

## **Shame: Used to Turn us Away from God and Each other.**

Hello everyone. For those who I do not know yet, I am Taylor and I work as a psychotherapist in Niagara and have done so for 3 years now. Today we are entering a heavy topic - we are going to talk about shame. All of us likely have some experience with this and yet also as likely is that not everyone has put language to identify the experience of shame. You might have heard these first three sentences and already want to grab a coffee and tune out or head out the back - I get that. And I'll say that you have permission to do so - but I ask that if that's what you do today, that you would come back to this sermon (a recording or transcript is online) and read it with or in the presence of someone you trust.

Shame is used to hide us - it convinces us to go into darkness and hide the parts of us that we believe will cost us what we most long for: belonging and safety in our relationships with others and with God. When we experience suffering, evil uses shame in this way to trick us into believing that all our success and all our failures are our doing, In turn making relationships with others and God the places of greatest fear and vulnerability. Part of the good news of Jesus is that we are invited to do the impossible and be absolutely open about how we suffer and fall short and struggle so that the love of God can transform us into a people who reflect Gods great love by taking the risk to bear others with our burdens and by bearing the burdens of others with them.

Kurt Thompson, a christian Psychologist in California, describes shame as the affect of and the partner alongside sin. Coming in sometimes as the result of sin, and sometimes the cause of sin. I do something that hurts someone, or misses the mark, someone sins towards me, or I experience sin happen in the world around me and now I feel guilt and/or shame. It is important to quickly distinguish between these two. Guilt accepts the mistake in our behaviour, feels bad, and has the capacity to allow us to make amends. Shame on the other hand is when we feel bad and then we get afraid of what it makes us, what it means about who I am, what we could lose, and we move/turn away.

Shame is preoccupied in trying to preserve one of our deepest desires - relationships

with others, with God, a sense of belonging and being known. We become afraid that what we did will cost us our friendships, our relationships, how loved we are, who we are, or God's presence with us. This is us coming up against parts of us burdened by the lies we believe. The parts of us that are sad, or disappointed or discouraged, and then afraid of what it will cost us that it is here shame can be used by evil or other powers to come and make us wonder if we are what is wrong? And that question is so sticky for us. We will follow that question down any number of answers to why we are feeling this way or why we always do the thing that makes us feel guilty. Further down that line of thinking it - shame - becomes the I am statements we are burdened with: I am bad, evil, what is wrong, I am what I did, I am selfish, I am stupid, I am never going to improve, I am too much for anyone to truly love, I am and fill in the blank of what we are afraid of. Shame is so convincing because it touches upon that which truly is broken or in need of God's saving grace. Our pain, our suffering, our limits, shortcomings, our sins, the situations of suffering and pain that we all experience directly and indirectly in the world and the experience of our brothers and sisters around us. I know this because I see it in my work with clients, but I knew this long ago first because it is also my experience.

For a long time and still currently, I am working on improving my relationship/comfort level with my own emotions. Now the last thing I would want to do is accidentally reinforce that our emotions are problems. Our emotions are never (yes I used never) the problem. I truly believe emotions give us necessary information about how we experienced or think about what we experienced in any given moment and are always worth taking into consideration. Emotions are not telling us about what is right and wrong, good or evil, helpful or unhelpful. Some emotions we are more comfortable with and others we would probably not choose to experience. It is in this pursuit of avoiding painful emotions we would rather not experience that evil uses our emotions against us. Evil will tell us it knows how to get rid of feeling guilt, regret, sadness, fear, embarrassment, shame - the list can go on. It tells us to hide it. Ignore it. Cover it up. If no one sees it you will be fine.

Immediately or eventually, hiding would turn us away from God and each other. We see this in the first human story in scripture. Adam and Eve do something regrettable. They disobey and show a lack of trust in God, they eat the fruit God asked them not to eat and are then ashamed, convinced that they need to hide. Genesis 2:25 tells us how Adam and Eve were there in the garden together with God and “felt no shame” Genesis 3 tell us how the serpent deceives Eve into believing that God told them not to eat the fruit because then they would be like God knowing good from evil. Eve eats and then Adam eats, and then they hear God in the garden and they hide. The rest of Genesis 3 describes the natural consequences of Eve and Adam’s actions and the new broken reality of relationship between humans and God, and humans and the land, and between Adam and Eve themselves.

This is our experience too isn’t it? We are convinced we need to hide parts of ourselves. Convinced often because of how high the stakes are: If I don’t keep this hidden I will no longer belong; I’ll be rejected. Or people won’t want to stick around or bear my burdens with me; I will be too much too love. Our solution is to hide. Hiding becomes the evidence that something is indeed broken or in tension in a relationship (when God notices they are hiding is when asks about what went wrong) and yet at the same time, hiding is our twisted attempt of trying to earn and keep the love of those around us after sin has shown up. (Shame Cycle Image)



This cycle not only never ends but becomes self fulfilling. We learn to believe that when people stick around it is only because we hid, which reinforces and starts to build on the lies that we are not worthy, deserving of friendship, of love, or relationship with God and with others - the things we truly long for.

Over time of believing that hiding is working, we become exhausted that no matter how hard we try we cant seem to be enough or get better or earn love. So we isolate. Instead of doing something different our exhaustion leads us to just avoid that which makes it hard to hide. The relationships with others and with God become the most vulnerable and scary places because they threaten our ability to stay in hiding. And here evil uses shame to continue perpetuating the dark side of individualism - that my success is all on my own merits and my failures are all my own doing - pushing us more and more into loneliness, isolation, and creating distance in our relationships. This is bleak.

There was a moment in my life, when I was working at a christian summer camp coming out of one of the most disorienting seasons of my life where I felt some of the deepest pain I've ever felt. Betrayed by a close friend friend; a long term relationship that had fallen apart with lots of verbal abuse and left me confused and doubting who I thought I was; coping with the shame of that by abusing alcohol (only for that to be another shameful thing to hide) and all of this came with a lot of anger towards God and lots of questionable decisions - growing the list of things I needed to keep in the dark. This is a longer story that you can ask me about another time, but somehow through this year and a half of loss and pain and suffering and very poor ways of coping, I chose to go to work at Keats Camps in BC. Still one of the best and most healing summers I have had. And yet about 5-6 weeks into camp the speaker invited everyone to get into a posture that we would hold if we were in the presence of God. I got on my knees, lifted my hands up, thinking about how close to God I felt and how great meeting all these new friends had been - and as soon as I was there I was hit with an incredible amount of shame. All the lies, all the bad decisions I had made, all the secrets I was holding started to shout at me all at the same time. I wept. And I felt embarrassed. The speaker

asked everyone to imagine Jesus inviting us to stand back up and I couldn't. I felt paralyzed, just enough control to briefly open one eye to notice I was the only one not standing in the room. It was then that I prayed one of the most honest prayers I think I ever have: "God if you do not physically pick me up I am walking out those doors and I don't think I'll ever come back".

The good news of Jesus is that the darkness we hide our shame in, cannot overcome the light (John 1). I want to look at what God's love and Christ's death and resurrection invites us to do when we experience shame. Please let's read Romans 5:1-5.

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace[a] with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. **2** We have also obtained access through him by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we boast (or rejoice) in the hope of the glory of God. **3** And not only that, but we also boast (or rejoice) in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance, **4** endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope. **5** This hope will not disappoint us (or put us to shame), because God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

One of the first times I read this passage I was caught by the word boast which in other translations is "rejoice". We boast and rejoice in that which we are suffering and ashamed of? When we experience the depths of pain and feel like God has forsaken us, we are supposed to boast and rejoice - talk about it? I could not imagine being willing to tell my new friends at camp, let alone my old friends and my family all that weighed on me from the prior years - definitely not with a sense or anticipation of hope.

Why might Paul go on to tell us to "boast" in our afflictions? I think the answer is what Paul says happens when we do: When we do boast or rejoice in our suffering and afflictions we grow, we change, we go through transformation. We turn towards God or another person instead of hiding and it is in this new path of vulnerability that produces endurance, character, and hope in us. We learn to persevere. To be who we want to be even when our lives might be falling apart. All while our hope grows. This is very counterintuitive. When your life is falling apart, let's say there's major breakdowns in your family, marriage, friendships, your career, your finances, in your decisions - how many of us would in all honesty slow down enough to talk

about it and even rejoice and boast in God's love when we are experiencing this? And who would think they would by doing that feel more hopeful than they did prior? And yet the invitation is clear - we see this in the book of James also when it reads: "consider it pure joy brothers and sisters" when talking about facing trials (James 1:2-4).

I don't think this is simple. I actually don't think talking about that which we are ashamed of is possible on our own. For two reasons 1) There is a connotation of boasting or rejoicing that requires a listener: acknowledging it to ourselves does not work, it takes another simply because it is relationship with an other person that we are longing for. Whether its God, our friend, our spouse, our mentor, pastor, whoever it is it takes someone else. And 2) We need the other person to be able to hear it and hold it in a loving relationship that can handle the weight of the pain, shame and/or suffering.

Luckily for us Paul bookends the process of boasting in our suffering with statements of the reality of being in right relationship with God the Father because of Jesus. "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." When we boast and rejoice and go through this transformative process, it produces hope that will not disappoint, or lead to shame, (verse 5) and this is only "because" of God's love poured out in our hearts. It is in this reality of being in a whole and right relationship with a loving God that we are invited to be fully known and find healing. NT Wright describes the "hope of the glory of God" (v. 2) as the hope that "the whole creation will be set free from corruption and share our new-found freedom, the freedom to be our true selves at last." Our true selves, flaws, imperfections, and all - but this time with no need to hide. Because of Jesus we are brought into relationship with God the father and we no longer need to hide. This is the reversal of the what happened in the Garden of Eden.

After I told God that he needed to physically pick me up or I was walking out never to return, within what must have been only 5 seconds, two friends each grabbed my shoulder and picked me up. I couldn't believe it. My friends started praying for me immediately about whatever was "weighing on me" and I was in shock at first and then all I wanted to do was run around celebrating the fact that God actually wanted me. That he didn't let me walk away. It

was like a switch from the deepest depths of shame to an intense Joy where praise was the only appropriate response, and lets just say my two friends were very confused at the time. I share this story because this was one of the most significant and clear moments in my life of experiencing the reality of God's love and right relationship with him.

I also share this story because I have had to remember this moment over and over again to learn how to boast about that which causes me pain and shame and to find the courage to continue to practice being vulnerable and sharing it. That moment at camp was the beginning of the journey for me. Shame remains my thorn; it keeps sneaking back when I'm not paying attention.

But the good news is that it is here in our fragility and in our brokenness that God turns towards us, promises to be with us, loves us enough to have died for us, while we were still sinners, as the rest of the Roman's chapter 5 goes on to talk about, which ties in to some other themes that continue how nothing can condemn or separate us from the love of God (Romans 8) or Romans 10:11 which reads "anyone who believes in Jesus will never be put to shame" - God will never leave us or turn his face away from us.

When we are loved, given mercy, and we risk sharing the parts of ourselves we have hidden - we heal. When we can acknowledge our pain and our brokenness and not experience rejection or abandonment - we heal. When we are met in our vulnerability and our fragility with acceptance, compassion, and love from God and his people, we find healing. I want this. I need this. You too?

A study that came out of Arizona state University and Duke University in the states found that in 1985 25% of people reported having only 1 or no confidants (someone you feel safe to share your emotions and struggles with). When they repeated the study in 2004 that number doubled to 50%. I can imagine this trend continued and was further impacted by the world going through a pandemic.

I think our invitation is two fold: 1) to be people who risk vulnerability, and 2) to be people who embody the shalom and love of God so that we can be trusted confidants. There is

a partnership between the person sharing and the person(s) listening. These two roles cannot be separated and we all are invited into both categories. Sometimes we are the embodiment of God's love to the people around us, and it is in relationship with each other that we start to have deeper revelations and understanding of God's love (the roles my two friends played to reveal God's love for me were absolutely necessary), which gives us the courage to be vulnerable.

Where can we take one step towards more vulnerability? If this is brand new for you maybe this means saying hi to someone, or asking someone to hangout, maybe after practice it could mean asking someone to meet with you regularly as a mentor or elder or pastor. Maybe it could be risking more vulnerability in your life group, or maybe your life group takes up a practice of confession, confessing the sins we have committed, sins that have been done to us, or sins that have been done in the world around us. Here is the thing - being vulnerable and receiving the vulnerability, are both just as difficult. Just because we risk vulnerability doesn't guarantee that the person we are sharing with - even if we know them well - will show up with love, acceptance, compassion and non-judgment. Keep trying. I would even encourage you before trying to share something tell the person what you are about to do "I'm about to share something I'm scared/ ashamed to tell you, can you let me know if you will be able to hear me compassionately right now?"

Where can we seek out opportunities to show up as the embodiment of God's love? On a basic level so often just staying present with someone without trying to fix it, without trying to change how they feel or think, is a huge gift. Learning to allow the experience of someone else to exist without you being scared or shying away from their brokenness, sometime by being silent, becomes the necessary environment where their healing can occur. Maybe this means saying yes to the person asking you for a coffee. Or maybe its staying in a conversation even when it feels vulnerable just to hear someone else's emotions or pain. Maybe this means investing in someone and showing up as a compassionate and non-judgmental companion or mentor. Will you seek out being this kind of listener?



Has this talk brought someone up for you? Something that maybe has you hiding in the darkness? You are not alone. I imagine, just as for myself, that if I asked people to show hands who had something come up that would feel vulnerable to share my hand along with many others would be in the air right now.

I hope we can all take one small step towards getting better at being vulnerable and being a good listener. My hope is that Southridge will more and more become a community where we boast in our suffering, so that we can turn the corner on our own shame towards healing. My hope and longing is that we can do this with and for each other in a world where shame is rampant - where many of us carry shame and are stuck in the cycle that we must keep it hidden in the darkness. What a light we can be in Welland, St Catharines, and Vineland as we learn to be a people that would be free from the shame that would turn us away and hide us.

Let me pray, Holy Spirit would you help us learn to turn towards God - the God who loves us and shows us compassion, who turns towards us and gives us healing and peace. Help us as we learn to turn towards one another, teaching us to grow in endurance, character, and hope which allows us to be our true selves - the best parts of us and the worst parts of us. Help us remember that through Jesus we are in right relationship with God and nothing can separate us from his love. When we bring ourselves out of the darkness and into the light before him by sharing vulnerably and being a compassionate listener, we will not be disappointed or put to shame.

