



L'Abri Papers #DK04



The Meaning of Shame and Guilt

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“ ... our models can tyrannize us by setting up unrealistic standards of heroism, therefore condemning us to frustrated shame”

Shame is often felt but little talked about and little understood. This is in part because it is so often confused with guilt, as if the two words were synonyms. It is also because the Biblical teaching on shame and its implications has been little developed by Christian theology.

To clarify the meaning of both words, let us look at their opposites. The opposite of guilt is innocence or moral purity. The opposite of shame, though, is not innocence; it is honour and glory. Think of Hosea 4:7, “... I will change their glory into shame,” or Philippians 3:19, “... they glory in their shame.” Shame is related to dishonour. Both shame and guilt are falling short of some standard, the subjective experience being the feeling of unacceptability and badness. Guilt is clearly for violating a rule, law or commandment. It is solidly in a moral framework, but from where, then, does shame come? What standard is violated when we experience shame?

If we look at three kinds of relationships between guilt and shame, the definition will become more clear. First of all, guilt and shame can come together for the same act. For example, I can tell a lie and feel guilt because I know it is wrong, but also feel shame because I had thought I was a strong enough person to have told the truth. Secondly, guilt and shame can function independently of each other. This goes both ways. I can know that I have done the wrong thing morally, but I can be quite unashamed about it. This is not to my credit, but it happens. In the same way I can feel shame for all kinds of things that are morally irrelevant. I can feel shame for being poor, for having been to the wrong kind of college or for having read or not read certain books. One area where most people feel shame is about their bodies. They feel ashamed of what they look like. In no sense are these moral problems or even moral issues. They are morally neutral, and yet we can experience extreme and painful shame over them. The third kind of relationship between guilt and shame is that of opposition: the two can work against each other. In other words, we can feel shame for doing the right thing, or sense a certain glory in doing the wrong thing. For example, in the Bible we are warned against being ashamed of Christ. We usually do not see the psychological implications of this. Believing and being identified with Jesus Christ is the most morally right thing we can do - and yet we can feel ashamed of doing it.

How do we explain these confusing things? The fact that guilt and shame can function independently or in opposition to each other shows that they point to two different systems

or standards of self-evaluation. Guilt and innocence deal with morals, rights and wrongs. Shame, however, deals with models, our sense of what is heroic, which is measured in terms of honour and glory on the one side and shame on the other.

Because we are all more familiar with moral categories, I will expand on models. All of us have heroes or heroines, people that we would like to be like. There is some kind of notion in our minds of the person that we would like to be. Psychologists call this our *self-ideal*. It functions as an ideal self-portrait by which we measure ourselves. We feel shame when we (often suddenly) fall short of this model of heroism. Sartre gives a good example of this in his book *Being and Nothingness*.¹ He describes a man eavesdropping on someone else, looking through the keyhole of the person's door. Suddenly he hears a footstep behind him, and there is someone watching *him*. This would be an experience where most of us would feel intense shame, because that sort of behaviour is not "me"; I'm not a voyeur or peeping Tom, and yet there I was, doing it! The experience goes beyond the fact of public exposure (that someone saw me doing it) but its impact is that it shows me myself in a new way that is utterly shocking. I am not the person that I thought I was, after all. I had no idea that I was so unheroic. I thought I was a bit closer to my self-ideal. Shame may or may not involve public embarrassment but always involves a painful loss of trust in oneself and with it a feeling of unacceptability.

This means that the kinds of things that cause us shame depend on whatever it is that to us is heroic, the content of our self-portrait. Of course our models can tyrannize us by setting up unrealistic standards of heroism, and therefore condemning us to frustrated shame most of the time because of our failure to live up to them. Even though our heroes and heroines must be utterly unrealistic, they still exert a tremendous level of control over our lives.

An obvious problem that we can get into is to have our morals derived from the Bible and our models defined by Hollywood. This is like having one foot in Jerusalem and the other in Southern California. It is too long a stretch between the two. It leads to a crossfire of self-rejection. We are condemned whichever way we turn. If we do what is morally right, we might feel ashamed of being "goody-goody"; if we do what might seem to us glorious and heroic, we would feel guilty. We inflict great suffering on ourselves by having morals and models that are incompatible or at least out of focus with each other.

The difference between guilt and shame is born out in the solution that the Bible offers to both. God's solution to our moral problem of sin is dear-cut and well known in Christian theology. As we trust in Christ, we are forgiven. The death of Christ legally satisfies the requirements of justice which would otherwise have condemned us. Through receiving the free gift of salvation by faith, we are pronounced justified in the sight of God. It is a legal acquittal that is involved. But when we come to shame, it does not seem to be so clear. It makes no sense to apply a moral and legal solution to a problem that may not be a moral problem. Here we begin to see that what the salvation of Jesus Christ involves is more than forgiveness. There is something more than just legal acquittal - and that is personal acceptance. The fact that salvation is often expressed in legal terms in no way means that it is limited to legal categories. Personal acceptance is more than forgiveness, but includes it. For example, I can forgive you for something you have done to me but I still might not like to spend time with you, I might not want you along on my vacation. Christian salvation goes beyond legal pardon. It is the work of a loving Father who adopts us into his family. He loves us and accepts us as we are. The parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11) is a good example. The father ran out to meet the son and welcomed him back with a banquet and great celebration. God's answer to shame is that He accepts us in our acceptability. The writer of Hebrews points out the Jesus "is not ashamed to call them brethren." (Hebrews

2:11) He is not ashamed to have us numbered in his family, even with all of our sin and shame. How easy it is to feel ashamed of those who are in our family - parents of their children's public bad behaviour, and vice versa. Yet Jesus is glad to call us His brothers and sisters and be identified with us. So, God's solution is forgiveness for our moral problem, acceptance in the midst of shame, and the promise that one day He will replace our shame with honour and glory.

Another whole question that must be raised is what to do with our heroes. When we are dealing with models, we are touching on the role of the imagination and its function in our psychology. Our imaginations need to be redeemed. They are cluttered with all kinds of heroes that have no business being there. This process has two sides, the negative and the positive.

Negatively, we must get rid of many of our heroes and heroines. Many of them come from Hollywood and Madison Avenue and are heroic for their exploitation of others in every imaginable way. As such, they have a powerful appeal to our pride. The Bible has a great deal of space devoted to exploding empty heroism. God seems to use humour and sarcasm to the fullest in doing this. Isaiah's words bear the sting of scorn, "Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, and valiant men in mixing strong drink." (Isaiah 4:22, RSV) On a wider scale, the Biblical doctrine of the fool is a development of the theme of unheroism disguised as if it were glory. The fool is usually the one who thinks he can outwit virtue, but ends up destroying himself. He is the archetypal loser, and the Bible spares nothing in his exposure. Perhaps this is because God knows that He must reach into our imaginations to discredit these heroes.

Positively, the Christian has the hero to end all heroes. Jesus Christ is the "hero and perfecter of our faith." (Hebrews 12:2) The various commands to imitate Christ are commands to make Him our hero. The imitation of Christ is not meant to be the imitation of His every action and circumstance. Some have felt that it meant that being celibate or not owning a house were especially virtuous because Jesus was celibate and did not own a house. God might call any of us to either of these things, but they are not good just because Jesus did them. The focus of the imitation of Christ is the imitation of His quality of life. There are at least six areas of Jesus' life that we are told to imitate, to do things because and in the way that Jesus did them. We are to love one another as Jesus loved His disciples. (John 13:13-15) We are to forgive one another as "God in Christ forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32 ff) We are to be willing to suffer unjustly. (1 Peter 2:20 ff) Since Jesus was rich and became poor that we might become rich, we are to give and be generous with each other. (2 Corinthians 8:9) If Jesus lowered Himself to become a man and die on a cross for us, we can afford to be humble. (Philippians 2:3-8) Finally, our greatness and fulfilment is found in serving, not in being served, because Jesus came not to be served but to serve, to give His life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:43-45)

The imitation of Christ is not the imitation of one who is far off and irreproachable like a statue on a hill. The one whom we are to imitate is the same one who is not ashamed to call us members of His family. He is beside us, walking arm in arm with us. The imitation of Christ is, therefore, not a moral bludgeon to make us squirm under an awareness of our failure, but is a call to redeem our imaginations, that having understood the radical acceptance and forgiveness of God, we would have our imaginations filled with this powerful model of true heroism.

All of this is not a recipe for getting rid of all feelings of shame. However, if we have Christ as our model, it will eliminate a great deal of unnecessary shame, shame for things that are not really shameful. If Christ is our model, then our models and our morals are in perfect

focus because Christ lived out the commandments of God. If this is the case, we will experience shame and guilt together for things that are really wrong and therefore dishonourable before God. It will also mean that we experience the forgiveness and acceptance of God that comes to us through Jesus Christ, “the hero and perfecter of our faith.”

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Citadel Press, 1964)