

Jesus' Affection for Shameful People

Some of you are familiar with Brené Brown. She is a research professor at the University of Houston; she has done fascinating research on topics such as vulnerability and shame. In her research she asked people to give an example of shame. Here are some of the answers she received (*Daring Greatly*, p. 70):

- Shame is getting laid off and having to tell my pregnant wife.
- Shame is having someone ask me, "When are you due?" when I'm not pregnant.
- Shame is hiding the fact that I'm in recovery.
- Shame is raging at my kids.
- Shame is bankruptcy.
- Shame is my boss calling me an idiot in front of the client.
- Shame is my husband leaving me for my next door neighbor.
- Shame is my wife asking me for a divorce and telling me that she wants children, but not with me.
- Shame is my DUI.
- Shame is infertility.
- Shame is telling my fiancé that my dad lives in France when in fact he's in prison.
- Shame is internet porn.
- Shame is flunking out of school. Twice.
- Shame is hearing my parents fight through the walls and wondering if I'm the only one who feels this afraid.

When you and I experience shame as a result of these types of things, others who care about us may try to make us feel better by saying things like, "It's not your fault that you got laid off. It's a tough economy." "Everybody has sins and weaknesses; I sure have mine." "College isn't for everybody. If college isn't your 'thing' something else is." "Even though your parents scream at each other, you have to know that it's not your fault and that they still love you."

These assurances and these perspectives might be helpful. They might not be; they might make you think, "You're not taking me seriously. . . what I feel is so much deeper than you know. . ." Either way, ultimately you can't be talked out of feeling shame. Getting past our shame will involve more than being told, "We're **all** screwed up in different ways. . . don't be so hard on yourself." Since shame is the deep sense, "I'm not enough, I'm not accepted, I'm not wanted," getting past our shame will involve being told, "You **are** enough, you **are** accepted, you **are** wanted," by somebody who really matters: by God Himself.

Since Jesus is "God in the flesh," today we are going to notice in the Gospels Jesus' affection for people who were considered shameful. Jesus "made a bee line" toward shameful people. He talked with them, He touched them, He ate meals with them, He befriended them. When we see Jesus' affection for shameful people, we will begin to understand how Jesus thinks about us in our shame. We need to see ourselves as the man with leprosy, as the woman who'd been bleeding for twelve years, as the woman

caught in adultery, as tax collectors and sinners, as prodigal sons and daughters, etc. When we see ourselves in these types of people, we will see how Jesus views us.

We're first going to take a brief look at Jesus' own statement about His target audience (Luke 4). Jesus targeted the downcast and disadvantaged - the very type of people who commonly experience extreme shame. Then we'll consider some examples of how Jesus befriended and touched and healed such people.

Jesus' Target Audience (Luke 4:14-30) This passage describes what happened when Jesus went back to His home synagogue in Nazareth.

16 And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. 17 And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written,

We aren't told whether Jesus chose the passage to read that day or whether it was simply the assigned reading. Whatever the case, Jesus turned to what we now call Isaiah 61. This passage describes the mission of the Suffering Servant - the One who would suffer and die on behalf of the people (see Isaiah 53:4-6).

18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me,
Because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor.
He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives,
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set free those who are oppressed,
19 To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord."

The Holy Spirit Himself would be "upon" and would "anoint" this One to carry out His mission. Notice the specific target audience of the Suffering Servant. The word shame isn't used in this passage, but there was shame associated with each category mentioned. Those mentioned were the people in that culture who likely felt like outcasts, worthless, unwanted.

The **poor**. There was (and is) shame associated with poverty; whereas the rich are insiders, the poor are outsiders; whereas many people want to get close to the rich (for all sorts of reasons), people try to avoid the poor; whereas the rich have a high profile, the poor are often invisible. After all the bad news they received day after day and year after year, the poor would finally hear good news - the gospel.

The **captives**. There was a special type of shame associated with being a "captive" or being enslaved. You were stripped of dignity and rights; you were completely at the mercy of people who could care less about your well-being. The Servant would release the captives with a proclamation.

The **blind**. Do you remember the question that the disciples asked Jesus (in John 9) when they passed by a man "blind from birth"? Their question was, "Rabbi, who sinned,

this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?” Jesus’ answer was “neither,” but the question illustrates how people with physical disabilities have to endure all sorts of misconceptions and stereotypes which can cause feelings of “I’m not enough” or “I’m not normal” or “I’m an outcast.” The Servant would bring “recovery of sight to the blind.”

The **oppressed**. To be oppressed is to be mistreated in some ongoing, demeaning way. If you are oppressed, you experience shame from having been treated unfairly, and there’s little or nothing you can do about it. The Servant would “set free those who are oppressed” and would “proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.”

After Jesus reads this passage from Isaiah, notice what happened next:

20 And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him.

Everybody at the synagogue that day was wondering what Jesus would say next.

21 And He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Jesus wasn’t reading Isaiah 61:1 the way you or I would read that verse. He spoke the words of Isaiah 61:1 in the first-person singular: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me. . . I give the poor good news, I release the captives, I restore sight to the blind, I set free the oppressed. . .” In other words, Jesus’ mission was to live out this statement. It wasn’t the case that Jesus started out targeting the beautiful people and the people who had “everything together” . . . and then when they didn’t respond He settled for the losers. . . No, He targeted the the the downcast and the disadvantaged - the type of people who commonly experience shame. Or more accurately, He targeted those who were most likely to recognize their shame.

Read the rest of this passage when you can. Their initial reaction was mildly positive, but Jesus eventually exposes what was really in their hearts and minds - so much so that they try to throw Him off a cliff. But that’s not how God intended the Suffering Servant to die, so Jesus “passed through their midst” and “went His way” (Luke 4:30).

In our time remaining I want us to see from the gospels how Jesus lived out this mission. As Edward Welch says, “Jesus made a beeline” toward people who were full of shame. He didn’t merely tolerate them or keep them on the fringes of His ministry. He violated all sorts of social norms to communicate that they were fully accepted in the Kingdom of God. We are going to consider several passages and we are going to be very selective in what we notice about these accounts.

I’ve divided these passages into two categories that correspond to two categories of shame: innocent shame and culpable shame. When you have “innocent shame” it’s not because of anything you’ve done wrong. You feel shame because of some physical or mental condition, because of how others have treated you, or because you’re associated with someone who’s done something shameful. “Culpable shame,” by

contrast, is the result of something you've done or something in which you've participated. What we're going to see is that in both cases Jesus takes away your shame.

Jesus and "Innocent Shame" (Luke 5:12-14, Luke 8:42-48, Mark 7:31-35, etc.) First let's consider an account of Jesus healing a man with leprosy. Leprosy was a disease that rendered a person "unclean" and everybody knew it. You lived outside the city and couldn't participate in everyday life. A person who touched you became unclean and couldn't worship at the temple. Surely there was some shame associated with leprosy. Listen to this account in Luke 5 and be amazed at Jesus' affection for shameful people.

12 While He was in one of the cities, behold, there was a man covered with leprosy; and when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and implored Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean." 13 And He stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." And immediately the leprosy left him. 14 And He ordered him to tell no one, "But go and show yourself to the priest and make an offering for your cleansing, just as Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."

Jesus didn't ***have*** to touch that man to heal him, but He did. Jesus "stretched out His hand and touched him." When He touched the man, what happened? When the "Holy One of Israel" touches someone who is unclean, the unclean becomes clean; the outcast becomes an insider in the Kingdom.

Consider another account. Luke 8 describes how Jesus was making His way to the house of Jarius, an official of the synagogue. As we walked along, the "crowds were pressing against Him." Luke records this:

43 And a woman who had a hemorrhage for twelve years, and could not be healed by anyone, 44 came up behind Him and touched the fringe of His cloak, and immediately her hemorrhage stopped.

If you've read Leviticus 15 lately, you gasp when you read this. That passage describes how a woman with this condition is ritually unclean. Everything she touches becomes unclean, and whoever touches her becomes unclean. She was a prime candidate for shame. It would have been "innocent shame" because she hadn't done anything wrong, but it was shame nonetheless. Having suffered in this condition for twelve years, she was desperate. And so she took the risk of touching the fringe of Jesus' cloak with the hope that doing so might bring healing. Luke records that that's exactly what happened.

45 And Jesus said, "Who is the one who touched Me?" And while they were all denying it, Peter said, "Master, the people are crowding and pressing in on You." 46 But Jesus said, "Someone did touch Me, for I was aware that power had gone out of Me."

At this point the woman realized that she couldn't remain invisible any longer.

47 When the woman saw that she had not escaped notice, she came trembling and fell down before Him, and declared in the presence of all the people the reason why she had touched Him, and how she had been immediately healed. 48 And He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."

I love how Jesus replied to this woman. This is how Jesus replies to everyone weighed down with shame who comes to Him in faith. He didn't say, "How dare you - a woman who is ritually unclean - touch Me, the Holy One of Israel!" No, He said, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace." He called her "daughter," commended her for her faith, and sent her away with a blessing of peace. That's exactly how Jesus responds to us when we come to Him with things that cause us shame - even innocent shame.

As I mentioned last week, several people here at Faith have written up their experience with shame. I'll be reading these throughout this series. This account describes two different types of "innocent shame" - one involving the body and one the mind.

I had polio at a very young age and so had a deformed foot and leg. I was usually last to finish in any kind of a foot race, and any time I had to wear a bathing suit, I did my very best to hide the leg and foot. Fortunately I got along well with my grade school peers, so I did not suffer any hazing about it and few people commented on it. [Because] I was coordinated in other ways [I] was able to play most sports competitively in my early years. . . . even though my right leg was an inch shorter and I did not walk with a limp, I am constantly reminded of the defect. It has only been very recently that I have worn shorts without thinking too much about it.

. . . [Also] I had problems with focus and learning, at a time before anything was known about these problems. I was from a family where outstanding grades and college was assumed. My parents, teachers and peers felt that I was smart and yet I could never measure up to expectations in school. This led to only one conclusion. I was not performing up to my potential. My father's comment was, "You are smart so you will do well when you *want* to do well." The problem was that I really wanted to. I was ashamed about my performance and believed that I could do more (one can always do more) but never could figure out what the problem was. It was a nightmare.

Do you feel the pain in that account? Can you hear the sense of shame - innocent shame - because of physical and mental limitations? How do you experience "innocent shame"? It might have to do with your body or your mind or your family. I would encourage you to do what the leprous man did and what the woman did: fall down before Jesus, cry out to Him, touch Him if you dare. In this life you may or may not be healed from whatever causes your shame. But you can know that Jesus - God in the flesh - doesn't hold you at arms' length. He brings you close and touches you. You can know that in Christ you are enough and that you are accepted and that you are wanted.

Jesus and "Culpable Shame" (Luke 5:27-32; Luke 7:36-39, etc.) In this second category of shame we have some culpability or guilt; we've played a part in the things that have caused us to feel unworthy or unclean or unacceptable. In the gospels we see

Jesus befriending people who had culpable shame. The designation for such people was “tax collectors and sinners.” Tax collectors were hated because they worked for the Romans and “sinners” committed (really bad) sins. . . you know, like _____ (whatever just popped into your mind). Tax collectors and sinners were treated as outcasts and therefore likely experienced all sorts of shame. Luke 5 records this:

27 After that He went out and noticed a tax collector named Levi sitting in the tax booth, and He said to him, “Follow Me.” 28 And he left everything behind, and got up and began to follow Him. 29 And Levi gave a big reception for Him in his house; and there was a great crowd of tax collectors and other people who were reclining at the table with them. 30 The Pharisees and their scribes began grumbling at His disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?” 31 And Jesus answered and said to them, “It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. 32 “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

Notice that Jesus doesn’t flinch when the scribes and Pharisees asked why He had table fellowship with “tax collectors and sinners.” He doesn’t say, “It’s not what it looks like. . . I don’t really *like* these people. . . I’m just spending a little time with them until I can slip in the message about the Kingdom. . . I really prefer to hang out with scribes and Pharisees. . .” No, Jesus befriended people who had everything wrong with them because He came “to call sinners to repentance.” Friendship is one of the few things that breaks through the defenses of people with culpable shame.

Let’s look at another example. In Luke 7:36-39 we read about a woman who was given the designation “sinner”; she may well have been a prostitute. The Pharisees believed that sinners didn’t have a chance with God; therefore God-fearing people should stay as far away from sinners as possible.

36 Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to dine with him, and He entered the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table. 37 And there was a woman in the city who was a sinner; and when she learned that He was reclining at the table in the Pharisee’s house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, 38 and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet and anointing them with the perfume.

This was an unmistakeable display of affection for Jesus. She obviously believed that Jesus was worthy of her affection and loyalty. But what did Jesus think about her? Notice what the Pharisees thought Jesus should think about her:

39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner.”

He believed that if Jesus really represented God that He would never allow a sinful woman to touch Him. The Pharisee believed that sinful and shameful people

contaminated holy people. Maybe under the old covenant, but not when the person is the Son of God. When you touch (i.e., believe in) the Son of God, your sin and shame are removed; His holiness is transferred to you. Please read the rest of Luke 7 when you can. Jesus commended this woman for her love and for her faith.

If you are feeling guilt and shame over some sin in your life, I encourage you to do what this woman did. Instead of running **away from** Jesus (thinking that He probably wants nothing to do with you), run **to** Jesus in faith. Jesus has great affection for people with culpable shame - people who are actually guilty because of their sin. Like the woman in Luke 7, Jesus wants you to be overwhelmed with the greatness of His forgiveness.

Listen to this account of one man who has experienced “culpable shame.” Notice how both God and his wife extend grace to him.

I spent most of my college life not walking with God. I most regret that I was involved with other women during those years. When [my future wife] and I started dating I had to share those details with [her] and felt extreme shame and regret. For a long time before she and I started dating . . . I didn't feel worthy to even be considered as her boyfriend not to mention her husband. [Thoughts and feelings of being] “not worthy” or “worthless” were common in my experience. I would add “embarrassed” and “regretful” and maybe feelings of “I'm a failure.”

Both my wife and God have helped me get past my shame, through their love and forgiveness I don't carry this as a burden but I don't forget either so some of the feelings can re-emerge at times. As I study the word and spend time with God I'm so thankful for the truth about who I am and how God has counted me worthy and his very own.

I love that this man's wife has helped him get past his shame. Many times we experience God's grace through the grace of those closest to us. The way out of shame is through knowing that you are fully accepted by those who matter most. The One who matters the very most is Jesus Himself. Next week we'll look at the “the shame of the cross”; the cross is the clearest declaration of what God says to shameful people.

The answer to our shame isn't an idea or a behavioral technique. The answer to our shame is a person: Jesus.