



“Shame Ridden, Guilt Driven”

a sermon by

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Psalm 139:1-18, 23-24

As some of you know, I come from a divorced family and growing up I lived largely with my mother. The year I turned five, however, I was sent for a time to live with my father. I remember being excited about getting to spend some time with my Dad. My stepmother, on the other hand, was not so excited, and I had been there less than two weeks when she confronted my Father and announced that “she would not raise another woman’s son.”

The next day my Father and I got in the car and we drove into the country. After what seemed like a long time, we pulled into the driveway of an old A-framed house and my Dad idled the car. With eyes too ashamed to look at me, he told me to get out of the car and to knock upon the door. He said, the people inside, would look after me while he went to a meeting.

Before my small feet could step upon the stoop, the car had turned around and sped off down the highway – never to return. It has taken me years to begin understanding the deep effects of that day. Being left behind, abandoned upon the curb, has colored – or at least shaded every aspect of my life. For years it led me to believe that I lacked value. Inside I felt deeply flawed, worthless, and alone. After all, if my own Father didn’t love me – who could?

Shame. Shame is a heavy feeling. It is a feeling that somehow, and in some indefinable way, we do not measure up. It whispers in our ears that we will never measure up, that we will never be the people we were meant to be.

It is a lingering sorrow. It is a sickness of the soul and it is in direct violation of our essential dignity as creations of God. Shame is a message that rings within our ears. It chastises the soul, telling us that we were somehow a mistake, that we are failures, fundamentally flawed at our core.

And like the shore line that is constantly eroded by the tumult of the ocean waves, so shame erodes our essential dignity, tainting our vision of ourselves. It is like a funhouse mirror that distorts your image. It creates a twisted reflection unlike the one standing before it. It is a lens that perverts everything seen through it. It has no basis in reality, it is rooted in deceit, and it is a lie. It tells us that we are something other than what we were created and designed to be.

For years, my shame rode me like a saddle and my guilt drove me like a pair of spurs sunk deep within my flesh. And were it not for the grace of God, I could have easily found myself forever ridden, perpetually driven, and eternally lost.

Shame. It is a lie, but most of us have heard its seductive voice whispering in our ears and most of us struggle daily to see ourselves through the eyes of grace that our Creator intended.

Shame is not something we impose upon ourselves, it is imposed upon us by those that are around us and we buy into it. And I believe that it stands as one of the

greatest spiritual threats of our time, largely because it prevents us from accepting our true identity as God's children and thus it robs us of the ability to live life at its fullest.

But Scripture says that the Truth will set you free and so this morning I want to expose for you what I believe to be the three greatest sources of shame in our world and I want to challenge you to rally against them.

The first ironically is graceless religion. Graceless religion is a source of shame because it "tells us that, to be acceptable, we must live up to the customs and shun the taboos of its tradition. It shames us when we do what it forbids and do not do what it requires ... [It compels us] to make up for what [we feel] we lack inside by obeying all its prescriptions on the outside. Graceless religion creates the illusion that if we only follow the letter of the rules, [then] we will be acceptable, and if we fail [then] we will be rejected and despised."¹

But Scripture speaks against such religion because Scripture tells us that nothing, absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God.

The second great source of shame comes from our secular culture. Secular culture shames us because it "tells us that if [you] want to be acceptable [you] must look good, feel good, and make good. [It tells us that] the self we are supposed to be comes in a [sculpted] body, draped in designer clothes, and capped with a gorgeous face. Furthermore, [you must] feel fantastic about yourself; seductive, alive, and wholly fulfilled. You must make a lot of money and have considerable clout with important people."²

Our culture tells us – that if you are single at the age of thirty, something must be wrong. If you are divorced, if you can't find a job, if you can't afford "Prada" or "Seven" jeans, if making friends in a new community doesn't come easy, then something must be, has to be, fundamentally wrong with you.

There is a torture device called the spitting cell. The spitting cell is a walled closet high enough for a prisoner to stand up in, but with no room for him to move his arms. There is a hole in the door at the level of his face. It is just big enough to show his face, but the shape of the closet prevents him from turning his head. Every time a jailer passes by, he spits in the prisoner's face, and he sees to it that he walks by often. The prisoner cannot wipe his face; all he can do is close his eyes.

Too often, living in our world is like being caged within a spitting cell. We walk through the grocery store checkout aisle and all we can see is what others think we should and what we inevitably fail to be. If we are too fat or too thin, too poor, or too powerless, our culture expects us to feel shame.

¹ Lewis B. Smedes, *Shame and Grace*, p. 39.

² *Ibid*, p. 39.

But God says, “I have loved you with an everlasting love. I made you. I claim you. You are my child, in you I am well-pleased. You are mine.” God longs for us to find courage in his love, to find strength in his love, to find freedom in his love. God’s great desire is for us to lay claim to our inheritance as His children and to rest in the comfort of our birthright.

The third source of shame I have already alluded to, it is unaccepting parents, and this is probably the most devastating source of shame. Unaccepting parents impose a more complicated ideal on us, because they can shame us not only by ignoring us, but they can also shame us by transferring their anxieties upon us.

When they ignore us, it makes us feel unwanted and worthless, not worthy of their time, love, or attention. When they are overactive, they often make us feel as if there is nothing we can ever do that is good enough. But either way, the result is the same – we feel ashamed of who we are and guilty for who we have failed to be.

Overactive unaccepting parents have a way of telling their children that they must dance, play soccer, and the piano. That they must get a 4.0, while also doing community service work, that they have to keep their rooms clean and their lives straight, that they must earn their Eagle, as well as their spending money.

All supposedly in order to get into the college of someone’s choice and to follow in the footsteps that we ourselves as parents only wish we could have trodden. In our heads, as parents, we know that we are being demanding upon our kids, but too often we justify it with the mentality that “we only want better opportunities for our children than we had for ourselves.”

Yet what we are really communicating to our kids is that they are not good enough. If they want to make us happy than they need to do this, and this, and this. If they want to make us proud than they need to be more than they are.

And so our kids grow up thinking that they do not quite measure up and the shame of that pushes them to try harder, all the while they feel increasingly guilty because nothing they ever do seems to be enough. Racked with insecurities and with deep questions about their personal worth, is there any doubt why depression is rapidly on the rise amongst our teenagers?

Every year I set aside one evening on my calendar for a program that our middle school youth have aptly named – “Grill Gregg Green.” They can ask me any question they like, anything that is on their heart - everything goes. This year, one of their questions was telling. It was, “Why are there more expectations placed upon my generation than were placed upon past ones?” You can agree or disagree with this young persons perception, but what you cannot disregard is the inner anxiety dancing nervously behind the question itself.

We drive our kids to live up to what we have not, teaching them in the process that nothing they do is ever enough to measure up to our expectations. Consequently they feel shame for not being the people that we want them to be and guilty for not being able to become what we expect.

But God says, you are “fearfully and wonderfully made.” We have value not because of what we do, or don’t do, but simply because we were created and formed by God. We are his unique creation. And there is nothing we can do to change that fact.

Rob Bell, in his Nooma video entitled *Lump*, tells a story about an experience he had with one of his sons. It seems that his son once stole a small white ball from a neighbor boy. Feeling driven by his guilt, his son began to act out – he fought with his brother and then lied about it when confronted.

Overcome by his guilt and shame, the small child ran to his parents room, crawled within their bed, and covered himself with the blankets. For two hours no one saw or heard from the child. Finally Rob went looking and found his son, curled upon the bed, soaking wet and matted underneath the covers.

As he lifted the covers off, Rob’s heart broke with compassion for his son. “You know there is nothing that you could ever do that would make me love you less” he told him. At that, his son, crawled immediately into his lap and buried his wet head into his shoulder, crying.

The incident reminded Rob of Romans chapter eight where we are told that “nothing can separate us from the love of God.” And Rob uses the opportunity to tell anyone who might be watching that “Whatever you’ve done, wherever you’ve been, whatever you will do, God loves you, God always has, and you can’t change that.”

We have all felt the devastating effects of shame in our lives. We are a shame-ridden, guilt-driven people. We live in an endless, often mindless, search for ourselves, and unfortunately most of us don’t know what we are looking for, much less how to look for it, or how to recognize it when we see it.

Most of us combat the shame we feel by endlessly searching for a miraculous way to gain self-respect. We turn to romance and to careers searching for wholeness ... for the ability to look ourselves in the mirror without wincing. We long for that one compliment that will magically make us feel better about ourselves.

But no compliment ever seems big enough, no romance ever feels significant enough, and no career ends up feeling fulfilling enough. So as one fellow traveler to another, let me offer this.

The answers and the security you are looking for can only be found in one place – they can only be found in the One who has searched you and knows you. They can only be found in the One who has never left you and from whom you can never escape. They

can only be found in the One who created your inmost being, who knit you together in your mother's womb, who saw your unformed body as it was being made in the secret place and who has placed his hand upon you. His love surpasses knowledge and His greatest desire is for you to rest in His grace, to be still in his presence and know who you are, and thus live into the fullness for which you were created.

So "May you stop hiding under the covers. May you let God pull the covers back. May you embrace him. May your whole life become a response to the truth that you've always been loved, you are loved, and you always will be loved. And may you know, may you know deep in the depths of your soul, that there's nothing you could ever do to make him love you less. [There is] nothing you could ever do to make God love you less. [There is] nothing you could ever do to make God love you less. Nothing. [Absolutely] nothing."³

³ Rob Bell, Nooma Bible Video Series, *Lump*.