

## SHAME: WHAT IS IT?<sup>11</sup>

It has been said:

*“There is nothing to be learned from shame and no growth is opened by the experience because it only confirms one’s negative feelings about oneself.”*

Think about this for a second, what does this mean to you? Do you agree?

Shame never feels good. It reminds us of our emptiness, that we are lacking something. It can leave us with a knot in our stomach, with wanting to shy away from people, or even becoming so outgoing in hopes that no one realizes just how bad we really feel about ourselves. We can struggle with depression, anger, anxieties or even addictions because of how we are responding to the shame in our lives. And this is a key point: *How we respond to the way we feel will affect the way we live and express ourselves.* You see, we live in an age where we are encouraged to follow our feelings. In doing so, we often choose to do all we can to get rid of the bad feelings and live our lives in ways that highlight the good feelings. So much of what we do and the choices we make are designed to get rid of shame- because shame hurts!

But we need to see that there are two types of shame. There is debilitating shame which holds us back from being all that God intends for us to be. This shame hurts us when:

- Our faults are exaggerated.
- It is chronic.
- It is put on us by others.
- It pervades our whole being and it influences everything we do—how we study, how we parent, how we work, how we relate.
- We are condemned by our memories, either things we have done or things done to us.
- It distances us from God.

There is also a healthy shame that reminds us of our incompleteness and our lack. It is a shame that is meant to drive us to God. This shame keeps us in a proper relationship with God. It is this shame that:

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<sup>11</sup> Copied with permission: [Tyndale.ca/counselling/issues/shame](http://Tyndale.ca/counselling/issues/shame)

- Shows us our true selves. It protects us from our falseness and reminds us of our limitations and of our need for God.
- May be a warning sign that something is wrong. We need to find out what it is and seek healing.
- Gives us a chance to understand ourselves and helps us keep the right perspective on God and how God sees us.

To paraphrase Thomas Merton: *To be healthy and whole is no substitute for being penitent and forgiven.* Forgiveness makes the difference in our shame. Shame is about who I am. It is how I feel about myself and what my identity is. Shame is also:

- *Fear of being exposed for who I really am.*  
The first thing that Adam and Eve felt after they bit into the apple was shame. They were exposed, and in the exposure, they questioned their value outside of a perfect relationship with God. We now live outside that perfect relationship with God and therefore face our exposure daily.
- *A reflection of our incompleteness.*  
We are created to need God. Shame becomes chronic when we see our incompleteness as something that makes us worthless. Yes, we are not worthy in ourselves of God's attention, but because He gives us attention, we have value and worth.
- *Being uneasy with evaluation by other people.*  
This is especially evident if we are exposed and then devalued.
- *Simply remembering or anticipating exposure and evaluation.*  
When we remind ourselves of past failures, we often regret what we have said or done to hurt someone or ourselves ("I can't believe I said that, did that, etc.). How we talk to ourselves about these regrets will either deepen the shame or allow us to keep a balanced perspective on ourselves.

Shame is usually seen in the ways we express ourselves. Our symptoms often reveal that shame is a struggle for us. Here are a few ideas:

- High performance covering over the effects of an unaffirming or abusive parent.
- Little social interaction.
- Talking down about other people.
- Addictions, like drugs, alcohol, sex, shopping, and more.
- Avoiding responsibility—low grades, not meeting ability, poor job performance.

- How we talk about ourselves, the things we allow ourselves to enjoy.

This list is not exhaustive. You will be able to think of other symptoms of shame.

## **Shame: Where Does It Come From?**

We have already mentioned how we are created with needs. This creates a sense of “general” shame that, in the context of a loving, nurturing, affirming, and secure environment, leads to a balance in relationships with God, others, and ourselves. This is the path to maturity and integrity. However, if those same needs are realized in a context of powerlessness, unmet needs, abandonment, abuse, and fear, we can be led to discount ourselves and become emotionally distant from people. We may then exhibit the symptoms mentioned above as we try to cover up how we feel about ourselves, hoping that nobody notices the truth. What results is a phony self—the person we show to people. We avoid our needs because our neediness is wrong and something that only seems to hurt us.

### **Who are our shamers?**

These are the things that create core wounds in us. At the depth of our created being, there is a spot where God meets with His image within us. The core wounds are those messages we receive from others and ourselves that create a distance between the image of God in us and God Himself. We interpret things said and done to us in a way that leaves us pushing God away because we feel our unworthiness and interpret it as wrong. So, where do we hear such messages?

#### *Parents:*

- Not taking responsibility for their children.
- Not feeling pride in their children.
- Not finding joy in their children

When children are not treated in ways that affirm that they are cared for and enjoyed, they begin to question the validity and goodness of themselves and their existence.

## How Do We Shame ourselves?

*We do this by:*

- Discounting our strengths and abilities.
- Magnifying flaws.
- Judging ourselves by undefined ideals—Other peoples' behaviour, unrealistic expectations.
- Confusing what we do with who we are.

*Other people:*

When we hear certain comments and attitudes from friends and family often enough, we begin to internalize these as definitions of who we are. Damaging comments and attitudes deepen our sense of shame as we question our acceptability before God and people.

*The Lies of Satan:*

Satan does all he can to keep us trapped in shame. By doing so he keeps us from being as effective for God as we could be. His desire is to keep us feeling as distant from God as possible. He will remind us of failures, cause us to stumble, and distract us from the truth of how God sees us.

## Healing Debilitating Shame:

In order to heal our shame, we need to deal with two realities:

### 1. **Separateness from God**

Shame tells us we are not worthy of God's grace and so we can believe that we are not able to approach God as our Father. This can come about from abusive examples of God, by being condemned by our consciences, or through the lies of Satan (who is a big influence on shame and guilt!). It is crucial that we face these things that can widen the gap between us and God so that we can know how God really sees us.

### 2. **Lack of self-acceptance**

This is a sin that goes deep into our souls and, in a way, laughs in the face of our Creator. When we do not accept ourselves, we are saying that God did not do a good job on us, that the flaws in this unit are too great to repair—like a computer that malfunctions. Shame leads us to question our own validity as human beings, creatures fearfully and wonderfully made by a loving God.

But there are ways of healing that do not work:

1. Lowering our expectations and not striving to be all we are intended to be. By doing this we are not living up to our God-given abilities.
2. Making ourselves acceptable through “self-improvement” (E.g., exercising, applying more make up, being a good person, being liked by all, being submissive and codependent, giving into peer pressure).
3. Persuading ourselves that we are just fine the way we are. Ignoring the reality of shame and the benefits it can bring to us, we tell ourselves “I don’t need to change, I’m OK the way I am” when in reality we are hiding behind many masks.

So, what needs to happen? Perhaps more than any issue, shame has the most resistance to “self-help” ideas. With anger, procrastination, codependency, and boundaries we can lay out steps to deal with the problem. But as we approach shame there is a sense that “steps to healing” won’t work. You cannot make shame go away by behaving differently. This may be because shame has so much to do with the core wounds that we all have and it speaks directly to our separateness from God. In fact, shame (and its close relative, guilt) may be the driving force behind our struggles with codependency, boundaries, self-esteem, our relationships, etc. because we relate to people out of our shame and recognition of lack—not out of fullness. Therefore, we need healing more than we need steps and advice. We need to understand God’s view of us, that is:

- **He loves us unconditionally**—Zephaniah 3:17 *The Lord your God is with you; He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you; He will comfort you with His love; He will rejoice over you with singing.*
- **He does not condemn those who are in Christ**—Romans 8:1 *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are Christ Jesus. We are forgiven and there is no need to explain who we are or what we have done. This is an incredible truth.*
- **He protects us and covers us**—Psalm 36:7 *How precious is Your unfailing love, O God! All humanity finds shelter in the shadow of Your wings.*
- **He searches and know us**—Daniel 2:22 *He reveals deep and hidden things; He knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with Him.* He is not afraid of our darkness and fears and shame.
- **He offers us:**
  - Pardon—Forgiveness for what we have done and who we are.
  - Acceptance—Reunited with Him despite our past.
  - Power—Spiritual energy to shed the heaviness of shame and guilt.
  - Gratitude—A sense of life and wonder at His generosity.

We need to face our shame in the presence of Christ and allow Him to heal. We cannot think shame away or act it away or feel it away. We honour God when we bring Him our shame and guilt. Only then are we acknowledging His Lordship in our lives. Our role is to accept the influence and truth of God in us and to accept ourselves for who we are.

Accepting ourselves means:

- Acknowledging our strengths and weaknesses
- Forgiving ourselves for what we have done
- Separating who we are from what we have done
- Finding joy in who we are and what we do
- Owning our “stuff,” the things we are made of, the gifts we have, the personalities we have
- Taking pride in what God has done for us—out of gratitude to Him. What He has done for us affects who we are and how we express ourselves.

When we accept ourselves and keep God in His rightful place, we will face our shame and experience the healing we truly long for.