

Overcoming Shame

Almost every fall when I was young, my parents took me to the Iredell County Fair. Without a doubt, one of the oddest attractions was called the "Room of Mirrors." These mirrors reflected a very distorted perspective of your body. You might look 3 feet tall and 5 feet wide or 8 feet tall and 2 feet wide. As a young person, I loved the weird, distorted portraits the mirrors gave me. Now imagine your parents replacing all of the mirrors in your home with distorted ones. You could easily grow up thinking you looked like Jabba the Hut or some other alien creature.

From childhood, our self-identity comes from the human mirrors in our lives. The primary mirrors in our formative years are our parents. As we get older, we gain additional mirrors from teachers, coaches, friends, successes, and failures. They all contribute to shaping the image we have of ourselves.

Some people grow up feeling esteemed. The human mirrors reflect affirmation and love. Others grow up surrounded by twisted or contorted mirrors. The negative message from these human mirrors may be, "You do not measure up." Many people spend their lives dealing with the distortions and emotional hurt caused by these perceptions. Such a person may struggle a sense of shame.

Shame is a very dark and powerful inward reality. Most of us have been embarrassed at one time or another in our lives. Consider living perpetually with a sense of embarrassment. Such shame framed into a core-identity can paralyze self-confidence; wither the spirit, poison relationships, and dim hope for the future. A sense of shame can become the distorted mirror that reflects who we think we are.

How does a person overcome such emotionally integrated shame? How do we dispel the darkened reflection from the distorted mirrors of our past and present?

First, we must confront our shame. *"To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul"* (Psalm 25:1). The Psalmist exhorts us *"to lift up our soul"* to the Lord. Trust and tell the Lord the hidden shame of your life. Honestly confront dark secrets, the hidden shame of childhood, or a past trauma to your body or wound to your soul. Be honest with yourself before God. *"Lift up your soul to Him."*

Do the same with a wise and loving pastor, counselor, or trusted friend. It is painful and many of us try to deny the emotional pain or avoid confronting our shame. But remember, as long as our shame remains hidden in the darkness of our psyche, the darkness controls it. This is why shame is one of the most effective strategies of Satan. When we confront the darkness in the light of God's acceptance and with a wise and loving confidant, the darkness of our shame will begin to lose its grip on our identity.

Secondly, commit our shame to Christ. Say to Him, *"In You will I trust"* (Psalm 31:14-15). By faith, you can employ the words of Joseph who had been betrayed by his brothers and left to die. *"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good"* (Genesis 50:20). But, be aware that such faith takes time. Healing is occasionally instant, but more often healing is a process. Joseph had years for God to work in him to bring him to the place of such trust and healing.

Thirdly, close our shame. *"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds"* (Psalm 147:3). Ask Christ to heal the wounds of our shame. Invite Him to cover the wounds with a scar that bears witness of His healing grace. Christ is the One and only One who can enable us to close the chapter on our shame. Whether our shame comes from a painful childhood, a past trauma, or the consequences of a self-inflicted sinful mess, Christ can bring his healing. He can bring us to the place where we can confidently say regarding our past pain and shame, *"One thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 3:13).

But this is not the last word on shame. While shame sometimes comes from the distorted mirrors of our lives, shame is also our response when we look at ourselves through the mirror of God's character. Elton Trueblood used the phrase *"redemptive shame."* This is the shame Isaiah experienced when he came face-to-face with God. *"Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty"* (Isaiah 6:5). But, this is a shame transformed by gospel grace.

God's solution to our shame is Christ. Confronted with the divine mirror of God's perfection, we feel *"redemptive shame"*. Redemptive shame drives us to the glory of the gospel of Christ and Him crucified. The reality of shame compels us into the redemptive, loving arms of our Savior in whom we are forgiven, eternally loved, and given a whole new true identity. *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"* (2 Cor. 5:17)