

The Good of Shame

Shame is good. Shame is the sense or emotion that you have fallen short in some way, and shame is good. It is uncomfortable and embarrassing, and you want to stop feeling ashamed as soon as possible, but if you short-circuit shame or live in denial of shame, it will come back with a vengeance, and you will be more ashamed than if you had just owned up to it at the beginning.

It is far worse to be shameless than to feel ashamed, because someone who has forgotten how blush is claiming to be perfect, and that claim is always and everywhere a lie, with one God-given exception. Every son or daughter of Adam should have some experience of shame, *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*. Shame is good, because shame is an assault on *boasting*, which is a symptom of that great sickness of the soul known as idolatry.

Two Reasons for Shame

Jealous for Glory

God uses the tool of shame to attack boasting for two reasons: first, to vindicate His own glory, and second, so that the boaster might be saved.

Boasting is the assertion of superiority, almost always an expression of sinful pride. Rejection of the gospel always demonstrates boastfulness, whether or not it is expressed in so many words. Because the gospel is good news for everyone in the world, for someone to refuse the gospel is to assert superiority over everyone else in the world, and what's more, since the gospel is the announcement that Jesus is Lord, when someone refuses the gospel, they are claiming to be superior to the Lord Jesus Himself. They don't *believe* Him – they're more reliable, more truthful than He is. They don't *want* Him – what they have is *better* than He is. They think that His message is *foolishness* – they're smarter than He is. They don't *need* Him – they are self-sufficient, and if Jesus needs them to worship Him, then He's not as self-sufficient as they are!

Statements like these are made, whether in word or deed, by *everyone* who rejects the gospel. And every time this happens, it is an attempt to rob Jesus of the glory that He deserves, that He bought with His own blood on the cross. And since our God is a jealous God, who will not share His glory with another, this theft moves God to action to vindicate His own glory.

And I want you to notice that if God were anything other than a Trinity of persons, this need to be vindicated and proven right, this refusal to allow even a smidgen of glory to be taken away, would be petty and selfish. Proverbs actually tells us that it is *glorious* when a king overlooks a matter; when he is so rich and so powerful that someone can insult him or steal from him or stage a coup and he just laughs and moves on. A man who feels a burning need to avenge every insult or slight is a self-centered, insecure, petty man, whether he is rich or poor, whether he lives in a cardboard house or a White House. This means that Allah is a selfish jerk; the Unitarian's God is an insecure crank.

But when the Triune God refuses to share His glory with another, He's not being selfish or petty. He's being *loving*. God actually does share His glory; just not with *another*. He shares it with Himself: the Father glorifies the Son and the Spirit, the Son glorifies the Father and the Spirit, the Spirit glorifies Father and Son. It is because of the love that exists between the persons of the Godhead that God so jealously guards His glory. There are many men who will ignore an insult directed at *them*, but if you talk about their momma or their wife, they'll knock the stuffing out of you, in defense of her honor.

Think of how Jesus speaks in Matthew 12:32: "Whoever speaks a Word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven." But then look at Hebrews 10:29: "How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God...and has outraged the Spirit of grace?" The persons of the Trinity are jealous *on behalf of one another*, and they will not allow boasting to rob any of the Triune persons of their rightful glory.

Zealous for Salvation

The second reason why God shames those who reject the gospel also proves that God is not selfish: He shames the strong and the wise for *their own good*. Their pride and idolatry are corrupting them in this life – who likes a proud person? – and keeping them out of heaven in the next life. If God let them go on their merry way with these ridiculous boasts on their lips, they would be destroyed for all eternity. But God intervenes in order to save them from boasting their way into hell. God is doing more than vengefully settling scores by bursting the balloons of the proud – He is mercifully making them aware of their need for salvation by shaming them and bringing them low.

Two Types of Boasting

1 Cor. 1 particularly mentions two different varieties of boasting: the intellectual boasting of the so-called wise, who are too smart for Jesus, and the boasting of the strong, those who think that the authority or power they have means that they don't need Jesus.

Wisdom – Intellectual boasting

Those who reject the message of the cross for intellectual reasons are claiming to be wiser than God. In Paul's day, we see this kind of boaster show up on Mar's Hill. They rejected Paul's gospel because if they knew one thing, it was that dead men stay dead. Paul's whole message was based on the fact that Jesus rose from the dead, and since they knew that this was nonsense, they laughed him off. As it says, *the Greeks seek wisdom*.

In our day, the gods of science tell us that the Genesis account is a fairy tale, that there never was a world-wide flood, and of course, that dead men stay dead. These are given as reasons why smart people, educated people, informed people do not and cannot accept the gospel.

Strength – Boasting in power/authority

Those who boast in power or might echo the words that were hurled at Jesus: “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross!” In other words, demonstrate that you have more power than we do. We put you up there; can you defeat us? *The Jews demand signs.*

There is a famous story about a conversation between Joseph Stalin and the Frenchman Pierre Laval, who wanted Stalin to make a show of encouraging religion in Russia so that Laval would have an easier time winning the Pope to their cause. “The Pope!” Stalin replied, “how many divisions has he got?” Stalin was prepared to ignore Christianity because it couldn’t match his military might.

Some of you might also remember John Lennon’s remarks about the Beatles and rock and roll: “Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn’t argue about that; I’m right and I’ll be proved right. We’re more popular than Jesus now...”¹ In other words, why should I follow Jesus when more people are following me?

Christ the Power of God and the Wisdom of God

But here’s the thing: the world *did not know God* through its wisdom. In all their power, in all their wisdom, the world has not come to a saving knowledge of God, or managed to overcome God. Science has not brought salvation to the world; philosophy has not solved the world’s problems. Christianity continues to spread over the earth, and everyone who has set themselves up to oppose Jesus is either dead or dying.

But everyone who believes in Jesus has been filled with Christ the wisdom of God, Christ the righteousness of God, Christ the sanctification of God, and Christ the redemption of God. In other words, the presence of Christ in His Church is how God puts the wise and the strong to shame, because Christ is the *power* of God and the *wisdom* of God.

God says, “I have called billions of people to worship and glorify a Jewish carpenter who wandered around preaching and healing for a couple years before he was brutally murdered on a cross.” Sounds crazy to the worldly wise, but not one of their ideas can compare. No philosopher ever spoke like Jesus does. Modern science still can’t overcome blindness by using mud and words. Stalin’s murderous rampage is over, and Christianity still flourishes. It’s no longer easy for John Lennon to imagine there’s no heaven, but people all over the world still sing praises to Jesus.

How did God do it? How did He make foolish the wisdom of the world? Did He sit down with the scientists and philosophers and amaze them by answering all their questions? Did He send down legions of angels to overthrow His enemies, or does He provide miracles on demand to satisfy the skeptics? No.

¹ More popular than Jesus. (2017, January 20). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 04:22, January 29, 2017, from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=More_popular_than_Jesus&oldid=761070011

God fills the earth with the glory of Jesus through the *foolishness* of preaching the message of the cross. The God who made the world and everything in it became a man in order to die on the cross so that the world might be saved from the wrath of God against man's sin. Fishermen telling the story of a dying God. A world-transforming church made up of not many wise, not many powerful, not many of noble birth.

The wise, the rich, the powerful, the strong have everything, and yet they accomplish nothing compared to Jesus, who emptied Himself and became nothing, and saved the world in weakness and humility. This is how God shames the strong: what do you have? Everything! What have you done? Nothing! What did Jesus have? Nothing! What did He do? He saved the world.

Does Jesus know more than you? Apparently! Is Jesus more powerful than you? Evidently! So why would you still refuse His offer of salvation? Why would you continue to reject the good news? Why do you still cling to your wisdom? What good is your so-called strength? Be ashamed, you who boast against Jesus! Shut your mouth, unless you are ready to open in worship!

Shame Taken Away

But there is good news for those who have been put to shame by the foolishness of God. In fact, the blood of Jesus was shed in order to cover all of your shame, every bit of it! Every sin you've ever committed, every time you ever fell short, every moment when you realized that you were not good enough. Jesus came to make you ashamed of all your efforts to boast in the presence of God, as if you were worthy to stand before Him on your own two feet. But when you fall down on your face in shame, it is Jesus who lifts you up and is able to make you stand, not because you found or made your own wisdom or righteousness, but because He has become to us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.

As I said at the beginning, no one is able to stand before God unashamed, *with one exception*. And although you have covered yourself with shame, Jesus came to bear your shame on the cross, taking your shame as His own, making up for every time you missed the mark and fell short, and becoming your redemption in the sight of God, so that *in Him*, when you *put your trust* in Him and *become one* with Him, *in Him*, you too, can stand before God *unashamed*. And so the way to avoid the shame of falling flat on your face before God is to willingly kneel before Him, and give glory Jesus Christ. As it is written, let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

Let us pray: "O Lord God, your foolishness is wiser than our wisdom, and your weakness is stronger than our strength. I pray that you would convict our hearts of being intimidated by those who seem so wise or strong to us when they reject the Word of the cross. Give us boldness, so that we may not merely suggest Christ as a good option, or offer Jesus up as a recommendation. May we shame the strong by boasting in the foolish wisdom of God, and the weakness of the one who is stronger than the grave, until He comes again in glory. In Jesus' name, Amen."