

Session 9 – Honor/Shame Cultures

Most of this session is based on a book called, Misreading Scripture through Western Eyes by Richards and O'Brien, with a focus on chapter 5, "Have you no shame?" Read that book for a ton more info on this topic!

One of the biggest difficulties Western readers have with the Bible is that we have an _____/_____ worldview while the Bible writers were honor/shame.

What I mean is that we see everything on a personal basis of :

- I'm a sinner.
- I repent.
- I get a personal savior.
- I live out my personal walk.

God has a New Covenant with *me.* Not us. At least that's how we see this.

Western cultures tend to be innocence/guilt cultures, which is significantly different than the Bible's culture, which makes the Bible is full of things that an individualist would find very confusing. I know I do!

There is a lot of the Bible that we can get really confused about. Especially about why God is all about his "name" and being honored.

Shame, Shame

In the book *Freakonomics*, we read a story about a day care that wanted to cut down on late parents. The parents' tardiness impacted the lives of the employees who had to stay after until the last child was gone. So the facility levied a fee for late parents, something like a set amount per period of time.

Interestingly - and this is why I still remember this story nearly 10 years after reading that book - the fee didn't work. It backfired spectacularly! Instead of parents coming sooner to avoid the fee they actually came later.

Why? Because the fee transaction removed the shame of making the workers wait for them.

Shame is a powerful emotion! But we don't have much of a focus on shame in our culture, so when the Bible talks about it – and it does all the time! – we totally miss it.

We also miss it when other cultures that still have a community focused honor/shame culture – like some Middle Eastern countries, many Asian countries and some African countries – demonstrate it as well.

Have you ever lost face? Has your name every been honored? What does that even mean?

The Thai word of losing face means literally to tear off your face so you look ugly in front of your friends and family. Yikes!

In an honor/shame culture losing face with your community is seen as the real sin, rather than the act that lead to losing face/being shamed.

Think of Paul who considered himself blameless even though he persecuted Christians (Phil 3:6).

When a sin isn't a sin.

Before I go further, I need to clarify that sin is sin even if you don't know it's a sin or think it's a sin. This session in class is explaining how different cultures based on honor/shame think. I'm not suggesting that sin is relative.

One of the interesting things about sin in a honor/shame culture is that many times what we do when no one finds out is not considered sin. There isn't the idea of an introspective conscience leading to understanding of sin!

When there isn't an inner voice telling you about your sin, what does God do to convict? He send his own message through:

- Prophets – speakers of God's words
- Angels – actual translation: Messengers
- Agents – people who situationally confront on God's behalf



IS “G-O-D”
SPELLED “E-G-O?”

A couple examples:

Paul Shames Peter into Repenting of Sin

In Galatians 2:11-14, Paul says he called out Peter “in front of them all” (v14). Why be a jerk?! But was he? Peter was choosing to be a hypocrite in avoiding hanging out with gentiles, instead requesting that people follow the Old Covenant (specifically in diet and circumcision.)

This is the same Peter who dealt with clean vs unclean animals and food in Acts 10:9-16. God had to tell Peter multiple times in a vision!

And now, Peter’s waffling on who should or should not follow the Old Covenant had caused Barnabus to be “lead astray” (v13). Peter was not acting like he knew he should (v8-10). The only way to get Peter to act right was to rely on the shame of hypocrisy, which required open confrontation.

“In an honor/shame culture it is not the guilty conscience but the _____ that punished the offender.” – Richardson & O’Brien

Nathan convicts David of His Sin through Shaming

Nathan, a prophet, comes before the King to tell him a story (2 Sam 12). The story tells of a rich man who takes from a poor man the things that matter most to him. David immediately calls this a sin. Nathan tells David that he is that man when he took Uriah’s wife, then his life.

We innocence/guilt people tend to see this issue as one where David knew he was sinful and was overcome with his guilt over adultery and murder and Nathan tricked him into admitting it in the open. But that’s not what happened. Nathan shamed David over actions that David never expressed remorse for!

Look at how his punishment would be public:

- His family would have constant conflict (v10)
- His shame at losing his wives to someone he was close to (v11)
- David and Bathsheba’s son would die (v14)

And all of this would be done in the open for people to see (v12)

Notice what David repents of: “I have sinned against the Lord.” (v13). Not adultery or murder. David brought shame to God because David had been given so much and yet David took more for himself.

This isn’t to say that David hadn’t also broken several of God’s laws. But breaking the relationship/covenant with God was the main issue (just like it is now.)

Look at how so much of David’s story is all about honor/shame (see 2 Sam 11):

- David wasn’t with his army, which was his job (v1)
- Bathsheba knew she could be seen by David (v2) and everyone knew David asked for her and slept with her (v4,5)
- He sends for Uriah (v6) who would have heard about his wife’s adultery and pregnancy.
- David asks Uriah to sleep with his wife and sends him a gift (v8). We know David’s goal because Uriah is said to have not gone into his home (v9). If Uriah goes into his home, even if he doesn’t sleep with Bathsheba, the baby will be seen as his. Uriah doesn’t accept the baby or the money.
- Uriah, when he is called again, shames David by mentioning that David is not where he should be with his warriors (v11).
- David continued to try to get Uriah to sleep with Bathsheba so his honor would be restored without taking her on as a wife (notice he sent her home, when he could have just kept her.)
- After David has Uriah killed, Bathsheba moves in (v26) and life goes back to normal.

Except it doesn’t, because “the thing David had done displeased the Lord” (v27).

David never repents of his adultery or murder. It took Nathan to call him out publically to get the repentance God deserved.

That’s how honor/shame cultures work. The sin has to be called out by the community.

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Westerners most likely expect that David would have felt guilty because we are introspective. We respond to internal pressure. The cultures of the Bible tend to respond to external pressure. That's a role that the Prophet filled.

This worked in the New Testament as well. In 2 Cor 5, we are threatened with public shaming of our deeds while being judged by God in front of everyone (v10), which we will all be afraid of (v11). Think of how this would have impacted Paul's readers!

And think of all the times that the Pharisees publically confronted Jesus with questions. As Jesus showed them up (shamed them) again and again, could this also inform why they wanted to kill him?

Honoring God

Like shame, honor is also public. We've finally gone the really loooooong way around the main question posed today: is God egotistical because He wants to make His name great?

Think about what Moses argued in Exodus 32 when God wants to destroy all those who worshipped the Golden Calf:

- "Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'" (v12)
- "Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self" (v13)

Moses is saying that God's actions, if he killed all of his people, would violate His own promises and make Him look bad to the Egyptians; it would bring God shame. God responds to this and doesn't kill all of His people!

Throughout the Bible, God's actions were seen by the culture as bringing Him honor: "You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, honor him! Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!" (Ps 22:23)

While there are so many passages where God saves His people and the result is honor and His name is

made great, it's important to remember a couple things:

- God doesn't need anything, including honor or accolades (Ex 3:14)
- God is Holy – completely other/better/greater – so it make sense to honor that (Rev 4:8)
- God acts in history for His people even though we don't deserve it, which is something that should bring Him honor (John 3:16)

So is God egotistical by honestly giving an account of His standing in a society based on honor/shame? I don't think so.

In our society, it would be odd for sure to talk about honor and shame – *try it! Please! Go to someone today and tell them about how you honor their name for something they did for you. Then tell me what happened. Take a video of their face* – and it is equally odd for people from our innocence/guilt culture to misread what the Bible says about honor/shame.

Are we doing this wrong?

God works _____ in both innocence/guilt and honor/shame cultures. One is not better than the other, and when we can see both aspects at work at the same time, we get a better understanding of God. David was both a individual sinner, and brought public shame. It wasn't one or the other.

God is worthy and honorable.

God is holy.

God has done so much for all of us and sharing our testimonies and the Gospel will bring honor to His name.

God loves me.

God died for me.

God forgave me of my sins and helps me in my every day life through an intimate personal relationship.

Both are right.

Understanding the language of honor/shame can help us understand what the writers of the Bible are trying to tell us.

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