

The Difference Between Guilt and Shame

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Last month we enjoyed an excellent weekend here at Ellel Ministries Gilbulla with Ken Hooper sharing about moving from Slavery to Sonship. It was a brilliant weekend. The testimonies gave full credit to the work Father God had done in every person who attended.

Sitting in and listening to Ken got me thinking about the impact of guilt and shame on a person and how shame in particular affects our 'sonship'. In fact, Ken's input reminded me of another great teaching on shame that comes from Gordon Dalbey's "Fight Like a Man".

Both Ken and Gordon's perspectives exercised my mind regarding the following question:

"What exactly is the difference between guilt and shame?"

So, here are some thoughts regarding my answer to that question... (and I want to give credit to both Ken and Gordon for the truth they have collectively helped me to understand about this topic).

Firstly, I have come to understand guilt as the feeling we experience after we have stepped outside of God's protective covering. When we are experiencing guilt, it is my personal conviction that we are feeling exactly what God intends us to feel after we have sinned. At that moment we sin, our conscience will be actively telling us "you are guilty of breaking God's commands! Confess. Repent. Get back under God's covering, quickly!"

God has given us a conscience for that very purpose.

So if our conscience is functioning as it should, you are supposed to feel guilty after you have transgressed. (Although, if you have hardened your heart and sinned in an area long enough - your conscience can become seared and shut down to the sensation of feeling guilt).

Guilt is in fact the emotion we are designed to feel when we have done something wrong. And it's been given to us by God so that we can do something about it!

We may need to apologise. Go and say we're sorry. Correct a wrong. It is meant to make us run back to God!

Guilt moves us to get relationships right with God and with others whom we may have hurt or failed. Guilt moves us to confess sin, to repent, to be forgiven, to be reconciled.

In one of his psalms, King David expresses what he is feeling as he responds with a broken and contrite heart, speaking of how guilt affected him. Listen to how he expresses it:-

"When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. (Selah) Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD" - and you forgave the guilt of my sin." Psalm 32. 3-5

I love the honesty of David sharing how his heart was in a real mess when he tried to cover over his sin. It was destroying him not just emotionally, but also affecting him physically. I know these symptoms well when I have been burdened by guilt. But once David opened up to God and confessed his sin, God forgave him and released him from the weight of that burden.

Guilt says: "Your response was bad"

Shame says: "You are bad!"

Guilt focuses on the sinful action or behaviour (to bring conviction and change)

Shame attacks our identity (in order to bring condemnation).

Guilt's role is to convict.

Shame's role is to condemn.

Guilt's job is to drive you towards the Cross!

Shame's job is to drive you away from the Cross!

Shame requires that we cover-up, hide our sin, pretend – such a 'cover up' becomes a darkness which then beckons the enemy to come and inhabit.

Shame therefore can only be overcome by nakedness and by vulnerability – ie surrendering to the Father and facing squarely our need of Him.

The vast majority of Christians that come to Ellet Ministries today believe (& act) as though shame overcomes sin. That is, 'If you just make a person feel ashamed enough about what he's doing wrong, he'll stop'. But that's like trying to put out a fire with petrol. The more fuel you pour onto the fire, the higher the flames climb!... So trying to shame a person into stopping their sin, usually only drives them further into that sin!

Shame is actually fuelled by distrust... primarily a distrust of Abba Father.

That's why it can only be defeated by restored relationship with Father God and not by mere striving after obedience or "doing the right thing". Trying harder to be righteous or godly can't overcome shame and restore you to your true identity. In fact, when you're trying to do something humanly impossible, you only fail even more and thereby increase your shame.

If you think back to Genesis, Adam defined sin - not by disobeying the Law – but by his distrust of God which wrecked their perfect relationship.

So, if the Biblical model set in Genesis by Adam, is that shame comes through broken relationship with the Father – then it is only Jesus who can restore that broken relationship for us with Father God... and this alone is what banishes shame forever!

Guilt comes from breaking the law; shame comes from breaking relationship.

Remember, guilt focuses on what you've done - shame, on who you are.

Shame prompts the debilitating sense of not measuring up – to yourself, to others and to God.

In fact, another word for shame is disgrace.

To put it simply, God's antidote to shame – or disgrace – is His **grace**.

Dalbey also states: *“Grace is not a doctrine. It's a relationship. It's not what you believe, but whom you receive”*.

You can't drive a person into grace. You can only invite them to receive it.

If you have been racked with shame about something you've done in your past (or perhaps by something that has been done to you)... maybe it's time to stop running away from the Cross, and start running toward it.

Below is a simple prayer to begin that journey of making a choice to receive God's grace, rather than trying to 'work' for it. Remember, you cannot earn grace (that only increases your shame). You can only choose to receive God's offer of grace which requires the surrender of your heart and a choice to trust God.

Invitational Prayer for Jesus to overcome our Shame

Lord Jesus, I want to say that I am sorry for how I have tried to earn your favour and overcome my shame in my own strength. I now recognise I cannot overcome my shame in my own strength, only You can overcome my shame.

Jesus I want to say that I am sorry for the sins I have committed that make me feel ashamed. In particular I confess my involvement in

Thank you that you took all my guilt and shame when you went to the cross in my place. I choose to accept your forgiveness of that sin. I choose to forgive myself for what I have done. I ask you to heal and cleanse me from the consequences of all these things.

Lord Jesus you know all about me. You know all the things that have happened to me and caused me to feel ashamed by what they did to me. I choose to forgive those who have caused me shame in anyway, including my ancestors. I particularly choose to forgive those whom You have brought to mind right now.....

Thank you that you understand all my feelings, hurt and pain. You do not want me to carry a burden of that shame or its associated pain. You died at Calvary to carry both away. I choose to trust You at this very hour by giving You permission to access feelings and memories that You allow to surface. I choose to put my full trust in You to bring Your healing and comfort to any memory you wish to surface and bring healing to me. I ask for restoration in every part of my being, spirit, soul and body.

I choose to accept Your free gift of grace and to receive your love, as a treasured son/ daughter.

Thank you Lord Jesus for loving me just as I am. Please set me free from my burden bearing, false responsibility, false guilt and my defiling shame.

I ask instead that You bathe me in Your perfect love from this day forward. Amen.