGS

One reason we get shame wrong is that we have such a limited vocabulary to discuss it, and that vocabulary is almost entirely negative. In the relatively recent past, Americans had a cultural understanding that was closer to the collective concept of shame. My grandmother once said, “Your friend is shameless.” I asked what she meant. She explained, “He has no sense of shame.” I still wasn’t sure what she meant, but I wanted to defend my friend. I retorted, “I don’t see what’s wrong.” She replied, “Have you no shame?” **In my grandmother’s time, to have a sense of shame was to know the difference between right and wrong.** If you “had *no* shame,” it meant you didn’t know the difference between the right and the wrong way to act. Someone was “shameless” when their actions suggested they didn’t know the proper way to act. If the person did finally realize what they were doing was wrong, they felt “ashamed.” So, in the old days, shame was somehow connected with doing the right things, knowing the proper way to act. It was used to help us stay within the lines. This matches better the Eastern (and biblical) understanding of shame: the sense of shame warns that someone has or is about to transgress a boundary.

Today, however, in most of the West *shame* has generally lost this sense of meaning. We can use *shameless* (lacking shame) and *shameful* (full of shame) to mean the same thing. Moreover, *shame* is strictly a negative word. “To have shame” is no longer a positive trait, meaning that you know the proper way to act. Now, “to have shame” means you are ashamed, or worse, you have been shamed (and probably shouldn’t have been). **It is often used only in a punitive way. As we shall see, God wants to set people free from this kind of shame.** The biblical writers also appealed to shame, but in a very different sense. Our word *shame* just obscures all these differences.

For example, we use *shame* today to mean dishonored, embarrassed, and so on. Perhaps speaking about people being devalued and disgraced might be a little clearer than shamed. How do you deal with someone who is



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

devalued? Value them. How do you deal with someone who is disgraced? Grace. To say that we want to remove their shame in this situation might just be about removing their feelings or perceptions. Several writers today on shame, popular in the West, are addressing primarily this aspect. We absolutely agree that God wants to take away any feelings of being devalued or disgraced. The church can and should be involved in this too.

In some cultures a woman who has a child out of wedlock is described as having shame or maybe being shamed. Removing her shame would be more than taking away feelings, important as that is. It would actually mean to provide a path for her to be restored to herself, to her family, and to her community. The church can be involved in this too. These are different scenarios.

Using the one English word shame for both things is quite confusing. No wonder we don't understand it when we see it in the Bible, and no wonder we struggle to help those experiencing shame around us. It's clear we need a more biblical understanding of shame.

SHAME LANGUAGE

Many languages in collectivist cultures recognize the difference between different shame tools and how they work, often with a rich vocabulary, much of it positive, giving the different ideas different words. English, as we have seen, clumps all these nuances together. We struggle in this chapter because we have to use one inadequate word to describe all the distinctions we're going to show. For example, Arabs, by contrast, use different words to describe some of the things we're going to show. **They have some words that refer to a shameful act being made public. When shame is applied to these situations, it condemns.** This kind of shame happens after a shameful act is made public and is a form of condemnation. As Christians, we should never use *this kind of shame*, this negative kind of shame. We should offer forgiveness and restoration, not condemnation.

What we are missing in our culture is the positive kind of shame, so of course we don't have a word for it. This kind of shame leads to virtue. People feel this shame *before* doing something shameless. For example, Arabs have *haya*, a shame that monitors one's behavior so one doesn't violate the community norms. Everyone should feel *haya*. It keeps us within the lines. When a young man leers at a woman on the street, people will tsk their tongues and say, "Ah, he doesn't feel *haya*." (My American grandmother would have agreed, saying, "He has no shame.") *Haya* should have stopped him from doing it. Someone who has *haya* (shame) doesn't want to lose it. You certainly wouldn't want God to take away your shame (*haya*).

Preachers will sometimes say, "The Greek language has at least four different words for 'love': *agapē*, *philia*, *eros*, and *storgē*." It is more accurate to say that English uses one word for four different emotions: a lofty kind of love, friendship, sexual passion, and parental love. It isn't just a theoretical vocabulary problem. Greeks kept these separate, but English clumps them together. I sometimes hear someone say, "What's wrong with two men loving each other?" Well, there is nothing wrong with two men who love (*agapē* or *philia* or *storgē*) each other. In fact, it is good, Christian behavior. We should encourage it. Combining four different and strong emotions into one word can easily lead to confusion, or worse, to combining four different feelings into one idea. It is a problem with the English word "love" and also with the English word "shame."

Different kinds of shame and shaming. Both Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament) use multiple words for the different nuances and ways of using *shame*. **The Old Testament has at least ten distinct terms for *shame*.** These are not ten different words for the same thing. Hebrews saw at least ten different things that we in English lump together as one thing. They thought it was important to know whether they were talking about this kind of shame or that kind of shame. Likewise, **the New Testament contains numerous words relating to shame. Two of them, *aischynē* and *aidōs*, were quite distinct from one another. *Aischynē* usually referred to the kind of shame someone felt after committing an act the community saw and frowned upon. The person felt *aischynē* and was condemned by the community. *Aischynē* is what we think of when we think of the misuse, improper use, or negative use of shame. The New Testament has another word, *aidōs*, which usually describes the sense of shame people felt *before* transgressing a boundary. Like Arab *haya*, this sense of shame helped to steer them away from sin.**

Someone in the Mediterranean said to me, "I feel shame about lying to my parents." He hadn't yet lied. He wasn't condemned. No one was accusing him. At the thought of lying to his parents, he felt shame. This uneasy feeling in his gut forecasted how he would feel if he did lie and if his actions were discovered. It is not a pleasant feeling, but it is good for him to have it. This kind of shame led him to change course and to avoid committing a shameful action (lying to his parents). This sense of shame kept him within the boundary lines. Other kinds of shame had the same result but worked differently. While he would describe this kind of shame to me as an uneasy feeling in his gut, he would say *āb* (shame) wasn't a feeling at all. He says it's like an alarm bell. If he interrupted his father,



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

he would suddenly hear the word *āb* in his head, even if his parents said or did nothing. Interestingly, we might lump the gut feeling and the head alarm together as my conscience speaking. I certainly wouldn't distinguish between them, but my friend clearly saw (felt) a distinction.

Honor versus shame? Even if we sort out the vocabulary, we will still misunderstand shame and shaming if we think it is the opposite of honor. When we make shame a negative thing, we can imagine that honor is the opposite or the solution to shame. It isn't. If by shame we mean feeling devalued, then giving honor certainly can make a person feel more valued. If they are disgraced, they need grace—to be shown favor and brought into community. Likewise, we can affirm, respect, and cherish an unwed mother, just as we would all believers, but how would honor help her out *practically*? (You may be thinking of a path back into the community, which is a goal of good shame, as we will see later.)

It may be important to bring honor into a situation involving shame, just like bringing compassion in, or providing assistance, or adding in any number of other good things to help. Nonetheless, honor isn't the opposite of shame. Yet many English Bible translations try to make shame the opposite of honor. For example, the New International Version translates Proverbs 3:35, "The wise inherit honor, but fools get only shame." Proverbs is describing opposites, but the problem is the translation. The New American Standard Bible translates it better: "The wise will inherit honor, but fools display dishonor." Dishonor is the opposite of honor. Respect is the opposite of disrespect. Grace is the opposite of disgrace. But honor is not the opposite of shame.

Let's be really clear in all this: no matter what causes shame, the biblical solution is always restoration. Paul is appalled at the behavior of a particular churchman. His behavior is so immoral that even pagans disapprove: he has been sleeping with his father's wife. Paul's solution is to shame the man. He is to be excluded from the church. Paul does not do this to condemn his brother but that he might be restored (1 Cor 5:1–5). Whether it was this same man or another Christian brother who sinned and was excluded, Paul later writes to the Corinthians that when such a one repents, the church should not only forgive but comfort and restore him. **The goal of shaming is to show the person that they have crossed the line, so they might repent and then be restored (2 Cor 2:5–11).**

Shame used badly only does half of this. It only tells people they have moved beyond the boundaries of the group; it offers no path of restoration. It offers no hope. It pushes out, rather than pulls back. People who have experienced this misuse of shame can be crushed or become hardened. Paul does not endorse any use of shame that causes someone or some people to be devalued, disgraced, or unwanted. The Bible calls this condemnation, not shame. Shame used properly provides a path of restoration.

SHAME IN THE MODERN MEDITERRANEAN

Modern Mediterranean cultures have largely retained the ancient Mediterranean tool we call shame. This tool—or really, set of tools—deals with those who have not embodied the values of the community. These tools can be misused to condemn someone by pushing them away, but they can be used well to restore someone to a group's values and to pull them back. Like honor, these tools we call shame are a collective culture's way of shaping behavior. **It is the community's conscience.** It is like my grandmother's idea that "having shame" means you know the proper way that "we" the group believe you should act. **It is not that I am guided by my values but that we guide one another by our values.**

In the Arab world, when children fail to embody the community's values by being disrespectful to others, or failing to greet someone, or not sharing their things, Arab parents will often say *āb* (pronounced *abe*, meaning "shame"). When we were newly married in the Middle East, we saw this happening and declared, "We will never say *āb* to our children." Of course, we planned to correct them when they did things wrong, but not by saying *āb*. Fast-forward six years. We had an eighteen-month-old son. My wife was in the grocery store, where the man who worked there routinely gave our son a banana. We often remarked on how kind and generous he was. Our toddler son had become used to this man's generosity. One week, my wife was shopping for vegetables, and our son pointed to a banana and said "Nana." The man hadn't yet offered him one. The shopkeeper felt embarrassed. My wife looked down at our son and found *āb* on the tip of her tongue. She loves our son and wanted to protect both him and the man from embarrassment. Her heart was for "we," the community, including both of them. The man felt embarrassed for not offering a banana and thereby appearing stingy. Our son should have felt embarrassed for asking before it was offered. My wife felt embarrassed by the old women who were clucking their tongues. (Judgmental moms and grandmothers are not just an American phenomenon.) Saying *āb* to our son would protect everyone. My wife would be protected because it would show the neighborhood that she understood the proper way to act. It would protect our son by showing that he was being trained in values. The man would be protected



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

from embarrassment, and our son would be protected from growing up impolite. Saying *āb* saves the entire community.

We were talking about this incident with Diana, a good Arab friend in Beirut. Diana said her parents had often said *āb* to her. She found it unhelpful because it had caused her to feel she was somehow lacking. Digging a bit deeper, we noticed the examples she gave. She was told *āb* for annoying her parents, for making noise in restaurants, and for appearing weak. These are hardly biblical values we would want to train our children to embody. They were not values Diana admired. **As a cultural tool, shame can be used to collectively remind and enforce values in members of our group. Tools such as honor and shame are neutral. Their meaning depends on which values are being reinforced.** As tools, they need to be used properly. When shame is used to pull someone back, it needs to be done with love, affirmation, and a willingness to stand with them on the journey. Arman pulled the man who stole the book back to the values of the church while affirming him and helping him feel Arman was for him. Shame was used on Diana to reinforce values that weren't important nor was it used to affirm her or to help her feel that her parents were for her.

Shame used properly restores. Shaming done right pulls back toward the center. Every culture (or subculture) has some agreed-on ways of treating another person with respect. Imagine this shared understanding as a circle. The ideal way to treat someone with respect would be the center of the circle. Obviously, no one does this, but people are expected to be close to the center. When I say or do something that is too far from this ideal—act rude or disrespectful—my actions place me nearer the edge of the circle, and my community is alarmed. This is true of individualist as well as collectivist cultures. **All societies guard their ideal behavior; otherwise, they begin to break down as a culture.**

While Westerners often use guilt to shape behavior, collectivist cultures more often use shame. While individualists might use guilt to shape *my* behavior, collectives use shame to shape *our* behavior. My grandmother would try to make *me* feel guilty, because I (as an individual) had drifted too far from the center of ideal behavior and was too near the boundary. Collectivist cultures think collectively. **It is not that the community is alarmed that I (as an individual) have moved too far. Their thinking is more alarm that I have pulled all of us off center.** I am part of us, and I am influencing all of us. We could be known as a community that has drifted away from the proper way to treat someone with respect! My community will use shame to make me aware that I have drifted. The goal—and this is critical to understand—is to *pull* me back toward the center, for everyone's benefit. We have rescued me *and us*.

Rami is a close friend. He grew up in a village in Syria. I noticed Rami was always hospitable, quick to invite people in to drink coffee. One day I asked Rami, "How did you learn to be so hospitable?" He told me a story. When Rami was a young boy, a neighbor knocked at the door and asked for his father. "Everyone is out," Rami replied, "but I will tell my father that you came to visit." As Rami promised, he told his father that a neighbor had come by. "Why did he leave already? Did you offer him more coffee?" Rami replied, "I didn't offer him any coffee." His father replied, "*Āb*. If any neighbors come to visit, you should always compel them in to have coffee." To be a member of their tribe meant to be hospitable. This is important: Rami wasn't just told *āb*; he felt *āb*. It pulled him into line with the community's values. Today, Rami takes pride in being hospitable. *Āb* taught him how to live out hospitality. This lesson was ingrained in him, and it shaped his character and behavior. Because he treasures the value *āb* taught him, he doesn't resent his family's use of *āb*, unlike Diana, our friend in Beirut. Shame as a tool was used on both Rami and Diana to enforce and reinforce a value. The difference was which value.

Shame misused ostracizes. We Westerners may still be uncomfortable with the idea of *āb*. How can shame ever be used properly? **In Scripture, when Israelites bring a lamb for sacrifice, it is to be perfect. Arabic translations say it is to be a lamb without *āb*. If we translate *āb* as "defect" instead of "shame," we understand why Arabs would use that translation. In fact, we Westerners probably feel better if we translate *āb* as "defect." Perhaps, for us, it would *feel* better to describe a behavior as "defective" rather than "shameful" when we correct our child. Likewise, as a Western reader, you feel better about *āb* when we offer "defect" as a translation rather than shame. This shows just how rooted in us is the negative perception of shame and shaming.**

As authors, we believe shame is viewed negatively in our culture because shame is almost exclusively misused in our culture. **Shame and shaming is misused when instead of *pulling* you back into the group, it *pushes* you away.** Shame is misused when it is applied too strongly and/or too publicly. My Armenian pastor was careful to stress this distinction to me. **When shame is misused, the shamed one can feel that they have drifted too far to be restored;** they can see no path of return. Shame misused is a terrible thing.



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

Shame misused almost always breaks relationships. If Arman had simply gone to the man who took the book and said, “I think you took a book from the library, and please could you put it back so people don’t think we are all thieves,” the man would likely simply have withdrawn from relationships in the church. He and his family would have been lost to the church. Such would be the improper use of shame. Westerners often prefer a direct approach. We don’t beat around the bush; we cut to the chase. We confuse this with honesty. Such a direct approach easily leads to the *misuse* of shame. It may lead us Westerners to apply shame too heavily, especially in crosscultural situations where we don’t understand the power of our actions and words.

In addition to an overly direct approach, a careless use of words or actions can misapply shame. An American friend of mine was pastoring a small church of Arab men in Europe. One day, a member told him that another man could not come because he was busy that night. My friend replied, “Oh, that’s a shame.” The brother who had not come that night never came back. He had been publicly shamed by the pastor. He didn’t know how to show his face again. Obviously the American pastor didn’t intend to shame this dear brother. He was using a common idiom to express his disappointment. But the power of words and actions can be very strong in shame-based societies. James warns of the power of words (Jas 3).

This pastor’s careless use of words could have been repaired. The solution would have been an approach like Arman did. The pastor needed to be indirect and provide a path of restoration. He could have gone to visit the brother and say he was there to check the man was not sick because he missed him at the meeting last night. Or, he could have asked another member to mediate for him, explaining how he had misspoken. Either approach would have provided the path of restoration. The individualist pastor did not realize the power of shame and did not chart a path of restoration, and alas, the man was lost. Furthermore, **the rest of the flock probably internalized that the value being reinforced was attendance rather than relationship.** So, as individualists, what do we do with shame and shaming? We certainly don’t want to superimpose modern Arab (or my grandmother’s southern American culture) understanding.

SHAME IN THE BIBLE

We saw above that Paul uses shame. When he writes to the Corinthian church he says, “Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God—I say this to your shame” (1 Cor 15:34). My individualist signposts confuse me here. Paul is not using shame here to condemn the believers. It is intended in a positive way to *pull* the Corinthians back into acting in line with their values. A survey of English commentaries shows modern writers struggle with how to translate Paul here. One commentator says, “Paul eschews shaming other Christians.” Since *eschew* means “to avoid using,” we wonder how the commentator can say Paul avoids shaming other Christians in a verse where he is explicitly doing it. The commentator is reflecting the modern English understanding of shaming as a negative thing to do. We agree that Paul would abstain from using shame in the negative way we have come to use it today. We are certain Paul would not condemn the Corinthians. He calls them saints (1 Cor 1:2). Paul himself argues there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1). There is always a path of restoration. Nevertheless, Paul is clearly participating in the Mediterranean system of shaming in positive ways, pulling people back to their values.

Let’s look at another example. This time, our cultural signposts can mislead us in several directions. In 1 Timothy 2:9, Paul encourages women to dress “with shame” (*aidōs*). A literal translation doesn’t work at all in English. It is commonly translated “with modesty.” Here Paul is using a positive term for shame. This is the positive kind of shame that told someone the proper way to act. Paul is saying that women should dress in a way that wouldn’t cause the voice in their head to say “shame” or for the community to think “shame.” Again, let’s avoid being too individualistic. It is not that an individual woman should determine for herself what is proper but that the women in the community, as a “we,” should determine proper dress. We help we.

Translating *aidōs* as “with modesty” can mislead in other ways too. In America, we assume Paul is talking about dressing in sexually modest ways. **Paul is actually talking about economics, being economically modest.** Women are not to dress lavishly, with expensive clothes, gold, and pearls. In antiquity, these were ways of dressing that said, “I have more money than you.” Paul says the women’s sense of shame, or knowing what was right, should discourage dressing lavishly. It didn’t embody the values at the heart of the gospel. It weakened the community. If Christian women today were tempted to dress in ways that flaunted their wealth in the faces of poorer church members, Paul would say *aidōs*. Their sense of shame (knowing the proper way to act to protect community) should keep them from crossing that boundary. Paul isn’t targeting women or clothing. It is a family issue and ultimately a community issue. *Aidōs* should have kept the entire church from doing this. Paul is using shame to reinforce a value: everyone has an equal seat at the Lord’s Table.



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

As an individualist, I need to be careful not to read into this passage an individual sense of guilt or right versus wrong. It's a collectivist value. Dressing lavishly when there are poor people around damages the community. It's about we, not me. Does that mean it's wrong to wear expensive jewelry? It depends on who is around. In some settings, wearing fine things would be dressing appropriately. A sense of shame (the proper, positive sense of shame that seeks to guard and strengthen community) helps someone to know when it is appropriate. *Aidōs* guides the hearts of the community to avoid hurting (and driving away) other members of the community. In 1 Timothy 2:9 Paul is describing one way shame works. He says shame is what guides a godly woman. It's important to make this distinction. Last, we should see the compliment in what Paul says. He thinks Christian women could and should be able to govern what is proper.

We mentioned that English is a muddled mess when it comes to using the word *shame*. Shame is a tool collectives use to enforce and reinforce their collective values. **In the Bible, when one doesn't embody our values, we can use shame to pull them back, because they are we. It's an insider tool.** But, alas, shame can be misused, to push them away, where they become no longer we. Shame used properly happens before someone moves too far from the values of the group and can center them. As with other social tools, such as honor or guilt, this assumes the values we want to enforce and reinforce are good ones.

11

SHAMING

Done Right (and Wrong)

Amira's husband works for a company in the Gulf. He makes a lot of money. Amira's sister, Mariam, married a painter. Mariam's family is not well off, so Amira passes on to Mariam lots of her own used clothes. There was a big family wedding, so Amira came back from the Gulf. As the family were sitting around talking excitedly about the wedding, Mariam said she was planning to get herself a new dress. Amira laughed and said, "Oh, so this time, you're going to buy your own clothes." Mariam was shamed in the bad sense. Actually, Amira had misused shame to devalue her sister. Mariam was very upset with her sister, but she didn't show it there and then. Over the next week, though, as Mariam and Amira messaged on the phone, Mariam accused her sister of saying cruel things, shaming her sister (but not offering a path of restoration). Amira felt shamed but couldn't remember what she could have said to cause it. They quit talking to each other. Amira's misuse of shame had pushed Mariam away, and Mariam's misuse of shame did the same.

A few days later, Mariam's dad (the mediator) came to Mariam's house. He said, "Mariam, my love, I know you're upset with your sister." She replied that she wasn't upset with her sister. The next week Mariam's dad came around again. He said, "Come on, get the kids ready and come to our house. Your mum and I have cooked your favorite dinner." Mariam dressed and went to her parents' home. Her sister was there. She didn't want to enter. Her dad said, "For my sake, because you love me, come in and eat." He was gently appealing to her sense of shame. She should eat with her father (because he's her father) and especially since he and her mum had troubled to prepare a special meal. Shame was pulling on Mariam to draw her back inside the boundaries. She couldn't say no; it wouldn't be in keeping with their family values. Over the meal, she talked with her sister. Her sister said she was sorry, and so did Mariam. They both cried, and the family was restored. By the way, this is how the parable of the prodigal son could have ended, when the father invited his son in to the feast. Yet, Jesus leaves it hanging; we don't know what the elder son decided (Luke 15). It is possible the parable was initially aimed at Peter, who may have been upset that Jesus had invited the local tax collector, Levi, to join the disciples (Lk 5). Levi had surely stolen from Peter, collecting more tax than was fair. If so, Jesus is honoring Peter by calling him the elder brother who had been doing right all along but now was resenting the return of the prodigal Matthew.

In our story of Amira and Mariam, we see kinship and brokerage in the story, but we also see shame working in different ways. Amira misused the tool of shame to push her sister away, to devalue and dishonor her. She did this because her sister didn't have wealth—but wealth is not a biblical value. Mariam responded by misusing shame, accusing her sister of cruelty, pushing her away. She did this because of unforgiveness—but unforgiveness is not a biblical value. Her father properly used shame to pull them back. He knew it would shame them to refuse his hospitality—but hospitality is a biblical value. He used shame as a cultural tool to pull the sisters back together. Shame is used and misused in their story.

Paul heard that some members of the Corinthian church were taking other members to court. This meant they were getting judgments from the wrong sources and exposing the trouble of the church to sinners. Paul writes, "If you have disputes about such matters, do you ask for a ruling from those whose way of life is scorned in the church? I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

believers?" (1 Cor 6:4–5). Their unwillingness to submit to the judgment of a member of their community is causing the entire congregation to be subject to unchristian values outside the church. Paul is trying to use shame to call the entire congregation back to one another and to embody the values of God.

BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF SHAMING DONE RIGHT

Instead of pushing them away, toward the edge of the group, shame used properly pulls people toward the center, as we stated above. This is the goal of confronting the brother in Matthew 18.

The church shames a member. A church member has sinned and is not yet repentant. A fellow Christian needs to confront the sinning member. Alas, even after two thousand years, we still don't always do this well. Sometimes we act as if the member's problem is ignorance. For example, a man comes and says he is thinking of divorcing his wife. We open the Bible to show a verse where Jesus discourages divorce (Mk 10:11), as if we expect the man to slap his forehead and exclaim, "Wow, brother, I had not realized that I should avoid divorce. Thank you." Problem solved. Hardly. In Matthew 18, Jesus teaches, "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (Mt 18:15–17).

What went without being said is that good shame is being used in this passage. It is applied as gently as possible. Initially it is done as privately as possible, just one on one. There is no need for others to know. Shame is kept to its absolute minimum to reach its goal. Arman took this approach with the missing library book. What if the brother here fails to respond appropriately to this gentle shaming? What if he does not repent? Now, we are to bring another member of the community. Influential eleventh century Arabic theologian Ibn al-Tayyib, who lived in a culture that understood collectivism and shame well, comments on this, "Jesus said take one or two with you in order to urge him to good action for maybe the group of people will cause him to feel shame." It is still done privately, but now the sense of shame is increased. Ibn al-Tayyib goes on to speak of this as being like a doctor who increases the dosage of medicine to heal the patient. The community is speaking, but two is the smallest form of the community. **Jesus is encouraging the minimal number of people to be involved and still represent the community.** If the brother still does not listen, then the entire community is brought to bear. The goal is still restoration, not condemnation. **The goal from beginning to end is to find a path for the person to return or move back toward the center, to be restored and healed.**

The final stage of shaming is "If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (Mt 18:17). In other words, treat him like he is no longer a member of the community—because, as we said earlier, this brother's sin is not an individual problem. He is not just pulling himself away from the center of the group; he is pulling the whole group off center. **An unrepentant member endangers the group, and it's not just the group's reputation at risk.** Even our culture recognizes that one bad apple can spoil the whole bunch. This person's behavior could contaminate and mislead others in the group: "our" group could become confused about what our values are. It's not me; it's we. Matthew 18 offers an example of shame used appropriately. This is a far cry from the misuse of shame, which tends to apply the maximum amount of exposure and does not seek restoration. Again, this is the kind of shame that Christians such as Dr. Brené Brown rightfully critique.

Jesus shames a Pharisee. It may be hard for you to believe that Jesus would shame anyone. Well, he did. But only in the good, restorative sense of shame. To a religious leader named Nicodemus, Jesus asks, "You are Israel's teacher and do you not understand these things?" (Jn 3:10). This is a very mild and gentle shaming. It is not public, but it is shame, and it works. Nicodemus is changed. He later is willing to defend Jesus in front of his peers (Jn 7:50–52). After Jesus himself is publicly shamed on the cross as a criminal by the Romans and as a blasphemer by Nicodemus's peers, Nicodemus honors Jesus by anointing Jesus' body with about seventy-five pounds of spice (Jn 19:39), an astonishingly large amount. In both John 7 and John 19, we are reminded that Nicodemus originally came to Jesus by night. The Gospel wants to show how Nicodemus has changed. Jesus pulled him toward Jesus' new values.

In Luke's Gospel, the Pharisees present themselves as the guardians of social norms. They act as if they know and protect the proper ways to act. Simon the Pharisee honors Jesus by inviting him to a public dinner. Luke tells us they are reclining to indicate it is a special meal. The larger community is allowed to participate by leaving open the door, permitting them to listen in.⁵ As they are reclining, "a woman in that town who lived a sinful life" (Lk 7:37) approaches Jesus with an alabaster jar of perfume. "As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them” (Lk 7:38). Simon, and probably everyone else in the town, knows this woman’s sinful past. Jesus isn’t a local, so he doesn’t necessarily know. Simon says to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner” (Lk 7:39). Since Jesus permits the woman to touch him, Simon concludes that Jesus does not know about her. Jesus corrects Simon by using shame, but he begins gently with a story that indirectly shames, like Arman with the stolen library book.

Jesus begins by honoring Simon by asking his religious opinion. Jesus says, “Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both” (Lk 7:41–42). Five hundred denarii would be nearly three years of pay for a working man. No debt collector would simply write off such a large sum of money. Jesus asks Simon, “Now which of them will love him more?” Simon replies, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.” Jesus honors Simon again by saying, “You have judged correctly” (Lk 7:43). This honor will take some of the sting out of the shame Jesus is about to deliver.

Simon thinks of himself as a guardian of social norms, but Jesus points out that Simon has failed to live up to them. He has not shown hospitality to his guest:

Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet.” (Lk 7:44–46)

This woman, Jesus notes, provided all the respect Simon did not. She has become a better host than Simon. Jesus has reversed their status. Simon is worried her presence is polluting his reputation. Jesus points out the woman is saving Simon’s reputation.

Why does Jesus shame Simon at all? Because Simon has not worked to restore this woman to their community. Simon has been shaming her for not embodying the community’s values, but he was doing it in the wrong way. He has been pushing her away. Yet she is the one actually upholding the hosting requirement of their community—an important value. **We need to remember what everyone there already knew: that *she and Simon belong to the same community*. Simon is confident that this woman needs forgiveness. Jesus agrees that she needs forgiveness more than Simon. Yet Jesus’ story reminds Simon that he also needs forgiveness. She comes and gets forgiveness. We are not told whether Simon does.**

We can miss the point if we forget that the early New Testament audience would have seen Simon and the woman as connected. This is not a story of two unrelated individuals needing forgiveness who happen to encounter Jesus on the same evening. As a Pharisee, Simon claims the responsibility of protecting the community (which includes her), and he has failed. Jesus shames Simon when he says, “Do you see this woman?” (Lk 7:44). Simon had quit seeing her as *we*. They both need to repent, but Simon needs some additional shaming to get there.

The Pharisees shame other Pharisees. Jesus isn’t the only one who shames Pharisees. Sometimes the Pharisees shame each other, because they are guarding “we,” their community of Pharisees. The Pharisees send a delegation to confront Jesus. When the delegation returns, they are mildly complimentary of Jesus. Some of the temple officers were supposed to arrest Jesus and come back honoring him: “No one ever spoke the way this man does” (Jn 7:46). The Pharisees shame them by suggesting they have been led astray, and they note that unlike the officers, no ruler or Pharisee has believed in Jesus (Jn 7:47–48). John expects us as readers to say, “Wait, one of them has!”—Nicodemus. He speaks up in Jesus’ defense. They respond by also shaming him: “Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee” (Jn 7:52). They suggest that Galileans are gullible and that Nicodemus is as well. Incidentally, the Pharisees are also wrong in claiming that no prophet arises out of Galilee. Actually, five did: Jonah, Nahum, Hosea, Elijah, and Elisha. Also, Jesus isn’t from Galilee but from Nazareth. John expects us as readers to add shame to their actions.

Paul shames lots of people. People from South Galatia absolutely did not want to be called Galatians. That term was reserved for the Celts living in North Galatia. The Celts didn’t speak Greek, and they had a reputation for being religiously gullible. This is why Luke is careful in Acts to call those living in South Galatia, “residents of ... Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia” (Acts 2:9–10). He would not have wanted to insult these new believers by calling them Galatians. Yet Paul is more than willing to insult them by bringing up gullibility (Gal 1). Is Paul just being



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

racially insensitive? No. What we are supposed to remember is that Paul is one of them. He was from Tarsus in South Galatia.

An insider can use language that would be an insult on the lips of an outsider. At a conference recently, during a break, we heard someone talking about “the problems with ministering to Colombians.” At least one of the Latinos in the group became angry. He stood and asked (a bit loudly), “What do you have against us Colombians?” The man replied, “I am a Colombian. Both of my parents are Colombians.” The man replied, “Oh,” obviously mollified, “then that’s OK.” The two proceeded then to commiserate about how hard it was to minister to Colombians. But they were speaking as we, as fellow insiders. Similarly, what would be a racial insult on the lips of an outsider is not for Paul. As an insider, Paul is reminding them that they are being religiously gullible. He says they are quickly exchanging the true gospel for a false one (Gal 1:6). Paul is speaking as we to his fellow Galatians. As an insider, Paul is referring to this slur (which he shares in common with them) to shame them, to pull them back by reminding them to think again.

In another instance, Paul shames Peter. The apostle Peter had been participating actively in the ministry of the new church in Syrian Antioch. Gentiles there were not God-fearers (Greeks who had spent a lot of time around synagogues and usually complied with many Jewish kosher expectations). Most of the Gentiles so far in the book of Acts who came to faith had been God-fearers and those who had close relationships with Jewish communities. Presumably, they were complying with Jewish kosher expectations. Antioch was different. This church had plowed new ground by aggressively evangelizing run-of-the-mill pagan Gentiles. The Antiochian church shared one table, and the Lord’s Table welcomed all believers. This might seem unremarkable to us, but this was new territory. Suddenly, in Antioch, a Jewish Christian was expected to share a meal with a pagan Christian whose breath stank of pig fat. As far as we know, such a thing had not happened previously.

Peter was participating as well; the lesson God taught him in Acts 10 he is able to actualize in Acts 11. Then some members of the Jerusalem church (which was primarily if not exclusively made up of Christians from the Jewish community) come to Antioch. We get a hint of their attitude by a comment James and the other elders of the Jerusalem church later make to Paul, “You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law” (Acts 21:20). James’s comment indicates that there were many Jewish Christians who maintained the commands of the law, which were Sabbath observance, circumcision, and table fellowship (kosher laws). Yes, they were believers in Jesus, but they kept their Jewish cultural customs. The challenge was that the Antiochian church shared one table with both Jews and Gentiles, with each presumably following their cultural food customs.

The group from Jerusalem are shocked at the shared table. They have never seen anything like this. They think that, to maintain purity, believers must still not share a table with those not following kosher laws. They persuade Peter to stop eating with the Gentile believers. Peter’s prestige as a premier, if not *the* premier, apostle carries all the other Jewish Christians in the church along. Paul is alarmed. It looks like Peter thinks the cross of Christ is not sufficient to earn a seat at the table. What was a beautiful picture of the future kingdom of God has devolved into ethnic division.

Paul confronts Peter. Because Peter’s actions have already moved the congregation away from the central values of the gospel message, Paul shames him back toward the center: “When Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned... When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, ‘You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?’ ” (Gal 2:11, 14). It needs to be in front of them all because the whole church community is involved. All of them need to move back toward the center. The shaming of Peter is actually the shaming of all who followed him. It is as private as it could be. Paul doesn’t take an ad out in the local paper, gossiping about it around town. We read later that the church in Antioch continued to strongly endorse Paul’s mission to the Gentiles, so we may assume that Paul restored the community back to the heart of the gospel, believing that the cross is sufficient.

Asaph tries to shame God. On one occasion, the psalmist Asaph is frustrated because it seems to him as if God has rejected Israel and won’t rescue them. God is not, in Asaph’s eyes, doing the right thing. It is not surprising that he uses his culture’s socially acceptable way to urge someone to act properly. As a Mediterranean, Asaph would have used shame to urge a friend to change their actions. It might surprise us that he tries to shame God, and it might even offend us, but Asaph is treating God like a beloved and trusted friend. He is trying to urge God to do what Asaph thinks is the right thing, to rescue his people. Asaph reminds God that their enemies have burned down God’s



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

temple (Ps 74:7). He reminds God that they have ridiculed his name. He suggests it is shameful for God to ignore their taunts and not respond:

Remember how the enemy has mocked you, Lord,
how foolish people have reviled your name.
Do not hand over the life of your dove to wild beasts;
do not forget the lives of your afflicted people forever.
Have regard for your covenant,
because haunts of violence fill the dark places of the land.
Do not let the oppressed retreat in disgrace;
may the poor and needy praise your name.
Rise up, O God, and defend your cause;
remember how fools mock you all day long.
Do not ignore the clamor of your adversaries,
the uproar of your enemies, which rises continually. (Ps 74:18–23)

Modern theologians say God accommodates himself to culture. What they mean is that God adjusts himself to *our* understanding. So in a time when people thought the world was flat and held up on pillars, God points out to Job that he (God) is the one who established those pillars. When humans thought snow was stored in giant rooms in the sky, God says only he knows where those rooms are (Job 38). Likewise, God accommodates himself to a shame-based culture's way of speaking. He understands Asaph is asking him to rescue Israel. Just like God accepts laments (Lamentations) or the anger of Psalm 137, so also he understands the heart and motivations of Asaph (and includes this psalm in Scripture).

We see another example when God wants to destroy the Israelites in the wilderness and Moses basically argues, But what will the nations think of you if you bring the people out only to kill them yourself? Moses is using a gentle form of shaming in his argument to rescue the Israelites. Moses was a man of his culture, and God accommodated (Ex 32:11–14). Most scholars think that God did this to teach Moses to forgive, for he was about to have his own anger against the Israelites for being a laughingstock to their enemies (Ex 32:25).

The Pharisees try to shame Jesus. Levi was a wealthy man from a business that most Jews considered unclean. He was a tax collector for the Romans. After Jesus calls him, Levi throws a big reception to honor Jesus. When the Pharisees see Jesus at the banquet, they want to remind him that the people he is eating with are sinners and one should not desire their honor. After all, Proverbs 23 cautions against that very thing, desiring the delicacies of the rich man's banquet. "When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?'" (Mk 2:16). By saying something to the disciples, the Pharisees are being polite and sensitive. They want to apply the minimum amount of shame by posing the question to Jesus' disciples, but within Jesus' earshot. The proper response, and what they expect, would be for Jesus to pretend he doesn't hear but to change his behavior and to leave the banquet. In this way, they have not publicly rebuked Jesus. They are treating Jesus as *we*. After all, despite their differences, Jesus and the Pharisees were one community over against Levi and his Roman-loving friends.

But Jesus does not do as they expect. He does not object to their method, only their message. Like with honor, the problem is which *value* were they honoring. Jesus' concern was that they were shaming to achieve the wrong value. Jesus uses the same level of gentle shaming in return. He does not publicly rebuke them. Rather, he speaks indirectly through a metaphor that should lead them to draw the correct conclusion, to the correct value, and to change *their* behavior: "On hearing this, Jesus said to them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners'" (Mk 2:17). Jesus identifies himself with the Pharisees (in a way) as those who are healthy. But he points out what the Pharisees have neglected: Levi and his friends are also *we*. They are also members of the community. They are sick and need restoration. The Pharisees were pushing Levi and his group out (the bad kind of shame). The Pharisees no longer considered people like Levi to be *us*.

BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF SHAMING DONE WRONG

While shame can be used appropriately, it is often not. Rather than pulling someone back into the group, it pushes them away. Jesus tells a parable of a Pharisee and a tax collector: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get'" (Lk 18:10–12). We should note that the Pharisee's prayer would be heard by the tax collector—and everyone else. Rather than pulling the tax collector back into the community, the Pharisee further pushes him away.



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

The tax collector feels it. He stands at a distance. He won't even look up to heaven (Lk 18:13). Luke uses this parable to introduce the Zacchaeus story, where a tax collector is lovingly forgiven and restored—not by the efforts of the Pharisees, or the village, but by Jesus.

In Jesus' parable, there is nothing wrong with the behaviors the Pharisee mentions. Fasting and giving are commendable behaviors. But by standing by himself, he indicates he does not want the tax collector as part of his community. He considers the tax collector to be other and not us. His rebuke of the tax collector is not a positive use of shame but a negative one. Luke loves divine reversal stories, and this is another one. Jesus flips it over: it is the tax collector who is reconciled with God; the Pharisee is not. Jesus tells this story to shame those in his midst: "some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else" (Lk 18:9). Jesus is using this parable to gently shame them, trying to pull them back. They were supposed to be trying to restore folks such as Zacchaeus.

In another story, Jesus is in a debate with leaders in the temple. Jesus has been contrasting his Father and their father: "I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you are doing what you have heard from your father" (Jn 8:38). They don't like the way the conversation is going, and so they reference Jesus' unusual birth. They say to him, "We were not born of fornication" (Jn 8:41 NASB). This is one of the worst biblical examples of shame used improperly. It does not provide any path of restoration. It is a public condemnation. They are trying to push Jesus away from the community. We know Jesus' birth was a miraculous event. Clearly, they assume otherwise. But even if it were true, how would that have been Jesus' fault? No child born out of wedlock should be blamed for the actions of their parents. Such a comment provides no path for restoration. It is not the words of a community seeking to restore someone. There is no place in God's kingdom for such misuse of shaming.

When Paul was in the city of Corinth, "the Jews of Corinth made a united attack on Paul and brought him to the place of judgment. "This man," they charged, "is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law" (Acts 18:12–13). The Jews lost the case, and it seems they blamed Sosthenes, the synagogue leader. Apparently, he is considered responsible for the way the case against Paul was presented to the Roman authorities. They do not handle the matter privately. "Then the crowd there turned on Sosthenes the synagogue leader and beat him in front of the proconsul" (Acts 18:17). If this (very public) shaming were done properly, Sosthenes would be restored to his community. We have a hint that this shaming was condemning, too public and too harsh. Paul later writes to the church in Corinth, and his cosender is a man named Sosthenes. If it is the same man (and it's quite possible), then the Corinthian Jews' inappropriate use of shame did not restore Sosthenes to them but pushed him away.

The Romans designed the cross to shame people in the most public and harsh way. It functioned to make people reject the crucified person as not one of their own. The cross was used by the Romans on Jesus and many early Christians to shame them and to encourage others to break their ties with the movement. This would have been a fearsome force to discourage people from following Jesus. The writer of Hebrews writes to Christians facing persecution and says, "**Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame" (Heb 12:1–2).** This is the proper response for anyone who has been improperly shamed: scorn it. We should not allow shame improperly used to push us out. *And* if other people experience this kind of shame, it is our responsibility to pull them back into the community. It is good for the (mis) shamed person but also for our community. Not only do we gain back our brother or sister, but we protect *us* and our godly values.

CONCLUSION: A LITTLE SHAME GOES A LONG WAY

Shame is a powerful tool. Wood can be carved with a whittling knife or a chainsaw. Both have their role. A chainsaw can be very, very useful. But it must be handled with special care, because it is so powerful. Used wrongly, it can cause serious damage. Shaming can be like a chainsaw. It can be the best tool, but it can also do a lot of damage when used improperly. Just like a chainsaw, some people will never want to use it. And perhaps this is wise (for them and us). Inexperienced hands, not the tool, make the result bad. If you saw a friend carelessly swinging around a chainsaw, it would be appropriate to urge them to stop. We would say the same to anyone using shame improperly. You may have experienced this yourself. Wounds from a chainsaw are rarely minor. You as a reader may have been the victim of shame used wrongly. Again, we are very sorry. God wants to pull you back into his community and to comfort and heal you.

Nonetheless, we have seen biblical stories where shame is used in a different way—properly, correctly, and by God—to restore people. As individualists, we may try to use guilt to bring people to repentance. But we don't like to use shame. Why? Partly this is because we think of shame only as the negative kind of shame, which condemns. We rightly refrain from wanting to use that kind of shame on people around us. Guilt can be used to teach; so can



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

shame. But only the right kind of guilt and the right kind of shame, in the right kind of situations. However, when we dismiss all shame as wrong, we miss a lot of what is going on under the hood of Bible stories. As we saw in the stories of Levi and the sinful woman, no explicit shame words are used. They didn't need to be. The Pharisees felt Jesus' pulling on them to think and act differently. The Bible has stories of shame used well, gently, and to restore. Shame can be a tool to pull back into our community those who have wandered beyond the boundaries. But like a chainsaw, it needs a prominent sign: Danger. Handle with care.⁸

¹shame \ 'shām\ *noun*

[Middle English, from Old English *scamu*; akin to Old High German *scama* shame] before 12th century

- 1 a:** a painful emotion caused by consciousness of guilt, shortcoming, or impropriety
b: the susceptibility to such emotion 〈have you no *shame*?〉
- 2:** a condition of humiliating disgrace or disrepute: *IGNOMINY* 〈the *shame* of being arrested〉
- 3 a:** something that brings censure or reproach *also*: something to be regretted: *PITY* 〈it's a *shame* you can't go〉
b: a cause of feeling shame

²shame *verb transitive*

shamed; sham•ing 13th century

- 1:** to bring shame to: *DISGRACE* 〈*shamed* the family name〉
- 2:** to put to shame by outdoing
- 3:** to cause to feel shame
- 4:** to force by causing to feel guilty 〈*shamed* into confessing〉

shame•faced \ 'shām- ,fāst\ *adjective*

[alteration of *shamefast*] 1593

- 1:** showing modesty: *BASHFUL*
- 2:** showing shame: *ASHAMED*—**shame•faced•ly** \-, fā-səd-lē, -, fāst-lē\ *adverb*—**shame•faced•ness** \-, fā-səd-nəs, -, fās(t)-nəs\ *noun*

shame•fast \ 'shām- ,fast\ *adjective*

[Middle English, from Old English *scamf+st*, from *scamu* + *f+st* fixed, fast] before 12th century
archaic: *SHAMEFACED*

shame•ful \ 'shām-fəl\ *adjective*

13th century

- 1 a:** bringing shame: *DISGRACEFUL* 〈the children's behavior was *shameful*〉
b: arousing the feeling of shame
- 2** *archaic*: full of the feeling of shame: *ASHAMED*—**shame•ful•ly** \-fə-lē\ *adverb*—**shame•ful•ness** *noun*

shame•less \ 'shām-ləs\ *adjective*

before 12th century

⁸ Richards, E. R., & James, R. (2020). *Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes: Patronage, Honor, and Shame in the Biblical World* (pp. 174–204). IVP Academic.



- 1: having no shame: insensible to disgrace ⟨a *shameless* braggart⟩
- 2: showing lack of shame ⟨the *shameless* exploitation of the natives⟩ —**shame•less•ly**
adverb—**shame•less•ness** noun⁹

SHAME

First display of shame, Genesis 3:10.

Creator's regret, Genesis 6:6.

Attitude toward father's privacy, Genesis 9:20–27.

Shame for immoral sons, 1 Samuel 2:22–25; 8:1–3.

Shameful royal death, 1 Samuel 31:8–10.

Inundated by guilt, shame, Ezra 9:5–9.

Those put to shame, those not, Psalm 25:2–3.

Deep sense of disgrace, Psalm 44:15.

Put to shame, Psalm 119:78.

Asleep during harvest, Proverbs 10:5 (NKJV).

Mother's shame, Proverbs 29:15.

Moon disgraced, sun ashamed, Isaiah 24:23.

Shamed by others, Isaiah 26:11.

Mountain wilts with shame, Isaiah 33:9 (CEV).

Idol makers ashamed, Isaiah 45:16.

Shame of getting caught, Jeremiah 2:26.

Refusing to be ashamed, Jeremiah 3:3 (NKJV).

Unable to blush, Jeremiah 6:15.

Too ashamed to talk, Ezekiel 16:63.

Fallen princes, Ezekiel 32:30.

Preferring shame to honor, Hosea 4:18 (LB).

Shameless evil, Zephaniah 3:5 (See CEV).

Shamed by nudity, Revelation 16:15.

See *Disgrace, Embarrassment, Humiliation, Wantonness*.¹⁰

SHAME

954 būwsh (9), *be ashamed*

955 būwshâh (4), *shame*

1317 boshnâh (1), *shamefulness*

1322 bôsheth (20), *shame*

2616 châçad (1), *to reprove, shame*

2659 châphêr (4), *to be ashamed*

2781 cherpâh (3), *contumely, disgrace*

3637 kâlam (6), *to taunt*

3639 k^elimmâh (20), *disgrace, scorn*

3640 k^elimmûwth (1), *disgrace, scorn*

6172 'ervâh (1), *disgrace*

7036 qâlôwn (13), *disgrace*

⁹ Merriam-Webster, I. (2003). In *Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary*. (Eleventh ed.). Merriam-Webster, Inc.

¹⁰ Anderson, K. (1996). *Where to Find It in the Bible*. T. Nelson Publishers.



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

8103 shimtsâh (1), scornful *whispering*
149 aischrôn (3), *shameful thing*
152 aischunē (5), *shame*
808 aschēmōsunē (1), *indecency; shame*
818 atimazō (1), to *maltreat, dishonor*
819 atimia (1), *disgrace*
1788 ěntrĕpō (1), to *respect; to confound*
1791 ěntrōpē (2), *shame*
2617 kataischunō (1), to *disgrace or shame*
3856 paradĕigmatizō (1), to *expose to infamy*

SHAMED

937 būwz (1), *disrespect*
954 būwsh (1), to be *ashamed*
3001 yâbêsh (1), to *dry up; to wither*
8106 Shemer (1), *settlings of wine, dregs*

SHAMEFACEDNESS

127 aidōs (1), *modesty*

SHAMEFUL

1322 bōsheth (1), *shame*
7022 qîyqâlōwn (1), *disgrace*

SHAMEFULLY

3001 yâbêsh (1), to *dry up; to wither*
818 atimazō (1), to *maltreat, dishonor*
821 atimōō (1), to *maltreat, disgrace*
5195 hubrizō (1), to *exercise violence, abuse*¹¹

PUT TO SHAME

Ps 35:4 Let those be *put to shame* and brought to dishonor who seek after my life
Ps 44:7 But You have saved us from our enemies, and have *put to shame* those who hated us
Ps 71:1 In You, O Lord, I put my trust; let me never be *put to shame*
Ps 83:17 Let them be confounded and dismayed forever; yes, let them be *put to shame* and perish
Ps 97:7 Let all be *put to shame* who serve carved images, who boast of idols
Ps 129:5 Let all those who hate Zion be *put to shame* and turned back
Is 54:4 nor be disgraced, for you will not be *put to shame*
Jer 10:14 every metalsmith is *put to shame* by the graven image
Jer 17:18 Let them be ashamed who persecute me, but do not let me be *put to shame*
Jer 51:17 every metalsmith is *put to shame* by the carved image
Joel 2:26 You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you; and My people shall never be *put to shame*

¹¹ Strong, J. (1997). [New Strong's guide to Bible words](#) (electronic ed.). Thomas Nelson.



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

Joel 2:27 Then you shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the Lord your God and there is no other. My people shall never be *put to shame*

Zeph 3:19 I will appoint them for praise and fame in every land where they were *put to shame*

Zech 10:5 They shall fight because the Lord is with them, and the riders on horses shall be *put to shame*

Luke 13:17 And when He said these things, all His adversaries were *put to shame*

Rom 9:33 Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offense, and whoever believes on Him will not be *put to shame*

Rom 10:11 For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be *put to shame*”

1Cor 1:27 But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to *put to shame* the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to *put to shame* the things which are mighty

1Pet 2:6 Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, “Behold, I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious, and he who believes on Him will by no means be *put to sham*”¹²

5

HAVE YOU NO SHAME?

Honor/Shame and Right/Wrong

On one occasion, I (Randy) was counseling an Indonesian couple in which the husband had just been caught in adultery. I was surprised that the wife’s greatest pain seemed not to be the personal betrayal. In her words, the most basic concern was, “Where can I put my face?” He had “wronged her”—to use my term—by “shaming her”—their term. This confuses us Westerners. In fact, the entire issue of honor and shame over against right and wrong (innocence and guilt) is a bit of a mystery to us. As authors, we must confess that this chapter was one of the more challenging to write. English just doesn’t have good words to describe this system, and our cultural values run almost in the opposite direction. Conceptually, the topic under discussion in this chapter is closely related to the subject matter of the last chapter. **As will become clearer below, individualist cultures tend also to be right/wrong (innocence/guilt) cultures, while collectivist cultures tend to be honor/shame cultures.** That means we’re getting deeper into choppy waters. Here’s what we propose: we’ll define what scholars have meant by honor and shame by comparing them to the Western concepts of right and wrong. Then we’ll show how honor and shame worked in the ancient worldview by offering some Old Testament and New Testament examples.

DEFINING A WESTERN VIEW OF RIGHT AND WRONG

We argued in the previous chapter that the formation of the individual self is a central value in individualist cultures such as that of the United States. An important part of mature selfhood, for us, is knowing the difference between right and wrong. Ideally, then, we choose the right and avoid the wrong. This sense of what is right and what is wrong is expected to be internal, within the heart and mind of each person, and people are expected to choose right behavior on the basis of the conscience. Rules and laws are established to guide people in the right path. But ultimately the goal is that people will internalize the code of conduct so that it becomes not a matter of external influence but of internal guidance. We even have a verse for this. Actually we don’t, but we (mis)paraphrase Paul and say: Christ’s law should be written on our hearts and not on tablets of stone (2 Cor 3:2–3). Our point is that our decisions to act rightly are not necessarily

¹² Thomas Nelson Publishers. (2000). [Find it Fast in the Bible](#) (p. 563). T. Nelson Publishers.



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

made with other people in mind—to please others, for example—but on the basis of an objective and largely individual sense of right and wrong.

Things have not always been this way in the Western tradition. In biblical times, it was an honor/shame world. Emperor Nero loved to sing, but singing referred to singing in public. An old Greek proverb reasoned, “Hidden music counts for nothing.” Likewise, ancients avoided doing evil not primarily because they were concerned about right or wrong, but because others were watching. For this reason, the mythical “ring of Gyges” was considered the one temptation that no man could resist. The ring made its bearer invisible. With it on, a man could do whatever he wished without others knowing. You may recognize this storyline; J. R. R. Tolkien used it in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The movie didn’t explain, though, why humans found the “one ring” so tempting. Plato knew. “No man can be imagined to be of such an iron nature that he would stand fast in justice” if he was free to act without anyone’s knowledge, Plato wrote; “No man would keep his hands off what was not his own when he could safely take what he liked out of the market.” The suggestion is that ordinary humans do right only if others are watching. Plato argued that humans could (and should) resist the temptation of the ring; he argued for an inner motivation for moral conduct. Plato set the Greek world, and later the Western world, on a path that would lead toward each person having an inner (individual) voice to distinguish and choose right from wrong.

This inner voice is strengthened by the concomitant Western habit of dichotomizing everything, usually into *good* or *bad*. In fact, it is more basic than that. We tend to view everything as an “either-or.” Aristotle’s use of syllogisms and, ultimately, the dualism of Descartes have conditioned Westerners to polarize choices into two opposing categories. (Many readers will be trying to decide if we are right or wrong about this!) Eastern thought, influenced by the Tao and Confucius, the yin/yang, tend to strive for harmony rather than distinction, stressing more a both-and perspective rather than an either-or. Thus, I (Randy) teach my sons to be individuals, make up their own minds, stand out from the crowd, stop listening to the group. I punctuate my lesson with an American aphorism: “Take the road less traveled.” My Chinese pastor-friend, by contrast, teaches his sons to live in harmony, to blend in, to listen to what the group is saying. Likewise, he quotes a time-honored Chinese aphorism, “It is the tall poppy that gets cut down.” Both fathers want their children to know what is right, but my sons are to listen to their hearts, and his sons are to listen to their community.

Because Westerners—especially Americans—assume we should be internally motivated to do the right thing, we also believe we will be internally punished if we don’t. American literature offers a sterling example of the Western assumption that internal guilt will convict a wrongdoer of his crime. In Edgar Allen Poe’s short story “The Tell-Tale Heart,” an unnamed narrator tells the reader how he killed (for no real reason) the elderly man who lived with him, dismembered him and then buried him under the floorboards of his own bedroom. It is the perfect crime: he leaves no evidence, so he is sure to get away with it. But he is undone by his guilty conscience, which manifests itself in a hallucination that the old man’s heart continues to beat in his ears from beyond the grave. It’s a gruesome illustration, we know. But it makes the point. In the West, we know right from wrong objectively, and we typically assume that our wrongdoings will find us out because our consciences won’t let us rest until we confess.



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

DEFINING HONOR/SHAME

Things work differently in shame cultures. In shame cultures, people are more likely to choose right behavior on the basis of what society expects from them. It is not a matter of guilt, nor an inner voice of direction, but outer pressures and opinions that direct a person to behave a certain way. Rules and laws are less a deterrent for bad behavior than the risk of bringing shame on oneself or one's family. In fact, one should not regret actions that, in the words of Dayanand Pitamber, "have been approved by those considered significant. When a person performs any act in the interest of the community, he is not concerned about the wrongness or rightness of the acts." If a person commits violence that is approved by the community, then he has no reason to feel shame (and certainly not guilt). A critical value in this sort of culture is preserving "face," or the honor associated with one's name. As Duane Elmer notes, the Thai word for being shamed, for losing face, literally means "to tear someone's face off so they appear ugly before their friends and community." Likewise, the word among the Shona of Zimbabwe denotes, "to stomp your feet on my name" or "to wipe your feet on my name." If a person from a shame culture commits a "sin," he will not likely feel guilty about it if no one else knows, for it is the community (not the individual) that determines whether one has lost face. This may seem unbelievable to many of you. You may think, *Is that even right? Surely, the person "deep down inside" feels at least a twinge of guilt.* (In our experience, no, they do not.) Paul considered himself "faultless" even though he was persecuting Christians (Phil 3:6). It was only when he was confronted by another that he realized his sin (Acts 9:1–5); this was also the case with Peter (Gal 2:11–14). In a shame culture, it is not the guilty conscience but the community that punishes the offender by shaming him.

For example, in 1997, a government minister of Malaysia, Ting Chew Peh, hoped to crack down on littering in his country. They put in place a fine of four hundred dollars (U.S.) for those caught tossing rubbish. But that wasn't the main deterrent. Offenders would be required to pick up trash while wearing a T-shirt that read, "I am a litterbug." Ting Chew Peh "hoped public shaming would deter others."

The risk of shaming can likewise affect the way that entire governments act. After the 2004 tsunami in Indonesia, Westerners rushed to help. The hardest-hit region, Aceh, has always protected itself from outsider influence. (Most Westerners would call this *isolationism*.) In this case, preferences had to be put aside. I (Randy) had never dreamed I would ever set foot in Aceh; yet, within weeks of the tsunami, I was leading medical teams there. Acehnese people were gracious and grateful. After a few months, though, the Acehnese government fretted over how their people would respond to so many foreigners everywhere. They worried the people might conclude their government wasn't protecting them properly from foreign influence. There was risk of shame. So the Acehnese government demanded that foreigners leave. They didn't *want* the foreigners to leave. They didn't *expect* them to leave. They made the demand in order to save face, to show that they cared about their people.

Indonesian vice president Jusuf Kalla needed to show that he honored the wishes of the Acehnese provincial government, so he demanded all foreigners leave the country by March 26, which was three months away. He didn't actually *want* the foreigners to leave, nor did he expect them to. Asians understood all this. Malaysian defense minister Najib Razak, speaking for the countries of Southeast Asia, noted the timetable and later commented that foreign aid would



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

remain as long as needed. From his perspective, everyone has saved face, everyone wins and everything is fine.

Well, not quite everything. Americans didn't understand. People in the United States were stunned and outraged, asking: *How dare they kick us out? Don't they want us there?* America's government demanded an apology, and a power struggle began. Indonesia wanted and needed us there. If Indonesia stood firm, they would lose aid they desperately needed; if they gave in to the United States, the Acehese provincial government would lose face. Ultimately, they apologized, to their shaming. Even after the apology, many Americans thought that the Acehese were ungrateful, which represents a cardinal sin in many Western cultures. No one won.

To summarize, in an innocence/guilt culture (which includes most Western societies), the laws of society, the rules of the church, local mores and the code of the home are all internalized in the person. The goal is that when a person breaks one of these, her or his conscience will be pricked. In fact, it is hoped that the conscience will discourage the person from breaking the rule in the first place. The battle is fought on the inside. In an honor/shame society, such as that of the Bible and much of the non-Western world today, the driving force is to not bring shame upon yourself, your family, your church, your village, your tribe or even your faith. The determining force is the expectations of your significant others (primarily your family). Their expectations don't override morals or right/wrong; they actually *are* the ethical standards. In these cultures, you are shamed when you disappoint those whose expectations matter. "You did wrong"—not by breaking a law and having inner guilt but by failing to meet the expectations of your community. For our discussion here, the point to notice is that the verdict comes not from the inner conscience of the perpetrator but from the external response of his or her group. One's actions are *good* or *bad* depending upon how the community interprets them.

As is clear from all this, non-Western and Western cultures have a difficult time understanding each other. Western readers of this book likely think the non-Western view of honor is strange and convoluted. Our non-Western friends find us equally confusing. Westerners like to think of ourselves as holding to the moral high ground that is found within ourselves; non-Westerners often view us as insensitive.

LANGUAGE AND SOME FINE DISTINCTIONS

The vocabulary for honor and shame is difficult for Westerners to keep straight, not least because though we still use the terms *honor* and *shame*, we use them differently.

First, *shame* is not negative in honor/shame cultures; *shaming* is. Technically, in these cultures, *shame* is a good thing: it indicates that you and your community know the proper way to behave. You have a sense of shame; if you didn't, you would *have no shame*. You would be *shameless*. This is different from *being shamed*. When an older American asks, "Have you no shame?" they mean, "Don't you know the proper thing to do?" When one is censured for not having a sense of shame, for being shameless, then one is *shamed*.

We know that all this can be confusing. But remember that languages tend not to have words for ideas that are not considered important. Since honor/shame isn't important in English, we are lacking in the words we need. Make no mistake, though: shame is important. It was why the Jewish officials killed Jesus. They didn't kill him for going around preaching "love one another" or



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

for healing the sick or for performing miracles. They killed him because he had taken their honor—a limited resource (more on that below).

This all means, of course, that how we view immorality—whether we view it as *wrong* or as *shameful*—affects the way we read the Bible. In a landmark essay, theologian Krister Stendahl demonstrated that the introspective conscience of Westerners is alien to the biblical authors. Beginning with Augustine, Christians understood Paul’s conversion as a troubled conscience weighed down by the guilt of sin but transformed by the soothing message of Christ’s forgiveness. Paul “saw the light,” not so much literally as internally. Luther encouraged Western Christians to come to Christ via our own consciences properly convicted from our reading of God’s law. Today, we often skip over Paul’s statement that his life was blameless according to the law before he met Christ (Phil 3:4–6). Paul shows no sign of a troubled conscience before or after his conversion. Yet we don’t know how to have a conversion without inner guilt. Doesn’t Jesus promise a Paraclete (“Advocate”) that will convict the world? Absolutely (Jn 16). But what goes without being said for us is that “conviction” must be internal. In fact, we might (mistakenly) assume that is the only way the Spirit might work. Actually, the Spirit uses both inner conviction (a sense of guilt) *and* external conviction (a sense of shame). While the ancient world and most of the non-Western world contain honor/shame cultures and the West is made up of innocence/guilt cultures, God can work effectively in both.

HONOR AND SHAME IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

When you know to look for it, the honor/shame aspect of the cultures of the Bible becomes apparent in many ways. We have enough space to consider only a couple examples. Scholars generally agree that the Holy Spirit convicted biblical characters through external, not internal, voices. A very familiar Old Testament story of how God convicted an unrepentant sinner illustrates well how our assumptions about an introspective conscience can cause us to miss what’s really happening.

The prophet Nathan was the tool of the Spirit to convict David of his sin with Bathsheba (2 Sam 12). That much we usually get right. Nevertheless, we commonly misread this story because we miss the undercurrent of honor and shame. We typically assume that David was aware of his sin but stubbornly refused to repent. Then, when Nathan confronts David—or, in a sense, tricks him—David’s conscience is pricked, he gives in to his inner conviction and he publicly repents. It is far more likely that David had not given the matter a moment’s thought. Remember, we Westerners tend to be introspective, but biblical characters were generally not. From beginning to end, the entire story of David and Bathsheba is steeped in honor and shame language, and this explains why Western readers often find some parts of the story confusing.

The way the narrator opens the story is telling: “In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king’s men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem” (2 Sam 11:1).

David was not where he was supposed to be. He was lounging at the palace, while Joab was doing the kingly role of leading the army. (Joab’s role will come up again.) Already the issue of honor and shame is introduced. David is not acting honorably as king. Then matters get worse. “One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent someone to find out about her” (2 Sam 11:2–3).

Women (then or now) don’t bathe in places where they could be seen publicly. We might assume Bathsheba had been engaged in a ritual Jewish bath, but the text never says, or even suggests, that she was Jewish (her husband was a Hittite). Furthermore, we are unaware of ritual purifications done at night. Since it is evening (remember, David had been in bed), it is likely it was dark and therefore Bathsheba had provided sufficient lighting—sufficient for bathing and sufficient for being seen while bathing. We may assume Bathsheba was aware that her rooftop was visible from the palace, notably from the *king’s* balcony. In antiquity, people were cognizant of their proximity to the seat of power. Even today, White House offices are ranked by their distance from the Oval Office. We would be unlikely to believe a White House aide who said, “I just stepped out in the hallway to talk. I didn’t realize that the president of the United States walked down this hallway every day at this time!” Likewise, we would be skeptical if Bathsheba asserted, “Oh, I didn’t realize that was the king’s balcony.” We think the story is told in a way to imply she intended to be seen by the king. Her plan works.

David likes what he sees, so he asks a servant to find out who she is. The servant responds to the king’s question with a question: “Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?” (2 Sam 11:3 NASB). This sort of response is customary in an honor/shame culture. The servant responded with a question because it would shame the king for a servant to know something that the king doesn’t know. So he informs the king by posing a question, giving David the opportunity to answer, “That’s correct.” Everyone saves face.

Then David has Bathsheba brought to his palace, where he sleeps with her. Then she goes home. When we find out she’s pregnant, we may be tempted to think, *Uh oh. Now David is in trouble. There’s no hiding what he’s done now* (2 Sam 11:5). But that’s not really the point. David is the king; he could have paid Uriah for the woman. But David isn’t interested in acquiring Bathsheba as a wife or concubine; he wants to save face.

Most Westerners will likely misread here. First, we’ll assume a measure of privacy that didn’t exist in the ancient world. David’s adultery with Bathsheba was not a private affair. He asked a servant to find out who the woman was. As soon as the king sent a servant to inquire who the woman was, everyone in the palace would be talking. Then he sent messengers (plural) to bring her to the palace. The entire palace would know that David sent for the wife of Uriah.

Also, the narrator wants us to know that the real conflict is between David and Uriah. The story quits referring to her as “Bathsheba” and switches to “the wife of Uriah” (“Mrs. Uriah”). In fact, it is quite possible that the narrator *never* tells us her name. Bathsheba means “daughter of an oath” or probably “daughter of Sheba.” Likely, this term references her appearance and origin—she is from Sheba—rather than her name. The story centers upon Uriah, the named and undisputed victim in the story. The wife of Uriah came, spent one or more nights and then was sent away. (The text pours on shame by saying she was “sent away,” not “she left.”)

Everyone in the palace knew about it. “The wife of Uriah” is shamed, since David didn’t keep her. When she sends word that she is pregnant, it is public news. Everyone knows. Everyone will also know that David sent for Uriah: “So David sent this word to Joab: ‘Send me Uriah the Hittite.’ And Joab sent him to David” (2 Sam 11:6).

Now, we may not know why he sent for Uriah, but everyone else would have. David is asking Uriah to let him off the hook. If Uriah comes home and spends one night with his wife, then the



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

baby is “technically” Uriah’s, even though everyone knows otherwise. Honor would be restored (among the men). Bathsheba may be the unhappy victim—either because she was assaulted originally or, more likely, because she was sent away afterwards. For our purposes here, though, we should note David’s concern is not whether adultery is objectively right or wrong. He doesn’t appear to be nursing a guilty conscience. While in our Western culture, a “guilty conscience” can go without being said, in David’s culture, honor and shame did not need to be stated overtly. The hints and innuendos were sufficient. David’s concern was not soothing a guilty conscience but protecting his honor as king.

It is quite likely that Uriah had already heard the gossip by the time he returned home. Supplies were constantly flowing between the city and the army. Everyone wanted news from home. If Uriah had no friend or servants in the city to fill him in—which was unlikely, since his house was so prominently located—he would have found out what was going on somehow. Uriah was no messenger or courier; he was a soldier. Kings did not summon random soldiers. Before you keep that appointment, you would want to know why. If the king intended to execute you, you would want to know so that you could fail to show up for the appointment. In any case, it is clear from the story that Uriah finds out what’s up *before* he sees David: “When Uriah came to him, David asked him how Joab was, how the soldiers were and how the war was going. Then David said to Uriah, ‘Go down to your house and wash your feet.’ So Uriah left the palace, and a gift from the king was sent after him” (2 Sam. 11:7–8).

The story tells us exactly what David is doing. He tells Uriah to go home and he sends Uriah payment (“a gift”) to let David off the hook. We don’t know the reason—perhaps Uriah loved his wife or perhaps the gift was too small—but Uriah won’t play ball: “But Uriah slept at the entrance to the palace with all his master’s servants and did not go down to his house. David was told, ‘Uriah did not go home’ ” (2 Sam 11:9–10).

Uriah’s reason for sleeping at the palace entrance was to make a public statement. Everyone, including David, knows now that Uriah is not letting David off the hook. The narrator doesn’t want us to miss this: “David was told.” So David ups the ante; he calls Uriah back for another conference. The very act of a mere mercenary soldier—remember, Uriah is not an Israelite—having a *second* audience with the king is a veiled threat. He asks Uriah, “Haven’t you just come from a military campaign? Why didn’t you go home?” (2 Sam 11:10). It is likely that Uriah is angry. His response shames David in three ways. First, Uriah notes that everyone (with one exception) was where they were supposed to be: in the field with the army. “Uriah said to David, ‘The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my commander Joab and my lord’s men are camped in the open country. How could I go to my house to eat and drink and make love to my wife? As surely as you live, I will not do such a thing!’ ” (2 Sam 11:11). Even God (symbolized by the ark) was there. Everyone was there, that is, but David. Second, Uriah notes the one in the field commanding the army—doing David’s job—was Joab, not David. This was all the more poignant because Uriah was a paid soldier, a Hittite mercenary. He has less reason to fight for Israel than David had. Lastly, Uriah indicates to David he knows exactly what David wants and will not cooperate: “and make love to my wife.”

So David switches strategies and tries to get Uriah to pass out drunk. He can then have the unconscious Uriah tossed into the front door of his house. But that doesn’t work either. “Then David said to him, ‘Stay here one more day, and tomorrow I will send you back.’ So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day and the next. At David’s invitation, he ate and drank with him,



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

and David made him drunk. But in the evening Uriah went out to sleep on his mat among his master's servants; he did not go home" (2 Sam 11:12–13).

Now it is clear to everyone, including David, that Uriah will not give David an honorable way out of this mess. It was customary for Mediterranean kings merely to seize whatever they wanted. King Ahab wanted Naboth's vineyard, for example, so he took it (1 Kings 21:18). You may recall that David himself refused to do this on another occasion (2 Sam 24:24). In this case, David takes the low road. He refuses to pay Uriah to divorce his wife; instead, he arranges for Uriah to be killed. We know the story, but the narrator wants us to notice that more than Uriah (or other mercenaries) died as a result of David's decision: "some of the men in David's army fell" (2 Sam 11:17).

Nonetheless, the text gives no indication that David felt any inner remorse. We misread when we think David had a guilty conscience. David's honor is restored; Bathsheba moves in so the baby is David's. Bathsheba probably got what she wanted. Only Uriah suffered, and David likely considered it Uriah's fault. Uriah had failed to play along. He had shamed David and David retaliated. Probably in David's mind, he had made Uriah a fair offer. *C'est la vie*, we might say. David summarized the episode this way in a message sent to Joab: "Don't let this upset you; the sword devours one as well as another" (2 Sam 11:25).

We want you to see that the honor/shame aspect of David's culture determined his conduct. At every step, he did what was typical for a Mediterranean king at the time in a situation like this. And according to the honor/shame system of David's day, the matter was resolved. It is likely that David never gave it another thought. He was not likely tortured by a guilty conscience. There was no further recourse. All parties were satisfied or silenced.

Everyone is satisfied except the Lord. Note how the narrator words it: "After the time of mourning was over, David had her [Bathsheba] brought to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son. *But the thing David had done displeased the LORD*" (2 Sam 11:27, emphasis added).

Although David had acted appropriately according to the broader cultural standards of his day, God held him to higher moral standards. Even so, God worked through the honor/shame system to bring David to repentance. The culture of David's day didn't have a way to bring up the matter. We Westerners might assume that God's Spirit would eventually convict David's inner heart, like Poe's tell-tale heart. That's because Westerners are introspective. We respond to internal pressure. But David doesn't appear to be experiencing any inner pressure. No matter; God is not stymied by culture. God had introduced another element into ancient Near Eastern culture: a prophet. Instead of a voice whispering to his heart, a prophet shouted at his face. Either way, God speaks. Since David's culture used shame to bring about conformity, God used shame to bring David to repentance. "Then Nathan said to David, 'You are the man!' " (2 Sam 12:7).

The moving story of David's subsequent repentance has stirred the hearts of believers for thousands of years. We have David's words of repentance:

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

and justified when you judge.

Surely I was sinful at birth. (Ps 51:3–5)

Actually, David's words of repentance might trouble you a bit. First, David says he sinned only against God. Well, it seems to us David sinned against Bathsheba, Uriah, Joab and certainly the Israelite soldiers who were killed just because they were nearby. In fact, it seems there are plenty of people against whom David has sinned. Second, David confesses his sin as "from birth." We were thinking more like one moonlit night on a palace stroll. In David's day, kings had the right to do the things David did. Kings (and governments today) take property from citizens. They send soldiers to war, where some die. David was within his cultural rights. He broke no laws. Well, he did break one: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife" (Ex 20:17 κιν). David had transgressed God's laws, not his country's. Thus, when he says, "against you, you only, have I sinned," David is admitting that he is accountable not only to the expectations for a king but that he is also accountable to God.

This story illustrates three things powerfully. First, what goes without being said about sin and how God deals with it can lead us to miss important factors in the biblical text. If we assume David thought like a Westerner with an introspective conscience, we're likely to miss the point altogether. Second, God does not consider the matter closed just because David and the rest of the Israelites might. While culture determines how we understand the consequences of sin, God's will and commands are universal. It doesn't matter if our culture says it's okay if God says it isn't. Third, this story makes it quite clear that God is capable of working through all cultural systems and expectations to bring sinners to repentance. Perhaps God has used your conscience to bring you to repentance in the past. We're not belittling that experience. (It was and is our experience too.) Likewise, though, the power of the honor/shame system should not be underestimated. It is at least as powerful, and some would argue more powerful, than our Western worldview of guilt. So does God work through shame-based or guilt-based methods? We think the answer is both.

God worked through the honor/shame system, but we would err if we implied this was merely a system. God himself is concerned about honor/shame even if we Westerners are not. Throughout the Old Testament, God is concerned about the glory/honor of his name. The psalmists talk about this a lot: "You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, *honor him!* Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!" (Ps 22:23, emphasis added); "Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will *honor me*" (Ps 50:15, emphasis added).

God is also willing to honor those worthy of it. "For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD *bestows favor and honor*; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless" (Ps 84:11, emphasis added). "He will call on me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and *honor him*" (Ps 91:15, emphasis added).

It is also interesting that Bible characters often appeal to God's honor to get him to act on their behalf. When the Israelites make the golden calf, God is angry. " 'I have seen these people,' the LORD said to Moses, 'and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation' " (Ex 32:9–10).

Moses makes a two-pronged argument to persuade God to change his mind: (1) think about what the Egyptians will say about your name; and (2) you swore on your name and you don't



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

want to get a bad name! Moses doesn't appeal to God's sense of justice ("it wouldn't be right") but to his sense of honor ("you will be shamed"): "Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self" (Ex 32:12–13).

HONOR AND SHAME IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the same way that God used shame, through Nathan, to bring David to repentance, so also New Testament writers employed honor/shame cultural assumptions to compel Christians to good works. Although Plato predates the New Testament, his influence had not yet shaped Palestinian culture. It was still an honor/shame society.

During what we commonly refer to as the "white throne judgment," all the misdeeds from our past will be displayed for all to see: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Cor 5:10).

For us, this is a bummer, but it's not devastating. I've always imagined this as watching a film reel of my foibles (some of them worse than others). Then when that uncomfortable formality concludes, it's off to heaven for eternity for me. Not so bad, in the grand scheme of things. For Paul's first-century hearers, though, this news would have brought them to their knees. This judgment is described as a public honor/shame event. (God has the time to judge us all privately and individually, if he so intended.) Paul is applying a shame motivation to get the Corinthians to live worthily of the grace-gift God has given them. The very next line Paul writes is, "Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord" (2 Cor 5:11). What is it we are fearing? That the Lord will expose all our sins to the entire community of faith. He is warning them that although they might not currently feel guilty about their sin, there will come a day when they will be publicly shamed for their misdeeds before God and everybody. Paul is trying to "scare them straight."

During his earthly ministry, Jesus worked within the honor/shame system. In the ancient world, there was only so much honor to go around—it was a limited good. Everyone was scrambling for more. Jesus' opponents understood this well. Public questions were never for information. If one wanted information, you asked privately, as we often see Jesus' disciples do (Mt 24:3; Mk 9:28). Likewise, Nicodemus came at night because he didn't want his question misunderstood. He was looking for answers from Jesus, not honor. But public questions were contests. The winner was determined by the audience, who represented the community. If you silenced your opponent, you gained honor and they lost some. Even though scholars often refer to this as the "honor game," don't underestimate its seriousness. As we mentioned above, this is why the Jewish officials killed Jesus. They had been challenging Jesus publicly (Mt 12:1–7, for example), and every time they "lost," they lost honor. They were tired of it, and they wanted their honor back. In one of these "honor games" with Jesus, the Jewish leaders asked him, "Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?" (Mt 22:17). We often fail to notice the two most important parts of the story, even though Matthew highlighted them.

First, Jesus' conflict with the Jewish leadership begins in the previous chapter: "Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

to him” (Mt 21:23). The questions are posed in the most important public place in all of Israel. There couldn’t be any higher stakes in the honor game.

The second point Matthew makes is at the end of the conflict story: “No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions” (Mt 22:46).

Jesus won. The leaders then decide to kill Jesus. Honor is at stake here. They cannot just go down to the assassin’s booth at the market. Sticking a knife in Jesus in some Jerusalem alley would make him a martyr. They need to publicly disgrace Jesus in order to get their honor back. They need him executed as a criminal. This honor stuff is pretty serious. Some Middle Easterners still kill over honor.

It is within this context that we must understand the fact that Jesus encouraged his disciples to be humble: “When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor” (Lk 14:8). If you are not humble, you could suffer a terrible fate: “for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, ‘Give this person your seat.’ Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place” (Lk 14:8–9). Our English versions don’t translate this well. This final sentence is better translated as, “you will *go with shame* to the least important seat.” Even so, for most of us, it is merely the fate of having a lousy seat for dinner. For Easterners, you would be shamed in front of everyone. In Jesus’ day, the loss of honor affected all areas of life. Arranged marriages might need to be reshuffled: perhaps your son isn’t worthy of his daughter after all. The bakers’ guild might kick you out, even though your family has been members for generations.

Why does this matter for reading the Bible? If we misunderstand what’s happening in the story, we might wonder why a story is included in Scripture at all. What is the possible application, for example, of a story that simply records the bad behavior of its characters? In stories of right/wrong, we can identify the bad guys and the bad actions. Sometimes in Scripture it is harder. We sometimes see “sin” where the narrator did not intend it—or worse, we don’t see “sin” when the narrator was waving it in front of our faces. In the outrageous story in Judges 19 of the Levite and his concubine, we likely misread many parts. We see “sin” in several parts of the story: unfaithful concubine (v. 2), sexual assault (v. 22), rape (v. 25), cruelty (v. 28) and desecration of the dead (v. 29). We wouldn’t want to dispute any of these sins, but we likely missed some the narrator considered more important. The man repeatedly shamed the woman’s family by taking her from her parents but never giving her a full marriage (vv. 1–3) and later insulted her father’s hospitality (v. 10). Also, what the man had feared would happen in Jebus, a non-Israelite town (v. 12), actually happened in an Israelite town. Israelites were not being their brother’s keeper; they were no longer considering each other to be family (vv. 15, 22). They were not looking out for each other. When the story concludes (v. 30), everyone who saw it was saying to one another, “Such a thing has never been seen or done, not since the day the Israelites came up out of Egypt. Just imagine! We must do something! So speak up!” (Judg 19:30). We today assume they are outraged over the chopped-up body. If so, it’s hard to imagine the purpose of including the story in the Bible. Just for shock value? Surely not. It is more likely that bystanders are expressing outrage over the fragmented state of Israel. If they won’t stand together and defend each other, they will end up as chopped apart as that poor woman. With the tribe behaving shamefully, the people’s hope and the promise of God seem to be unraveling. The story is included to illustrate how bad things have become among God’s people, to show the dire need of the people’s return and the Lord’s intervention.



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

HOW THEN SHALL WE LIVE?

Non-Western honor systems and Western guilt systems are both used to encourage appropriate behavior and to discourage inappropriate behavior. Because the Bible was written by Middle Eastern authors in cultures that traded in the currency of honor and shame, we need to be sensitive to the language of honor and shame in Scripture if we hope to learn how to live faithfully as Christians. As we saw above, Paul used shame to discourage bad behavior. But he also used honor/shame language positively. In Ephesians 4:1, the apostle calls his listeners to “live a life worthy of the calling you have received” (see also 2 Thess 1:11). The word *worthy* should alert us that honor/shame language is being used. In the verses that follow, Paul mentions specific behaviors that fall in this category. But his point is to identify righteousness as conformity to the expectations of God’s community. The thought that should guide our conduct is that we are representatives of both Christ and the community that bears his name. As such, we must be careful to live in such a way that brings honor, and not shame, on Christ’s name and his family.

We deceive ourselves when we think sin is individual and independent of a community’s honor. Our individualism feeds the false sense that sin is merely an inner wrong—the private business between me and God, to be worked out on judgment day. Paul thought otherwise. He considered sin yeast that influenced the whole batch of dough (1 Cor 5:6). The church in Corinth was having problems with the fellowship meal and the Lord’s Supper. Slaves got off work at 5 p.m. Some of the wealthy, it appears, were arriving early and eating choice meats and drinking strong wine before the poorer members arrived. This division of haves and have-nots struck against the very heart of Christian fellowship. Paul exclaims,

In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God’s approval. So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord’s Supper you eat, for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. Don’t you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? (1 Cor 11:18–22)

As far as Paul is concerned, the Corinthians were eating the meal of Christ in an unworthy manner, which brings judgment. He adds, “That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep” (1 Cor 11:30). When we find what appear to be jumps in the logic, usually something went without being said. We misread when we fill that gap with something that goes without being said in our own culture. In this case, what went without being said in Paul’s day was that communities were “permeable.” What we mean is that bad things could soak into people (and groups). Ancients didn’t understand the world like we do, but they were good observers. When one person in a group caught a cold, often others in the group got sick. When one person in a group began bad habits or behaviors, often others in the group did as well. We might say that one scenario follows biology (viruses) and the other sociology (one bad apple spoils the whole bunch). Nonetheless, contamination happens.

Paul warned the church about the same thing. If you allow this “infection” in the Christian fellowship, it will spread. We often misread this passage. We fill in a value from our own culture: that is, “everyone pays for their own sin.” Thus we assume the ones who are getting sick or dying



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

are the ones who were eating unworthily. Paul never says that. Life seldom works that way. The actions of some have dishonored the entire community. Paul argues, “Don’t you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing?” (1 Cor 11:22). Their actions were shaming the church of God and therefore God was defending his honor (Mal 1:6–7)! God was smiting the church for not defending her purity (Mal 2:2). He was not meting out early individual punishment for a few. Sin is corporate; it permeates the whole body. We don’t like to think that way, but it’s true. It leavens the whole lump and the honor of us all is at stake.

CONCLUSION

Let’s return to the betrayed wife who had no place to put her face. We are all confident the husband sinned—we get that from the Ten Commandments. Why it was sin depends upon the culture. (Actually, it is sin because God said so, but our culture then explains to us “why” God didn’t like it.) The greater challenge is then how we become ministers in this place of sin. Honor/shame isn’t just an academic issue, a peculiarity of ancient worldview. While I (Randy) was developing ministerial training in Indonesia, the issue of counseling came up. It seemed like a no-brainer, but the matter unraveled quickly over issues I had never considered. First, as we have noted, there is no privacy in Indonesia. Everyone knows everybody’s business. When couples are disagreeing with each other, there are usually other folks in the house. Also, the neighbor’s house is only a couple of feet away. Unless they are whispering in the bedroom, others will hear. In villages the walls of houses are made of split bamboo, and you can even hear whispering. There are just no private issues. Second, a couple cannot go to see the pastor without everyone knowing a visit occurred. Third, a couple is very unlikely to go to see the pastor until the entire village knows. More significantly, they are unlikely to think they have a problem until someone else tells them. When neighbors tell the couple, “You two are arguing and need help,” then they become aware of relationship problems. It is the village’s problem. The couple will live there in the future, whether or not they are together, so it affects village life. This cheating husband’s sin had an impact on the entire community. So in what way was “private counseling” appropriate for that couple?

The further we move down the iceberg of culture, the more difficult it becomes to prescribe practices for uncovering our presuppositions. This may be the most challenging chapter yet. We recommend you see the Resources for Further Exploration for suggested readings on this topic. You’ll begin to see honor/shame language in the Bible when you are more familiar with the concept. In the meantime, pay attention to *where* stories take place in Scripture. If an event or conversation is taking place publicly, there’s a good chance that honor/shame is at stake, such as in the story of Ruth and Boaz. As we mentioned above, the key difference between the questions Nicodemus and Jesus’ disciples asked and those asked by Jerusalem’s Jewish leaders was context: Nicodemus and the disciples questioned Jesus privately (see, for example, Jn 3:2 and Mt 17:19). The Jewish leaders questioned him publicly. You might object that the primary difference was motive: Nicodemus and the disciples were asking sincere questions, while the religious leaders were trying to trap Jesus. That’s true. But context indicates motive. Private questions were not honor challenges. Public questions were.



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

1. The media frequently report a politician's misbehavior. Often someone will respond, "What he does privately is his business. Public life and private life are separate matters." Yet the Bible views life holistically. A lack of integrity in any part of a ship's hull is still a risk of breach; it doesn't matter if it is the port or the starboard side. Sin is never really private. Is a divorce really just the private business of two people? What about the children? What about the grandparents? Are coworkers and friends really immune? How have you seen "private" sin have corporate consequences?
2. As bearers of the name of Christ, our conduct is not our own private business. It is the business of Christ's church together. This is clear when Paul discusses the immoral man in Corinth (1 Cor 5:1–8). Paul brings full weight to the matter by indicating it was a community problem. How does this chapter's discussion on honor and shame inform 1 Corinthians 5:1–8?
3. In Galatians 2, Paul accuses Peter of hypocrisy because he ate with Gentiles until "certain men came from James" (Gal 2:12). Note the context in which Paul rebukes Peter. Paul makes it clear he opposed Peter "to his face" (2:11) "in front of them all" (2:14). He didn't pull Peter aside privately to reason with him. Paul's goal was to shame Peter into appropriate behavior. That was his culture; this is ours. So what should we do when a church leader isn't acting appropriately?
4. We often imagine that after Peter denied Christ three times, his guilty conscience led him to repent. The crowing rooster seems almost a plot device. Yet the text suggests it was the crowing rooster that shamed Peter into repentance. How does—or should—shame and shaming play a role in the lives of Western Christians? Can God convict us of sin through shame as well as through our conscience?
5. As we noted above, God is also concerned about honor and shame. The writer of Hebrews tells us that because of the faithfulness of the patriarchs, "Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God" (Heb 11:16). Have you ever wondered if God would be honored or ashamed to be known as our God? How do our actions as Christians bring God honor or shame?¹³

¹³ Richards, E. R., & O'Brien, B. J. (2012). *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (pp. 113–137). InterVarsity Press.



Two

HONOR & SHAME IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The early Christians proclaimed a message and stood for values that differed from, and indeed contradicted, core values within the dominant Greco-Roman culture as well as the Jewish subculture within which the church arose. Their non-Christian neighbors, therefore, subjected the early Christians to censure and other shaming techniques, designed to bring these deviant people back in line with the values and behaviors held dear by the surrounding culture (whether Jewish or Greco-Roman). The authors of the New Testament devote much of their attention, therefore, to insulating their congregations from the effects of these shaming techniques, calling the hearers to pursue lasting honor before that court of God whose verdict is eternal. These authors continue to use the language of honor and shame to articulate the value system of the Christian group, and to build up the church into a court of reputation that will reinforce commitment to those values through honoring those who distinguish themselves in acts of love, service and faithful witness and through censuring those who fail to embody those values.

Twenty-first century churches can learn much that is useful from the New Testament authors with regard to forming vital communities of disciples undaunted in their pursuit of complete obedience to Jesus by the world around them. The study of honor and shame language in the New Testament feeds directly into the building up of the church now, even as it did in the first century.

Assaults on the Honor of the Early Christians

Jesus gave his followers every indication that attachment to him would make them fall in the estimation of their neighbors:

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. (Lk 6:22)

A disciple is not above the teacher... If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! (Mt 10:24–25)

Similarly, John the evangelist recalls that even some prominent and high-placed Jewish leaders believed in Jesus but kept silent about their convictions because “they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God” (Jn 12:43). And, indeed, being known as a “Christ-follower” did prove to be a source for dishonor and the manifestations of one’s neighbors’ lack of esteem (insult, abuse, assault).

Rarely in the first century were Christians killed (i.e., lynched). Far more rarely were they executed on official orders (Nero’s brief persecution appears to be the only imperial act against Christians in the first century), but very frequently they experienced the rest of the spectrum of society’s strategies for “correcting” those who had deviated from honorable paths. In Jerusalem and Judea, particularly in the years immediately following the resurrection, the Christian



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

movement was identified as a deviant group and suppressed. Its leaders were cajoled, threatened, whipped (their honor publicly assaulted) and even killed (Acts 4:1–3; 5:17–18, 40–41; 7:54–8:3; 12:1–4; 1 Thess 2:14). Throughout Asia Minor and Greece, Gentile Christians experienced the social pressure of their non-Christian neighbors:

You endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting. (Heb 10:32–34)

Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.... Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.... Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker. Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name. (1 Pet 2:12; 3:16; 4:12–16)

The references to society's attempts to pressure the Christian "deviants" back into conformity with Greco-Roman or traditional Jewish values could be multiplied indefinitely. It is noteworthy that maligning, reproach, beatings, imprisonments and financial ruin are mentioned frequently and explicitly, but lynching or execution only rarely: their neighbors were trying to reclaim these wayward members of their society.

Why should such social pressure be brought to bear on this group? To the outsider, this Jesus movement appeared to undermine the sacred and central values of the society, pulling formerly good and reliable people into a subversive cult. First, the leader figure of the movement was executed in a manner suggestive of sedition: crucifixion was commonly associated with the punishment of political revolutionaries. Greeks and Romans might view Jesus, then, as a rebel who sought to overturn the peace. Jews regarded him as a "deceiver" (a false teacher), a "sorcerer" (his miraculous deeds went unquestioned; the source of the power, however, was a matter of debate) and a "blasphemer" (the charge that comes out in his trial before the Sanhedrin). Those who elected to follow such a subversive and disgraced man were immediately suspect in the eyes of both audiences.

With regard to Greco-Roman values, the message about this Christ was incompatible with the deeply rooted religious ideology of the Gentile world, as well as the more recent message propagated in Roman imperial ideology. Hints of the other side of the argument appear in statements made by New Testament authors. Central to the conflict is the fundamental religious shift made by converts to the Christian movement: "You turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God" (1 Thess 1:9). Christians shared the Jewish conviction that there was in fact only one God and that all the gods of the Gentiles were empty nothings. To the pagan, however, these gods were the guardians of the stability of the world order, the generous patrons who provided all that was needed for sustaining life, as well as the granters of individual petitions. The presence of idols throughout and the incorporation of some act of reverence toward the gods into every public festival, every assembly (whether for the business of the city or the meeting of a trade guild), and every private dinner party was a constant reminder to the individual of the care and protection of the gods—as well as the necessity of giving the gods their due and maintaining their favor. Piety



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

was indispensable to an individual's good reputation, especially since reverence toward the gods was interwoven so deeply into the domestic, social, civic and political aspects of Greco-Roman life. Plutarch regarded piety toward the gods (and the belief in their rule) as the bedrock of government: "It would be easier to build a city without the ground it stands on than to establish or sustain a government without religion" ("Reply to Colotes" 31).⁶ The rejection of the gods by the Christians made them "atheists" and colored them as a subversive element in the society, a potential cancer in the body politic.

Strict avoidance of participation in idolatrous worship meant that the Christians would need to remove themselves from much of the public life of their city. As Ramsey MacMullen correctly observes: "There existed...no form of social life...that was entirely secular. Small wonder, then, that Jews and Christians, holding themselves aloof from anything the gods touched, suffered under the reputation of misanthropy."⁸ First Peter 4:3-4 captures something of the response from the pagan side: "You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry. They are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation, and so they blaspheme." Of course, the author is painting Gentile conduct in the most negative of colors here, so as to reinforce the Christians' distaste for their own former lives and thus their aversion to returning to that life. Nevertheless, he still captures the essence of one important source of the unpopularity of Christians: their defection from the solidarity they formerly showed with their pagan neighbors at public worship, at public festivals, at social gatherings. Such a violation of that solidarity, and the feelings of rejection and even indignation it would arouse, is more than enough to motivate unofficial persecution. Seeing their neighbors and former friends defect from that way of life might, additionally, even threaten their own assurance that their own behavior and convictions about the world were ultimately "correct"—a questioning that can result in conversion, of course, but more frequently in hostility. By shaming the defectors they reaffirm the absolute veracity of their own way of life: if they succeed in winning back the "deviant," their own security is also reconfirmed.

To the rejection of their gods and rejection of their lifestyle, the Christians added rejection of their neighbors' very world order. The central conviction of this movement was a revolutionary premise: Jesus would return, put an end to the reign of the current world rulers and establish his own kingdom in their stead. The gospel of Jesus was a warning about God ripping into the fabric of society, calling day-to-day life to an abrupt halt and judging all according to the standards of this minority group. It spoke of "wars and rumors of wars," of the self-destruction of the glorious empire, and of cosmic conflagration before a new order was established. The Christians' neighbors, however, placed their hope in the perpetual rule and enforced peace of Rome and her power; for them, the stability necessary to sustain their often precarious existence came from the emperor's careful rule and the protection afforded by legions of soldiers, able to rebuff any assault from without. The inhabitants of the Mediterranean knew all about the ravages of "wars and rumors of wars" and wanted no part of it: the "Roman peace" was their golden age. Thus apocalypse and empire, "kingdom of God" and "Eternal Rome," were incompatible ideals, and the group that proclaimed the end of the Roman peace made itself the enemy of the common good.

So much for Gentile anti-Christian sentiments. The non-Christian Jewish population also had strong reasons for attempting to dissolve through erosion of commitment the sect that had grown up in its midst. First, it had grave reservations about Jesus' way of keeping Torah and his assaults on central Jewish symbols like the sabbath and the temple. When Jews became Christ-followers, their Jewish families might feel the social pressure to cut them off, so as to say to their neighbors,



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

“We do not approve of what they do. Do not attach their shame to us.” Jesus clearly anticipated that many of his followers might face bearing this cost (Mt 10:34–37; 19:29). Second, the non-Christian Jews took exception to the way in which Jewish Christians lowered the boundaries between themselves and the Gentiles. Thus Paul discerns the primary aim of Jewish persecution to be “hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved” (1 Thess 2:16).

Separation from the Gentiles was a core value of Jewish culture from the beginning. When Jews desired to “become like the Gentiles” again, assimilating to Gentile culture and breaking down the boundaries, disaster overtook the people of Israel. This truism of history was deeply reinforced for the Jews by the events of 175–164 B.C., in which the Jewish leadership sought to make Jerusalem a fully Greek city and stamp out the customs (like circumcision, monotheism and dietary regulations) that separated Jews from the larger world in which they wanted to become players. When resistance grew, the Hellenistic overlord Antiochus IV took measures to enforce this policy, and a brutal period of oppression ensued: “Those whose ways of living they admired and wished to imitate completely became their enemies and punished them” (2 Macc 4:16). Only after many Jews suffered heroic martyrdom (rather than transgress Torah) and many others fought successfully alongside Judas Maccabaeus and his brothers was peace and Torah observance restored.

Those who wrote about this period used it to teach the lesson that neglect of Torah and the marks of the covenant for the sake of making it easier to relate to Gentiles only leads to national disaster. When Paul, therefore, proclaims that circumcision is meaningless in God’s sight, urges Jewish Christians to eat freely with Gentile Christians rather than to keep kosher (or force the Gentiles to keep kosher so that they can have table fellowship), and declares that the dividing wall of hostility has been broken (Eph 2:14), he is striking at the heart of what it means to be Jewish. To prevent this new outbreak of Torah neglect, non-Christian Jews act speedily to shower the leaders and their followers with disapproval and disgrace in the hope of cauterizing the open wound on the body of Israel. Because of this persecution, some Jewish Christians attempt to Judaize the Gentiles in their midst (Gal 5:11; 6:12) and put their non-Christian Jewish neighbors, friends and relations at rest.

For these and other reasons the Christians’ neighbors sought to dissuade them by any means available from continuing in this deviant way of life and to return to being “decent” people who supported the values and stability of Greco-Roman society. We find, therefore, the New Testament authors responding in varying degrees to two critical issues arising from this situation. First, since the values of the new community are, at many points, radically different from the values of the dominant culture (or Jewish ethnic subculture) in which the converts were first reared, the leaders of the group must be attentive to the persistence in the new community of those old definitions and models of what is honorable and how honor is attained, maintained and displayed. Thus, a fair portion of these texts is dedicated to reinforcing the group’s definition of what makes a person honorable as opposed to what other cultures promote as honorable behavior. Second, the New Testament authors address the potentially erosive effects of the dominant culture’s negative evaluation of the group members (expressed at the light end of the continuum by reproach, moving through abuse, disenfranchisement and the occasional lynching at the heavy end), while at the same time attempting to strengthen the “alternative court of reputation” so that members will continue to pursue honor in terms of the group’s values.¹⁵

The Case of Jesus



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

The very story at the center of the church's faith already forces a decision concerning the reliability of the world's estimation of honor and shame. Jesus suffered crucifixion, known as an intentionally degrading death, fixing the criminal's honor at the lowest end of the spectrum and serving as an effective deterrent to the observers, reminding them of the shameful end that awaits those who similarly deviate from the dominant culture's values. Paul no doubt understated the case when he referred to the proclamation of this cross as the wisdom of God as a "stumbling block" to Jews and "folly" to Gentiles. No member of the Jewish community or the Greco-Roman society would have come to faith or joined the Christian movement without first accepting that God's perspective on what kind of behavior merits honor differs exceedingly from the perspective of human beings, since the message about Jesus is that both the Jewish and Gentile leaders of Jerusalem evaluated Jesus, his convictions and his deeds as meriting a shameful death, but God overturned their evaluation of Jesus by raising him from the dead and seating him at God's own right hand as Lord.

The evangelists had also, in many respects, provided resources to buttress the community against the outsiders' view of their leader. They present Jesus as an honorable figure whose opponents were in fact acting dishonorably in seeking his demise. Many of the features of the encomium, the funeral speech in praise of the deceased, are addressed by the Gospels: those who were accustomed to hearing encomia would also understand how the Gospels were constructing encomia in praise of the dead-yet-living leader of the Christian group. The birth stories in Matthew and Luke present Jesus as the descendent of the most noble stock in Israel (Mt 1:1–16; Lk 1:27, 32, 69) and at the same time reach to Jesus' divine parentage (Mt 1:18–20; Lk 1:35; Jn 1:1–18). These same infancy narratives affirm that he was set apart by God for a special and noble destiny, namely the deliverance of his people and of the world (Mt 1:21; Lk 1:32–33; 2:10–11; Jn 4:42). Angelic messages and astronomical omens (i.e., the star) enhance this impression. The Gospels are filled with accounts of Jesus' "deeds of virtue," chiefly his acts of healing and exorcism, which are acts of beneficence and result in the increase of his fame. It is those who oppose Jesus who are shown at every turn to be dishonorable: they refuse to give God his due (Mt 21:33–44); instead of continuing to act openly against Jesus, like honest people, they retreat to acting secretly in their efforts to dispose of him (Mt 26:3–5, 14–16, 59–61); ultimately, their motives are attributed to "envy," a mark of dishonorable people (Mt 27:18).

While the outside world might regard his crucifixion as a shameful death that signaled his opponents' defeat of their rival, the evangelists present Jesus' death in such a way that reader will clearly understand it as a noble death. Those who died to bring benefit to others or to save others from danger (such as soldiers on the battlefield, who die to preserve the people back home) were understood to have died honorably: they laid down their lives voluntarily to benefit their friends or fellow citizens, displaying their virtue in death more clearly than most display in life. The materials preserved by the evangelists explicitly address these topics. First, they emphasize the voluntariness of Jesus' death: "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (Jn 10:18). Jesus' foreknowledge of his death, even of the very hour of his betrayal and arrest, the prayer in Gethsemane (Mt 26:39, 42; Mk 14:36), and Jesus' power in the midst of arrest (Mt 26:52–53; Jn 18:3–11) all emphasize that Jesus laid down his life for others voluntarily. It was a gift, not a defeat. Second, the Gospels emphasize that Jesus accepted death specifically with a view to benefiting others: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). Jesus dies in order to bring about forgiveness of sins, a fact celebrated not only in the Gospel story but in the central ritual of the Christian group, namely the Eucharist (Mt 26:27–28; 1 Cor 11:23–26; see also Jn 1:29; Heb 10:1–10). Jesus' death "on behalf of [his] sheep" brings them eternal life (Jn 3:14–17; 10:10–11, my translation). The death of Jesus



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

was in every respect, then, an honorable death, despite the vehicle by which it was effected. The failure on the part of the world to understand this fact speaks of their ignorance, not Jesus' degradation.

The New Testament defense, as it were, of Jesus' honor affects the early Christians in several important ways. God's affirmation of being "well pleased" with Jesus (God's only two direct communications in the Synoptic Gospels; see Mt 3:17; 17:5), an affirmation that is finalized in God's raising of Jesus from the dead (overturning human estimations of Jesus: Acts 2:32, 36; 3:14–15), assures those who hear him and follow his way that they are the people who truly please God, whose honor God will likewise vindicate on the last day. In the paradigm of the maligned group leader who, rejected by society, becomes God's right-hand regent, the Christians come to terms with their own relationship to society's approval. At the close of the parable of the wicked tenants, Jesus cites Psalm 118:22–23 as a scriptural warrant for this paradigm: "Have you not read this scripture: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'?" (Mk 12:10–11). What human beings reject as worthless and dishonored by a marvel of divine intervention appears at the top of the honor scale.

Jesus' case becomes then the demonstration of the ignorance and upside-down mentality of the society, as well as the guarantee of the reversal and vindication that God will grant to all Jesus' followers. As such, it becomes a precedent that will be applied to the Christian group members as well. Particularly interesting is the application of Psalm 118:22–23 first to Jesus and then seamlessly to the situation of believers in 1 Peter 2:4–8:

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." Honor, then, is for you who believe; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner," and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

The author has described Jesus in 1 Peter 2:4 as a "stone...rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight," a description combining echoes of Psalm 118:22–23 with Isaiah 28:16. This second passage, which is then explicitly quoted in 1 Peter 2:6, ends by promising that "whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." The addressees of 1 Peter, currently being intentionally shamed by their neighbors (see above), are thus told that their trust in Jesus will result in their future vindication. Verse 7 makes this conclusion even more explicit: "Honor, then, is for you who believe," just as honor came to the One who had been "rejected by mortals."

The author of Hebrews also appeals to the example of Jesus as a warrant for his audience to set aside their concern for society's negative evaluation of and response to them: just as Jesus "despised shame" (that is, understood the folly of society's attempts to shame him and divert him from his goal) and thus arrived at his seat at the right hand of God (Heb 12:2), so the Christians are not to "grow weary" as they struggle against the pressures they face (Heb 12:3–4). The fact that, after voluntarily humbling himself in obedience to God, Jesus was exalted to the place of greatest honor by God (Phil 2:5–11) becomes a warrant for believers also to humble themselves in the assurance that God will look after their honor and manifest it in the future (Phil 2:1–4). Here Paul appeals to Jesus' example specifically to curtail competition and rivalry over status within the Christian movement, showing that the precedent of Jesus was as useful for regulating relationships within the group as for strengthening the group against erosion from without.



Convening the Court of Reputation

Like the leaders of other minority cultures in the first century, New Testament authors were also careful continually to point the members of the Christian group away from the opinion that non-Christians might form of them toward the opinion of those who would reflect the values of the group and reinforce the individual's commitment to establish his or her honor and self-respect in terms of those group values. It is this latter group that must constitute the "court of reputation," the sole body of significant others whose approval or disapproval should be important to the individual.

Most prominent within this court of reputation is God, whose central place is assured because of God's power to enforce his estimation of who deserves honor and who merits censure. Jesus brings this powerfully to expression in the well-known saying: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Mt 10:28). In executing the deviant, the society bestows the fullest measure of disgrace and disapproval, but Jesus considers society's "worst" as trivial compared to the punishment coming to those who merit God's verdict of "deviant" and "dishonorable." God's power to place the final stamp of approval or censure is brought into sharp focus by the conviction that God has appointed a day (see Acts 17:31)—the Day of Judgment—when he will hold the whole world accountable to his standards. On that day, God will award grants of honor to those who have lived to please him and heap disgrace upon those who have lived contrary to his values. The belief in a Day of Judgment is foundational to the elevation of God's estimation of the individual as the opinion of first importance: "We make it our aim to please him. For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil" (2 Cor 5:9–10). At that time God will also bring all secret things to light and thus make a reliable assessment of nobility and lack of nobility, or worth, possible (1 Cor 4:3–5).

Commendation on that day is the only commendation that ultimately matters, so that Christians are throughout the New Testament urged to live so as to "be found blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones" (1 Thess 3:13, my translation), and so as to hear the words "well done, good and faithful servant" pronounced by the mouth of the Master (Mt 25:14–30). Indeed, the more focused the individual believer is made to be on receiving that commendation on the day of visitation, and the more concerned he or she is made to be about not falling into the group at the "left hand" of the Judge (Mt 25:31–46)—the group that is rebuked as "wicked and lazy," "worthless" or "evildoers" (Mt 25:26, 30; 7:23)—the more firmly committed he or she will be to remaining loyal to the group and to embodying the behaviors and virtues it promotes so as to be "pleasing in his sight" (Heb 13:20–21). In this way they will be enabled to "have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming" (1 Jn 2:28).

In order to sharpen this focus on God's approval or disapproval, and thus to keep the believers' ambitions focused on securing their honor through pleasing God rather than by surrendering to society, New Testament authors frequently remind the churches that God's grants of honor or dishonor are of far greater significance than human affirmation or censure. Thus Paul carries out his ministry strictly with a view to pleasing God, not people—whether they are his potential converts or his Jewish-Christian colleagues with a stricter sense of Torah's application in the new community (Gal 1:10; 1 Thess 2:4–6). Similarly, believers are instructed to live for God's approval rather than human approval. They are to seek the circumcision of the heart that God values rather than circumcise their flesh so as to gain the approval of conservative Jewish Christians (Rom 2:29). They are to seek God's approval by their pious actions (whether prayer, fasting or almsgiving) rather than engage these actions for the sake of human approval (Mt 6:1–18).



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

These authors repeatedly underscore the contrasting, indeed often contradictory, courses of action commended by God and one's society: "What is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God" (Lk 16:15). Awareness of this difference continues to insulate believers against society's attempts to shame them, since the Christians know they pursue a more lasting and significant grant of honor. In John's Gospel, concern for the estimation of other people cripples discipleship: "How can you believe when you accept glory [honor, *doxa*] from one another and do not seek the glory [honor, *doxa*] that comes from the one who alone is God?" (Jn 5:44). Those among the Jewish leaders who "loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God" keep their belief in Jesus hidden from their colleagues so as not to lose face in the Jewish community (Jn 12:42–43). Such concern for reputation among humans, however, poses the greatest threat to one's reputation before God: "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven" (Mt 10:32–33). Those who keep their eyes on honor at the last day will thus be emboldened to witness boldly to their association with Jesus and with the way of life he taught, so that they, in turn, will receive his testimony before the "court of reputation" whose verdict is eternal.

By focusing on God's approval, the Christian's desire will be to "live up to (walk in a manner worthy of) the gospel" or "the Lord" (see Eph 4:1; Phil 1:27; Col 1:10; 2 Thess 1:11–12) rather than living up to the expectations and standards of the cultures they left behind. The opinion of those who award honor and censure by standards alien to the Christian culture is bracketed as being of no real concern. Occasionally one finds in the New Testament that even some inside the new community still evaluate worth based on the world's values. When sisters or brothers judge "from a human point of view," their opinion of the worth of their fellow believer must be disregarded as well.

How can God's affirmation (or disapproval) be experienced by the believer? Certainly we should not overlook the possibility of the direct experience of this through prayer and through the practice of the presence of God. God's direct affirmation of Jesus, the Son "with whom I am well pleased," in Matthew 3:17 and 17:5, for example, encourages the possibility that the testimony of the believer's conscience can provide important reassurance of God's affirmation in the midst of the experience of unbelievers' censure (Rom 8:16–17; 1 Jn 3:21–22).

Another important channel of access to God's estimation is Scripture, which James insightfully likens to a mirror (Jas 1:22–25). As the Scripture is read, the individual believer sees his or her conduct and commitments reflected in what the oracles of God declare to be pleasing in God's sight, or perhaps sees his or her behavior and attachments reflected in what God censures in the record of divine revelation. Thus "gazing intently, looking into the perfect law of God" as if into a mirror shows the person a reflection of God's approval or disapproval of the individual's conduct. The person who acts in accordance with what he or she sees in the word of God "will be blessed in what he or she does," that is, enjoy God's approval and favor (Jas 1:22–25, my translation).

Perhaps the most prominent vehicle envisioned by the authors of the New Testament for the individual believer's awareness of when he or she stands in honor before God or merits divine censure is the community of faith. Paul models how the community of faith can reflect God's evaluation of the believer in the thanksgiving sections that begin most of his letters (see, for example, Rom 1:8; 1 Cor 1:4–9; Col 1:3–8; 1 Thess 1:2–10; 2:13–16). By thanking God for certain qualities exhibited by these congregations, or for certain activities that they have been engaging, he affirms that those qualities and activities are indeed pleasing in God's sight—indeed, a blossoming of virtue that is the very work of God's Spirit in their midst. Hearing their leaders'



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

commendations and rebukes, couched as these are in terms of what is honorable or censurable in God's eyes, also brings the believers before the divine "court of reputation," as it were, identifying for them where they have a strong claim to honor and where their honor is threatened. For this reason it is important that the early churches esteem their leaders (see 1 Thess 5:13), particularly local leaders, not only because their service merits the honor of the group but because they have a primary responsibility for keeping the group members mindful of God's standards, calling back the wayward.

One's fellow believers will be the most visible and, in many senses, the most available reflection of God's estimation of the individual, and so the New Testament authors are deeply concerned with building up a strong community of faith that will reinforce individual commitment to the group. John, for example, effectively reduces Jesus' commandments to one, namely, that the Christians "love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 15:12; 13:34; see also Paul's emphasis on this mutual love in 1 Thess 3:12; 4:9–10). The bonds between believers should be so strong—the affective ties so firm—that an individual believer would be willing to lay down his life for the sake of a sister or brother in the faith (Jn 15:12–13; 1 Jn 3:16). Such a lofty principle calls for directions for practical application, and John provides this:

How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. (1 Jn 3:17–18)

The Christian group is called to share, to serve, to support one another as Jesus gave himself for them—unselfishly and without reservation. Writing to addressees who had known the full range of society's deviancy-control techniques (short of mob lynching or legal execution; Heb 12:4), the author of Hebrews captures even more completely the essence of the kind of community that enables its members to withstand social pressure:

Let mutual love ["fraternal love," *philadelphia*] continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. (Heb 13:1–3)

The author invokes the ethos of kinship, specifically the love characteristic of siblings, which represented the pinnacle of friendship and the most enduring and intimate of relationships. Adopting a kinship ethic meant mutual sharing of resources as any had need, as well as a firm commitment to one another. They were to be family, a call that was all the more essential given the networks of relationships that a believer could potentially lose in the ancient world. This kinship was to extend beyond the local group to the provision of hospitality to traveling sisters and brothers. Hospitality in the early church served to create strong bonds between local churches, facilitating communication and mission work between churches and allowing an itinerant leadership to keep linking local cells together. The love of sisters and brothers of Christ is most needed where the censure of society is most keenly felt. The author therefore urges the hearers to reach out to those most acutely targeted by the society for deviancy-control techniques, letting them know that the family they joined will not desert them, and letting each other know at the same time that their bond is stronger than society's hostility.

This kind of intense in-group reinforcement and mutual commitment makes the verdict of the group, not the verdict of society, the one of ultimate importance for the individual caught in-between. The strong affection and support within the group makes these relationships primary for



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

each member—he or she would be more willing to sacrifice relationships with outsiders than lose face before the people the member really cares about, and whose commitment to each other is “to the death.” Once the community of faith becomes the primary reference group for the individual believer, then mutual exhortation can have its full effect. Members can reinforce for one another and stimulate one another on to what constitutes honor in God’s sight and in the sight of the group, dissuading one another from what would bring shame (see 1 Thess 5:11, 14; Heb 3:12–13; 10:24–25).

The local congregation, moreover, is part of a matrix of such cells empire-wide, and New Testament authors will frequently call the local church’s attention to this fact. Frequently this happens simply through greetings being passed on from one church or group of churches to another (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:19), or the mere mention of the activities happening in other churches (such as the endurance of hostility; 1 Thess 2:14–16) or in conjunction with other churches (such as the collection effort, which unites the churches of Macedonia and Achaia in a group relief effort; 2 Cor 8:18–24). Such mention keeps the local cell aware that it is part of a much larger movement and not an insignificant group. Authors may also call attention to this global network to remind a local congregation that its dedication to Christ and the group has won it fame abroad in these other cells (1 Thess 1:6–10; 2 Thess 1:3–4), so that the believers are compensated for the loss of esteem they suffer in their neighbors’ eyes by the fame they win in the eyes of Christians empire-wide. Paul will even call a local congregation to take up a certain course of action out of concern for its honor in the eyes of the other congregations of believers (2 Cor 8:24; 9:1–5), and also to conform to the norms followed by the larger Christian culture (1 Cor 7:17; 11:16; 14:33).

Christians can remain committed to “walking as Jesus walked,” to bearing witness to the author of their salvation, and to standing by the community of those called out by God as they set their hearts fully on being approved by God and seeking honor before God, Christ and the holy angels on that day when all shall be judged by God. Because the unbelievers will use the power of shaming to impose their values on the believers, and to call them back to a way of life that supports and perpetuates the values of the non-Christian culture, it is imperative that the believers’ sense of worth be detached from the opinion of unbelievers. Rather, their engagements with one another, their mutual esteem and support, and their awareness of the many who affirm them in their Christian commitment (God, the angelic hosts, the church throughout the world, the people of faith throughout the ages) will strengthen them for the journey.

Invalidating the Opinion of Outsiders

As the Christians are looking away to God’s approval, New Testament authors also explain why the approval or disapproval of outsiders should not matter to the members of the group, or why it is no reflection of the group members’ true honor and worth. Usually this takes the form of stressing the ignorance of outsiders or their shamelessness.

Those who do not have faith do not have all the facts necessary to make an informed evaluation concerning what is honorable and what is censurable. The non-Christians are therefore frequently said to be “in darkness” and even “of the darkness” (Jn 8:12; 12:46; Eph 4:17–20; 1 Thess 5:3–8) as opposed to being enlightened (2 Cor 4:1–6; Heb 6:4; 10:32) or “children of light” (1 Thess 5:5). This contrast stresses the fact that outsiders lack essential information—for example, the fact that God’s judgment is soon coming (1 Thess 5:1–3) or God’s standards of what is honorable conduct (1 Thess 4:1–5). The fact remains, however, that God’s judgment is impending: when it arrives, those who now in ignorance oppose the Christian movement will be made aware of their error and their shame while the “children of light” enter into their honorable destiny. Christians make their



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

choices and evaluations with the full benefit of this knowledge and so are in a better place to understand what is praiseworthy and to pursue and achieve it. This topic appears in the Gospels as well. As Jesus censures the Pharisees as “blind guides,” for example, the disciples of Jesus can apply the critique to the disciples of the Pharisees and their descendants, the rabbis (Mt 23:16–17, 19, 24). Jesus’ criticism of the Pharisees’ “ignorance” of what God requires of those who would keep God’s covenant assures the Christian readers that their way of keeping Torah—the way taught by Jesus, in whose resurrection by God one sees God’s affirmation of his instruction—is in fact the way that pleases God, despite the assertions of their rivals to the contrary.

The ignorance of outsiders comes to expression in several other ways as well. New Testament authors may specifically target their inability to form reliable estimations of people. Both John and Paul, for example, contrast those who “judge by appearances” with God, who judges by the heart (Jn 7:24; 2 Cor 5:12). God had already spoken a definitive word in 1 Samuel 16:7 on this point that the heart, and not the outer person, provides the true criterion of assessment. The opinion of outsiders is thus based on flawed premises and is not a reliable guide for the believers to follow if they hope to be found truly honorable when God comes to judge. Their ignorance, moreover, is attributed both to delusion but also to purpose. Because they “refused to love the truth and so be saved” and “took pleasure in unrighteousness,” God intensifies the delusion that holds them in darkness, with the result that God will ascribe dishonor to them on the Day of Judgment (2 Thess 2:10–12). The society’s resistance to the Christian group is thus transformed completely from an experience of shaming that might weaken the believer’s resolve, into a demonstration of the society’s alienation from the truth and God’s verdict of condemnation on the outsiders.

The negative evaluation outsiders form of and enforce on Christians is offset not only by considering the ignorance of these unbelievers, such that they are unable to form a reliable evaluation of worth, but also their dishonorable conduct, indeed, their utter shamelessness in the light of God’s revelation of God’s standards. To be shamed by the shameless is ultimately no shame at all. In fact, contemplating the vice of their detractors almost transforms their experience of rejection into a sign of the believers’ honor. Contrary to the dominant-cultural view of participation in idolatrous forms of worship as an honorable mark of piety, Paul declares idolatry to be the true source of dishonor (Rom 1:18–32). On account of its commitment to idolatry, the non-Christian Gentiles have become a debased, shameless crowd, handed over to the domination of the passions and every kind of vice. What is perhaps most poignant about this passage is that the pinnacle of their degradation is not merely their participation in such conduct: “They know God’s decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them” (Rom 1:32). The unbelievers form again an unreliable court of reputation, commending what is actually wicked and shameful (see Phil 3:18–19). Their very sense of honor and value is upside down, as their lives testify. Therefore, the Christian experiencing their pressure to “join them in the same excesses of dissipation” (1 Pet 4:4) should not be moved away from his or her honorable course of action.

Johannine literature also contributes to the Christians’ impression that the censure (or honor, for that matter) that the outside world might offer the believers ought to be disregarded on account of the judges’ own lack of honor. In Revelation, for example, those who cling to idolatrous worship are also presented as those who engage in all manner of wicked conduct and who have made a pact with the forces of chaos, Satan, the enemy of God (Rev 9:20–21; 12:1–13:8). They are committed to vice and to impiety, despite having been given many opportunities to repent (and no matter what God does in the future, they will still manifest this dishonorable character). In John’s Gospel those who remain apart from the Christian group do so because of their commitment to wickedness:



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God. (Jn 3:19–21)

All who stand outside the community of disciples show by that very fact that they prefer vice to virtue. They prefer dishonorable conduct to the light of God that first reveals the nature of that conduct but then empowers one to set it aside. All such statements in Scripture serve to insulate the community against the pressure of society's attempts to "rehabilitate" them. Christians will see the course of "rehabilitation" as the course back to darkness, back to vice, back to a disgraceful status in God's sight that would merit God's punishment at the Day of Judgment.

Two other strategies assist believers in setting aside the opinion of nonbelievers. First, the New Testament authors commend as honorable many who "despised shame" in order to remain steadfast in their quest for the honors God had prepared for them. The most prominent of these, of course, is Jesus, who endured the low point of society's ascription of disgrace en route to the high honor God had appointed for him (see Phil 2:5–11; Heb 12:2), but he is joined by many others from among the people of faith throughout the ages. Notable among these is Abraham, presented in Hebrews 11:8–16 as willing to leave behind an honorable existence in a homeland for the low-status life of a resident alien and foreigner for the sake of attaining citizenship in the "better" and "heavenly" homeland that God prepared. Moses, too, understood that solidarity with despised and abused slaves was of greater worth than remaining as heir to the crown of Egypt, since the latter afforded only "fleeting pleasures" while the former brought one eternal "reward" (Heb 11:24–26). Jesus, Abraham and Moses made the correct choices because they weighed honor and advantage through the eyes of faith—in the eyes of unbelievers, all three during their lifetimes would have been considered to have made foolish choices, incurring the loss of honor. Disregarding the opinion of outsiders (the world) is thus presented as a necessary step to achieving honor where it counts eternally.

Finally, the same visions of reversal and divine judgment that focus the believer on God's estimation as the evaluation of greatest importance also assist in insulating the believer from society's negative sanctions. The believers may endure the scorn and censure of their neighbors, knowing that the day is coming when the majority culture that scorns the group will be put to shame and the group will come into its own honor. On the Day of Judgment not only will God affirm the honor and virtue of those who have responded to him with trust and obedience, but he will also censure the disobedient and enforce the status degradation (e.g., through punishment) of those who now have the upper hand on the believers (see 2 Thess 1:6–10; 1 Pet 4:5).

When Dishonor is No Dishonor

In addition to preventing the experience of insult, scorn and shame from having its intended effect on the Christians by pointing out the ignorance and shamelessness of the outsiders (that is to say, by explaining that the people censuring the believers are themselves incapable of rendering reliable judgments about the noble and the shameful), New Testament authors also seek to help the believers make sense of those experiences in ways that will not cause them to question their commitment to the group. They even go so far as to turn the very experiences of society's deviancy-control techniques into marks of honor within the group. The frequency with which these texts address the topic of shame from outside the group reveals the importance of insulating members from the strong pull the experience of disgrace will have on them. The predictability or normalcy of the experiences, the commendation of perseverance as a means of demonstrating



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

loyalty and courage, the interpretation of the hardships as God's training of the believers or as a noble contest or battle in which the Christians have the possibility of an honorable victory over their antagonists simply by persevering are topics intended by New Testament authors to inform and protect the group from being pulled back into the values of the majority culture.

The leaders of the Christian movement, beginning with Jesus himself (see Mt 10:17–18, 24–25; 24:9–10), prepared their followers for society's censure and rejection ahead of time. By stressing that it was to be expected, and indeed that it was predictable, these leaders hoped that it would not be disconfirming when it actually occurred. That is to say, it should not catch the Christians off guard; it should not surprise them and cause them to question their new commitments. Given what happened to Jesus, it is only natural that the world should act the same way toward his followers (Jn 15:18–21), but also given the honor that Jesus now enjoys after enduring the hostility of sinners (Heb 12:3), it is also endurable! Jesus' predictions of society's attempts to shame them into silence and surrender are specifically intended by him to arm them ahead of time to encounter it and persevere (Jn 16:1–4). Paul followed the same procedure in Thessalonica: "We sent Timothy...to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith, so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions. Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for. In fact, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution; so it turned out, as you know" (1 Thess 3:2–4).

The experience of shaming was meant by outsiders to make the Christians feel abnormal and make them wish to retreat back into the safety of conformity. Paul, however, turns the experience of being shamed into something "normal" for the existence of believers in the world. The believers in Thessalonica find replicated in their own experience the well-established pattern of rejection known by Paul (1 Thess 2:2; 3:7; see also Phil 1:30) and by their sister churches in Judea (1 Thess 2:14).

Suffering for Jesus' sake is even transformed into a badge of honor before God. This strategy represents perhaps the strongest tool the minority group has for reversing the effects of society's attempts to reign the "deviants" back into line with dominant cultural values. The response of the twelve apostles to the Sanhedrin's marking them with the whip as deviants requiring correction becomes paradigmatic: "They rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name" (Acts 5:41). The author of 1 Peter, writing to Christians throughout Asia Minor, seeks to inculcate a similar response among them to their experiences of their neighbors' insult and abuse:

Rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker. Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name. (1 Pet 4:13–16; see also 3:14)

The pattern of Jesus is invoked as the first means of understanding the "blessedness" of suffering the world's hostility. Sharing the lot of Jesus for the sake of association with his name now will mean sharing in his lot in glory as well. Indeed, the believers should see society's negative response to them as a sign of the "spirit of glory"—the honor of being part of God's own family and sharing with his Son—resting on them. Pronouncing such a person "blessed" (*makarios*) essentially means pronouncing him or her "honorable," or perhaps in some contexts, "favored." *Happy* is too weak a synonym for this term, which is used more to affirm a person as occupying a noble or divinely favored status.



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

A further rationale for the surprising estimation of those disgraced by the society as “blessed” appears in Jesus’ beatitudes:

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. (Lk 6:22–23)

The appeal to the historical precedent of the prophets of Israel, many of whom suffered severe degradation at the hands of the rulers of Israel and Judah, provides proof that those people who were most honorable could also be most openly disgraced by their neighbors. The fact that Jews had for centuries revered the names of Jeremiah and Isaiah overturns any shame that their kings might have tried to impose upon them. The followers of Jesus can have the same confidence when they encounter impositions of dishonor from outside.

Paul states this same rationale in terms of a more general principle: “Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. But wicked people and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived” (2 Tim 3:12–13). Godliness—and those who pursue virtue—is simply persecuted by a dishonorable world. Because of this, the Christians should feel confirmed that they have chosen the honorable path when their unbelieving neighbors assail them and tear them down.

The early church leaders also used the metaphor of the athletic contest to turn endurance of hardships into an opportunity to manifest the virtues of courage and endurance, recasting society’s hostility as the antagonist over which the believer can win an honorable victory—and the crown of the victor—simply by persevering in his or her Christian commitments:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race (“contest,” *agōn*) that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. In your struggle against [*antagōnizomenoi*] sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. (Heb 12:1–4; see also Heb 10:32)

The metaphor works because athletes needed the qualities of perseverance and endurance, particularly in the face of pain but also in the face of the jeering of the crowd. Giving up in the face of such jeering or because the body hurt would mean defeat and dishonor, but the athlete who persisted despite the opposition of people, antagonists and personal weakness would be honored.

In this passage the author calls the Christians’ attention to the spectators whose approval they are to court as they engage in the contest. It is the people of faith throughout the ages, with Jesus conspicuously at the center, who now watch how the Christians run the same gauntlet of society’s antagonism. They compete not merely against their unbelieving neighbors but ultimately against the power of sin itself (making surrender all the more disgraceful and impossible to contemplate). The metaphor is a powerful resource indeed, as it turns the experience of being victimized by a hostile society into an opportunity for victory, empowering the victim to choose to follow his or her own convictions rather than succumb to coercion.

The author of Hebrews also ennobles the experience of reproach, ridicule and even physical violence at the hands of unbelievers as being God’s training of his children for citizenship in the kingdom (Heb 12:5–11). This is explicitly not punitive discipline (not “chastisement” for sins committed by the believers) but character-shaping exercise, building up their commitment to God and the strength of their trust and loyalty, sharpening their investment in the unshakable kingdom



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

they are about to receive. As parental discipline, it becomes a proof of their being God's legitimate sons and daughters rather than illegitimate children for whom a parent does not take such care and forethought.³⁸ In addition to courage and endurance, then, perseverance becomes an opportunity to demonstrate reverent submission to God (after Jesus' own example, Heb 5:8–9).

Endurance of the world's deviancy-control measures is also an opportunity to demonstrate one's fidelity to and trust in God (1 Pet 1:6–7) or one's sincerity and integrity. Paul uses his own experience of sufferings in the latter manner, offering his endurance of shame—both verbal and physical degradation (2 Cor 6:4–10; 11:23–25)—as proof that he does not use the gospel as a means of enjoying temporary gains or pleasures (like the Sophists, who peddle philosophies for a living), but for the highest of ideals. Modeling the confidence of one who has remained loyal to Jesus despite earthly adversity and disgrace, Paul believes that God will surely vindicate those who remained faithful: “No one who believes in him will be put to shame” (Rom 10:11; cf. 2 Tim 1:8, 12). Endurance now means incomparable honor eternally (2 Cor 4:17–18).

The Christian Riposte to the Outsider's Challenge

The honorable person subjected to insult or to some other challenge to honor is culturally conditioned to retaliate, to offer a riposte (see discussion in chapter one) that will counter the challenge and preserve honor in the public eye intact. Christians confronted with such attacks on their honor as verbal challenges, reproachful speech and even physical affronts would be sorely tempted to respond in kind, playing out the challenge-riposte game before the onlookers. Beginning with Jesus, however, Christian leaders sought to cultivate a specifically Christian riposte—the believer is allowed to respond to the challenges made against his or her honor, but directed to do so in such a way as reflects to the outside world the virtues and values of the Christian group.

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. (Mt 5:38–41; see also Mt 5:44; Lk 6:28, 35)

Followers of Jesus overcome challenges to honor not through using the same currency of insult or violence that the outside world throws at them, but rather they meet hostility with generosity, violence with courageous refusal to use violence, curse with blessing from God's inexhaustible resources of goodness and kindness.

Paul expands on the teaching of Jesus by urging the Christian to “take thought for what is noble in the sight of all” (Rom 12:17) rather than repaying “evil for evil.” One finds in Paul and 1 Peter a deep concern to demonstrate to outsiders that being Christian is in fact honorable. On the one hand, Christians are never allowed to choose their course of action out of desire or need for the affirmation of the outside world. They are to remain focused on God's approval and on the actions that lead them, regardless of the world's response. On the other hand, however, there is the explicit hope articulated in the New Testament that by pursuing the course that God approves, the nobility of the Christian community will be made apparent to those outside the church, who still have some ability to recognize virtue even if they pursue vicious paths in the name of virtue (like idolatry). Some concern for the group's reputation is also in keeping with the conversionist emphasis of the Christian movement, since the “multitude” only go by hearsay rather than investigating the facts.

The Christian posture in regard to how it elects to respond to its attackers is very similar to the course promoted by Plutarch in his treatise “How to Profit by One's Enemies” (*Mor.* 86B-92F):⁴¹



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

“ ‘How shall I defend myself against my enemy?’ ‘By proving yourself good and honourable’ “ (“How to Profit” 4, *Mor.* 88B). It will distress the enemy more than being insulted, Plutarch writes, to see you bear yourself with self-control, justice and kindness toward those with whom you come in contact. The insulted person must use the insult as an occasion to examine his life and rid himself of any semblance of that vice (“How to Profit” 6, *Mor.* 89D-E). In the same way, the author of 1 Peter urges Christians throughout Asia Minor, “Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge” (1 Pet 2:12). “Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame” (1 Pet 3:16). By means of honorable conduct, the author hopes to overturn the reproach that society attaches to the name of “Christian”: “For it is God’s will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish” (1 Pet 2:15). At the very least, he adjures the believers to do nothing that might actually add to or justify the bad reputation of the group: “But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker” (4:15). Advice given to wives and slaves (1 Pet 3:1–7; 2:18–25; see also Tit 2:9–10), young men (Tit 2:6–8) and women (Tit 2:4–5), and to the group as a whole, can be seen as serving the goal of offering proof through noble conduct that the group is truly honorable (whether or not the outsiders ever actually come to admit this: at the last judgment they will be forced to do so).

At many other points one can find New Testament authors showing concern for living with integrity (see 2 Cor 1:12; 4:2; 6:3–4; 1 Tim 3:7), showing the congruence of the message of Jesus with the virtues implanted, as it were, in the hearts of Gentile and Jew alike (Rom 2:14–16). Thus Paul is careful to administer the collection for the sisters and brothers in Judea with regard for “what is noble not only in God’s sight but in the sight of human beings” (2 Cor 8:21, my translation). Another notable arena in which the Christians are called to demonstrate their virtue is through beneficence not only within the community of faith (essential though this is to the maintenance of the group’s commitment and solidarity) but also toward all (Mt 5:43–48; 1 Thess 3:12; 5:15). Benefaction is unmistakably recognizable in the ancient world as honorable in and of itself, reflecting also God’s own character. If the outsiders do not respond nobly with gratitude but rather keep maligning the believers, that will be just another confirmation of the outsiders’ debased character. The Christian group thus keeps walking the fine line between remaining independent of society’s response (approval or censure), while also striving to enhance the honor of the group through embodying the highest ideals, overcoming evil by doing good (Rom 12:21).

The Christian’s Honor

The early church leaders frequently reminded the believers that joining the Christian group did not merely bring them dishonor in the eyes of the world that refused the gospel. The believers have also gained incomparable honor because of their attachment to the group. The author of 1 Peter, sensitive to the fact that he writes to people whose self-respect has come under serious fire from without, dedicates the first two chapters of his epistle largely to affirming the honor that is theirs in Christ. The language of elevation to priesthood provides him with an important vehicle for conveying the honor that believers now enjoy as those fitted to approach God with confidence in holiness:

Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.... You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people. (1 Pet 2:5, 9–10; see also Rev 1:5–6; 5:9)

The emphasis in these verses on God's selection of each of the believers to become part of God's own people also speaks to the honored and favored status conferred on the Christian.

Most impressively, becoming a disciple of Jesus brings with it adoption into God's family and a share in Christ's honor (Jn 1:12–13; Rom 8:14–17; Heb 2:10; 3:1–6, 14; 1 Pet 1:23). In this regard, God ascribes the honor of God's own household to the believer. The exaltation of Jesus to the place of highest honor in the cosmos (Eph 1:20–22) is thus an honor in which all faithful believers now share (Eph 2:6). This honor, though possessed by the Christian, is yet fully to be enjoyed and yet to be manifested to the world. It remains their inheritance (1 Pet 1:4). Their full investment with, and indeed their full discovery of the magnitude of, the honor that God has conferred on them through adoption into his family will occur at the future appearing of Jesus. When the glorified Christ's own honor is revealed to the world, then the honor of his followers will be revealed as well (Col 3:4; 2 Thess 1:10–12; 2:14). The Christians look forward to receiving an unshakable kingdom (Heb 12:28), an enduring city (Heb 13:13–14) in which the believers will be invested with their full honor as God's children, where that honor will be manifested and not assaulted.

More immediately, the believers gain the esteem and respect of their sisters and brothers as Christ takes shape within them and as their actions show his love. Communities of faith are met with international fame across the web of churches empire-wide as they reach out in support of fellow-believers, endure bravely the opposition of unbelievers, or shine as examples of trust and firmness in their commitment to Jesus (see Rom 1:8; 1 Thess 1:7–9; 2 Thess 1:4).

Pressures to conform to the values of the Greco-Roman culture or Jewish subculture, and temptations to assess worth and honor in light of those alien values, do not come only from outside the Christian community. After all, every member of the church during the first generation of its existence in a given locale was first socialized into one or the other of those cultures. One finds, therefore, early Christian leaders combating the tendency to import what are now to be considered alien standards and values into the Christian group. The challenge here is to prevent the members' "primary socialization" from overriding or short-circuiting their full secondary socialization into the Christian worldview and ethos. The Christians needed to reinforce clearly and distinctly for one another the group's values as the path to honor. There was no room for acculturation of those values to the definitions of honorable behavior they "left behind" at their conversion.

Jesus, James, Paul and most New Testament voices take the time to clarify the true basis for honor and to correct intrusions of dominant-cultural (or Jewish ethnic subcultural) ways of attaining or asserting honor. The prevalence of these discussions suggests that one's primary, non-Christian socialization is surprisingly persistent, and Christian leaders need to show special vigilance in this regard. Jesus, for example, confronts head-on the manner in which the majority culture thinks of greatness in terms of power over others and precedence before others, a conception that manifests itself in the disciples' conversations at least twice on the road to Jerusalem (Mk 9:34–35; 10:35–45 and parallels). True honor consists rather in serving the sisters and brothers after the model of Jesus, the servant leader who "came not to be served but to serve" (Mk 10:45). The disciples, and the later readers of the Gospels as well, are jolted into realizing the vast difference between what counts as honorable or great in the world and what makes one great or honorable in God's sight: "The one who is least among you all is the one who is great" (Lk 9:48, my translation).



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

James and Paul both combat the tendency to honor the rich above the poor, thus replicating within the community the majority culture's conviction that a person's honor or worth is proportionate to his wealth (see 1 Cor 11:20–22; Jas 1:9–10; 2:1–9). Ethnicity can no longer be a cause for claiming honor above others (Rom 1–3; 11:19–20), whether the Christian Jew would consider himself privileged beyond and more honorable than the Christian Gentile, or the Christian Greek would cling to the dominant culture's perception of the Greek as more honorable than the barbarian. In a world that valued visible signs of divine possession and proximity to God's power, God's gifts and endowments of the believers are not permitted to become a ground for competition for honor among believers (1 Cor 4:7). Similarly, spiritual knowledge does not create an enlightened elite within the church, where building up one another in love (rather than becoming puffed up) is the way to act honorably and be recognized as honorable (1 Cor 8:1–2).

An especially critical issue for Paul in the Corinthian correspondence is detaching the believers there from their tendency to evaluate a person's worth by appearances, that is to say, by charisma, observable strengths and polished performances (2 Cor 5:12). The case of Jesus proves, Paul argues, the unreliability of these criteria in determining honor (whether evaluating one's own honor, the honor of a fellow believer or the honor of various leaders and teachers), since the "world in its wisdom," that is, acting and selecting according to its criteria of worth, failed to recognize God's wisdom (1 Cor 1:18–31). Only God's work in the believer, transforming the mortal into the image of Christ, bringing the life of Christ to life in the frail human (and, in the face of death, even the strongest and most gifted human is frail), gives a person any claim to honor. Valuing oneself or others on the basis of the "outer person," that is, the endowments of our mortal person or our performance, is folly, since no strength of the outer person can avail in the face of death. Paul's decision not to try to hide his weaknesses or work to make his appearance "perfect" and semi-divine as a means of gaining respect and authority (which was the goal of most public speakers) reflects his firm conviction that such a way of valuing and trying to convey value was fundamentally opposed to God's values (again, revealed most clearly in the extreme case, the case of Jesus). Thus the only "boast," or "claim to honor," that Paul will allow is boasting "in the Lord" (1 Cor 1:31; 2 Cor 10:17) and "in one's weaknesses" (2 Cor 11:30; 12:5–10). Only where the character and person of Jesus becomes visible in the individual (which Paul found most where his human strengths ran out) does one find cause for self-respect, and the group needs to reinforce this as the central criterion for bestowing honor.

Another essential and pervasive aspect of this re-education of the Christians concerns the replacement of the basic competitive model of establishing one's honor with a cooperative model. The believers, as children of God, become what sociologists would call a fictive kinship group, that is, a collection of people who are not genealogically related but who nevertheless consider one another as family, attempting to relate at that higher level of intimacy, belonging and mutual commitment. As sisters and brothers, believers share honor within one household, working together toward the advancement of the honor of all members of this family rather than competing with one another for honor as if between unrelated individuals. Thus Jesus criticizes the scribes and the Pharisees for loving to be honored in ways that set them above and apart from their fellow Israelites, forbidding his own disciples to create or pursue such distinctions: "They love the head table at banquets and the first seats at the synagogue and greetings in the market place and to be called 'Rabbi' by people. But do not you be called 'Rabbi,' for One is your teacher and you are all sisters and brothers" (Mt 23:6–8, my translation). Honor is not truly gained by competing against one's own kin. Similarly, Paul urges his friends in Philippi to lay aside all rivalries over recognition in the church, choosing instead "in humility [to] regard others as better than yourselves" (Phil 2:3).



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

Instead of clinging to claims of certain recognition, the Christians are simply to relinquish those claims (seedbeds of factionalism that they are) and offer recognition and honor to the other members of the body.

Believers are summoned to honor one another and to affirm one another's value in God's sight and in the sight of the group (see Rom 12:10; Phil 1:17; 2:3–4; 1 Pet 5:5–6; 3 Jn 9–11). There is certainly no room for dishonoring or shaming fellow Christians for any reason other than their departure from the norms of the faith. The poor Christian is not to be treated shabbily and made to feel ashamed because he or she is poor (1 Cor 11:21–22; Jas 2:6–7); believers are not to disdain one another on the basis of indifferent matters of custom (Rom 14:3, 10) or on the basis of promoting some spiritual gifts as more distinguished and distinguishing than others (1 Cor 12). Such would only push the shamed believers away from the group and back to the bosom of society to no good purpose. Shaming must be reserved only for the enforcing of vital group norms of honorable conduct (see 1 Cor 6:5; 15:34; 2 Thess 3:6, 14–15; 1 Tim 5:20, and discussion below).

Instead the interactions within the group must reflect the honor of each person in God's eyes and according to God's standards. This means taking special care to bestow honor on the "less presentable" ones:

Those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. (1 Cor 12:23–26)

Within this single paragraph, three related concerns are brought together. First, Paul uses the metaphor of the body as a means of helping the Christians in Corinth understand the importance and suitability of intentionally affirming the honor of those who have honor in God's sight but, by society's criteria (the criteria of the Christian's primary socialization, learned in the pre-Christian period of one's life) would be of no account. Second, the relationship between this kind of attitude toward one another and the maintenance of unity and concord within the church is made explicit. Third, Paul articulates a kinship ethos as far as both loss and honor are concerned. The advancement of the honor of one member of the family means advancement for all members of the family, such that it becomes only right to rejoice at one another's being honored and even to promote one another's honor (rather than promote one's own at the expense of others). The Christian community that nurtures this kind of ethos will see tremendous growth and be equipped to do acts of ministry worthy of God.

Honor and Shame Within the New Community

Once the distinctively Christian criteria for what constitutes honorable and dishonorable behavior have been established, and group members' focus has been taken wholly off the verdict of the unbelieving world and fixed on God's approval and the intimations of that approval reflected in one's fellow Christians and in the leaders of the group, then honor and shame can be used within the group to reinforce commitment to live out the group's values. Leaders can harness the hearers' natural desire for honor to promote the courses of action or attitudes necessary for sustaining the Christian movement as the path to honor before the court of reputation that matters and to dissuade them from any attitudes, behaviors and commitments that might prove detrimental to group solidarity or contrary to group values, labeling it as the path to dishonor before that body of



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

significant others. Where the majority of this minority culture can agree, it can encourage individual members to embody shared values by bestowing honor on those who manifest them, and it can even use shaming techniques (although notably not the same techniques to which the outside world has subjected them!) to correct members who stray beyond the shared norms.

The promise of being honored in God's house reinforces the value of not yielding to the lusts of the body (2 Tim 2:20–22), of serving Jesus (Jn 12:26), of taking up the posture of servant to the Christian community (Mk 10:41–45), and of extending hospitality and material support to the sisters and brothers in need (2 Cor 8:1–7, 24; Philem 7; 3 Jn 5–8), to name but a few examples. “Dying in the Lord” is held up by John as an absolute good, an absolute claim to being deemed honorable: “ ‘Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord.’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them’ ” (Rev 14:13). John is redefining the criteria for a “good death,” with loyalty to the Lamb and the group's core values (in his situation, monolatry and disentangling oneself from the sinful prosperity of the imperial system would be prominent) at the center. The makarism carries weight whether this death is violent or natural. The important point is that the hearers will associate perseverance “in the Lord,” whatever that may entail, with a noble death, a good death.

The threat of disgrace before God sustains commitment to forgive one another (Mt 18:23–35); to tend the hungry, sick, destitute and imprisoned (Mt 25:31–46); and to remain loyal to the Lord who saved them rather than bring dishonor to his name through defection (Heb 6:4–8). Looking again to Revelation, John graphically depicts the public (indeed, cosmic) humiliation that awaits those who yield to the pressures to participate in idolatrous ritual and especially emperor cult—being physically degraded through punishment in the sight of an honorable audience, the holy angels and the Lamb (Rev 14:9–11). Those who yield are labeled “cowardly” and “faithless” (Rev 21:8) and are excluded from the honor and favors prepared by God for his people. As particular acts or general attitudes are linked in the believers' consciousness with honor or disgrace as the consequences, their own ambitions and aversions are being reprogrammed in terms of the distinctive ethos of the Christian culture.

Leaders will thus frequently remind the hearers of honorable and shameful behavior through words such as those above. Members will then reflect this information back to one another in their conversations and even in their nonverbal communication. Honor and shame do not work in the Christian culture only at the level of the internalization of values, however. Across the New Testament the early shepherds were themselves “activating” the church as a “court of reputation” as they held up certain believers to be honored, shamed others and encouraged the churches themselves to create a dynamic social environment in which honoring and shaming actively supported the group's values and reinforced individual commitment to embody those values. Leaders like Paul or the author of Hebrews openly praise (honor) believers who embody the group's values and whose energies or commitment have advanced the group's well-being (whether locally and translocally). For example, the Christians in Thessalonica are commended for their loyal work and loving labors in the Lord, and particularly for their steadfastness in the face of opposition, by means of which, they find out here, they have become a model for emulation throughout the regions of Macedonia and Achaia (1 Thess 1:3, 7). The author of the letter “to the Hebrews” indirectly praises the hearers for their past stance of courage and solidarity in the face of society's shaming strategies (Heb 10:32–35), an honorable course in which they now need to persevere. The seven oracles to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 show a masterful and quite explicit combination of praise and censure, as Jesus affirms those who have manifested steadfastness, loyalty and love toward him and one another and censures those who have made far



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

too much room for the dominant culture's values and prized pursuits. This praise and censure, being heard by the churches throughout the province, is very public and thus even more powerful an affirmation and deterrent as each local church's fame throughout the circle of churches is augmented or diminished as the Judge makes his appraisal known.

These same oracles display another important strategy being used throughout the New Testament: they intentionally direct the hearers and channel their ambitions for honor toward the honors bestowed by God or by the group for having embodied the group's values (see also 1 Thess 3:12–13; 2 Thess 1:11–12; 2:14). Whether their current behavior has merited praise, censure or a mixture of the two, each church is invited to pursue a specific course of action that Jesus will affirm, and each is invited more broadly to aspire to “conquer” and thus receive the honors and awards promised to “everyone who conquers” (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26–28; 3:5, 12, 21). This summons to conquer spurs the hearers on to orient themselves toward the society as if in a battle (in the context of Satan's war against God and its last desperate campaign in the power of Rome and the cult of the emperors; see Rev 12–13), and to embody endurance and courage as they resist the enemy's pressures to surrender.

Fear of shame before one's fellow Christians in the local assembly or concern about loss of honor in the eyes of the translocal Christian group now becomes a powerful motivation for investment of oneself in the activities and processes that sustain the minority culture. Paul, for example, uses this fear of being dishonored with a view to securing maximum participation in the relief efforts for the sisters and brothers in Judea:

Openly before the churches, show them the proof of your love and of our reason for boasting about you...to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year; and your zeal has stirred up most of them. But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you may not prove to have been empty in this case, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be; otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—in this undertaking. (2 Cor 8:24–9:4)

The Corinthians have already won a reputation for generosity among the churches (a desirable honor, to be sure) thanks to Paul's boasting about them, but this reputation is now on the line: the Corinthians must put their money where Paul's mouth is, as it were, if they are to confirm their honor in the sight of their Macedonian sisters and brothers. If they fail to support this relief effort generously, their reputation among the churches will suffer loss.

Not just the leaders of the movement but the members themselves are called to exercise social control within the group. On the positive side the believers are called on to honor those who distinguish themselves in service to the church (1 Cor 16:15–18; Phil 2:29–30; 1 Tim 3:13; 3 Jn 12), the effect of which is to encourage even broader investment in these kinds of group-building and sustaining activities. Even Jesus, however, also prescribes the use of censure and public rebuke (shaming) within the Christian community for the brother or sister who persists in living contrary to the way of life taught by him (Mt 18:15–18). Notably, this process begins in private, for the first concern of kin is to protect rather than damage the honor and standing of their sisters and brothers. If a private meeting, and then a meeting with but two or three others, fails to correct the sister or brother, then the whole assembly has an opportunity to censure the behavior (now made public) and call for reformation. The final stage in the process is shunning. Loss of these important relationships is the final strategy that the church will employ, and in many cases this will finally bring about repentance (if the church has been functioning properly as the individual's primary reference group and primary network of support).



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

Paul likewise calls upon the local community to discern when an individual member has left the honorable paths and to “restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness” (Gal 6:1; see Heb 3:12–13)—censure is not to be sharp or demeaning, but the group’s values are nevertheless to be upheld and the erring lovingly led back to the path that God honors. If the person persists, however, in flouting the group’s values, shunning again becomes the last measure of social control (see 1 Cor 5:9–11).

Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from brothers and sisters who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us... Have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed. Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as brothers and sisters. (2 Thess 3:6, 14–15)

Other New Testament voices continue to cultivate an ethos of accountability within the group. John, for example, underscores Christians’ responsibility for addressing deviance and pulling the wayward back to firm commitment to the uncompromised values of the group (Rev 2:14, 20). Toleration of deviance and transgression becomes a blot not merely on the honor of the transgressors but on the whole church, which is censured for not exercising its responsibility to help all its members remain true to God’s standards. While the church cannot be held responsible for the transgression itself (thus only the idolaters within the church will actually experience the Lord’s punishment (Rev 2:22–23), the lives of the transgressors are, to some extent, in the hands of their sisters and brothers who must make every effort to reclaim them for life: “My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins” (Jas 5:19–20). Accountability within the Christian community is still not altogether popular in Western Christianity, being seen as the kind of “intrusion” into the private areas of one’s life characteristic of groups labeled “cults.” Nevertheless, the early Christians recognized it as an essential part of maintaining the community of faith and expressing Christian love and pastoral care.

People in the Greco-Roman world were concerned not only with their own honor but also were careful to give honor to whom it was due. Isocrates had advised his student, “Fear the gods, honour your parents, respect your friends, obey the laws” (*Ad Dem.* 16), advice that is incorporated into the Christian culture as well (see Rom 13:7; 1 Pet 2:17). People were particularly careful to honor those who were more powerful and on whose goodwill one’s well-being depended. For this reason, early Christians were guided as much by considerations of the honor due God as by consideration for their own honor—indeed, the two were inseparably linked. As Christians honor the one God as he merits, offering worship, fidelity and obedient service, they continue to share in the honor of being part of God’s household and God’s own people. As they guard God’s honor in their actions, they have the assurance as well that God will preserve and vindicate their honor at the last day. Any course of action that would show dishonor toward God or bring the name of Christ into disrepute must be avoided at all costs since the Christian who affronts God would then become the target of God’s anger and satisfaction of God’s honor. This, and not conflict with the larger society, is the most dangerous threat to the believer’s honor and the thing that can prevent their arrival at the “glory” reserved for them in the kingdom.

The author of Hebrews uses this topic extensively, since some of the addressees have begun to withdraw themselves from visible attachment to the community of Christians, presumably because they have lost their stomach for continuing to live as shamed people in the eyes of the majority. Such visible detachment from the group (which would surely be noticed and approved by the



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

unbelieving neighbors) brings disgrace on the name of Christ, for those who defect (or simply try to blend back into society while maintaining a private and hidden faith) bear witness to the unbelievers that Jesus and his promises are not worth what they cost to keep (Heb 6:4–8; these passages will be analyzed more fully later in chapter four). The lack of trust in God’s ability to make their loyalty worthwhile (Heb 3:7–4:11; 10:37–39) demonstrates the lack of value such people place on God’s gifts and the sanctification that cost Jesus so dearly (Heb 10:29; 12:15–17). Such lack of respect for God provokes God’s anger and will bring upon their heads the “fiery zeal that is about to consume God’s adversaries” (Heb 10:27, my translation) when he comes to judge (Heb 10:29–31). Fear of provoking God, once having been received into his favor, becomes a powerful resource for motivating perseverance in the group.

We close our survey of the ways in which New Testament texts address issues of honor and incorporate honor and shame into their strategies for group formation with this topic since it provides a focusing point for the vast amount of diverse material that has preceded. The believer who lives above all things for God’s approval on the last day, considers how he or she can honor God in all places and endeavors, and assists the community of disciples to maintain this same focus will admirably fulfill the calling of a disciple and ably contribute to the building up of the church.

Rethinking Honor in the Church Today

The points of connection between the needs of the early church and the plight of the church in both the modern Western world and in non-Western countries are impressive. Latin, Islamic and Oriental cultures are strikingly close to the classical world in terms of focusing on “honor” and “shame” as concepts that motivate the individual to conform to the values of the dominant culture (or at least the majority culture). The application of the foregoing discussions to Christian communities in those environments will be entirely natural. It may be surprising to discover, however, how much we have in common with the social dynamics of the first-century Mediterranean in the modern Western world. The machines of conformity have become perhaps more subtle and more institutional, but their wheels turn nonetheless.

In North America and Western Europe we find ourselves struggling to “work out our salvation” in the midst of a majority culture defined by pluralism and materialism. A mid- to late-twentieth-century believer is socialized into the gospel on the one hand and on the other hand into a society that holds up position, wealth and ownership of prestige items as measures for self-respect. To say that Christians are persecuted would perhaps exaggerate the situation for the majority of believers in the West, but we nevertheless cannot fail to notice more subtle pressures being exerted on us to soften our commitment to “one faith, one Lord” in the name of toleration, pluralism and multiculturalism. Desire to make room at the table for everyone’s beliefs, perspectives and cultural traditions has made it very unpopular to claim to have the Truth and to try to win others from their traditions to one’s own. This pressure can be exerted in many ways. Religion can be declared out of place in public spaces like businesses and schools. Those who attempt to bring religion into those spaces are made to feel ashamed for not respecting boundaries. In academia, of course, those who hold to a confessional or evangelical faith can be scorned by their more liberal and “free-thinking” colleagues as intellectual cowards or even as charlatans who use academic language to bolster premodern worldviews. The privatization of religion in the West—the widely shared conviction that an individual’s religion is a private matter not to be discussed openly, much less challenged—contributes greatly to the social pressure that fosters pluralism and trammels evangelism.



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

While America would not be described as an “honor” culture, individual Americans still seek to find their self-respect in achieving those marks society sets forth as the definition of successful. These definitions are communicated by our families of origin, who were themselves perhaps only partially socialized into the Christian ethos; by our educators who motivated study by pointing to the promising, well-paying careers and potential for advancement it would bring; by the endless barrage of commercials telling us what we should aspire to possess and display; and by the role models our society selects and elevates through very public award ceremonies and other avenues of idolization. We still are raised to seek the approval of the group and to act so as to gain recognition. In some circles, people are taught to value themselves based in socioeconomic terms (position within the professional class, wealth and ownership of prestige items) and to show their approval or disapproval of others based on similar values. In other circles, people lay claim to honor within the group based on physical strength or sexual conquest.

These facts place the Christian community in the midst of a majority culture and a dominant culture that neither shares nor supports its primary values. All the work done by the New Testament writers to insulate believers from their own internalization of those alien values and from the approval or disapproval of those who live by them will still be relevant work for the leaders of the twenty-first-century church. Attention to how New Testament authors directed their congregations to construct their honor will also help us in our quest for self-respect, our cultural confusion about how to value ourselves and one another. More to the point, it will help us discover how bodies of Christians (churches) can form strong communities that encourage pursuit of what God values in a life and that free individuals from seeking their sense of honor from the dry wells of the secular world.

Becoming more sensitive to the cultural context of honor as a core social value attunes us to hear more clearly what the New Testament has to tell us about where our own personal value—our self-respect, our validation—comes from, about what gives us our worth. (The same word in Greek, *timē*, meant “worth, price, value,” as well as “honor.”) Reading and meditating on the Scriptures with this focus will assist our liberation from trying endlessly to establish our worth and self-respect through the avenues the world lays open before us and incites us to pursue. In the United States, some of the more frequently traversed roads to worth are acquisition, upward mobility, competition, sexual conquest or affirmations of attractiveness, independence, insisting on our rights, affectations of superiority based on ascribed status like race, class, “birth” or “breeding” (including education, refinement and the like). The New Testament writings hang an unmistakable dead-end sign at the mouths of these avenues, summoning us to measure ourselves and one another by such yardsticks no longer.

These New Testament writers were engaged in forming a community based on values and on an ideology wholly other from that of the society. This leads us to consider how to create effective, energizing congregations and support groups that enable individuals to remain faithful to the life and witness to which God has called them, and how to defuse the messages they receive from other members of the society that dissuade them from wholehearted commitment to this “outdated” or “impractical” religion and seduce them into caring first for the things of this life. This is especially insidious in twentieth-century American culture, where the dominant culture speaks the language of Christianity and where many churches function basically as proponents of a Christianity wholly adapted to the needs of the dominant culture. Pastors and lay leaders will need to grow in their awareness of social engineering, as it were, if they are to see vital communities of disciples following the call of Jesus and not the call of society.



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

The New Testament authors provide us with many resources for building up congregational and individual resistance to society's aggressive promotion of its own values and its marginalization of historic Christian values. They model effective strategies for neutralizing the power of non-Christians' evaluations of "successful" and "valuable," particularly as this acts to dissuade single-minded pursuit of discipleship and commitment to do what God values. They underscore the importance of and model how to go about forming and activating the church as the alternate "court of reputation," in which the members reinforce for one another the centrality of God's values and the meaning of success in terms of Christ-likeness, obedience to the New Testament teachings and serving God's agenda.

One significant challenge here is for the church to act reliably and consistently as this court of reputation, not continuing to be or allowing itself to become a mirror of society's values. This was the problem in the Corinthian celebration of the Lord's Supper or in the "ushers' guild" depicted by James, which seated the rich in the best seats and pushed the poor to the corners. Do we or do our churches show partiality along similar lines, importing into the church the persistent tendency in American culture to honor the rich and despise the poor? Do our interactions with others show that we reflect God's valuing of the heart, or are we, like our culture, attentive to beauty and fine dress and disdainful of the plain and ill-clad? Do we harbor ethnic, regional, class or cultural prejudices that override our respect for and solidarity with our sisters and brothers in Christ? Self-examination of this kind is a process to be undertaken by every believer and group of believers. Guidance for this process can be found in the New Testament, as Jesus, Paul, James and others all address intrusions of the world's criteria of personal worth into the Christian community. Authentic discipleship means discerning and leaving behind those alien values and prejudices that prevent us from honoring, respecting and loving each other—and ourselves!—as God calls his family to do.

As we analyze the way in which the New Testament constructs Christian honor and mobilizes communities of faith to reinforce the pursuit of honor in terms of discipleship, we have the opportunity to become more aware of the ways in which individual discipleship depends on the support of a Christian community. We can observe and adapt the strategies used by the first-century congregations and their leaders to reinforce each believer's honor and self-respect in ways that promote the embodiment of specifically Christian values and commitments. The result will be a stronger community of disciples, a clearer awareness of the values that distinguish Christian culture from other groups. This in turn will enable a clearer prophetic voice for the church in its critique of society as well as radical commitment to seek honor in God's eyes, resisting the gravity of society's affirmations of what makes a life worthwhile.

Finally, we cannot fail to observe the connections between the early church and the situation of Christians in many parts of the non-Western world (e.g., India, China, Indonesia, Nigeria, many Islamic countries and the former Soviet Union), where society is frequently overtly hostile toward Christians in their midst and use all the deviancy-control techniques at their disposal to "correct" Christians. Reading the New Testament with a sensitivity to the needs and strategies explored above opens valuable resources for Christians in such circumstances to understand the significance of the opposition they encounter in such a way as to be empowered to endure society's rejection, insult, scorn and even violence if the path of obedience to Jesus' teachings and God's vision leads in that direction. Such a reading also educates Christians in the West concerning our responsibility to encourage, affirm and extend spiritual and material support to those sisters and brothers who face hostile shaming and physical abuse for the faith. We can investigate and tell the stories about the persecuted, spreading the fame of these heroes of faith, and let those needing support know



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

that their struggle does not go unnoticed but rather brings them the admiration of their sisters and brothers. This may be more meaningful than many Westerners would imagine, since many persecuted churches are also embedded in honor and shame cultures very much like the first-century Mediterranean. We can seek out means of communicating with the persecuted, encouraging them in their noble contest, making the reality of the church as a “body of significant others” felt more keenly through prayer, material support (particularly when the primary supporter of a family is jailed or removed, or when economic privations are a principal means of coercion) and working toward the alleviation of the persecution. We can let them know how valued they are by their sisters and brothers worldwide and seek out ways to affirm their dignity and to help them to face the harsh deviancy-control measures imposed on them. Their own harsher contest can in turn embolden us, in a spirit of positive and brotherly emulation, to face our own bloodless contests here with greater courage and commitment.

Growing in sensitivity to the cultural context of honor, to the social dynamics at work where a minority culture is shamed into conformity, and to the strategies developed by the leaders of the minority culture takes us to the New Testament with a distinctive agenda. This agenda opens us up to the ways in which the New Testament can help us (and help us help one another) to set aside any ambition to be recognized as honorable (to be approved) by the worldly minded on their own terms and to set our hearts fully on living so as to hear those two words that only Jesus can speak at the last day: “Well done.”

Excursus: A Word About Shame

Shame has become something of a buzzword in psychology—both in professional and popular publications, and so we will give some attention to the intersection of honor and shame in the church with shame in the psychological disciplines. One psychologist who has brought the academic discussion of shame in psychology to popular attention, Robert Karen, distinguishes between three kinds of shame. The first is the “feeling” or “experience” of shame (the warmth under the skin and extreme self-consciousness that overtakes an individual when he or she has done something that provokes public disapproval or ridicule); the second is a “sense” of shame, the “healthy attitudes that define a wholesome character,” the predilection for avoiding certain behaviors that bring shame. The first two meanings are very much in line with the definition of shame at the opening of chapter one. The third kind of shame, however, is what Karen describes as “repressed but hounding shame, something activated to the level of gnawing self-doubt, occasionally reaching the intensity of fully inflamed self-hatred,” a kind of shame about who we are that “drives people toward perfectionism, withdrawal, diffidence, combativeness,” “a festering negative self-portrait against which one is repeatedly trying to defend.”

This third kind of shame is clearly pathogenic. It is the kind of shame that the church should heal rather than reinforce. It means hiding part of who we are because we are sure we will be rejected and loathed because of that part, a commitment to repression that spawns all manner of dysfunctional and inauthentic behaviors, relational patterns and self-image. It is this vague, self-hating shame that is the target of psychologists, who rightly affirm that this kind of shame is prevalent even in a time when shame in its other senses appears to be so much in a recession (witness the immodesty that leads people to “expose their sexuality on TV, howl obscenities at those who would once have been considered their betters, cling to elective office despite the revelation of serious breaches of public trust, and greedily pen books about their misdeeds”).

The discoveries of psychologists with regard to the presence and impact of this kind of shame on the human psyche lead me to suggest that while we can be quite avid and broad in our honoring



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

those who embody Christian ideals and commitments, shaming techniques must be employed only with great care in the church. The church must be committed to becoming a place where people are healed of that which causes them to hide away some part of themselves, for as they hide it from fellow Christians, they also tend to push it back past the reaches of God's power to cure. How can we begin, then, to reinforce group values and curtail non-Christian behaviors without reinforcing the hold of pathological shame on the individual?

First, if we are to recover the mechanisms by which the early Christians helped one another stay on course in the "race set before us," we need to break through the modern lie that one's life is one's own business, encourage people to talk about their struggles as they seek to walk in line with the gospel, and elevate the importance and value of struggling courageously and diligently to fight the good fight for the Lord who redeemed them and the God who delights in the ethical victories of God's children. We also need very much to increase our conversation with one another concerning what God does value and what values God hopes will direct his children—this is vital, since there is so much conversation happening about what is valuable to and valued by the secular society. When we do not speak out to one another, we by our silence collude with society's indoctrination of the values of pluralism, the privatization of religion, the importance of the bottom line, the eschatological ideal of financial wealth, the promotion of consumerism to the point of a virtual return to debt slavery.

I would dare to suggest, however, that we also need to break through our discomfort with confrontation and recover a certain level of "situational" shame—the kind of shame that keeps us from behaving inappropriately, from giving free reign to aggression or lust and so forth. Remaining silent about behaviors that run counter to what the New Testament teaches and the church has passed on throughout the centuries has a great and dangerous potential for reinforcing pathological shame. We can remain silent, we can avoid confronting a sister or brother, but we cannot hide our aversion. As this is translated into nonverbal communication and eventually into unmistakable patterns of relational avoidance, we can easily convey the impression that we reject the person who has transgressed Christian values. Thus we impose the kind of shame that leads to pathology. Ironically, then, as we shy away from speaking about behaviors that are shameful (from the viewpoint of the New Testament and Christian ethics) out of a desire not to promote psychological disease, we end up being more prone to do what we would avoid.

If we were to be bold to speak as a group about the behavior, however, our aversion would be clearly and precisely focused. The transgressor would know that it was the behavior and not his or her person that did not find acceptance. The recipient of this censure would have the opportunity to divorce him- or herself from the dishonorable behavior (repent), as well as the opportunity to choose perseverance in what the Christian culture calls sin, knowing that he or she would thus continue to bring grief to the sisters and brothers. Either way, however, the church would not be reinforcing the dangerous, self-hating shame. Karen writes that guilt is about doing, shame about being. "We say, I am ashamed of *myself*. I am guilty *for* something." This distinction, however, is too clean and simple. In the Greco-Roman world (including the Jewish subculture), being is reflected in doing: one is what one does; a tree is known by the nature of its fruits; good people do virtuous acts; the one who does what is shameful is a shameful and base person (Mt 7:16–20). In that world, people are made to feel ashamed of doing certain things, and that kind of shame remains a helpful safeguard against the dangers of sin. Only when a person is made ashamed of "being" does shame become destructive.

Psychologists have studied twelve-step groups intently from the perspective of shame, something closely connected with addiction. Karen levels the critique that these groups deal with



Summer of Lies

Week 1: LIE: God uses shame to correct me and change me.

“secondary shame,” the shame of being addicted to something, but not the “core feelings of shame that may have caused one to become an addict in the first place.” A room full of alcoholics can quickly dissipate the stigma of being an alcoholic. What is most needed, however, is to get at the root of what drove a person to alcoholism, to touch and heal that shame or disorder.

How can we apply this apt critique so as to improve the mission of the church? We would do well to begin to see ourselves as a sort of “sinners anonymous.” This means, rather straightforwardly, admitting rather than suppressing the truth of our fallenness, ceasing our efforts to create and preserve a perfect image (that is, a mask—and our commitment to our own mask reinforces everyone else’s commitment to their own masks) and refocusing our churches healthfully on the restoration of God’s image in us. Admitting our solidarity in this regard removes the sense of being a shameful person because of some sin. This is the kind of shame that prevents a person from confessing, discussing, becoming open about who he or she really is—a silence that proves the best breeding ground for sin fully to conceive and bear fruit. Removing the secondary shame makes it possible for the person to expose the sin, to discover what motivates the sin, and to pursue release from the power of that sin in an atmosphere of prayer, mutual honesty and mutual support. The Christian learns that he or she fights a common enemy who works best by alienating our secret obsessions with sin from our healing community. Disarming the enemy’s strategy and sharing our temptations make it all the less likely that we will follow through on, or persist in, the sin. If we are honest as a believing community about who we are and with what we struggle, we can also support one another as a family of faith on the way to becoming what the power of God seeks to make of us.¹⁴

¹⁴ deSilva, D. A. (2012). [*Honor, patronage, kinship & purity: unlocking new testament culture*](#) (pp. 43–93). InterVarsity Press.