



# SHAME

RECOGNIZING AND NEUTRALIZING THE TOXICITY

by David A. Muench

## GROUP STUDY SUGGESTIONS ...

### Opening

Sing or speak together verses 1–2 and 6–7 of “Oh, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing” (LSB #528; LW #276; TLH #360), adding “Amen.”

### Closing

Sing or speak together verses 3–5 of “Oh, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing”, closing with “Amen.”

“SHAME ON YOU!” Perhaps you have a memory of hearing this phrase as a child. Maybe you (like I) have used it in attempting to guide your children. Would it shock you to discover there is no research to support the premise that shaming a child is a helpful tool in changing behavior? Would it further surprise you to learn that shame is toxic and has been identified as much more likely to promote destructive behaviors?<sup>1</sup>

The destructive nature of shame is not only connected to relationships in our personal and family lives, but the negative impact can also be seen in relationships at work and school, in our community, even in the Church. The importance of understanding the antidote for shame can hardly be overstated. That antidote is the bedrock of our Christian faith. Shame loses its power in the certainty that we have righteousness by grace through faith in Jesus.

Consider **Romans 3:21–24** and **Romans 9:33**. Reflect upon how the message of these texts neutralizes aspects of shame with which you may be struggling.

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Let’s look a little more closely at shame and the toxic impact it has on people and relationships. Please review the scriptural account presented in **Genesis 1** and **2**.

Here we recognize that the Creator’s divine design was all about relationships. In God’s original intention, every created entity was functioning at an optimal level and in perfect relational harmony with every other created entity. All of this was happening to the glory and honor of the Creator.

Then, reading further, we come upon the familiar events of **Genesis 3**. Adam and Eve disobeyed God and fell into sin. Which of the relationships of God’s perfect design were impacted by the fall (**Romans 8:22**)? \_\_\_\_\_

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Please note one result of the fall into sin which is described in **Genesis 3:7**. \_\_\_\_\_

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Adam and Eve knew they were naked. In truth, they had been naked since the time of their creation. That reality was not new. What *was* new to them, and the reason they sewed leaves to hide themselves, is that they were now experiencing shame. This new feeling of shame is connected to the fall into sin and loss of the perfection in which they had been created.

It was the toxic nature of shame that caused them to hide when they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden, in the cool of the day, and shame that led Adam to turn against Eve, the helper corresponding to him, created from his own rib! It was shame that damaged their relationship, their relationship with God, and their relationship with every other created entity. List specifics from **Genesis 3:8–19**: \_\_\_\_\_

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Shame is capable of the same toxic impact on relationships today. The definition I find to be helpful is this: “Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and, therefore, unworthy of love and belonging.”<sup>2</sup>

Who among us does not struggle from time to time with the painful realization of our own shortcomings? We each know our own faults better than any other person knows them because we know our private thoughts, temptations, and desires that mostly remain hidden to others. The toxic impact of shame is that our “better” knowledge of all the ways in which we have fallen short of God’s expectation tempts us to feel unworthy of relationship connection. As was true of our first parents in Eden, the natural reaction is to lower our vulnerability. That can happen by shifting blame to someone else, by criticizing, disengaging, or otherwise hiding our shortcomings.

Relationships suffer when this kind of disengagement is happening. It often leads to further feelings of unworthiness and further hiding. This unhealthy cycle tends to feed on itself. We begin to assume things about what others are thinking of us and are not relationally engaged enough to know differently.

Brené Brown is a leading researcher on the topic of shame. She suggests that some categories of shame are more likely to be experienced by women in our culture, whereas other categories more threatening to men.<sup>3</sup> She also identifies twelve shame categories as more universally threatening. At the top of this broader list is “appearance and body image,” followed by “money and work.”<sup>4</sup> How do you define the category in which you are most vulnerable to shame? \_\_\_\_\_

Enter again the good news of a Messiah, first delivered to Adam and Eve by God, who was not content to let them hide or otherwise disengage from a relationship with Him. It’s the only message that brings lasting relief from the toxicity of shame. The message declares that righteousness is by grace through faith in Jesus. Righteousness and perfection will never be achieved on our own; never do we have any hope for righteousness by getting our behavior correct.

**Romans 4:5** \_\_\_\_\_

**Romans 5:1** \_\_\_\_\_

**Philippians 3:9** \_\_\_\_\_

The antidote to the toxicity of shame is this Gospel truth: I have nothing to be ashamed of because Jesus is my substitute in righteousness.

When considering the topic of shame, we do well to be mindful of the distinction between shame and guilt. While it’s true (as referenced earlier), there is no research to demonstrate that shame motivates to positive behavioral change, this is not the case for guilt. An individual’s acceptance of his/her guilt is known to be a significantly helpful motivator.

The difference is in the reality: guilt deals with action, with behaviors. Shame, on the other hand, is about one’s value. Another way to clarify is to understand that guilt is about what I’ve done and shame is about who I am. I can accept responsibility for something I’ve done which is wrong, seek to make appropriate amends, and take steps to avoid repeating the wrong behavior. It’s an entirely different challenge to change what I believe in my heart and private thoughts about who I am and what is my value.

Once again, the reception by faith of Jesus’ righteous life and innocent death, serving as my substitute, is the only antidote. His death on the cross (passive obedience) paid the penalty for all guilt, for all people, for all time. But do not fail to remember: Jesus has not ever sinned. His righteous earthly life (active obedience) is also credited to all who receive it by grace, through faith. This “restored” value is referenced with His declaration in **Revelation 21:5**.

That restoration of all things to the Creator’s original design includes an existence in which shame is no longer a factor in our lives. But His work of making all things new is not yet completed. It will be so only in heavenly glory. Until we experience that reality, we live in the certainty that the righteousness of Jesus that is ours by grace, through faith, is sufficient to neutralize the toxicity of shame, restoring our value and validating our worthiness for relationship with God and others.

God grant it, for Jesus’ sake.

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Brené, (2012), *Daring Greatly—How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*. Gotham Books, New York. p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 69

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 85-93

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 69