

Fight the Good Fight: Shame

Clint Sheehan

CCRC, February 21/2016

We've been looking at practical strategies to overcome the things we commonly struggle with. We started by looking at the two main reasons we struggle, lack of knowledge and unbelief and from that we developed our general threefold strategy; learn God's word, believe God's word, and preach God's word to ourselves. Informed by this we explored struggles with despondency and with anxiety. We've had time since then to practice what we've learned and my guess is everything went perfectly for each of us, until it didn't any more. That's perfectly normal, we'll have ups and downs along the way in our spiritual battles but this can create an entirely different struggle, a struggle against shame.

Shame is defined as a painful emotion caused by consciousness of guilt, shortcoming, or impropriety. Shame can be crippling as past failures or wrong doings weigh us down, sometimes for years, and the shame can be so powerful it robs us of hope and joy and creates a self-fulfilling prophecy where shame saps us of strength so that we repeat our same failures again, which causes the shame to grow in turn weakening us further driving us deeper into failure. Unchecked this cycle can continue to snowball.

As we continue our look at practical strategies for overcoming our struggles we should remind ourselves of what we as Christians are called to (1 Tim. 6:12) and why it is that we will ultimately succeed (Phil. 2:13): "Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called ... for God is the working one in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure". With that in mind, today we will look at how to fight the good fight of faith against shame.

We should note up front that not all shame is bad shame, shame can play an important role in helping keep us on the narrow way in our spiritual journey. The problem is not shame in and of itself, the problem is misplaced shame as John Piper refers to it. In other words, the problem is having shame when we ought not to. We will begin then by looking at the proper role of shame. First of all, we should have shame over our sin;

^{NIV} **1 Corinthians 15:34** Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God-- I say this to your shame.

Proper shame is solid evidence we are among the New Covenant people of God because God has built it into our new nature in Christ;

^{ESV} **Romans 2:15** They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them

This proper shame that is part of the hallmark of our new nature is the fruit of the inner working of the Holy Spirit in fulfilment of the promise of Jesus who said;

^{ESV} **John 16:8** And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment:

The goal of this godly shame is repentance;

^{NAS} **2 Corinthians 7:9** I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to *the point of* repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to *the will of* God, in order that you might not suffer loss in anything through us. ¹⁰ For the sorrow that is according to *the will of* God produces a repentance without regret, *leading* to salvation; ...

When this process carries itself through it results in complete forgiveness;

^{NAS} **1 John 1:9** If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

So if we have come to genuine repentance over wrong doings, why do we persist in shame when the Bible assures us of God's complete forgiveness in Christ? There are two possible reasons;

- A. We don't understand the full scope and nature of our forgiveness.
- B. Persisting unbelief is triggering double mindedness.

Not surprisingly, these are nothing more than the same two core causes of any other struggle, lack of knowledge and unbelief. With that in mind we can now develop a strategy specific to the struggle with shame by identifying the spiritual truths we need to know, understand, believe, and preach to ourselves. This involves three lines of thought.

We fight back against shame by hoping in the Lord's forgiving love. This is the theme of Psalm 130, a Psalm about the forgiveness of God for sin and how that is the cure for shame. The Psalm identifies why God forgives our sin, God forgives our sin so that we will worship him;

^{ESV} **Psalm 130:3** If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? ⁴ But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.

In this context, to fear the Lord means to worship the Lord. Verse 4 therefore is clear, the reason that God forgives us is so that we will worship him. We often feel shame because we convince ourselves that God will not forgive us because we do not deserve forgiveness. This is half true, it is true we do not deserve forgiveness. The good news is that our forgiveness is not based on what we deserve (forgiveness) but rather it is based on what God deserves (worship). God forgives us for his sake primarily and only for our sake secondarily. This truth is very liberating when it comes to breaking the cycle of shame and failure. Our forgiveness does not originate in any decision we make but rather in a decision of God. We don't deserve to be forgiven but God chooses to show mercy to us and forgive us anyway so that we will love and worship him;

^{NAS} **Romans 9:16** So then it *does not depend* on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.

Our forgiveness comes from God's decision to show mercy and it is rooted in the covenants of God;

^{NAS} **Psalm 130:7** O Israel, hope in the LORD; For with the LORD there is lovingkindness, And with Him is abundant redemption. ⁸ And He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

We have encountered this word “lovingkindness” many times in the past in our study of the covenants of God. We learned that it was the Hebrew word *hesed* which can be translated as mercy, lovingkindness, or steadfast love but that no single translation captures the fullness of the word. It carries the idea of a special love that God has exclusively for his covenant people which is unending because God himself has made the covenants and which manifests itself in God doing acts of kindness to help his people in their helplessness. We hope in spite of our sin because our hope is rooted in the *hesed* of the Lord, his special covenantal love and mercy towards us. God will forgive us because he has promised to in his covenants and because it is how he most fully expresses his special love towards us. The fact we do not deserve forgiveness should not give rise to shame when we know and believe that our forgiveness is not based on our merit but on the mercy of God who has called us into covenantal relationship with him and who forgives us so that we will love and worship him.

This hope is strengthened through prayer;

^{ESV} **Psalm 130:1** *A Song of Ascents.* Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD! ² O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy!

We have discussed previously the idea that prayer is not about us getting God to do what we desire but rather about God through his Holy Spirit conforming our desires to his. We often start praying by asking God for what we will but end up seeking God’s will. That is clearly expressed in verse 2 of this Psalm where the Psalmist is praying for the very mercy that God desires to shower upon his covenant people.

If our hope is strengthened in prayer to God, it is anchored in the word of God;

^{NAS} **Psalm 130:5** I wait for the LORD, my soul does wait, And in His word do I hope.

The Psalmist expresses faith and trust in the Lord, a faith that bears the fruit of hope because it is anchored in the word of God. It seems that at some point every topic related to the practical living of day to day Christian lives comes back to a knowledge of God’s word, emphasizing how important it is for each of us to take seriously the task of growing in our knowledge of God’s word. That is no less true here. Our shame can be replaced by hope when we know what the word of God says concerning the forgiveness of God for his covenantal people. There are many such passages in Scripture, consider the following examples;

^{NAS} **Psalm 103:12** As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.

^{NAS} **Isaiah 43:25** "I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake; And I will not remember your sins.

^{NAS} **1 John 1:7** but if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.

^{NAS} **Romans 8:1** There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

^{NAS} **Colossians 2:13** ... having forgiven us all our transgressions, ¹⁴ having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us *and* which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

Psalm 130 powerfully teaches us to fight back against shame by hoping in God's forgiving love. A second way we fight back against shame is by reflecting on who redeemed us and when he did so. The one who redeemed us is the God-man;

^{NAS} **Colossians 2:9** For in Him all the fulness of Deity dwells in bodily form, ¹⁰ and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority;

^{NAS} **Ephesians 1:7** In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace,

^{NAS} **Colossians 1:14** in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

^{NAS} **1 Corinthians 1:30** But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption,

Since it is God himself who redeemed us, our redemption is complete, it is certain, and it is secure. The certainty of our redemption becomes all the more powerful when we consider the *when* of our redemption. When were we redeemed?

^{NAS} **Colossians 2:13** And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions,

^{NAS} **Romans 5:6** For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly... ⁸ But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

If God redeemed us in Christ while we were spiritually dead, given wholly over to sin, and utterly without any trace of genuine faith, then how much more will he forgive our sins now that we are his redeemed people? If an unmeasurably large mountain of sin did not hinder God from redeeming us in the first place, then how can sins we commit now do so? The exclamation point is this fact we discovered through Psalm 130, God forgives us for his sake not for ours, so that we will love and worship him. Romans 5:6 takes this one step further. Not only did God lovingly redeem us in Christ when we were still spiritually dead, but in fact he demonstrated this love for us through the cross before we were even born. If we are truly saved it is because Christ died specifically for us on the cross, and that he did some 2000 years before we were even born. This brings us back to the point we established earlier, deserving God's forgiveness has nothing to do with receiving God's forgiveness. It didn't when Christ was on the cross and it doesn't now.

Unbelief however is very crafty, and the fear of failure can create shame in things not even done yet. We can create hypothetical scenarios in our minds where we envision future failures, often based on past failures, and then we feel shame over these future failures which have not even happened. When we fall into this trap we need to remind ourselves that no wrong is too big to be forgiven;

^{NAS} **Romans 8:34** who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.

Christ has been appointed as judge, he is the one who is responsible for all judgment, and he is also the one who has not only died for us but who continues to intercede for us. The judge himself is our redeemer and interceder and so condemnation for us is no longer even a possibility;

^{NAS} **Romans 8:1** There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

When we know and believe who redeemed us and when our shame gives way to hope.

The third way we fight back against shame is by reflecting on the fact that the blood of Christ not only bought us forgiveness but has brought us power to overcome. This is the theme of many great hymns. Consider the words of Charles Wesley in O For a Thousand Tongues, “He breaks the power of canceled sin, He sets the prisoner free; His blood can make the foulest clean, His blood availed for me”; or Augustus Toplady in Rock of Ages, “Let the water and the blood, From Thy wounded side which flowed, Be of sin the double cure; Save from wrath and make me pure.”

The blood of Christ did purchase our redemption and free us from the guilt of our sin but it also gives us newness of life, empowering us to live holy lives now so that we can through the power of the Holy Spirit live outwardly what we are inwardly,

^{NAS} **Colossians 2:13** And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions,

Christ truly is the double cure for sin and this theme is echoed throughout the New Testament. Consider for example;

^{NIV} **Romans 6:6** For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—

^{ESV} **2 Corinthians 5:17** Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

^{NAS} **1 Peter 1:3** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,

^{NIV} **Ephesians 2:10** For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

^{NAS} **Philippians 2:13** for it is God who is working one in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure.

To conclude, like every other struggle, we fight the good fight of faith against shame by knowing God's word, by believing it, and by preaching it to ourselves. No matter what we've done wrong in the past, no matter how heinous it was, no matter if it has tripped us up again and again, even if it trips us up again in the future, we have God's assurance that if we are truly repentant and if we have confessed to him then he has completely forgiven us in Christ. If God does not hold us guilty then neither should we.

^{NAS} **Colossians 2:13** ... He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions