“Shame of Face”
Dr. Bob Abramson

Psalm 44:15
“My dishonor is continually before me, And the shame of my face has covered me,”

Daniel 9:7-8
“O Lord, righteousness belongs to You, but to us shame of face, as it is this day—to the men of Judah, to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Israel, those near and those far off in all the countries to which You have driven them, because of the unfaithfulness which they have committed against You. {8} “O Lord, to us belongs shame of face, to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, because we have sinned against You.”

On the surface, “shame of face” seems somewhat difficult to understand. It’s only found as a biblical expression in Psalm 44:15 and Daniel 9:7-8. Each of these occurrences refers to the loss of respect and right standing before God. It can be seen in our cultures today, but now also before our peers. Shame of face indicates a humiliating feeling of having lost our sense of self-worth. From an ethical and cultural point of view, “shame of face” refers to a negative impression, coming from a feeling of embarrassment. This happens today when we feel the loss of “face” among a group with whom we share common bonds, experiences and origins. Whether our understanding of it is accurate or not, we often hide our feelings in humiliation, accepting it as our lot in life. When the idea of “shame” is mated to loss of “face” it forms an emotionally charged, most often destructive force. This force has dictated itself to sinful mankind since the beginnings of recorded time.

“Shame of face,” though not specifically mentioned as a term, can be seen and an explanation of it begins in Genesis, Chapter 3, with Adam and Eve, when they sinned and hid themselves from God. Their perception of themselves and the fear that God would
see them differently drove them to look for “a covering,” a hiding place. They felt the sin of eating the forbidden fruit had emotionally stripped them bare. This drove them to hide from their normal fellowship with God because their disobedience produced a loss of something they valued as precious. They knew God’s perception of them had changed and they were fearful. This was the first time “shame of face” manifested itself. It has become a hallmark of sinful culture ever since.

Here’s what I consider an expert understanding of the impact of “shame of face.” It’s found in a textbook I’ve read multiple times and use as a reference for counseling and pastoral care. The book is “Pastoral Counseling Across Cultures.” In it, its author, David W. Augsburger wrote, ¹

“In a culture shaped predominantly by shame controls, the expectations, sanctions and restraints of the significant others in a person’s world become the agents of behavior control… through the promise of acceptance or the threats of rejection.”

In societies that are closely held by traditional social expectations, rules and restraints, individuals will see themselves as part of something bigger than themselves. Such individuals find their identity as “one of many.” Therefore, their moral values and judgments are based on what “the many” would expect and consider normative. Deviation from these norms would be considered hurtful to the group and abhorrent. Some examples of such groups would be traditional Chinese, Indian, Native American or Fijian tribal groups, who had not been influenced or assimilated by more liberal societies. These traditional cultures thrive on strongly interdependent socialization. They tend to disintegrate without it and thus, a person who violates the groupthink of the people of the group feel shamed and may actually be ostracized. This removes their sense of belonging and isolates the individual, leading to all kinds of emotional issues.

It’s important to understand that “shame of face” can be a punitive action, but in many circumstances, also a preventive opportunity. Individuals in a family, subculture or tribal unit will often choose to restrain themselves from self-serving actions (whether intrinsically good or not) because of what the group might think of them. This is a strong internal constraint. It’s built in from the individual’s upbringing and social experience. I encountered many examples of this in my missionary pastoral ministry. An example of this occurred while I was a pastor in the Fiji Islands. The narrative is fairly typical of groupthink’s effect on the members of a strongly bonded group. Here’s what happened:

A member of my church, who was a highly educated, professional man, came to me with his dilemma. He was Chinese and told me he was “in love” with a young woman who was living back in China. He wanted to marry her. The problem was his parents strongly disapproved of her. I spent a number of months in counseling him through the situation. It was evident that he was trying to overcome the pressures (both internal and external) of his parents’ disapproval. I witness his intense struggle and eventually watched him make his choice. He finally was at peace and chose to honor his parents and break off the relationship. Interestingly, a few years later, after I finished my missionary term and had returned to the United states, I had the pleasure of marrying him to another Christian Chinese lady whom he met while earning his doctoral degree in America. His parents fully approved of her. He was at peace with his choice and theirs.

The young Chinese man eventually came to a place of peace. The outcome illustrates the potential value of positive “shame of face” through the group’s pressures. Here’s another case where these pressures could have had a negative influence and potentially harmful effect, but was overcome by love:

My wife and I know a woman who is married and has a child with special emotional needs. She and her family immigrated to America from a culture with fairly primitive
social roots and ways of dealing with things that if known, might be embarrassing to the group. Issues that might be culturally perceived as shameful to the family have traditionally been dealt with privately. The woman wanted to take advantage of an American government program that was available to aid her child in overcoming his special need. However, she received strong resistance from her extended family for quite some time. They were recent immigrants to America and carried with them cultural patterns typical of the socialization found in their native land. They were reluctant to make public the need to find counsel for the child, because they felt going to outside counsel reflected shamefully on their family. This was typical of many shame-based cultures from which so many come. Such issues are normally closely held and privately dealt with. Attempts to solve them were expected to come exclusively from within the family unit. (Eventually, the woman’s family conquered the pressures their vulnerability toward “shame of face” put them under. With the love and grace they held for the child, they overcame these pressures, agreeing to send the child to the help that was available.)

Before going on to what the Bible says and teaches about “shame of face” and overcoming its pressures and potential barriers, let’s look at one more example. This one illustrates the damage “shame of face” can cause in evil sin-based societies that try to justify what can never be justified.

We’ve all seen media reports of the self-justifying, shameless killing of Hindu, Muslim or tribal women for an actual or perceived act of immorality. Violent retribution is demanded because the act is looked upon as bringing shame to the family or their particular cultural unit. (This may even be seen in the killing of an innocent who has been raped and pays an undeserved price, though never her fault.) The deciding factor is whether the group feels the embarrassment of “shame of face,” not whether the
party in question is guilty or just a victim. The perception of honor has to be restored at any cost; and in doing so there is no anxiety, shame or guilt. Augsburger, quoting D.D. Pitamber, writes the following:

“If a shame-prone person commits violence which is considered valid (in the community of significant people) then such a person has no reason to feel shame.”

Biblical Narratives and Teaching about Shame of Face

A good place to begin illustrating the Bible’s view of issues of shame and loss of face is to look to their opposite. This is a refusal to justify or fold to dishonorable, destructive choices to save being shamed, losing face or worse. This occurs when we accept and tolerate inconvenience and discomfort by refusing to embrace the demands of the controlling group or culture in which we find ourselves. I have one particular verse of Scripture that I’ve made a hallmark of my life. It provides me with the example of one man who refused to defile himself. His name was Daniel.

Daniel 1:8

“But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank; therefore he requested of the chief of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.”

The lessons I find in this Verse are fourfold:

1. Daniel determined that he would trust God, regardless of what it cost him. His life’s choices would not bow and bend to the culture’s expectations of him. He would not dishonor God.
2. His decision appeared to fly in the face of the cultural norms of the group he was part of. Everyone else ate what was demanded of them. Daniel boldly asked to be exempt from this, knowing that what he asked would please God.

3. Daniel’s choice came from the heart. It was internal and not subject to external pressures. He resisted the demand to conform, knowing it was a choice others close to him would disapprove of and therefore look at him with disfavor.

4. The determining factor in Daniel’s choice had faith as its foundation. His understanding of who he was went beyond his incredibly difficult circumstances. He demanded of himself that whatever he did would please God. He didn’t know how, but he trusted that God would reward him for his decision to honor the Lord. That’s how faith works!

   *Hebrews 11:6*
   
   “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.”

   *1 John 2:28 (MSG)*
   
   “And now, children, stay with Christ. Live deeply in Christ. Then we’ll be ready for him when he appears, ready to receive him with open arms, with no cause for red-faced guilt or lame excuses when he arrives.”

   *1 John 2:28 (NKJV)*
   
   “And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming.”

The fundamental cultural issue is not whether honoring God’s ways causes problems within the family or society within which a Christian lives. It’s whether he or she will “not be ashamed before Him at His coming.” Yes, righteous living, as God prescribes it may cost you, and it may require courage in the face of intense criticisms. It may even result in being shunned by the people around you. When this occurs, the challenge will be to see these people with grace and not fall into anger, anxiety or other carnal negative emotions.

The question for believers is always whether we will compromise
what Scripture tells us are righteous and pleasing attitudes and behaviors before God. As you read earlier, “Shame of face” is an internal human reaction to others’ perceptions of us (real or imagined). Know this - God will never be ashamed of you when you stay faithful to Him. This ought to be the paramount measure of a believer’s actions. Jesus was not ashamed to hang naked on a cross for our redemption. He suffered and died there without any thought about the shame He was bearing. He endured this because His love for you and me is so powerful and immense that He willingly paid this horrific cost. His substitutionary atonement for all our sins sent a message that whosoever would turn to Him for salvation would be saved.

Look to the cross. It was a price only Jesus could pay and He willingly did. He was the sinless Lamb who was slain for our sins. His death was the final victory over our anxieties, shame and guilt. His submission to that unspeakable death seemed a defeat; but turned out to be the final victory over death, hell and the grave. He validated His atoning work on your behalf and mine by His resurrection and triumphal ascension. Jesus is the Christ. He is fully God and now reigns in majesty forevermore.

Only deity could have conceived of the message of the cross. To the human mind, it was foolishness. God removed our shame by using this “foolishness” to bring His power to bear. It was the only answer. The only sinless Man, Jesus Christ, had to die, hanging in shame on an old wooden tree - all for our sins.

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. {19} For it is written:

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.”

{20} Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? {21} For since, in the wisdom of God, the
world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. {22} For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; {23} but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, {24} but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. {25} Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

“In Christ” we find the power of God. In His power, there is no shame of face.

Our Unchanging Assurance

1 John 2:28-29

“And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming. {29} If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him.”

What is it that provides us with the assurance that we’ll never be delivered again into the bondage of shame? What will keep us from “shame of face” among the people with whom we live? How can we be confident that we will not be ashamed before Jesus when He returns to claim His kingdom forever? The answer to these questions is to practice righteousness as born again believers. God doesn’t expect us to be perfect. He just wants us to do our best to honor Him with the way we live. How He views us through His loving, grace-filled eyes is what’s important. How people may view us is temporary (and though a valid concern) and is seen through eyes veiled with the fallen nature of mankind. “Shame of face” does not have to dictate how we feel about ourselves. The Bible says that we are children of the Most High. We are members of the royal family of God. The Bible says we are His children (Romans 8:15-17). We have absolutely nothing to
be ashamed of. The Scriptures stress this truth repeatedly.

1 John 3:1-3

“Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. {2} Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. {3} And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.”

Our identity rests in the truth of who we are as God’s children and what we can look forward to at His coming. In Christ your future is secure. You have an eternity without shame awaiting you. You are a winner and a champion for Jesus. The former things [with all their lying condemnation] …have passed away!

Revelation 21:1-5a

“Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. {2} Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. {3} And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. {4} And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.” {5a} Then He who sat on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.””

It’s time to forget the past, with its hurts and sorrows. The future is bright and shining with hope that has an eternal guarantee. The Holy Spirit gave it to you. Embrace it. Live it! Enjoy it!

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