

EXPOSING THE POWER OF SHAME AND TAKING BACK THE GROUND

By Jerry and Denise Basel

Ungodly, toxic shame is one of the most prevalent and harmful issues that we have worked with in the lives of believers over the years. It robs us of the life that the Father intends for us to experience and interferes with us living lives passionately as lovers of God and man.

WILL YOU ACCEPT THE GIFT?

Do you know the Vineyard song, "I Will Change Your Name," written by D. J. Butler? It is a powerful song that is written as if God is speaking to us:

"I will change your name,
You shall no longer be called
Wounded, outcast, lonely or afraid.

I will change your name,
Your new name shall be
Confidence, joyfulness, overcoming one, faithfulness, friend of God, one who seeks My face."

The first verse identifies some of the names we are called by the father of lies. But, the second verse speaks of how our Heavenly Father sees us--what our identity is in Him. Many of us have believed the lies and been deceived. It is time for us to seek God earnestly to expose the lies to His Truth and take back the ground that has been stolen from us. It is our right as children of God to be free of an identity based on shame and to find who we are based in the Father's love. Shame in its appropriate form lets us know that we have limitations and that we make mistakes. It allows us to feel the pain or sorrow when we violate or break healthy, Godly rules. This kind of shame brings "Godly sorrow that leads to repentance" (2 Cor. 7:9-11), and is often used interchangeably with (true) guilt.

Unhealthy shame, on the other hand, is a hopelessly uncomfortable or painful feeling that we experience when we come to believe that a part of us is defective, bad, flawed, phony, inadequate or a failure. A sense of worthlessness and "no value" is at our core when we are shame-based. We may feel isolated and alienated, different and less than others. We judge ourselves and become an object of our own contempt. When we take over the practice of self-shaming, we become our own tormentor, which gains even more ground for the enemy. We find little about ourselves that we are satisfied or pleased with and can always find plenty of negatives to criticize. We judge ourselves by ideal standards leaving us doomed to constantly prove the obvious to ourselves and everyone else--we can never do it good enough.

In addition to feeling defective or inadequate, shame causes us to believe that others can see through us, past our "false front" and directly into our defects or flaws. We may then

physically withdraw from others and/or emotionally hide by projecting a facade that protects our "real self." Shame keeps us too afraid to share our inner self, because if we do, who we really are may not be accepted or acceptable. Many times we learn to project an image of what we believe others want to see, instead of sharing who we really are. Exposing our "real self" seems too naked, too vulnerable. The risk of rejection becomes too great, the fear too formidable. So, we learn a very important rule for life--AVOID SHAME AT ALL COSTS. If you don't identify with being a shame-based person, ask yourself these questions: Do you find yourself being defensive with others? Are you critical of yourself and others? Is your self-talk negative, condemning, and merciless? Are you a perfectionist? Are you performance driven (a human doing versus a human being)? Do you fear closeness and intimacy, craving it but fleeing from it? Do you isolate physically or emotionally (e.g. shutting down or stuffing your feelings)? Are you controlling? Are you a people pleaser, longing for approval and recognition? Do you have difficulty trusting others, including God? Are you sensitive to criticism, even when it's constructive? Is it difficult to admit you are wrong? Do you find yourself trying to prove you are "okay" by working harder, doing more, making more money, partying more, buying more "things"? Do you struggle with addictions and compulsions to help you avoid the pain of "falling short"? A "yes" answer to any of these questions points to a wound of shame.

As children, we may be exposed to shame-based "negative rules or messages" that have a profound effect on us later in life. When we hear recurring negative messages such as: Shame on you! You should know better! How stupid can you be? Children are to be seen and not heard! Don't ask questions, just do as I say! Don't cry! Always look good! Don't betray the family! You'll never amount to anything!, we internalize them as being true about our very being. Shaming messages do not even have to come in the form of words. A glance, a frown, a stare, a gesture, a kick, a slap in the face can all carry the same profound message of shame to a child's inner being. In addition, the absence of affirmation, acceptance, affection, protection, and a sense of belonging can communicate an equally profound message of devaluation to a child, with the subsequent development of a core of shame. Children need to hear the words, "I love you" and feel the affection and appropriate touch from their parents or caregivers. Children have no way of understanding that when their parents withheld affection and affirmation or afflicted abuse, it revealed something sadly missing in the parents rather than something hopelessly flawed in them.

Shame has an extremely high price tag on our lives: it costs us love, friendships, acceptance, hope, and connectedness. But, the highest price we pay for shame is that it robs us of an intimate relationship with the Father. It causes us to see the Father through distorted or faulty "lenses," and it inhibits us from receiving the love He has for us. We may find ourselves "performing" for God to please Him and earn His love versus serving as the fruit of a love relationship with Him. When we are finally burned out or depressed, we may complain, "I did all these things for God and I got no reward!" Shame keeps us locked in this mentality and this fruitless cycle. In our daily walk with God, we may find ourselves comparing other's blessings and gifts to ours; their healing to ours; their fruit to ours. We look at others as having God's favor; others as getting the prophetic words that we wanted; others as experiencing the power of God in more manifest ways than us. We

feel rejected, abandoned, worthless, alone, ashamed, and beaten down. We again hear the core message, "There must be something inherently wrong with me that God doesn't hear me, see me, speak to me, touch me, bless me . . ."

Now that we recognize the shame we carry inside us, what can we do about it? The biblical solution to shame is based on the appropriation of grace into our deepest being. This does not come by head knowledge, but by positioning ourselves in such a way that we can begin to experience grace. The first step is to surrender! We must become tired of the struggle to be worthy and acceptable to everyone important to us and desperate enough to press into God to help us. We must get honest with ourselves and God, take off our masks and allow the Holy Spirit to reveal our "true" self. We suggest praying Psalm 139:23-24 daily (Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.), and asking God to take down every wall that keeps us in bondage to the lies.

It is critical that we allow ourselves to get in touch with the guilt, the fear, the abandonment, the low-self esteem, the anger, and the brokenness. We must examine what it has cost us in terms of relationships, jobs, promotions, peace, self-worth, etc. We have to be willing for the Lord to show us every shaming event that has negatively imprinted our lives. For every time we "bought" a lie, we need to return the "defective gift" and exchange it for the "love package" God has for us that is filled with His Truth about who we are and who He is. Believe us, it is a great exchange! Next, we must choose to forgive those who shamed us and confess our own shaming behaviors, such as being defensive, never admitting wrong, labeling others and ourselves, performing for approval, etc.

We must also learn to walk with others who will support us and pray with us. Healing of shame will not occur in isolation. Sometimes we also need the help of a Christian counselor to help us identify the lies, to pray for healing and deliverance, and help us restore relationship with God. We must choose to believe the scriptures which reveal how the Father sees us, loves us and values us. Truly hear what the Father is saying: "Do not be afraid; you will not suffer shame. Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated. You will forget the shame of your youth . . . (Isa. 54:4) Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame. (Ps 34:5) Instead of their shame my people will receive a double portion, and instead of disgrace they will rejoice in their inheritance; and . . . everlasting joy will be theirs. (Isa. 61:7) For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." (Rom 8:15) As we begin to see who God says we are, we also must choose to see the true character of the Father as He is revealed in Scripture, instead of making Him into "our own image" (like our parents).

Our Father has provided us with a free gift--Grace--that empowers us to break free from the shame that binds us. We are empowered to no longer believe that there is something we can do which will earn us a right relationship with God. We have a Father who is not performance-based, but love and grace-based. Will we accept the gift He offers us? Inside the package, we will find the very truth we are seeking--we are accepted, affirmed, cradled, held, and loved by our heavenly Father, whose acceptance of us matters the most.

The following list of “Negative Rules and Negative Messages” may help you understand how destructive, toxic shame has become a part of your life. Look over these phrases and identify those to which you relate. Remember, you may or may not remember specifically “hearing” these words, but if you operate or function, to some degree, with these beliefs in place, the message was communicated to you by some means.

NEGATIVE RULES

Don't express your feelings
Don't get angry
Don't get upset
Don't cry
Do as I say, not as I do
Be good, “nice,” perfect
Avoid conflict (or avoid dealing with conflict)
Don't think or talk; just follow directions
Do well in school (exclusively)
Don't ask questions
Don't betray the family
Don't discuss the family with outsiders; keep the family secret
Be seen and not heard!
No back talk
Don't contradict me
Always look good
I'm always right, you're always wrong
Always be in control
Focus on the troubled person's behavior
The troubled person's behavior is not the cause of our problems
Always maintain the status quo
Everyone in the family must be an enabler

NEGATIVE MESSAGES

Shame on you
You're not good enough
I wish I'd never had you
Your needs are not all right with me
Hurry up and grow up
Be dependent
Be a man
Big boys don't cry
Act like a nice girl (or lady)
You don't feel that way
Don't be like that
You're so stupid (or bad, etc.)
You caused it
You owe it to us
Of course we love you!
I'm sacrificing myself for you
How can you do this to me?
We won't love you if you . . .
You're driving me crazy!
You'll never accomplish anything
It didn't really hurt
You're so selfish
You'll be the death of me yet
That's not true
I promise (though breaks it)
You may me sick
We wanted a boy/girl
You _____
(fill in the blank)

(Negative Rules and Negative Messages developed by Charles Whitfield, M.D.)