

Life Without Shame

Acts 26:9-18

Dr. M. Craig Barnes
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Of all human emotions, guilt is among the least welcome. That's a pity. Because our guilt can introduce us to God's grace.

Today's text gives us the third account of Paul's conversion in the Book of Acts. It is the second time Paul himself has given it since he was arrested. And in his epistles, he frequently tells the story again and again. Every time he gives his testimony, Paul begins by describing his persecution of the church. "I did many things against the name of Jesus of Nazareth. I locked up many saints in prison. I cast my vote against them that were being condemned to death" (26:9-10). Luke has already told us that Paul held the coats of those who stoned Stephen to death. Paul makes it clear that he so "furiously enraged" against the church that he traveled to foreign countries to try and extinguish it.

The striking thing about all these testimonies is that Paul never demonstrates any sense of shame. The church that he is now leading, he formerly tried to destroy. Both men and women lost their lives because of Paul. And yet there is not one word of dark remorse. He admits that he was wrong, and even calls himself the chief of sinners. But Paul is not plagued by guilt over his past sins of hurting others. I ran over a squirrel last week, and I felt terrible about it all day. How does Paul get off with a clear conscience having repeatedly run over the church?

You only have to be a pastor for thirty minutes to realize that most people live with so much guilt that it is running out their ears. We feel guilty for what we have done and what we have left undone. We feel guilty for our failures and frankly we feel guilty that we are such a success. We feel guilty that we have so much when so many have so little. We feel guilty about the sins we have committed, the opportunities we missed, the mistakes we have made, and the people we hurt - especially our children. Yesterday when we were discussing the sermon at home, my college-aged daughter told me I don't have to preach on guilt because she has already forgiven me! "I don't have any baggage," she said. "Well, maybe just a carry on bag." Then she smiled and said, "But it'll fit in the overhead compartment where God can have it." (In a preacher's home you learn to really milk a metaphor.)

Paul certainly doesn't seem to have any baggage. After all he has done. After all that has been laid on him. What happened to the guilt?

Most of our theologians try to distinguish between false guilt and true guilt. False guilt, or inappropriate guilt, is when we feel a sense of shame because of the judgments of someone else. We are particularly susceptible to this when we have been judged by someone we love who tells us that we aren't good enough, pretty enough, or smart enough. When you hear those words as a child, you will be tempted to keep hearing them long after leaving home. The measuring and evaluating of life that began as a child continues as long as we live. Someone around you is always willing to judge you as being inadequate, and that can leave you with crippling feelings of guilt. But that is not how the Bible understands true guilt.

True guilt, appropriate guilt, according to scripture comes from the judgment, not of others, but of God. The Bible isn't primarily concerned about the people we disappoint or the lies we tell, but our refusal to live in dependency upon the Savior Jesus Christ. Having insisted upon saving ourselves, we will hurt all sorts of people and tell lots of lies, not the least of which are the lies we tell ourselves. We will tell ourselves that we are on our own, that it is up to us to fix our sins. But as King David discovered, the only way to manage your sins is with more sin. The biblical alternative is simply to confess our sin as sin against God the Savior. In Psalm 51, a psalm written by David after killing Bathsheba's husband, he said, "Have mercy on me, O God ... I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." So we may hurt others, but our true guilt, the core of all sin, is that we have hurt our relationship to God.

When any church starts talking about guilt, we tend to make two mistakes. One is to become fundamentalists. Then we set up standards of what a religious people are supposed to look like. These can be standards of morality, or spirituality, or commitment that no one will ever meet. If I were a fundamentalist preacher, my job would be to stand in the pulpit every Sunday and say, "Bad dog!" This is supposed to encourage people to try harder, but since they cannot meet the standard, it has the effect instead of forcing people to pretend they are not as bad as they are. They learn simply to look religious. They get kind of a pained expression on their faces. They learn all the right language. But it is just pietistic wrapping paper. They know the truth, and deep in their hearts they have internalized a lot of false guilt, which leaves them depressed, angry, and terrified that they will be discovered.

The opposite mistake that other churches make today is to designate themselves as guilt-free zones. In these "progressive" churches, the message is that it doesn't matter how you live, as long as you are sincere. They advertize that you can sleep with whomever you choose, set your own ethical standards, or not have any standards at all as long as you are honest. "Just trust your instincts," we hear. But it is our ability to rise above our instincts that makes us humans, created in the image of God. My dog trusts his instincts, and you wouldn't believe what that gets him into. Why would you want to trust your instincts when you can be a human being?

Have you ever driven a car in the United Kingdom? As you know, they drive on the left side of the road there. It takes a lot of mental thought to do that when you have learned to drive on the right side of the road. All your instincts are wrong over there. It starts when you walk up to the wrong side of the car. Then you sit in the driver's seat, but reach for the seat belt on the wrong side. Then you have to learn to shift on the left side. First gear is way off to the left. As you head out onto the road, you've got to keep thinking left side, left side, left side. You hit a roundabout, which are omnipresent over there, and have to remember to look right, drive left. You enter the motorway and have to remember that the left lane is the slow lane, not the right lane. You don't want to listen to

conversation in the car. You don't want to turn on the radio. Because it takes all your energy to think about how to avoid a crash. And the very last thing you want to do is trust your instincts. Your instincts will kill you.

It doesn't matter that you have an instinct to hurt when you have been hurt. Or an instinct to find someone who will take away the loneliness. Or to hoard your money because you are afraid of the future. You have also been given a mind to think through your actions, and the church is not helping you draw close to God, if we say you don't need to feel guilty for your sins.

Our job in the church is not to add guilt, as the fundamentalists do, or to pretend there is no guilt as the progressives do. Our job is to point you to Jesus Christ, the only one who can absolve you of your true guilt.

Notice how Paul tells his story. After listing out all his persecutions against the new church, he then goes on to say that as he was traveling on the road to Damascus to drag more followers of Christ to jail, he was interrupted by a blinding light from heaven and the voice of Jesus Christ saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Paul's sin wasn't against the church. It was against the Savior. He can't even figure this out for himself. This is not the conversion of a penitent sinner who realizes his sin. By grace, Jesus has to come to Paul and turn his life around. Which means that before grace is about forgiveness, it first appears as the prosecution - - why are you persecuting me? And as judge - - you are guilty of persecuting Jesus Christ. This type of guilt is a grace because it blinds us with the overwhelming discovery that we've been running away from God, and it is time now to come home where we can find healing for our sin sick souls.

Imagine going to your doctor for an annual routine exam that reveals you have a treatable disease. Do you really want that doctor to think, "But should I tell her? After all, the word "disease" sounds so judgmental. And who am I to make a judgment about something so natural? Maybe I should be gracious, and just keep my opinions to myself." No, that's not being gracious. Grace would be for your doctor to look you in the eye and say, "Something is wrong here, but I know how to heal you."

After diagnosing Paul's guilt, Jesus then tells him, "Get up and stand on your feet." I love this part! It is not the ministry of Jesus to beat us down with guilt, but to get us back on our feet. Because we have to be on our feet if we are going to come home to the Father.

What grace removes from us is not guilt, which continues to guide us to God, but shame. Shame is the humiliating condemnation that beats down our souls. But as the New Testament later tells us, "There is no condemnation to those who are found in Jesus Christ." Because Jesus does not use guilt to disgrace us, but to grace us - - to give us the freedom to return to the place where know we are the beloved of the Father. You get to that place not by trying harder, but by the Holy Spirit who adopts you into the Son's relationship with the Father. So that the place you receive is right next to Jesus Christ, your healer.

So you see, as Paul's own life testifies, it just doesn't matter what you have done. What matters is what God has done in finding you. Your responsibility is not to get free of your guilt, but simply to turn to Jesus. Because he is the only one who can get you back on your feet.

Merciful God, turn our ears away from the voices of condemnation and sham, that we may hear the Holy Spirit who whispers in that still small voice the good news of salvation. Amen.