

Healthy Shame

Genesis 2, Revelation 3

This morning we begin a four-week sermon series on the topic of shame. I've been planning to do this series since last summer because the topic kept surfacing in conversations and in reading. I doubt that I need to convince many people in the room this morning that shame is a relevant issue in all of our lives. And so I hope that as a result of these sermons that the topic of shame becomes a part of the conversation we have as a church. As always, these sermons aren't the "last word" on this topic; they're merely the first word in an ongoing conversation.

What I ***didn't*** anticipate was how hard it would be for me personally to study and talk about shame. I feel like I'm just beginning to understand the ways I've experienced shame - this deep sense that I'm not enough and not accepted and not worthy. And I'm just beginning to realize all the ways that my shame has manifested itself in my life: the fear of being "found out," going to extreme measures to avoid looking stupid, avoiding eye contact with God, etc. Studying and teaching about shame isn't particularly easy or fun. Nevertheless I really sense that God is leading me (and us) into this topic. So I trust that this series will be good for all of us.

We'll expand our definition (or description) of shame as we move through this series. But we'll begin with this "working definition" of shame:

"Shame is the deep sense that you are unacceptable because of something you did, something done to you, or something associated with you. You feel exposed and humiliated." (Edward Welch, *Shame Interrupted*, p. 2)

Welch points out that shame can be caused by a number of different things: things you've done (sins, mistakes, failures), things that have been done to you (ridicule, abuse, rejection), or something associated with you (relationships, circumstances, conditions).

We're going to see what the Bible has to say about these various types of shame. Even though everything within us wants to keep our shame in the dark/shadows, I hope that through these messages God gives you the freedom and the courage and the security you need to bring your shame out into the light so that you can experience healing. Shame thrives on secrecy. It will be important for all of us to notice our shame, name it, talk about it, and then go directly to Jesus Himself for healing.

This morning we begin by considering what I'll call "healthy shame" - a type of shame that is actually appropriate in light of our actual condition. Healthy shame leads us to humble ourselves before God. Toxic shame (or unhealthy shame) merely leaves us feeling condemned and worthless. We'll talk about other types of shame in coming weeks, but we begin by considering healthy shame. Unless we have a healthy shame that leaves us humble before God, our attempts to deal with other types of shame will be band-aids and superficial fixes. [Note: In theory it's easy to separate healthy shame and toxic shame, but in practice all different types of shame get jumbled together.]

Our survey of “healthy shame” will be a bit like flying from the the west coast to the east coast with a brief layover in Kansas: We’ll begin in Genesis, dip down into the book of Psalms and the prophets, and then we’ll land the plane in the book of Revelation.

Shame as a byproduct of sin. (*Genesis 2:25, 3:7, 10*) Genesis 2 describes how in the Garden the man and the woman, Adam and Eve, experienced a type of wholeness (*shalom*) that you and I have never known. There was no sin and no guilt that separated them from each other or from God. Listen to the description of Adam and Eve given in the last verse of Genesis 2.

25 And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

Isn’t it striking that the author of Genesis describes “the man and his wife” in this way? Out of all the things he could have mentioned about their condition and about their experience, he mentions that they “were both naked and were not ashamed.” Why would the author of Genesis specifically mention that they had no shame? He’s setting up chapter 3 where their condition would change radically. In chapter 3 they would go from being naked and having no shame to being clothed and full of shame. The culprit will be sin.

I like Craig Barnes’ comment that they “were created hungry and the whole world was their food. . . except for one tree.” They were given an amazing amount of freedom to enjoy **everything** but the fruit from tree in the middle of the Garden. Genesis 3 describes how Eve and Adam believed the serpent’s lie. They believed that God was holding out on them by forbidding them to eat from the tree; they believed that God was withholding something good from them. Let’s pick up the narrative in verse 6.

6 When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings.

On a heart level, Adam and Eve “sided” with the serpent instead of God when they took the fruit and ate. Consequently, their “eyes were opened” to things that God didn’t want them to see; they now knew things they had never known before. Specifically, “they knew that they were naked.” Before they sinned the category of “naked” was irrelevant; it made no difference that they weren’t wearing clothes because they had nothing to hide. But when they sinned, everything changed. Instead of being naked and unashamed, they are now naked and full of shame. Instinctively, they now felt the need to cover themselves up. Verse 8 tells us that they also felt the need to hide.

8 They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

Before they sinned, they talked freely with God. But now the thought of talking face to face with God filled them with anxiety. They were ashamed over siding with the serpent and so they instinctively hid themselves among the trees.

9 Then the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" 10 He said, "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself."

That's a very honest reply, isn't it? Notice God's follow-up question:

11 And He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from 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 from the tree, and I ate."

That's kind of a long answer to God's question. God also had a question for the woman:

13 Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" And the woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

This passage illustrates that ***shame distorts our thoughts, feelings, and actions***. We see this so clearly in Adam and Eve. We read this account in Genesis 3 and find ourselves thinking things like: "Seriously? You're going to hid behind a tree and think God can't see you?" And, "Really, Adam? In chapter 2 you called her 'flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone,' and now you're throwing her under the bus and even insinuating that God had given you a defective companion?"

We see so clearly how shame distorted their thoughts, feelings, and actions. But we don't always see how shame does the same thing to us. I've asked a few people to write up their experience with shame; they've given me permission to read what they've written (anonymously). Listen to this account and notice how shame distorted this person's feelings and made this person want to hide.

The thing that brings the most shame in my life is relational mistakes that my parents have made that I have repeated. I swore I would never be like that, and judged them for their sin, but then fell in to the same trap myself.

When I feel shame I want to hide from the people I've hurt, and keep my past a secret, even though normally I am a very open person. My heart rate elevates and I become overly introspective and critical of myself. I should have known better.

I have asked for forgiveness from the people I've hurt, but the consequences of broken relationships and relational pain still remain. Processing all these things with a counselor and a couple trusted friends has been immensely helpful and given me a safe place to talk about my feelings and work through the shame and self-hatred. Bringing it into the light was the beginning of healing.

There are times where I feel like I'm at a pretty healthy place - I have asked for forgiveness, God has forgiven me, and Christ has paid for my sin; but there are other times I still want to run and hide, fearful of what others would think of me if they knew the truth, and embarrassed at my own frailty.

Very insightful, isn't it? Shame distorts the truth and makes us want to hide. Bringing shame into the light was the beginning of healing.

Let's drop into the Psalms and the prophets for ***An example of healthy shame (and the lack thereof)***. Let's first look at Psalm 119:80. This verse reflects a healthy desire to avoid the shame associated with sin. Listen to how the Psalmist expresses himself:

80 May my heart be blameless in Your statutes,
So that I will not be ashamed.

He understood that the byproduct of sin is shame. He wanted to avoid the guilt and shame associated with not keeping God's commands. When you read Psalm 119 you get the strong sense that obedience to God's commands wasn't about following a set of regulations in some legalistic, technical way. For the psalmist, obedience was relational; obedience was a matter of being faithful to God Himself. Therefore, disobedience was also relational; disobedience was a matter of being unfaithful to God Himself. As with Adam and Eve, there is an appropriate type of shame when you don't side with God.

And so the prayer here is, "May my heart be blameless in Your statutes, So that I will not be ashamed." It's not that obedience removes shame or that obedience removes sin (and therefore shame). It's just that when we live our lives according to God's Word, we experience wholeness and integrity instead of shame.

I realize that you might be reluctant to admit that there's shame associated with your disobedience because you might be afraid of being crushed under the weight of your shame. I "get" that. You're taking a risk when you view sin as violating your relationship with God (instead of merely violating a regulation "on the books"). But this is a biblical diagnosis of sin; and if we reject the diagnosis, it's highly unlikely that we'll accept the cure. Admitting that there's shame associated with your disobedience doesn't mean heaping condemnation upon yourself (or "shaming yourself"). I'm suggesting that you allow yourself to feel/experience the shame that naturally accompanies disobedience. I'd encourage you to experience that it's not good or right to be in relationship with God and at the same time side with His enemy or be indifferent to His glory.

Perhaps looking at the other extreme - a lack of healthy shame - will be helpful. In Jeremiah 6 we have an example of people who had no shame over their sin. God is describing the people of Israel in the days of Jeremiah.

15 "Were they ashamed because of the abomination they have done?
They were not even ashamed at all;
They did not even know how to blush.
Therefore they shall fall among those who fall;

At the time that I punish them,
They shall be cast down,” says the Lord.

The fact that they “did not even know how to blush” is evidence of a hardened/calloused heart. Throughout the Bible we see that people who admit that they’ve sinned receive forgiveness and cleansing; those who say that there is not God or who won’t admit their sin before God are in a very dangerous place.

Edward Welch has written extensively on shame from a biblical perspective. He’s also written a powerful book on addiction (*Banquet in the Grave*). He writes this paragraph in his book *Shame Interrupted* (p. 16):

Addicts live with shame, whether the problem is drugs, alcohol, food, or sex. No one tells you that when you fall in love with any of these, you also say “I do” to shame. Then, when shame strikes, it is so nasty you have to numb yourself, and what better anesthetic than your addiction? It is the perfect vicious circle.

I would encourage you not to be afraid of healthy shame in the areas in which you struggle with habitual sin. The impulse is to think that shame is **always** bad and destructive. But that’s not the case in Christ Jesus. A healthy shame can warn us and humble us and drive us back to Jesus.

The offer to remove “the shame of our nakedness.” (*Revelation 3:14-22*) This is Jesus’ letter to the church at Laodicea; it’s the last of seven letters to churches in Asia Minor. Their main problem was spiritual apathy. They were lukewarm:

15 ‘I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. 16 ‘So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.

When it comes to a drink, a hot drink can be good (like hot chocolate on a cold winter night) and a cold drink can be good (like iced tea on a hot summer day). In this imagery if you’re lukewarm you used to be hot and you’ve cooled off. . . or you used to be cold and you’ve warmed up. Either way you’re not what you’re supposed to be.

This would be like going to the kitchen sink and filling up a glass with what you think is cold tap water, but because someone has recently run the hot water it’s actually lukewarm. You take a big gulp and your your instinctive response is to spit it out. That was Jesus’ reaction to the church at Laodicea. Jesus didn’t die on the cross so that we might be lukewarm. He went to the cross so that we might love God passionately. The Laodiceans were not only lukewarm, they were also deceived.

17 ‘Because you say, “I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,” and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked,

They were oblivious to their true spiritual condition. Instead of merely condemning them, Jesus makes this amazing offer in verse 18:

18 I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.

When He said, “**Buy** from Me gold. . . garments. . . and eye salve. . .” Jesus is echoing Isaiah 55:1 in which the Lord invites the people to “Come, buy wine and milk, without money and without cost.” In the same way, we “buy” gold, garments, and eye salve from Jesus without money and without cost. Jesus is offering to move us from being spiritually impoverished to being rich toward God, from being spiritually blind to having clear spiritual sight, and from being spiritually naked/bankrupt to being clothed in righteousness and purity.

When he mentions not revealing “the shame of your nakedness” He is picking up the language of Genesis 2 and 3. Remember that ever since the Fall, shame has been associated with nakedness. Through the righteousness of Christ, the results of the Fall are reversed. The shame of our nakedness is healed. This healing takes place through a direct encounter with Jesus Himself. Notice what Jesus tells the church to do and notice what He promises:

19 ‘Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.
20 ‘Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.

If you answer the door and let Jesus come in, He will sit at your table and eat your food and drink your wine. Jesus will share table fellowship with you. You will have gone from being “wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked” to enjoying the friendship and the camaraderie and the affection of the One who is described in Revelation 1 as “the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” Because you are now clothed in righteousness and because of your association with One so glorious, you can almost feel your shame begin to melt away. But there’s more:

21 ‘He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. 22 ‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’ ”

In Revelation “he who overcomes” is code for true believers, those who persevere to the end. We’ll talk about this more on Easter morning, but hear this if you can and if you will: in Christ Jesus you will go from being naked and ashamed to being royalty. When you are seated on the throne with Jesus there is no place for shame.

I’ll close today by reading the experience of one woman responded to Jesus’ offer and experienced healing of her shame.

“Shame has been an experience I’ve dealt with my whole life. I come from a non-Christian home, an emotionally abusive father, and have had multiple relationships based solely on sex. I’m not a virgin, I’ve been diagnosed with depression, I’ve contemplated taking my own life, and I’ve physically harmed myself in order to release the pain I felt deep inside. But there has always been a force much greater than me that has been watching and waiting patiently for me. That force? That’s God. That’s my God!

The God who found me crying over the mess I had made out of my life; where I turned to men for comfort and found myself seeking their love through sex. God found me on the brink of questioning my own existence and whether I was worth the air that I breathed. God saw all of this shame I carried with me and he did the most amazing thing: he forgave me. He dug his way into my heart and claimed what was rightfully his. That shame that I carried with me for twenty years was washed away in one single moment when I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. A full twenty years passed before I was able to fully experience God’s mercy, grace, and forgiveness! But God loves me just the same.

There have been numerous times, including this one, where I breakdown and cry because I feel his love surging through my veins. I want others who are struggling to take heart and know that God doesn’t care where you have been but where you are right now. He so desperately wants you to talk to him and to accept his love into your heart. It may seem overwhelming to accept that much power and love but the God I’ve come to call my father, wants just a small window to give you the love you fully deserve and seek. Shame may seem like a mighty mountain but God turns that mountain into dust if you just give him the chance.”