

Battling the Unbelief of Misplaced Shame

by John Piper

The biblical criterion for shame is radically God-centered, and we must battle shame by battling the unbelief that feeds its life.

Duration: 35:46

Scripture: 2 Timothy 1:6

Topics: "Overcoming Shame", "Faith And Unbelief"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the experience of shame and how it can affect individuals. He gives two illustrations to explain the concept of shame. The first illustration involves being investigated and publicly exposed for lying and stealing, leading to feelings of guilt and shame. The second illustration involves a long-distance runner from a small country competing in the Olympics and being far behind the other competitors, causing shame. The preacher emphasizes the importance of fighting shame by believing in the promises of God, as stated in various Bible verses. He concludes by highlighting the battle of unbelief and the choice between believing Jesus or the forces that shame individuals.

Transcript

The text for this morning's sermon is found in 2 Timothy 1, 6-12. If you have not brought your Bible with you this morning, you will find one in the pew pocket in front of you. 2 Timothy 1, 6-12.

Hence, I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and love and self-control. Do not be ashamed, then, of testifying to our Lord, nor of me, his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel and the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works, but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago, and now has manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

For this gospel I was appointed a preacher, an apostle, and teacher, and therefore I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me. Shall we pray together? Father, my heart's desire, and I'm sure I speak for the people as well, is that in the remaining minutes of this worship service, we would indeed worship in that we, with all our hearts, give heed to the truth of your word.

So my prayer for myself is that I would only speak truth, that it might be your word and not merely mine, and that it might come in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction, and that lives might be changed for good, for your glory, for joy, that there might be clarity, and that there might be wisdom, and that there might be new power for a life of clear, unabashed, forthright, courageous testimony to the glories, the fair glories of your grace in this city. Now I ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. I'd like to begin with a definition of shame that is just an ordinary definition taken from contemporary circulation and then moved from this definition toward a biblical refinement of it and then into discussions of how to battle it where battling is appropriate. So let's start with the definition.

Shame is a painful emotion that comes from a consciousness of guilt, shortcoming, or impropriety. Let me illustrate those three possible causes of this painful emotion. Take guilt, for example.

Suppose you, against your conscience, withhold information on your income tax form and send it off and forget about it. And for two years, nothing happens, and you feel nothing. And then suddenly notification arrives that you're being investigated, and it comes out that you have lied and you have stolen, and it is public, and you feel now shame for the guilt that is yours.

Second illustration. The definition said that this painful emotion can arise for shortcoming. Suppose you are a long-distance runner from a small country, quite good in your country, and are sent to the Olympics in Seoul, and you discover in the 3,000-meter race that the competitors are very, very good.

So good that in the heat where you run before thousands and thousands of people, they, by the time the race is over, are a whole lap in front of you. Everybody is a lap in front of you. And while the audience is cheering the winners, you are finishing the race under the eyes of all these people.

No guilt. You didn't do anything wrong. But very likely a battle with shame and embarrassment.

The third cause that was mentioned in the definition of this painful emotion called shame was impropriety. We've all experienced this. You go to a party or banquet, and it's important people, and you want them to like you.

And you get there, and you discover you're dressed all wrong. Totally wrong. And you stick out like a sore thumb.

No sin. No guilt. But very likely the struggle with shame before these people whom you had wanted to impress.

Now, one of the things that emerges from this little analysis of a dictionary definition of shame is that there is some shame that is justified and some shame that's not justified. I think all of us would agree that if I lie on my income tax and withheld information about honorariums, because I don't think Uncle Sam can find out about honorariums, and then I was uncovered, and it became public, most of us would agree I ought to feel shame. It's right to feel it.

But probably most of us would also agree that if this runner gave it his best and had to finish a lap while everybody else was already done, it might be healthy and normal for him to be disappointed. But shame, we would probably say he shouldn't struggle with shame. He shouldn't have to be ashamed.

So the point is, there is shame that we would generally say is right, good to have, appropriate. And there is shame that's not appropriate, that we shouldn't feel. Now, I want to go to Scripture and look at these two kinds of shame.

I'm going to give them these names. I'm going to call shame that we ought not to have, misplaced shame. And I'm going to call shame that we ought to have, well-placed shame.

Let me define those, and then we'll go to Scripture and see some examples of each. Misplaced shame, shame you ought not to have, is shame that you feel for no good reason. Or, biblically, that means that the thing that you're ashamed of is something that honors God.

Or, something that doesn't honor God, but in which you were not involved in dishonoring God. Well-placed shame, on the other hand, is shame that you ought to have. Shame for which there is a good reason to have it.

And biblically, that would mean something that you are ashamed of, which, in fact, has involved you in dishonoring God. Okay. Those are my definitions of misplaced shame and well-placed shame.

Now, let's go to the Bible, and we'll start right here in our text, and look at several examples, first of all, of misplaced shame. Verse 8 of 2 Timothy 1. Do not be ashamed, then, of testifying to our Lord, nor of me, his prisoner. But take your share of suffering for the gospel in the power of God.

Now, two things are spoken of as shame that ought not to be in this text. Number one, we ought not to feel shame about testifying to Jesus Christ. That would be misplaced shame.

If shame starts to rise in your heart when you have an occasion to bear witness to Jesus, it's bad. It ought not to be there. That's misplaced shame.

We must battle it. We're going to talk about how before we're done. Secondly, we are not to feel shame for a friend that we're associated with who falls into disrepute of the world.

In this case, Paul, he's in jail. So, he looks weak. He looks like a failure.

I mean, it's a shameful thing to be in jail, for goodness sakes. And so, Paul says, no, don't think like the world at this particular point. I look weak.

I look like a failure, but don't be ashamed of me. Why? Because I'm here for Jesus. So, the hidden criterion of what constitutes misplaced shame is whatever exalts Jesus ought not to bring shame upon his people, no matter what the world thinks of us.

Here's another illustration. Mark 8.38, most of you know this well, so you don't need to look it up. I'll just read it.

Whoever is ashamed of me, this is Jesus talking now, whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him, the Son of Man, will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. Now, shame, therefore, in this verse, Mark 8.38, is misplaced because Jesus and his words glorify God. They don't bring any disrepute upon God.

Therefore, there is no warrant for shame for Jesus or his words. So, if Jesus says, love your enemies, and some realistic, sober-minded, hawkish American says, oh, that's ridiculous. It's wholly unrealistic.

Ridiculous. We shouldn't feel shame at that. The fact that the words of Jesus are called small or foolish or unrealistic shouldn't make us be ashamed.

Or if Jesus says, fornication is wrong, Matthew 15.8, 9 or 15. If some liberated yuppie says, that is just utterly out of it. I mean, it's just out of date.

Putting it down. We shouldn't feel shame, Jesus says. No shame should arise in our hearts because the world regards the words of Jesus as foolish.

Why? Because they aren't foolish. Because they glorify God. They don't bring any disrepute upon God.

Now, what I hope you're seeing as we move through these texts is that there is a big difference between biblical understanding of shame and contemporary ordinary understanding of shame. Most of us battle with shame based on self-centeredness, not God-centeredness. Most of us wrestle with feelings of shame that are owing to the fact that we didn't cut quite the image that would win admiration.

And therefore, shame is rooted in self-centeredness, usually. The Bible comes along and says, whether or not you cut the image that gets admiration is utterly irrelevant in determining what you should be ashamed of. What you should be ashamed of is anything that dishonors God, not you in the eyes of the world.

Now, let's look at another text to illustrate this. 2 Corinthians 12, verses 9 to 10. In this text, you remember, Paul is struggling with the thorn of the flesh, the thorn in the flesh, and he asked God Christ to take it away, and Jesus responds to him in verse 9 of 2 Corinthians 12, My grace is sufficient for you.

My power is made perfect in your weakness. And so, Paul responds to Jesus like this, I will all the more gladly exult in my weaknesses that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, calamities.

And for when I am weak, then am I strong. Now, think about this for a moment in relation to shame. Weaknesses and insults are usually, in ordinary human experience, grounds for shame.

If you try something and you look like a weakling, you feel shame. If you try something and all you get is insults from people, you feel shame, ordinarily, on ordinary human criteria. Now, Paul says just the opposite.

He says, weaknesses and insults cause me to now exult, which is the opposite of shame, exulting. Why? How can this be? Notice the criterion that he's using. This is the mark of a Christian.

Because when I'm weak, the power of Christ is magnified, and that is the thing I will never be ashamed of. I will never be ashamed of being involved in that which exalts Christ. I will always be ashamed of being involved in that which belittles Christ or dishonors Christ.

A wholly different criterion, because Paul would say, it doesn't matter whether the world regards me as weak. It doesn't matter whether I get insults. It doesn't matter whether they regard me as wrong or foolish.

If Christ is exalted, then I have no warrant for shame, no matter how I am perceived by other people at all. Christ is the issue in whether or not I will succumb to shame. So my conclusion now on these few texts concerning misplaced shame is that the biblical criterion of misplaced shame is radically God-centered.

The biblical criterion says, don't feel shame for something that honors God, no matter how weak, no matter how foolish, no matter how wrong, the world may think you are in that action. Let's shift over now and talk about well-placed shame before we come back and talk about battling. What is well-placed shame or where are some biblical illustrations of shame that we ought to have, that it's right to have? 1 Corinthians 15, verse 34.

The situation is that Paul is struggling with people who are false teachers at Corinth in that they are saying there won't be any resurrection of the dead. And behind this is a gross ignorance of God and sinfulness in the community. And this is what he says in verse 34 of 1 Corinthians 15.

Come to your right mind. Sin no more. For some have no knowledge of God.

I say this to your shame. Now, what he means is here is a well-placed shame. They ought to be ashamed.

Shame would be a right and appropriate emotion for people who are dishonoring God by culpable ignorance, sin, and false teaching. People who are walking in that path ought to be ashamed. Here's another example of well-placed shame.

1 Corinthians 6, verse 5. The situation you remember is that there's conflict in the community. Christians can't settle their disputes. One is going to law against another.

And of all things, they are using Godless judges to settle disputes for godly people. And Paul is ready to pull his hair out at the dishonor that this is bringing upon Christ in the community. And so he says in verse 5, he rebukes them.

He says, I say this to your shame. Can it be that there's no man among you wise enough to decide between members of the brotherhood? It's a well-placed shame when the people of God are in disputes with one another, can't even settle their disputes, and make those disputes public before the world and try to get secular, godless people to come settle disputes in the church. Paul says, I say it to your shame.

Shame is the appropriate emotion at Corinth at this moment. Now let's notice something else here in this text. These people are trying to look strong and right.

Are they not? They're standing up for their rights. They're saying, I'm not going to be bulldozed over by that person who thinks this. I'm right.

And the other says, I'm right. And so they go to the judge and they try to vindicate themselves before a secular judge. Now, what's happening here? Well, it's a shameful thing to be found wrong.

It's a shameful thing to admit you might be in error. It's a shameful thing to submit to a Christian counselor when you need help. And so on this worldly pattern, they're looking strong.

They're getting victory. They're standing up for their rights. They're not going to take help from anybody.

And Paul looks at them and says, be ashamed. Be ashamed. Now the point is, the standards for what is shameful are flip-flopped in the Bible from the world.

In the world, you feel ashamed if you come off as weak or foolish or wrong or helpless or in some kind of need. And Paul says, look, when you try to defend yourself that way, when you try to cut that kind of image in the world, the appropriate emotion is shame. You're not escaping shame.

You are shameful at that moment. So there is a place, a well-placed, a good place, a right place for shame. Now let me draw this together.

I conclude from these texts, and there are a lot of others that I've skipped over, which you can read if you want to get the notes later on. I conclude that the biblical criterion for misplaced shame and well-placed shame is radically God-centered. The biblical criterion for misplaced shame says, don't feel shame at something that honors God, even if you look weak and foolish and wrong in the world's eyes.

And well-placed shame, the criterion there is, do feel shame when you've had a hand in dishonoring God, no matter how strong or wise or right you look in the world. Orient what you feel shame about on God, not on man. Now, final question, practical question.

How do you battle shame? This painful, crippling emotion called shame. And you might say, well, wait a minute. I thought you said there is a shame that is well-placed.

You're going to talk about battling that? I am. I am. And hang on if that doesn't make sense to you, because I'll try to clear it up.

The answer to the question how you battle shame, whether misplaced or well-placed, is the same, in principle. Namely, you battle it by battling the unbelief that feeds its life. Now, let me illustrate with three closing instances of shame.

I'm going to take well-placed shame and show how to battle that and why to battle it. I'm going to take an instance of misplaced shame, like shame in the gospel, and I'm going to take an instance of misplaced shame where others are heaping shame upon you that you ought not to have. First, how do you battle well-placed shame? For example, Luke 7 says there was a woman who came to Jesus.

He was in the house of a Pharisee named Simon, eating. She was a sinner, probably a euphemism for a prostitute. She comes in and her face is streaming with tears of penitence.

Evidently had heard Jesus or known Jesus in some context and had been broken. This is an occasion for well-placed shame. She is a sinner.

She ought to be ashamed of what she's done. So she comes with tears of shame and tears of penitence on her face. She kneels down.

In those days, you stretched out with your feet that way and your body this way on the ground and you're eating. And she walks up behind him and lets the tears fall on his feet and takes her long hair and begins to wash his feet. A sign of great humility, great brokenness, lowliness.

And Simon, the Pharisee, who is evidently quite a self-righteous fellow, doesn't say anything out loud. But Luke says, in his mind, he says, if he knew what kind of woman this was, he would tell her to go because he wouldn't allow her to touch him. Now, evidently, and I don't think this takes any imagination, this is communicated because Jesus picks it up.

And no doubt she can pick it up. So here is a force coming from the Pharisees of shame, that is, compounded shame, indicting shame. You're a sinner.

You should be out of here. All right? Get out of here. Now, Jesus responds to this by looking at her and saying, your sins are forgiven.

Now, at that moment, you got two forces at work, right? You got the Pharisee shaming force and you got the Jesus forgiving force. The Pharisee strikes again. In fact, the guests all together do.

Imagine how this hit her. They said out loud this time, who is this that forgives? In other words, there's no deliverance here from a word like that. You just can't say something and change this woman's problem.

And so, again, the force hits against her shame. And Jesus comes back for a final time, looks her right in the eye and says, your faith has saved you. Go in peace.

Now, what is at stake at this moment? Belief in the promises of Jesus. If she believes the Pharisees, she will pull her veil down over her face and scurry out and be done for as a woman. If she believes Jesus, she will stand and back away with his promise filling her and walk out into a new life and hope.

The issue for how to battle an inappropriately extended and crippling well-placed shame is the battle of unbelief. Will she believe Jesus or the forces around her that are shaming her? Second illustration. Well, let me just mention that I wrote some text down here that all of us must do this.

That all of us fight well-placed shame in this way. We do it with promises like Psalm 130, verse 4. There is forgiveness with thee that thou mayest be feared. Or we do it with Isaiah 55, 6. Seek the Lord while he may be found.

Call upon him while he is near. Let the wicked man forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts. Let him come to the Lord that he may have mercy on him and to our God that he may abundantly pardon.

That's the kind of weapon you take into hand when you're fighting the unbelief of people who are shaming you, saying there is no hope to escape from the shame, the well-placed shame that you have had to endure. And many other texts that I'll pass over. Let's go to the second illustration.

We want to talk now for a moment about how you battle misplaced shame when the thing that you are tempted to be ashamed of is God-honoring, like the gospel or Jesus or the words of Jesus. Now, to see this, we go back to our text. And the text is 2 Timothy 1, and we'll look at verse 12 because here Paul talks about his own battle with feeling shame for something that ought not to cause shame because it is God-honoring and God-glorifying.

Let's read verse 12 to see how he fought this battle. He said in verse 12, Therefore I suffer as I do, that is, I take insults, I take the imprisonment of others. Then he says, But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed.

There it is. I am sure that He is able to guard unto that day what has been entrusted to me. Or your version may say, what I've entrusted to him.

It doesn't matter in this particular point. The point here is the twofold statement. I'm not ashamed because I've believed and I know the kind of person I have confidence in.

And then a restatement of it. And I'm sure that He has power. He's able to bring me through in victory.

And if God is that kind of God who's going to bring me through in victory, my present imprisonment, the insults I'm feeling, are no ground for shame. Now, that's a warfare. That's not automatic.

We have to fight. The shame begins to rise in our hearts. When we have an occasion to talk to somebody about Christ, we just start to feel a little bit embarrassed.

That must be fought. Nothing automatic about this. Life is war in this area.

Shame, misplaced shame, is something to be warred against by believing in the kind of God that we have and assaulting those forces around us that are inclining us to believe that this is a good thing to be ashamed of or a right thing to be ashamed of or a necessary thing to be ashamed of. One last illustration. What about battling shame that is loaded on us for evil circumstances in which we had no part in dishonoring God? We didn't dishonor God.

And yet, there are enemies who are attempting to load us with guilt. Now, this is not an unusual thing. And you see it right through the Bible.

For example, it happened to Jesus. What did they say about Jesus? What did they say to Jesus? They said, He's a winebibber and a glutton. They said, He was a temple destroyer.

They said, He was a hypocrite. He healed others. He can't heal himself.

Now, what's going on when His enemies and His critics heap this kind of lie on Jesus? They're attempting to load Him with a guilt and a shame for things which simply were not so. He was not involved in dishonoring God in those ways. Same thing happened to Paul.

They criticized Paul as a madman when he spoke of Christ in his defense before Felix. They said, He was a despiser of Jewish customs and an opponent of the Mosaic law. They said, He taught that you ought to sin so that grace may abound.

Why did they say these things? To load Him with guilt and discredit His name and to bring shame upon Him which He had no warrant to bear. And it's happened to you and it will happen to you again. This is not unusual.

It is typical. Now, how do you fight it? You fight it by believing the promise that in the end, all the efforts of people to shame the people of God will fail. And there are dozens and dozens of texts that say that.

For example, Isaiah 45, 17, You shall not be put to shame or confounded to all eternity, says the Lord. Romans 10, 11, No one who believes in the Lord will be put to shame. Or a note that made its way into my box already this morning.

Bless his heart. Here's another text that I didn't find but somebody found while they were meditating on this right after the service. Because the sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced.

Therefore, have I set my face like a flint and I know I will not be put to shame. Isaiah 50, verse 7 In other words, for all the evil, for all the deceit, for all the judgment, for all the criticism that others may heap upon us in order to increase our shame, for all the distress of soul, for all the spiritual warfare that this brings into our lives, the promise stands sure. They will not succeed for the people of God.

The people of God will be vindicated. The truth will be made known. Those who trust Him will be glorified.

All who believe in the Lord will never be put to shame. We fight with those kinds of truths against misplaced shame. It's a battle of unbelief.

And I want to close by singing a song together. Number 91 And I want to explain to you how I'd like to sing it. Number 91 is, "Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus." And I want you to focus on that idea of trusting Jesus and His words.

Let's sing verse 1 two times. The first time through, would you sing it as a declaration to each other that you are going to trust the words of Jesus. That you're going to fight with promises.

And then the second time through, let's change the pronoun His to Your. So it would go, "Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus, just to take You at Your word." And the second one will be a prayer. Leah will drop out.

We'll sing it a cappella as a sweet prayer together as a congregation to the Lord. First declaring to each other our faith in Him and then declaring to Him our trust. And the last line is a petition.

Oh, for faith to trust You more in these kinds of battles.

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