

Shame and Blame

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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In our culture shame is often associated with blame, and the two conditions tend to be regarded as unhealthy – both for the shamer and the shamed. Still, nothing could be more common in human life than our need to determine who's to blame for any particular evil or offense – so that we can prevent it from happening again, and one very common way of controlling human behavior is to inspire shame about things we want to discourage. It's a big subject, and we certainly can't cover it all in 20 minutes, but we can bring the light of revelation to it, and see at least some of the ways that shame and blame can be useful – or indeed very harmful.

40 years ago Webster defined shame as “a painful emotion caused by consciousness of guilt, shortcoming, or impropriety,” also “a condition of humiliating disgrace or disrepute” often associated with regret. It can be used as a noun or a verb. The same definitions still apply today. Shame is also associated with fear, so when we do something wrong, that is, something that we know is wrong, our shame about that can inspire a healthy fear lest we do it again. But as you think about shame you can see that a lot of the time it relates to standards imposed by *other people* and what *they* see as wrong or inappropriate. Does that make it bad? No, not necessarily, but it should give pause for reflection.

In the Word shame is often associated with embarrassment, as when someone for any reason fails to live up to an expectation, or suffers the consequences of some misdeed. In that sense the Prophets and Psalms often speak of being “clothed” or “covered” in shame, meaning scorn or censure. A married woman, for example, might have felt shame for not having children. Then again, all of Israel was repeatedly brought to shame – meaning real suffering – for their failure to trust or obey the Lord. As is so often the case in the Old Testament, these are not necessarily internal feelings but external effects.

In the New Testament, however, we have intimations of a more internal kind of shame, as in the Lord's parable of a man taking the best seat at a feast, only to be asked to step down in favor of another (Luke 14:9) or of the man setting out to build a tower and not being able to finish it (Luke 14:29). In these cases there's no great physical consequence, but plenty of personal embarrassment. And in fact it would appear that the Lord Himself used shame to make a number of points, without actually using that word exactly. For example, in the parable of the talents He told the one who buried his talent that he was “wicked and lazy,” and ought at least to have earned some interest on the money (Matt. 25:26). He scolded Peter several times, once even calling him Satan. He certainly exposed the treachery of Judas in front of all the other disciples, and in the resurrection He called the disciples “fools and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets had spoken” (Luke 24:25). How embarrassing! And yet by these means the Lord prepared His disciples for the personal conviction that would drive them to spread the gospel throughout the world. Just imagine how they must have felt after betraying and abandoning Him at His crucifixion when they saw Him restored to life! In that case their shame translated into real fear, and yet when the Lord in His resurrection showed them only love and understanding, they were bonded to Him in way that sealed their faith and commitment to Him.

So in the Writings for the New Church we're taught that shame is an important and useful tool for the Lord to get our attention. Why? – because it affects our love of reputation, honor and gain, in short, our pride and self-centeredness. After all, this is where we are before the process

of regeneration really gets under way, and that has to be broken down somehow before we can make any real spiritual progress. Think about it. Nobody wants to look foolish, and least of all jeopardize an opportunity to get ahead in the world. And yet the fact is that we ARE foolish about spiritual things; we ARE born into tendencies to evils of every kind, and we need to recognize that without the Lord's guidance and instruction we really are lost. So in our lives shame can be an instigator – *not really a motivator*, but a means for the Lord to get our attention so that He can begin to improve our quality of life.

Here's how it works. Seeing that we are immersed in selfish and worldly loves pretty much from birth, the Lord first of all very gently and often secretly instills deep within us certain fundamentally good loves and truths. Then, as we begin to think for ourselves He taps into these – what we call “remains” or “remnants” of *His* spiritual life within us, and causes us to see the embarrassing contrast between that and whatever else we may be thinking. This in itself doesn't change us, in fact if that's as far as it goes, and we just continue feeling shame and embarrassment about who we are and how we feel, we can really stymie the Lord's efforts to help us, and fall into a pitiful, depressing state. But if we take it as the wake-up call that it's intended to be, and ask the Lord to help us do better, it can be the beginning of our salvation.

Let's take an example. Deep down inside we all know it's wrong to tell a lie or betray someone's confidence. But even telling only half the truth can really amount to a lie, and when we get caught saying something inappropriate we can feel pretty bad about it – first because we got caught, but then on reflection because we realize it was wrong. So the first impact is really external and natural, based on our self-interest, but the second takes us a little deeper. Still, the shame has not done its job until we apologize and really resolve – for the right reasons – not to do it again. And we can see from this or a hundred other examples that the Lord not only works from within, but also from outside, through moral and social pressure to at least appear to be doing what is acceptable.

Now, granted, our social customs are not always in line with the laws of heaven. In some cultures, for example, certain forms of abuse are not only tolerated but expected. And here in our culture, while we can be glad that the prudery of the Victorian age is long gone we can also see the pain caused by a total lack of social restraint in sexual matters. Still, the most important use of shame is not that it is inflicted on us by others, but that we feel it within ourselves because we know that we're not doing the best we can.

This takes us to the topic of blame. As mentioned before, nothing could be more common among us than the “need” to place blame for things that go wrong. Our entire judicial system is based on it, and even though blame doesn't always involve punishment, we always feel better knowing that the cause of our problems has been identified – at the very least so that we can relax about the people who are NOT guilty. But this “blame game” can easily get out of hand. For example, we can blame *ourselves* for things over which we have little or no control, and since the shame for those things doesn't really belong to us we can find ourselves paralyzed to do anything about it. Of course it's always useful to reflect on what we can do better, but to assume that we are fully responsible for whatever has gone wrong in our lives is rather egotistical. In fact, *focusing* on the shame just holds us back, and keeps us from doing better.

As for blaming other people, the angels, we read, and those among us who are in real charity, take no delight in finding fault with others, rather they go to great lengths if possible to make excuses for those who offend. This is not to say that they don't recognize any evil; they certainly

DO. But they look for ways to have a positive effect on any evil-doer, and so, like the Lord Himself, they try to show their love and compassion for those who make mistakes. This is what motivates and inspires people. Simply assigning blame without any effort to understand generally only makes a bad situation worse. Consider various addictions – drugs, alcohol, or whatever. In many ways addicts really are powerless in and of themselves to change. Often they will say they want to change, but then they find the craving too great for them to manage. So they relapse, and then the shame and remorse drive them further into abuse as the only way they can find temporary relief – until they get real help, help that builds on the good, that is, their sincere desire to get better, and not just the shame.

Then again, blame can be assigned without malicious intent. If children aren't confronted about things they know very well are wrong they can grow up not trusting or believing their parents, or with totally unrealistic expectations about what they deserve later in life. And if at any time we don't learn to take responsibility for the mistakes we make we can end up hurting a lot of people. But this has nothing to do with retribution, retaliation or vindictiveness (veiled as these may be by cries for "justice"). It's simply about recognizing what is wrong.

In that vein, in the famous line in Matthew where the Lord says, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone," the word, tell, does mean to confront, but in the original Greek it carries the force of examination or explanation as much as accusation (Matt 18:17). In short our goal should not be punishment (though punishment may be unavoidable); the goal should be reconciliation, which obviously requires mercy. So it is as we read in Isaiah, "'Come now, and let us reason together,' says the Lord, 'though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow...'" (Isa. 1:18). We just have to get a few things right.

All that said, one great way to assign blame with mercy and understanding is to put it where it always ultimately belongs, that is, in hell. We've referred to this passage often in the last few years but it's always worth repeating. We read,

"If man believed, as is really the case, that all good is from the Lord and all evil from hell, he would not make the good in him a matter of merit nor would evil be imputed to him; for he would then look to the Lord in all the good he thinks and does, and all the evil that inflows would be cast down to hell whence it comes. But because man does not believe that there is any influx into him either from heaven or from hell, and so supposes that all the things that he thinks and wills are in himself, and therefore from himself, he appropriates the evil to himself, and the inflowing good he defiles with merit" (HH 302; see also DP 320, AC 3812, etc.).

One clear implication of this teaching is that if we believed, as is really true, that all evil is from hell, we would not find it necessary to shame or blame ANYBODY in this world for the stupid things they do. Rather we would sympathize with them and try to comfort them, and bring out whatever good they may have from the Lord so that they can be encouraged to DO BETTER. Is this easy? No, of course not, especially if they don't want that sort of encouragement. But as an alternative to *imposing* shame we can help a person discover his or her own shame by making it clear that we disapprove of some particular words or actions. We might be wrong; we might not understand the situation at all; but right or wrong, doing so gives the other person an opportunity to reflect, explain, and possibly make a helpful change.

Another implication of this teaching is that we can actually help one another with the recognition

that is so crucial for a healthy spiritual life. We do it with children all the time: we don't say how good or how bad they are (children aren't good or bad!), but they have good or bad attitudes, and do good or bad things. Why? – because they have the freedom to *choose* influences from heaven or hell. And when we remind them of this they can feel a great sense of relief, neither having to expect too much of themselves nor having to feel too ashamed if they mess up.

OK, but with adults this is tricky. No one wants to come across as superior to a friend or colleague, and in any case most of us are all too well aware of our own faults to be comfortable confronting others – lest we be confronted (and embarrassed) in return. But there are healthy ways to approach this problem. One is to take a page from the Lord's book and just tell a story. It could be a story from your own life or from some other person's life (no need to say whose!), but the point of the story would be to affirm and illustrate the reality of spiritual influences in this world. It might begin with an example of the power of peer pressure in this world, and then transition to reflections on how the same thing “surely” comes about as the result of our connections to the spiritual world. We can talk about how we may have felt this influence in our own lives, and then simply ask the question: “Have you ever felt that in your life?”

We know that we are most vulnerable to the influence of the hells when we are sick, stressed or tired. And yet the doctrines assure us that we are neither reformed nor condemned in states like this, when our freedom is impaired. So another useful approach when confronting a problem is to begin by asking, “How are you feeling today?” or “How has your day been?” Maybe you already know that the person you're concerned about is under a lot of stress. If so you might offer some sympathy right off the bat, saying something like, “I've been thinking about you a lot, Joe; I get the feeling you've had a lot of stress in your life lately.” This may not be terribly well received, but if it is then you could follow up with an offer to listen – which could eventually lead to a totally non-threatening conversation about whatever it was that had been bothering you. And in the back of *your* mind you can be an angel, looking for the good and excusing the faults even as they come out into the open for a friendly resolution.

In the end the Lord has taught us that we are *not* to resist the wicked (Matt. 5:39). All people are our neighbors whom we must love if we have the Lord's love in us. But we love each one according to his or her unique qualities. So we resist the evils people do, but offer good counsel to the people who do them because we want the best for them. Any shame we recognize should be shame on account of the evil, *not the person*, and any blame we assign for some misdeed should be directed to the hells so that IT, and not the person we love, can be cast out. The same applies in our own private lives. We may feel shame about many things, and, you know, we are all responsible for many foolish mistakes, but the only purpose of shame is to set us on a better path, and the only reason for blame is to help us see exactly what needs to change. Let's not get bogged down in self-pity or indignation over either one of these states, but simply use them as the Lord intended to move us more powerfully into a truly rewarding, peaceful and productive *new life* of blessings with others in the cheerful sphere of heaven.

Amen.

Lessons: *Judges* 2:11-19
 Children's talk on Why “You Should be Ashamed of Yourself”
Luke 14:1, 7-11 & 28-33
Arcana Caelestia #1079 (see page 5)

1079. *Saw the nakedness of his father.* that this signifies that he observed the errors and perversions, is evident from the signification of "nakedness" (concerning which see just above, and also before at n. 213, 214), as being what is evil and perverted. Here, those who are in faith separated from charity are described by "Ham" in his "seeing the nakedness of his father" that is, his errors and perversions; for they who are of this character see nothing else in a man; whereas-very differently-those who are in the faith of charity observe what is good, and if they see anything evil and false, they excuse it, and if they can, try to amend it in him, as is here said of Shem and Japheth. Where there is no charity, there is the love of self, and therefore hatred against all who do not favor self. Consequently such persons see in the neighbor only what is evil, and if they see anything good, they either perceive it as nothing, or put a bad interpretation upon it. It is just the other way with those who are in charity. By this difference these two kinds of men are distinguished from one another, especially when they come into the other life; for then with those who are in no charity, the feeling of hatred shines forth from every single thing; they desire to examine everyone, and even to judge him; nor do they desire anything more than to find out what is evil, constantly cherishing the disposition to condemn, punish, and torment. But they who are in charity scarcely see the evil of another, but observe all his goods and truths, and put a good interpretation on what is evil and false. Such are all the angels, which they have from the Lord, who bends all evil into good.