

Shame on You

We are now in week #3 of our series called "Vulnerable". Dan launched this preaching with a powerful description of our struggle with being authentically transparent with one another by reminding us of what happened in Genesis, chapters 1-3. Sin and the resulting shame entered the world with God's first people – we are their legacy.

The next week, Tracey and Pete spoke about the problem we have with our mindset of scarcity – that there somehow just isn't enough of God's grace to go around, so we are stuck in an endless competition of perfectionism with those around us.

Today, in a phrase that makes us cringe – I want to talk about the shame that's on you – and me – and offer a way out of a very unhappy cycle of self-recrimination, hiding, and blaming that accompanies our feelings of shame.

The first thing we need to do is to define shame. One of my favorite authors on this, and many subjects, Lewis Smedes, defines shame in a general way by describing it as the "persistent feeling that we are not acceptable, that we are maybe unworthy, and less than the good person we are supposed to be." Further, shame can be described as the "vague, undefined heaviness that presses on our spirit, dampens our gratitude for the goodness of life, and slackens the free flow of joy." (From Shame and Grace, by Lewis Smedes)

In Dan's original message, we were reminded that guilt can generally have a redemptive quality – it can be an indicator that we have done a specific wrong and we need to confess the infraction. Shame can't be dealt with so simply. In its advanced stages, people who are filled with shame don't believe they make mistakes – they believe they are mistakes.

Listen for a moment to the following statements – these are the sounds of shame: (from Shame and Grace)

- I sometimes feel like I'm a fake.
- When I look inside myself, I seldom feel as if I am up to what is expected of me.
- I feel inferior to the really good people I know.
- I feel as if I just can't measure up to what I ought to be.

There are only a few times when shame should be felt. Shame is an appropriate response to doing evil things. This is not the reality most of us are experiencing. But if we were to be truly vulnerable on this, we might remember there have been times when we have shamed someone else. The phrase "shame on you" is a dangerous one to utter. If it is present in our vocabulary, now is as good a time as any to ban it from our phrase book.

When we struggle with feelings of shame, we tend to react in at least one of three unhelpful ways: We run from those around us, avoiding encounters, or we hide to cover ourselves from emotional exposure, or we blame, even attack other people. None of these are healthy options. What would God say to us about this? In Jesus' ministry, we see how he dealt with those suffering from shame – he came right at the problem head on.

You remember the story of the woman at the well. Jesus passed through Samaria, a despised region to those who were strongly religious. He came to Jacob's well in the middle of the day, tired from his long journey. There he encountered a Samaritan woman who had come to draw water. The heart of the story is that the woman was getting her water during the heat of the day, which no one else would do. She had a story – a past that made her a suspect person in the village. A woman in a patriarchal society had it rough to begin with. In that culture, her worth would have been determined by her fidelity and her fertility. We know from the story that she had failed at fidelity, possibly at fertility too, though we don't really know. We can surmise that it was her sense of failure, of shame, that drove her to the well at a time she wouldn't be seen by others.

We know that as a result of her conversation with Jesus, where she transparently revealed the story of her life, she didn't feel like she had to hide anymore. In fact, she went to the townspeople and told them that this Jesus knew everything she had ever done – and that not only seemed okay – she felt healed and whole in the telling of it. She added a finishing touch in her conversation with the townspeople –“Could this be the Messiah?”

It's not hard to see what I'm driving toward here. It's time we matched our theology of sin and shame with our understanding of Scripture. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21 “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” When we encounter Jesus and embrace his love for us, we have our sin and shame taken away. We may not consistently feel that way, but it's a fact. When Jesus was put to shame emotionally and physically - mocked, abandoned, insulted, beaten – he experienced every possible human emotion a person could ever feel. He doesn't just understand shame - he experienced it and hoisted it all along with a wooden beam on his shoulders so that we would no longer be held captive to sins that couldn't be forgiven and emotions that could never be healed.

The writer of Hebrews calls us to a remedy for our ongoing struggles with remembering the sins and pain that God has already forgotten. In Hebrews 12: 1-3, we hear these words:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”

Some of us have a hard time thinking about God somehow taking on and taking away our shame. But God does it – and often he uses the agency of a fellow follower of Jesus to be our listening, supportive partner in the work of healing. I will always remember when I learned how the absence of a willingness to confront our issues with a sense of vulnerability can lead to catastrophic consequences.

When I was a young pastor, our church was in the fortunate position of attracting a lot of visitors. We had a great location, a new building, and a congregation that was eager to invite their friends to church. One couple invited their neighbors to visit us one Sunday and they started to come on a regular basis. I never really got to know them, but I couldn't miss them sitting near the front, dressed to the nines – pleasant, handsome people. I would shake their hand after the services, but there was a sense in which it was clear they wanted to keep their distance. I was used to that and assumed they just didn't want to be asked to serve on a committee or lead the Vacation Bible School in the upcoming summer. We were always asking for volunteers and I became familiar with avoidance behavior.

One day I got a call from the person who knew these people, and had invited them to church. What she told me was startling. It seems the man had been arrested the day before for bank robbery. He was in jail and asked to see me. I went to the jail and it was clear that law enforcement was in no mood to coddle the man. After several security checks, I was taken to a room where I talked with him on a phone through thick glass. Actually, there wasn't much conversation. He simply sobbed and in our limited time tried to tell me his story. They had financial troubles, and he didn't feel he could tell anyone. Their marriage was disintegrating, and they didn't feel they could tell anybody. He began to steal small amounts of money – but he didn't feel like he could tell anybody. The problem escalated to robbing banks – several in fact, before he was caught. Over and over again, he repeated, "I'm so ashamed, I'm so ashamed."

I doubt there are any bank robbers here, so this isn't a morality play about what to do if you are. But I'll never forget the frustration that welled up in me that our faith community wasn't, according to him, able to deal with someone with problems like they were having. The worst part of it was, I remember thinking he was probably right – we didn't have a culture vulnerable enough to seem open to hearing about problems like they were having.

Shame blossoms in the dark room of our minds. It begins to go away when it's shared with a trusted friend, or a counselor, or a pastor. Shame is an emotional sore that always festers when it isn't addressed. One thing I've discovered in my own life is that when I share my struggles honestly to a trusted person, I experience a tremendous sense of freedom. I've learned a little bit by now about myself and about all of God's people. It's not a profound observation, but what I've learned is that none of us are wholly holy. Let me give you the depressing results of a survey taken by Focus on the Family. In 2007, a study was done of lifestyle choices among active Christian believers. The results showed that "just as many believers as nonbelievers were likely to: visit a pornographic website,

take something that did not belong to them, consult a medium or psychic, physically fight or abuse someone, consume enough alcohol to be considered legally drunk, have used an illegal or non-prescriptive drug, say something to someone that was not true, or to have gotten back at someone for something he or she did.”

I’m not one to bare my own soul, so we won’t take time here for testimonials about any of these things. What I want us to see is that all of us have got our stuff. Our lives aren’t perfect, our kids aren’t perfect, our relationships have problems, we daydream about winning the lottery so we can retire, and we sometimes sleep in on Sundays when we ought to be at church. The last one is the only one that’s not true for me.

As a result of things we’ve done, or have been told, this thing called shame has a grip on us and we’ve forgotten that God took care of this in the sufferings of Jesus. Further, God has placed us in community so that we can find support and relief from our fears and perceived failures.

I have two suggestions: Face the fact that that you and I don’t have it all together. If we did, we wouldn’t need a savior. Second, consider taking a step toward vulnerability. You might find yourself thinking more joyful thoughts than you imagined possible.