



Do You Love Me?

Text: John 21

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1. Read Genesis 3:1-13; 21. Guilt and shame over sin can be traced back to the original sin in the Garden of Eden.
 - a. In response to their sin, what did Adam and Eve do?
 - b. How do people hide from God (and each other) because of shame?
 - c. How do you feel when you've "blown it"?
 - d. Can you think of something in your life that you associate with guilt and shame?
 - e. How do you tend to respond to feelings of guilt, shame, and regret?
 - f. Which of these responses do you most identify with? (Offering promises to God, comparison, or punishing yourself?)
 - g. How does God respond to Adam and Eve in verse 21? What does this say about God's heart for us when we are ashamed and want to hide?

2. Read John 21:1-22.
 - a. What is Peter effectively saying when he says that he is going fishing in v. 3?
 - b. What parallels do you see between this encounter and Luke 5:1-11 and John 18:15-18 and John 18:25-27, and why is this significant?
 - c. Have you ever felt unable to be used by God because of present or past sin in your life?
 - d. How can you begin to see your stories of failure as a story of forgiveness and favor? (See Ephesians 2:1-10)
 - e. If Jesus asked you if you loved him, what would be your honest answer? How can we cultivate this love?

3. Often, we let shame and regret tell us who we are rather than our Creator. Read the following passages. Which do you find most encouraging? How can we allow these words from God to shape our identity and who we believe we are?
 - a. John 1:12
 - b. John 15:15
 - c. Romans 8:1
 - d. Romans 8:17

- e. 2 Corinthians 5:17
 - f. Galatians 4:7
 - g. 1 Thessalonians 1:4
4. Read Hebrews 11. Peter failed when he denied Christ, but Jesus restores him. Peter continues to fail when he takes his attention and turns it to John (John 21:20-22). And later in his life the apostle Paul even had to rebuke him (Galatians 2:11-14). Peter wasn't perfect, but he was deemed faithful. Hebrews 11 is known as the "Hall of Faith", and these Old Testament saints are remembered and honored for their faith. What do you know about the failures in the lives of some of these men and women?
- a. How did these men and women demonstrate their faith?
 - b. Do you see any common themes?
 - c. How is faithfulness what defines us as believers?
 - d. How have you struggled with being imperfect but faithful? How can you increase your faithfulness?

Challenge: Read Study Deeper. Are you comfortable in sharing ways you have "blown it" with the group or does guilt, shame, and regret keep you from sharing openly? How can your group continue to love others well in their failures?

Prayer: Break Free of Guilt and Shame

All praise to You, Almighty God, for the wonderful things You have done. I lift my arms and my voice in complete adoration and love to Your Holy Name. You are great, Oh Lord, and worthy to be praised and honored. I pour my heart and soul into worshiping You, my Divine Creator, Wonderful Counselor.

Romans 8:1 – "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit."

Abba Father, I can't seem to let go of my past; the shame I feel about how I've lived my life, the things I've done and the guilt as a result. Over the years I've held grudges and I suspect those I have wronged also have that hold. I just can't seem to let go and break free of the guilt.

I pray for the people who have been hurt in the process and are unable to forgive me, that as I lift them in prayer, eventually we will truly forgive one another.

Isaiah 43:25 – "I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; and I will not remember your sins."

1 John 1:9 – "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Today I pray for others who have not been able to forgive and feel a deep sense of guilt, to be cleansed by You Father.

I surrender all to You. Lord, I know that I have already been forgiven. I confess that my sins are washed away by the blood of Jesus. May I be led by the Holy Spirit and not be controlled by my emotions.

I declare that He is my Guide, my Comforter, my Deliverer, and as I read the Word and get a more meaningful understanding of it, God's truth will be clearly revealed to me. These mercies I ask in the precious name of my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. SO BE IT...AMEN AND AMEN!

STUDY DEEPER

Facing Shame Issues in a Small Group

This article has been excerpted from the SmallGroups.com training tool called Improving Small-Group Accountability.

Joe and Jane have found themselves in a small group that wants to start sharing more deeply, building authentic relationships, and developing true accountability. But even as the group leader makes the case for this kind of authenticity as a vehicle for spiritual growth, Joe and Jane both feel ill at ease with what the changes might entail. They, like many others, carry a deep dread of being known. They chose a large church so that they could melt into the crowd, but the church was high on small groups and it wasn't long before they were invited to participating one by some well-meaning people they had begun to respect. Now they are beginning to dread what the acceptance of that invitation is going to cost them.

You might assume that we all share the same desire to be known and to engage in loving community. At our very best, when we are walking in harmony with our created design, this is true. But because we are all products of the fall, our default position is to avoid the pain that can easily come when we open our hearts to others. Prior experiences in relationships have taught us that it is very risky to be vulnerable and that loving community is an elusive dream. Internally, we often make a vow to never be hurt again. And we begin to deeply mistrust our hunger for relational intimacy.

The Reality of Shame

What could be going on for Joe and Jane? Somewhere along the way, they have had their eyes opened to their nakedness. Maybe it was rooted in the struggle Joe had with reading in elementary school—the teasing that came when he stumbled over words the other kids all seemed to know. Maybe it was the time he went with some older boys to pick up balloons at the drugstore and they tricked him into unknowingly purchasing condoms. Even the girls had a good laugh when they heard about that one. Joe learned that the safest strategy was to lay low and avoid exposure, or else risk being seen as a fool. Jane's father made fun of her childlike naiveté to the point that she felt her judgment was fatally flawed. That was reinforced through a sexual encounter on a date in high school. Both Joe and Jane have sewn fig leaves to cover their feelings of shame and experiences of betrayal.

Shame is a murky awareness of being deficient or undesirable in the eyes of someone we hope might deeply enjoy us. We are sure we will eventually be found out. As a result, we begin to hate our longing to be wanted and enjoyed.

Sooner or later God comes walking in the garden and asks, "Where are you?" He sometimes does that in the form of a small group that is determined to engage people in what they bring into their group and not ignore it. The next question is logical: "Who told you that you were naked?" This is the way God pursued Adam and Eve in their shame, and it's instructive for us. Following the path of shame exposes more than a story. Dr. Dan Allender points out that it exposes how we really feel about ourselves, what we demand of ourselves and others, and where we believe life can be found. It unearths the strategies we use to deal with a world that is not under our control.

It should be pointed out that there was nothing innately sinful in Joe or Jane's stories. They could not say, "God, forgive me for being stupid" or "Forgive me for being naïve." But trusting in the self-protective strategies they have created to cope with life is sin. It has become idolatry. Their shame is informing them of who they are, rather than their Creator.

It is easy for people caught in shame to commit to rules and systems of accountability. As long as they can perform, they can feel good about themselves. It might just be doable to earn your acceptance if you work hard enough! Shame-based people can be some of the busiest, hardest workers in Christian service. But, ultimately, unaddressed shame shuts God out, keeps inner lives secret, and results in more shame-producing behavior. It also becomes a way to hide addictions.

The way some groups think of "accountability" contributes to the problem. If accountability is reduced to reporting your failures and having others hold your feet to the fire, it is an incubator for guilt and shame. Some think that the shame of confession is what produces godly discipline. Far from it. Rather than produce self-control, it actually drives negative behavior underground.

Good small-group accountability will look deeper at what is driving the behavior—what beliefs you have formed from your interpretation of life experiences. Group members will want to know your whole story, not just your current struggles. They will want to get involved not only in hearing confessions of failure, but in looking at the wound that makes it so difficult to walk in the first place. In this way, we can truly "strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees (and) make level paths for your feet, so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed" (Hebrews 12:12–13).

The Value of Love

So what can a small group do for people like Joe and Jane? There is no greater antidote to shame than pursuing people in love—even when exposing sinful strategies. After Adam and Eve's sin was exposed, God covered them with garments from the skins of animals he sacrificed. People in shame need someone to offer grace and re-clothe them with the dignity that God has provided.

The group can stand in as advocates for both grace and truth. Their compassion can make it safe for Joe and Jane to come out of darkness, because they are not deceived about their own sin. "Joe, it took a lot of courage for you as a young boy to come back to class after being made fun of. I would give that boy a purple heart!" "Jane, your father missed your soft, tender heart. His teasing drove you away and kept you from having a safe place to go when you needed to share what had happened."

But the group must also be eager to encourage one another to walk in the light. "Joe and Jane, your withholding does not honor all that God has created in you and that you are capable of offering."

Group leaders need to guard against allowing group members to respond to stories by rescuing people from their feelings. Some find it difficult to weep with those who weep. But many formative experiences have contained losses that need to be grieved. Not only were these experiences damaging, but they resulted in damaging ways of living for which the individual now needs to take responsibility. If he or she

chooses to trust the group, they can find great help. The group can help them recognize and name the shame.

The group can observe them isolating in shame—or, as others sometimes do, overcompensating by dominating—and give gracious feedback. "Joe, can you tell us where you've been? We've missed hearing from you." "Jane, we'd like to take five minutes to talk about what you've brought up. Is it okay if we hold it to five minutes by giving you a signal when you have one minute left?" Or maybe, "I've noticed that when you share, something takes over and it becomes hard to contain what is going on inside. Do you have any idea what that might be?"

How people's shame is responded to by a group and its leaders will determine how deep they or others will feel safe to go. What would make it safe to share issues of shame in the first place? Group leaders set the tone. When leaders are in touch with their own brokenness and can talk openly about it because they have received help and healing, they create space for others to do the same. If people are not bringing up real struggles of the heart, could it be that they do not feel safe because it has not been modeled in the group?

We have been talking about shame over who I feel I am. But there is also legitimate shame over what I know I've done. It is not the goal of the group to talk people out of either kind of shame. Both expose what I am allowing to define me. In both cases, I have lost awareness of who I really am in Christ. Fortunately, once I have identified what is going on, I have the opportunity to go to the Cross and confess what I have believed. It is a beautiful thing when a group can go there together with one of their members, pour out their heart in confession, and, in exchange, have the righteousness of Christ poured out on them.

As a final thought, it could happen that someone will confess shame and, along with that, communicate a desire to do harm to themselves or someone else. Or someone could confess having committed a reportable offense. In either case, the responsibility of the group is to preserve and protect life. Get outside help. No group agreement of confidentiality supersedes this responsibility. Loving community will, however, walk with the willing through the darkness and into the light, wherever that leads.