

The Shames People Play

Stan Haegert, MD¹

1. Workshop description --*“We all live with shame. Sometimes it can serve as a motivator for ministry. But ministering from a foundation of shame-avoidance can lead to perfectionism, posturing and people pleasing, setting one up for anxiety and burnout. We’ll look at the alternative: Embracing our identity in Christ, owning our stories and ministering from a position of courageous authenticity.”*

2. Introduction
 - A. I’ve shared my story of burnout and recovery as a missionary physician in West Africa. (See www.servingwithjoy.org if interested).
 - i. We have talked about the three elements of the burnout syndrome (RED).
 - ii. One of those elements is a Reduced sense of personal adequacy or effectiveness, leading sometimes to the Imposter Syndrome.
 - B. I’ve come to understand through counseling and reading that what I often deal with is something called shame.
 - C. Why spend time looking at shame?
 - i. Because the experience of shame is universal.
 - ii. Shame can be a motivator for ministry, but it’s not a good one!
 - iii. I’m largely presenting the work of Brené Brown, but “held up to” the scriptures.²

3. What is shame?
 - A. Definition – “Shame is basically the fear of being unlovable...Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.” (Brown 2007, 39)
 - i. My second grade story.
 - ii. Mark 5:24-29. The woman with the issue of blood.
 - a. Why would she sneak up behind Jesus instead of approaching Him boldly? How do you see this connecting with the definition of shame?
 - b. Under the “old orthodoxy,”
 1. She would have been “perpetually unclean, cut off from every other Jewish person.”
 2. By touching Jesus, she would have rendered Him unclean as well.³
 3. She would have been regarded as having done something wrong in the past and as receiving the just punishment of God.
 4. “Belonging is the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us.” (Brown 2010, 26) She would have had no way to

¹ My speaker’s notes may be obtained by writing me at sdhaegert@gmail.com

² The two works of Brené Brown that I will be most often referencing are: 1) Brown, B. (2007). *I Thought It Was Just Me: Women Reclaiming Power and Courage in a Culture of Shame*. New York: Gotham Books, and 2) Brown, B. (2010). *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*. Center City, MN: Hazelden.

³ Card, M. (2013). *Matthew: The Gospel of Identity*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

achieve that...only shame. "I am flawed and therefore I am unworthy of love or belonging."

- B. Shame vs. guilt.
- i. For the believer, the Holy Spirit brings a sense of guilt when we violate God's laws, and act in ways that fight against His work of forming Christ in us.
 - a. This is not *judicial* guilt (Jesus' death has taken that away), but *corrective* discipline.
 - b. Its goal is *restoration* of relationship, not *loss* of relationship.
 - ii. "Shame is focusing on *who we are* rather than what we've done." (Brown 2007, 14, emphasis added)
 - a. Satan's preference is to attack *identity*. Read Mt. 4:1-7 – Notice his wording "If you are the Son of God..."
 - b. We all know the voice of the accuser..."And you call yourself a Christian?" He tries to threaten our identity in Christ, our relationship with God. He knows to strike the cords of fear that we will be unlovable, unforgiveable, that we will no longer *belong*.
 - iii. Summary: "...the difference between shame and guilt is best understood as the differences between 'I am bad' and 'I did something bad.' Shame is about who we are, and guilt is about our behaviors...Guilt is just as powerful as shame, but its effect is often positive while shame is often destructive...shame corrodes the part of us that believes we can change and do better." (Brown 2010, 41)
4. Immediate effects of shame: Fight, Flight or Freeze (Brown 2007, 28)
5. Responses to shame:
- A. Moving away (to hide)
 - i. Implode/turn our guns inward/blame ourselves. "What I'm feeling must be true...I really am an imposter. I don't deserve love or belonging."
 - ii. Flight or Freeze – "Please don't look at me because I am exposed and vulnerable."
 - B. Moving toward (to appease)
 - i. "You're right...I'm not good enough. I'll try to do better so I can earn your love."
 - ii. "I must be perfect, or else I won't be loved."
 - iii. "Maybe God will love me more if I serve Him!"
 - C. Moving against (to defeat)
 - i. Explode/turn our guns outward/blame others. "If you hadn't treated me that way I wouldn't be feeling like this!"
 - ii. Fight – "I'll show you all!"
6. Shame and the connection to the elements of burnout: Remember the "RED" of burnout.
- A. Reduced sense of personal adequacy/effectiveness/imposter syndrome:
 - i. Shame message: "I am deeply flawed...don't expose me!"
 - ii. Shame response: "*Moving away*" to hide from people, to reduce risk of my inadequacies being discovered.

- a. By becoming invisible, dropping out, anesthetizing with substances or escapism.
 - b. By posturing...cultivating a “false self” that people might accept.
 - B. Exhaustion:
 - i. Shame message: “I’m not worthy of love...I will try to become so!”
 - ii. Shame response: “Moving toward,” trying to appease and please God and others. This can lead to exhaustion.
 - C. Depersonalization:
 - i. Shame message: “I don’t deserve to belong...let me prove it by pushing you further away!”
 - ii. Shame response: “Moving against,” blaming others for my distress and lashing out in anger.⁴
- 7. Developing Shame Resilience
 - A. Shame happens. “The good news, however, is that we are all capable of developing shame *resilience*...that ability to recognize shame when we experience it, and move through it in a constructive way that allows us to maintain our authenticity and grow from our experiences. And in this process of consciously moving through our shame, we can build stronger and more meaningful connections with the people in our lives.” (Brown 2007, 34)
 - B. Brené Brown writes “After a decade of research, I found that men and women with high levels of shame resilience share these four elements: (Brown 2010, 40)
- 8. The First Element: Recognizing Shame and Understanding Our Triggers.
 - A. “[S]hame has a feeling—it’s physical as well as emotional.” (Brown 2007, 69) What physical sensations are you most likely to feel when you experience shame?
 - B. When we are feeling shame, it’s often likely that someone has stirred up one of our “unwanted identities (characteristics that undermine our vision of our ‘ideal’ selves).” (Brown 2007, 74)
 - i. “First, we are very hard on ourselves. When we identify these desired and unwanted identities, we give ourselves very little room to be human.
 - ii. Second, we cannot deny the power of the messages we heard growing up.” (Brown 2007, 86)
 - a. Leaving aside our identity in Christ for the moment, what are some of the desired identities that you had growing up, and perhaps have retained into adulthood?
 - b. What are some of the undesired identities that you carried, perhaps even until today?
- 9. The Second Element: Practicing Critical Awareness (bringing automatic thoughts to the truth)
 - A. Let’s return to Mark 5:25-34:
 - i. Vs. 25-29: What “unwanted identities” would this woman likely have acquired?
 - ii. What elements of this woman’s shame does Jesus specifically address?

⁴ “Because anger is an emotion of potency and authority, being angry can help us regain a sense of control. Regaining control is important because shame leaves us feeling worthless, paralyzed and ineffective.” (Brown, 2007, 76).

- iii. I love the fact that Jesus is not content simply to remove the cause of this woman's shame. He does not let her remain anonymous, to "move away" and hide. He pursues her, and moves toward her to reverse the damage caused by shame.
 - 1. No longer a "loner," she is now "Daughter."
 - 2. No longer a "sufferer," she is "healed."
 - 3. No longer to be known as a "sinner," Jesus declares her to be a "[woman of] faith."
 - 4. No longer "fearful," she may "Go in peace."
- iv. How might we be like Jesus in this way toward our clients?
- B. What identities do we have now that we are "in Christ?" A small "sampler:"
 - i. John 1:12 – children of God
 - ii. Rom. 15:7 – accepted by Christ
 - iii. Col. 2:9,10 – we have been given fullness in Christ
 - iv. I Pet. 2:9 (NIV84) – "*a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God...*"
- C. There is an "already" and "not yet" aspect to our identity in Christ:
 - i. I John. 3: 2 (NIV84) – "*Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.*" We are already children of God, secure in our *relationship* to Christ. But the process of *sanctification* is incomplete.
 - ii. Rom. 7:21-25 – we are both slaves to God's law and slaves to the law of sin.
 - iii. I Cor. 10:13 (NIV84) – "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man."
- D. "For most of us to successfully begin to recognize and understand our shame triggers, we first need to accept that acknowledging our vulnerabilities is an act of courage." (Brown 2007, 81)
 - i. When we feel shame, there is an alternative to "fight, flight or freeze." We can anchor in our relationship to Christ, and courageously acknowledge that we indeed are "works in progress," with limitations and vulnerabilities.
 - ii. "The root of the word courage is *cor*—the Latin word for heart. In one of its earliest forms, the word courage had a very different definition that it does today. Courage originally meant 'To speak one's mind by telling all one's heart.' Over time, this definition has changed, and, today, courage is more synonymous with being heroic...Heroics [are] often about putting our life on the line. Ordinary courage is about putting our vulnerability on the line." (Brown 2010, 12)
 - iii. Notice how acknowledging our vulnerabilities robs shame of its power. "The truth will set you free."
- E. See Appendix A – "Practicing Critical Awareness."

10. The Third Element: Reaching Out

- A. Bring shame to *Community*...break the "Code of Silence." "One of the most important benefits of reaching out to others is learning that the experiences that make us feel the most alone are actually universal experiences." (Brown 2007, 127).
- B. Experience "Knowing laughter." (Brown 2007, 130)

11. The Fourth Element: Speaking Shame

- A. Choose *growth* over perfection. (Brown 2007, 196)
 - B. Practice “*courageous authenticity*.” “To me, this quality of *being who you are regardless of who you are with* seems to be the very essence of authenticity...” (Brown 2007, 262)
12. We can learn to identify the maladaptive shame responses others may be choosing. We’ll see how “owning our stories” can help us use empathy and compassion to build bridges of connection with others.
13. The importance of connection: “We are wired for connection...Connection is critical because we all have the basic need to feel accepted and to believe that we belong and are valued for who we are. Shame unravels our connection to others. In fact, I often refer to shame as the fear of disconnection—the fear of being perceived as flawed and unworthy of acceptance or belonging. Shame keeps us from telling our own stories and prevents us from listening to others tell their stories.” (Brown 2007, xxiv)
14. We can help others restore a sense of connection through empathy and compassion.
15. Compassion:
- a. “The prerequisite for empathy is compassion. We can only respond empathetically if we are willing to hear someone’s pain.
 - b. We sometimes think of compassion as a saint-like virtue. It’s not. In fact, compassion is possible for anyone who can accept the struggles that make us human—our fears, imperfections, losses and shame.
 - c. We can only respond compassionately to someone telling her story if we have embraced our own story—shame and all.
 - d. Compassion is not a virtue—it is a commitment. It’s not something we have or don’t have—it’s something we choose to practice. Can we be with someone who is in shame and open ourselves up enough to listen to her story and share her pain?” (Brown 2007, xxv)
 - e. Compassion is risky. “When we hear stories that mirror our own shame experiences, it helps us know we aren’t alone. Of course, if the story hits too close to home, we can actually find *ourselves* in the grip of shame.
 - i. Rather than just listening and responding to someone else’s experience, we become overwhelmed with our own feelings of shame.
 - ii. When we hear stories about shame that don’t fit with our experiences, our first reaction is often to distance ourselves from the experiences...The distancing turns very quickly into blame, judgment and separation. This fuels the shame epidemic.” (Brown 2007, 9)
16. Empathy – the “strongest antidote for shame.” (Brown 2007, 32)
- a. Definitions:
 - i. “...the skill or ability to tap into our own experiences in order to connect with an experience someone is relating to us.” (Brown 2007, 33)

- ii. "...from a counseling textbook by writers Arn Ivey, Paul Pederson and Mary Ivey. They describe empathy as 'the ability to perceive a situation for the other person's perspective. To see, hear and feel the unique world of the other.'" (Brown 2007, 33)
- b. Empathy skills can be learned: "Teresa Wiseman, a nursing scholar in England, identifies four defining attributes of empathy. They are: (Brown 2007, 37-41)
 - i. "To be able to see the world as others see it...to listen as they describe what they see, feel and experience.
 - ii. To be nonjudgmental...Often, our need to judge others is deeply motivated by our need to evaluate our own abilities, beliefs and values...we most often judge others around the issues that are important in our lives...Shame, fear and anxiety are all major incubators of judgment.
 - iii. To understand another person's feelings. In order to do this, we must be in touch with our own feelings and emotions, and we need to be comfortable in the larger world of emotion and feelings. [W]hile I certainly do not want to project my experiences onto her, I do want to be able to touch, in myself, some of the emotions that she might be feeling so that I can try to connect with what she's saying. I don't have to tell her my story. I certainly wouldn't say, 'I know exactly what you mean,' because I don't. (Brown 2007, 58)
 - iv. To communicate your understanding of that person's feelings."
- c. Empathy vs. Sympathy (Brown 2007, 51)
 - i. Giving sympathy: "In most cases, when we give sympathy we do not reach across to understand the world as others see it. We look at others from our world and feel sorry or sad for them. Inherent in sympathy is 'I don't understand your world, but from this view things look pretty bad' ...When our need for empathy is met with sympathy, it can often send us deeper into shame—we feel even more alone and separated. Empathy is about connection; sympathy is about separation."
 - ii. Seeking sympathy: "One sentiment underlying sympathy seeking is often 'Feel sorry for me because I'm the only one this is happening to' or 'my situation is worse than everyone else's.' This naturally creates disconnection and separation. People seeking sympathy are not looking for empathy or evidence of shared experiences—they are searching for confirmation of their uniqueness."

Appendix A “Practicing Critical Awareness”

- A. “Critical Awareness Questions (appearance as example):
- What are the social-community expectations around [appearance]?
 - Why do these expectations exist?
 - How is our society influenced by these expectations?
 - Who benefits from these expectations?
 - How realistic are my expectations?
 - Can I be all of these things all of the time?
 - Do the expectations conflict with each other?
 - Am I describing who I want to be or who others want me to be?
 - If someone perceives me as having these unwanted identities, what will happen?
 - Can I control how others perceive me? How do I try?”⁵
- B. “Practicing critical awareness means linking our personal experiences to what we learn from the questions and answers. When we do this, we move toward resilience by learning how to:
- Contextualize (I see the big picture);
 - Normalize (I’m not the only one); and
 - Demystify (I’ll share what I know with others).
- C. When we fail to make the connections, we increase our shame by:
- Individualizing (I am the only one);
 - Pathologizing (something is wrong with me); and
 - Reinforcing (I should be ashamed).” (Brown 2007, 99)

⁵ B. Brown, *I Thought It Was Just Me: Women Reclaiming Power and Courage in a Culture of Shame* (New York: Gotham Books, 2007). Pg. 94, list abbreviated, brackets inserted as example.