

Guilt and Shame

The Elephant in the Room
2/8/2015

Introduction and explanation of terms.

Guilt is a verdict, an awareness of failure against a standard.

Shame is a feeling, a sense of exposed failure before someone else.

Everyone here this morning can relate to these terms in some way or another. This elephant is one that we have all sat in the room with, and at times felt as if his weight was sitting on us unbearably. Guilt and shame are ingrained in our human experience. We are all too familiar with them. But this is not how things began with life on this great planet.

Creation began void of guilt. The standard was upheld. Our first parents lived in perfect relationship with their Creator. There was harmony between God and man in a way that was unique to their days together in the garden. Adam did not know what it was like to live in broken relationship with God or with Eve. There was no sense of exposure or shame as the result of failure.

This is how the creation account finishes out in Genesis chapter 2. Verse 25 tells us that God created man and woman, and they were naked and not ashamed. They were fully exposed before God and one another, yet without shame. There was no failure or broken relationship to experience. This verse serves as a transition of sorts. Creation was complete in all ways. Then our eyes read to the next chapter and see the personal and relational landscape change drastically.

The beginning of guilt and shame.

In chapter 3 of Genesis we read of doubt, rebellion and disobedience. We see perfect relationships altered in a seemingly irreparable way. Adam and Eve doubt God's care and goodness toward them, in ways that seem harmless. God charged them as stewards for all that He had created, but for their good put boundaries in place. To protect them. They gave into unhealthy doubt and rebelled against his boundaries choosing disobedience. From that moment their relationship with their Creator was broken – they offended their good and perfect Father.

They didn't offend him, resulting in God's hurt feelings and wounded ego. This was a much worse offense. In that moment, with their rebellion and disobedience, with their mouths full of fruit, they overturned the place of their Creator. *They* stood in His place as the boundary-makers, the harmony-sustainers, the ones who put and keep all things in their place. They in effect made themselves, with their desires and appetites, their own gods. And the way that we read the scriptures, its almost as if as the fruit slid its way down their throats they knew their guilt. *They had failed to keep the*

standard of obedience that God had put in place for them. They were fully exposed in their now imperfection before each other – and before God – and for the first time felt shame. Verse 7 tells us that the first step that they took after their disobedience was to cover themselves. They wanted to hide from each other. The vulnerability that they were living in would no longer work. Their relationship with each other was damaged.

This is where we pick up in verse 8. **Genesis 3:8-13** - [8] And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. [9] But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” [10] And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” [11] He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” [12] The man said, “The woman whom *you* gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” [13] Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

Adam and Eve heard their Creator walking in the garden as the sun was going down. And their response was much different from their interactions with Him before. It says that they *hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.* God called to them, not in condemnation but in question – *Where are you?* Adam replied that they heard Him in the garden and *was afraid, because [he] was naked and [he] hid myself.* There were consequences for their disobedience. The harmony that they had been living in was gone. Their relationship with their Creator was damaged.

Here at the beginning of history – our first parents found themselves under the weight of a guilty verdict and responded with shame. They hid from each other and from God.

Living with the mark of guilt.

Today we are still living in the legacy of their guilt. Their doubt, rebellion and disobedience are ours. Thousands of years later Paul would write about this in his letter to the church in Rome. In chapter 3 starting in verse 10 Paul writes quoting portions of Psalms,

Romans 3:10-18 - [10] “None is righteous, no, not one; [11] no one understands; no one seeks for God. [12] All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” [13] “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of asps is under their lips.” [14] “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.” [15] “Their feet are swift to shed blood; [16] in their paths are ruin and misery, [17] and the way of peace they have not known.” [18] “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

He sums it all up in **verse 23** saying, *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* He goes on in **chapter 5** to say, *sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.*

The guilty verdict that our first parents earned has been passed down to us. We come into this world with the mark of guilt - sin. We are born bowing away from our Creator and toward self-made mirrors. We want what we want, our desires and appetites, the fruit that we want. We don't have to be taught this, it's hardwired into us. If we came into the world without sin, we could come into the world self-sufficient to achieve our own righteousness.

Our guilt plays out in thousands of crazy, different ways. We each have our own tendency toward sin. We lie, we cheat, we hate, we want more than what is ours, we elevate ourselves, we condemn others, we are harsh, we act out of lust, we act out of pride, we feed our addictions, we are self-oriented, creating idols that we hope will satisfy us and put to death the shame that is the result of our guilt.

Because of our sin, we are guilty – guilt is ours. *We have failed the standard that God has set for us.* We live in broken relationship with God and with each other. And when guilt is around, shame is always close behind him. We know our guilt. We're thinking about it in specific ways right now. That's what makes this an elephant in the room for each one of us. *Guilt is ours. It's here and all too often it is ignored and avoided.* *Shame overtakes us – we feel exposed, we feel vulnerable and uncomfortable.* Our shame causes us to hide from each other and to hide from God. Our guilt is the thing that we all have in common, it hits us all in one way or another, but no one wants to talk about it. Our shame wins. We all deal with guilt and shame differently.

How do we naturally respond to guilt and shame?

1. We shift the blame of guilt to avoid shame. **This is exactly what our first parents did.** God asked Adam if he had disobeyed. Adam blames Eve, he blames God – the woman that God had given to him. Eve blames the serpent. This is an easy and common response to turn toward when faced with our own guilt, in hopes to avoid shame. *This is someone else's problem.* Pastor/author, Paul David Tripp, calls this *self-atoning externalism.* *In other words, whenever we're accused of violating God's standard, our immediate reaction is to find something, or someone, to blame.* "Had it not been for _____ [fill in the blank], we would have never stumbled into sin." The truth is that no one or thing can cause us to act in any way. We choose. We respond. We are responsible for our own guilt, our own sin.

2. We deny guilt and feel no shame. We downplay what sin looks like in our own lives in an attempt to feel no shame at all. We justify our lives. *I work hard. I provide for my family. I'm not physically hurting anyone. This is only affecting me, God's already forgiven me anyway.* Or, we compare ourselves to others in an attempt to deny our own guilt. *I'm not nearly as bad as they are. I can't believe that they act like that.*

The truth is that we cannot deny our own guilt, we cannot say that it doesn't exist by struggling to look over it or by comparison.

The parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee in Luke 18:10-14. [10] “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. [11] The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. [12] I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ [13] But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ [14] I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Our humanity puts our guilt and failure on full display before our holy God. We may ignore our guilt because no one else knows about it. We may deny it because we've kept it a secret. We may have downplayed it so much that the feelings of shame that we had initially are a faint echo, but we persist in the same guilty and destructive behavior. Our real sin has offended a real and holy God. In the end there will be no way to deny this. ***I'm not bleeding...***

3. We are consumed by guilt and owned by shame. Some of us are consumed by guilt. When Danny mentioned last week that we would be looking at guilt and shame this week, you got nervous and considered not even coming this morning. You know your guilt, you deeply feel your shame. Your guiltiness is like an open wound and anytime anyone begins to talk in a way that might address it you feel like it's being pushed on and you can barely stand it. You live under constant self-condemnation. You never feel enough, you feel as if shame is your middle name in the family of guilt. Whereas denying guilt is acting as if it doesn't exist, you tend to act as if it's the only thing that exists. You think about your past. You think about your failure and has come to define who you are. The shame that you carry has left you paralyzed under its weight. You cannot move forward, you're always looking backward as you hear your shame yelling your name and telling you that you'll never be good enough. Never good enough to undo your failure, to right your wrong. You feel constantly exposed and vulnerable, waiting for someone to find you out. You want to hide. ***Remember the woman at the well? Jesus named her shame and called her out of it.***

How does Jesus enable us to respond to guilt and shame?

Repent and believe the Gospel. Jesus is a friend to the guilty.

Romans 5:18-19 - [18] Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. [19] For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Our first parents have left the mark of guilt on everyone who has come after them in history – only Jesus can right this wrong. He takes our verdict of guilt and hands us his verdict of innocent. This is the unbelievably good news of the Gospel - the sin that should cause us to live in separation from God, is taken by Jesus in exchange for His own perfect record. When we are in Christ, God looks at us and does not see our guilt - there's no reason for us to hide in shame – He sees the righteousness of Christ. This is justification, our standing is changed from sinner to just as if I'd never sinned and just as if I'd always obeyed.

1 John 1:9 - If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

So through Jesus, we are able respond to guilt with belief and repentance. Belief that this good news is true, personally – that Jesus' death on the cross took my guilt and did away with my shame. Repentance from our sin – we turn from it. We stopping bowing to our man-made mirrors of self-satisfaction and turn toward Jesus – the one who satisfies.

Romans 6:17-18 - [17] But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, [18] and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

In Christ we are set free from guilt and shame. There is no need to fear how others will judge us or receive us, because we are fully accepted in Christ.

While there are consequences for our personal guilt – pain, separation, offense toward others - there is healing through repentance. Healing of a broken relationship with God and steps of healing in hopes of restored relationship with others.

One of the most helpful things that we can do in our response to guilt and shame is to confess it to others – to name our elephant. We can say out loud those things of which we are guilty and bring us shame – and are cared for and prayed for by others. This is what James writes about:

James 5:16 - Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

Recognition of our guilt and shame reminds us of our need for Jesus – who bore our guilt and shame – and frees us to live in unbroken relationship with Himself and others.