



The gospel for the ashamed

In Genesis 3 Moses records the fall and its immediate effects. In particular he shows three completely novel and deeply negative experiences that would forever accompany mankind: guilt, shame, and fear. In vv. 12 and 13 Adam and Eve play the blame game, highlighting their guilt; in v. 7 they cover their nakedness of which they are newly ashamed; and in v. 10 they hide from God, fearing the one that has only ever been their benefactor.

Every one of us since that day has known all three of those states. Guilt, shame, and fear are part of our lives. But interestingly, it seems that people in different parts of the world have tended to primarily experience their fallenness through one more than the other two:

In the East sin is primarily experienced through shame. (Think for instance of the role shame has played in Japan.)

In much of Africa, and other cultures where animism and witchcraft are prevalent, fear holds sway.

Historically in the West, and in particular in the US, we have experienced mostly guilt. We are a nation of laws. And when you violate laws, you're guilty.

Transition toward shame

But in the West it seems we are in transition. We are moving away from being a guilt-based culture, towards a shame-based culture. It's not hard to see why. Guilt is the experience of one who has broken the law. If there is no law, there can't be any guilt. For a generation of students who don't necessarily agree that there is a fixed moral code they are obliged to obey, guilt is a concept with little meaning.

But they still do things that are wrong, and that they somehow know are wrong. In particular they tend to do wrong things with their bodies. We are awash in a sea of sex and sensuality. Pornography, premarital sex, promiscuity, abortion, homosexuality, sexual abuse, and eating disorders, are all issues of the body, and shame (often, but not always) zeroes in on sins committed by and against the body. So as belief in absolute laws has diminished and as sins of the body have increased, we have moved away from guilt and towards shame as the primary experience of our fallenness.

Because of that transition, many of our students have grown up experiencing shame more than guilt, but they've done so in a country where the Christian community's expertise lies in dealing with guilt more than shame. Which probably means that to many of them, and maybe to many of our staff as well, the offer of the gospel has not sounded as sweet as it actually is.

One thing to note that's really important, though it's not my main point- we also experience shame because of things done to us, not just things we've done. When a woman is raped, or a boy is molested- they too experience shame, though it's a different shame. It's not their fault (that is, they aren't guilty) if they've been a victim of someone else's sin. There's shame over what we've done, and shame over what's been done to us. People who have experienced those things don't need to be forgiven for what happened to them, but they do need the restorative power of the gospel. They need to hear God say what's true of them. Though they have no share of blame in what's been done to them the truth of the gospel is still what they need to hear, to restore their lost sense of self.

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How we have communicated the gospel

For most of the United States' 200 year history (and throughout much of the West for longer than that) people have primarily experienced guilt. And because of that we've tended to speak of the gospel as a solution to our guilt. Which it is, wonderfully so.

And so we say things like, "Jesus died to pay the penalty for your sins." That's guilt language. Or we'll tell the judge illustration, a parable in which you have committed a crime, and you stand before a judge who happens to be your dad. He declares you guilty, because you are, but then he pays your fine on your behalf. The purpose of the story is to help show someone how God can solve the problem of their guilt.

I'm not repudiating any of that. It's all true and it needs to be told. For millions and millions of people that is the ache in their soul and it's where the gospel intersects with their lives. They know they are guilty and they want their guilt expunged.

But I have tended to think and communicate as though guilt is *the* consequence of sin. What I am suggested here though is that it is only *one of* the consequences of sin.

Perhaps there are millions more who primarily experience their fallenness through a slightly different lens. The gospel can speak to them too, because Jesus didn't just come to take away guilt. He also came to erase our shame— so we don't need to hide from him anymore, and our fear— so we can respond to his love. He came to take away our sin in all it's manifestations: Guilt *and* shame *and* fear and anything else that might be missing from that list— though I think that most everything falls under one of those headings.

Sam's experience

I've been thinking about this for several months. I've talked about it with my staff, servant team, Bible study, and the movement at large. Sam is one of the students I've worked with who identifies himself as one who experiences shame more than guilt. As we talked about his experience three things he said struck me as significant.

The first was that for most of his life he didn't just think that he had done bad things, but that he was bad himself. That's the essence of shame. Guilt focuses on what we do. Shame focuses on who we are, or who we perceive ourselves to be. When Jesus died for us, he didn't only die to take the blame for what we've done, but to restore who we have become, to who we were meant to be.

Second, Sam told me that he often has just wanted to disappear. That is a dead giveaway for shame. What do you always want to do when you are ashamed? Hide. It's universally instinctive. Shame makes us what to hide, disappear, flee, isolate.

The third thing that he talked about was the antidote for that. He told me about a friend of his who didn't have any solutions, or real advice, but who told him that he didn't want him to disappear. That he'd miss him. That Sam was his friend and he didn't want to lose the relationship. He moved toward him and didn't let Sam become isolated.

The solution to shame is relationships, it's community, even though we hate it at first. *We want* to hide. But what we *need* is someone to coax us out of hiding and into community.

Shame says, *I'm bad* and therefore, I want to *hide* and isolate. The solution is found in *relationships*: when another human creates an area of safety where there's enough affection for us to trust them and come out of the shadows and be known.

A complete atonement

Jesus died for all our sin; not just a facet of it, the whole thing. He paid for our *guilt*. He took the wrath of God. He was punished for our violation of his laws.

He also drank to the bottom the cup of *shame*. Crucifixion is a shameful thing. Jesus was crucified in his underwear. Obviously that wasn't the worst thing going on, but it's hard to be exposed in front of people. Hebrews 12 says, "*For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame.*"

Remember that guilt focuses on what we have done, shame focuses on who we are— our being. Then take a look at this. It's from 2Co 5:20-21.

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

"God made him who had no sin to be sin." I never really understood what that was saying. I think it means Jesus didn't just take away the guilt of what we've done, but also the shame of what we've become. He became sin. He identified with what was wrong in us, not just in our actions, that he might do away with it.

And finally, he also faced *fear* head on. Luke says that in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus' terror was so great that he literally sweated blood. He suffered from a condition called hematidrosis in which extraordinary grief causes your skin to excrete blood. He knew the fury of the wrath of God fully, and it terrified him. But he faced it so we wouldn't have to.

Implications for ministers of the gospel

I think these things can inform how we communicate the gospel to this generation of students. Number one, since his atonement was complete— that there might not be any guilt, or shame, or fear left for us, our communication of the gospel should be complete too. Because we minister in a transitional time, we need to cast as broad a net as possible. Regardless of which trigger resonates most with any given student— guilt, or shame, or fear, we can offer each of them the sweetness of Christ and his ability to meet their need.

It's worth going back and looking at how Jesus communicated the gospel, particularly to those who had cause for shame. I've spent some time in Luke 7 which has been instructive. It might be profitable to look at that with your team and search for insights into how Jesus interacted with "the sinful woman."

Number two, if community is the antidote for shame, we need to make sure we have healthy, attractive, welcoming communities, and learn to unleash their evangelistic power. Until this year I had barely given a nod to body evangelism at Penn State. It is now a major focus in how we share the gospel. We developed a campaign called Community 2:8 and have seen some measure of success with it. You can read more about Community 2:8 in the *Strategy* section of this site.

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