

## “Restored Honor” June 5, 2022

In cultural anthropology, one of the ways different cultures are categorized is to make distinction between guilt innocence cultures, fear power cultures, and shame honor cultures.

One of the first people to use these classifications was a woman named Ruth Benedict in her book, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. The US office of War Information asked her to research Japanese culture during World War 2 because we could not figure out why Japanese soldiers would rather die than surrender, no matter the circumstances, who had thousands of kamikaze pilots flying using their planes themselves as weapons on suicide missions. What she discovered was that shame and honor were driving motivators in Japanese culture; getting captured brought shame whereas dying for the emperor brought you and your family honor.

It was confusing to the US because we are not a shame and honor culture. We are a guilt and innocence culture. We tend to think primarily in terms of right and wrong, fair and unfair.

There are also fear based cultures. Many Latin American cultures, African cultures, and many Asian cultures are more based on fear and power instead of guilt and innocence. There is a constant struggle with the supernatural, with different gods, or ancestors, or spirits; and with a fear of what the supernatural might do and a desire to have power over them.

And then again, shame honor cultures are generally collectivist. The primary issue isn't about individuals keeping or breaking rules, but rather social norms...have I acted honorably or dishonorably? Acquiring honor and avoiding shame are the highest goals. They are like a social credit system where your most valuable asset is your reputation.

If you think about places in the world today where they disown members of their family or perform honor killings, someone in the family has brought shame onto the entire family; and they will kill that family member in order to restore their family's honor. We look on that with horror, but the truth is, in their community, it does in fact restore their family's honor. This is the degree to which the social credit system of shame and honor can operate.

Of course, you and I still experience shame; but we aren't nearly as sensitive to it as those from other parts of the world, and sometimes we aren't as clear on what it is and how it works. More on that later.

The relevant information for now is that the first century world Jesus inhabited certainly had elements of guilt and innocence as well as fear and power...but it was predominantly a shame and honor culture. And if you don't know that, you'll miss some very important things that Jesus does... and a great example of that is the text we're going to look at today.

### **Luke 5**

**12(a)** While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy.

Leprosy is a skin disease. And, it's a pretty scary one. Sores would open all over your body, often very painful sores.

It starts with red, open sores that become porous which would cause a lot of discomfort and pain. You don't want to bathe because the open sores and wounds are so incredibly painful. Over time, this also can cause serious nerve damage; the result being that if you burn yourself while cooking or injure yourself while working, you don't feel it. Eventually, you'd start losing appendages and limbs because you were numb and desensitized.

In ancient Israel, it wasn't just a physical condition, it was also a social condition. Leprosy was not just a disease someone might have; it was a contagious disease that could be transmitted person to person. If you touched a leper, it was believed you stood a good chance of becoming one yourself. So, if you were a leper, you were a social outcast. You were seen as filthy, repugnant, repulsive to the people around you. Many people believed you could not let a leper into your house, or your house would become contaminated. You wouldn't want to walk where a leper had just walked because of what it might do to you. You couldn't go to the temple to worship. In no meaningful way do you get to participate in your community.

Listen to this, from the book of Leviticus...

### **Leviticus 13**

**45** The person with such an infectious disease must wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean!' **46** As long as he has the infection, he remains unclean. He must live alone.

In a silly way, it makes me think of playing golf. On the golf course there is course etiquette where if you hit a bad shot and it's heading towards another person, you yell out "Fore." So, you hit a bad shot and you yell, "Fore! Watch out! Sorry I'm so terrible at golf and my presence on the course has put you in danger! I'm sorry you happen to be playing golf at a time when I am incompetently playing golf!"

But, this isn't a pretty much meaningless, "Sorry, I hit a bad shot, watch out!" This is about your very self. You have to live alone, make sure your physical body and dress indicated to others that something was wrong with you; and when you did see another person, you had to yell to let them know you were near so they would stay away from you. He had to yell out "Unclean! I'm unclean! Be careful, I'm a danger. I'm disgusting. I'm toxic; you don't want to come near me."

Can you even imagine the psychological effects of this? The emotional, mental, spiritual effects of this on somebody's life? Like, some of you have extremely negative self talk. The things you say to yourself and think about yourself are just awful. Which is damaging enough. Can you even imagine having to verbalize this to every single person you encounter? "Stay away. Something is wrong with me. You can't get close to me. I'm gross. I'm disgusting."

And on top of all of it, people wrongly thought that all lepers were cursed of God. So, oftentimes, when they needed compassion, they didn't receive it.

And Luke says this man who comes to Jesus is quote, "full of leprosy." He has open sores on his ears and his nose and his eyelids and his lips and his fingers; his face is covered in open sores.

This is not cute. He is not a mildly sick person laying gently in a bed using tissues. And this is years of his life. This is not recent.

**His life is absolutely filled with shame.**

And look what happens next...

**12(b)** And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.”

He comes to Jesus and instead of keeping his distance, consider the boldness here, he falls down at Jesus’ feet. He bows down and honors Jesus. He says, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.” Now, think about that statement. This man does not doubt whether or not Jesus has the power to make him clean. He knows that Jesus has the power to make him clean! What he doubts is if anybody would be willing to actually help him. Here is a guy who has lived his entire life with everybody ignoring him. He’s become used to people running from him, not walking toward him. The greatest fear that others had was touching him. He’s gross, defiled, cursed, disgusting. His doubt isn’t about Jesus’s ability, but his willingness.

Look at what Jesus does...

**13** And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him,

Don’t miss that little part. How long do you think it has been since anyone touched this man?

**Instead of turning from the man, Jesus turns to him.** That in of itself is different than everybody else in the culture; but not only does He turn to him, Jesus reaches out his hand and touches the man.

**13** And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I will; be clean.” And immediately the leprosy left him.

For everyone else, if you touch a leper, you defile yourself. You run the risk of taking his leprosy upon yourself. Jesus doesn’t just keep his hands behind his back and say, “OK, be clean.” He could’ve done that... he’s commanded demons to leave with just a word from his mouth; he calmed the storms by speaking, not by touching... he could’ve done the whole thing without having to touch him... BUT, instead, he reaches out and puts his hands on this man in the moment of his deepest need and greatest shame.

When nobody would even get near him, now somebody is actually touching him. Jesus says, “I am willing, be clean.” Can you imagine the shock, the thoughts, the feelings coursing through the leper as he realizes this man is willing to risk taking his defilement upon himself to make him clean?

Jesus says, “Be clean,” and immediately the leprosy left him. Luke had emphasized how he was covered with it and now immediately it is gone. This is who Jesus is...the one willing to take our defilement upon himself in order that we might be made clean.

**So, let’s talk about shame for a minute.**

**Shame** can be easily confused with guilt. They can feel similar. Part of that is because sometimes they go hand in hand.

When we do something sinful, it is shameful. We’ve done something, or become something, that is not right... so, we’ve done things, gone places, been a part of things that we know we shouldn’t have... and we feel this mixture of guilt for our actions and shame for what it says about us.

The key difference is that guilt is usually associated with something that I did. If I say something sharp to someone I care about, I'll think, "Man, I shouldn't have said that." That's guilt.

Shame is what runs a bit deeper than that. Shame asks, "What's wrong with me? Why would I say something like that? What kind of person am I if this is true about me?"

One way to think about it could be that guilt is, "I did something wrong," and shame is, "I am something wrong."

Shame is that little thing in you that knows or believes: there is something about me that if people knew it or saw it, would make me unworthy of connecting with them. The thing that would embarrass or humiliate us. It's what lies behind the thoughts of, "I am not good enough, thin enough, smart enough, rich enough."

Beneath all of that is shame...that I am actually something wrong.

Nonemotional example given in which I scored points for the opposing team in a middle school basketball game after not realizing it wasn't my team shooting free throws when I came back into the game...

Do you connect with that feeling?

I feel exposed, vulnerable, want to hide, disappear, don't fit in, don't belong, feel lesser than, feel bad, feel wrong, feel dirty, feel embarrassed, feel weird, defiled, damaged...

All of that is about shame.

For some of us, the reason we have so much friction in our relationships is actually about shame.

- In premarital counseling a few years ago, a couple told me they got into a fight about asparagus. Literally, in a heated blow up because one of them liked the thick asparagus and the other liked the thinner asparagus. And they are telling me this, embarrassed and clueless as to why they reacted that way. I told them it wasn't about asparagus, it was about shame. Shame says, "There is something about me, that if it became known, would cause you to reject me." So, it can't be that your asparagus opinion makes you weird and different because then people might reject you. They said, "Oh my gosh, that's exactly what happened."
- For some of you, you're so riddled with this you can't accept a compliment. You can't believe you're worthy of any type of praise. Others of you can't receive any sort of criticism or even coaching because of your shame. So, you get dejected or incredibly defensive. It's actually rooted in shame.
- I heard a guy recently say, "I would never talk to another person the way that I talk to myself." That's shame!
- Others of you can't give people the benefit of the doubt when they don't text you back fast enough, and now you're like, "See, I knew they didn't like me." No, you don't like you because of your shame, and you're projecting that onto others... And because of that you aren't able to love people well. 1 Corinthians 13 tells us that love trusts all things. And you can't do that because you are mastered by shame.

Shame goes all the way back to the garden. If you'll remember, when our first grandparents ate from the forbidden tree, their eyes were opened. Before this, we're told they were naked, but unashamed...but, in Genesis 3:7 it says they saw their nakedness and sewed fig leaves together for cover.

Point being, they saw themselves for who they were and they knew they were not okay. With sin, shame entered the cosmos...and our first grandparents sought to cover it up...

And we've been doing the same thing ever since. We cover ourselves in our own proverbial fig leaves.

- When we feel vulnerable, we seek to escape or numb it.
- We are the most in debt, obese, addicted, medicated group of adults in US history.
- Many of us spend our entire lives trying to perfect things. Our bodies, our lives. Thinking if we can just get the outside looking right, be the perfect instagram mom, build a life mom and dad would be proud of, we will no longer feel as though something is wrong with us.
- We pretend. We act tougher than we are, smarter than we are, more competent than we are. We tell jokes because we feel accepted when we make people laugh.
- **For some of us, this can even come out in a really religious way** - we play the part of the good little Christian - who says the right things and does the right things - not because we love God, but because somewhere in us we believe that maybe by our good deeds we can cover up the shame we feel before God for our bad ones... and maybe that will make up for things...

And because we live in a guilt innocence culture, shame and honor can be very difficult for us to diagnose and get our arms around. We have all sorts of language and awareness surrounding wrong actions and right actions, but very few words and language for shame and honor.

And this isn't helpful because shame grows on secrecy, silence, and judgment. The goal is not that you never feel shame for any reason. Just like the goal is not that you never feel guilty for any reason, no matter what you do. That actually makes you a psychopath.

You keep telling yourself not to feel guilty or not feel shame, and it doesn't actually work. You can't remove your own shame because shame is relational and social and ultimately spiritual..

I can't help but think that there are many of us who are here this morning who have things in our lives, and in our past that have made us feel untouchable, dirty. Whether it is something you've done that you really wish you could forget, or sins you've struggled with that you wish you could wipe out completely from your mind. Or, maybe it is things that have been done to you that you couldn't control, and you were helpless then; and, for whatever reason, for years the dirt and the filth that you have felt have just pervaded your life.

And what you need is exactly what this leprous man needed - something , someone to take your shame away from you. Something or someone to make you clean.

And what I want you to see this morning is that if you are in Christ, what Jesus has done for *this* man is what He has done for you, too. On the cross, Jesus looks at you and He says, "**I am willing** to take your shame upon myself - **everything that is in you that IS unacceptable and ISN'T enough**...everything that is wrong, that has scarred you, that has made you feel untouchable, dirty, and defiled...I am willing to take all of that, and I am willing to make you whole...to forgive you, to restore you, to make you clean." Jesus does not turn from you in your shame. He turns to you in your shame. He reaches out to you and touches you and makes you clean.

But, and here's the even better news...he doesn't stop there. Jesus doesn't just stop with taking away our shame, though that would be good enough on its own...Jesus takes it a step further...and restores our honor.

Look back at verse 14...

**14** And he charged him to tell no one, but “go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof to them.”

Now, for our modern 21st century ears this might feel like a bit of unimportant Jewish detail. But, that's not the case. What he's referring to here is something instructed in Leviticus 14. Leviticus 14 gives detailed instructions for someone who has experienced an alleged healing from leprosy.

The leper would schedule an appointment with the priest — the spiritual leader and mediator between God and the people — and they would meet in a third place outside of the city, outside of the camp, and the priest would come to verify the healing of the leper.

And if the leper had, in fact, been healed, the priest would declare a healing. And perform a ceremony where two birds would be taken, one would be sacrificed and the other set free...and it was this beautiful little image of sin and its effects being forgiven - through the sacrifice - and taken away through the bird set free.

And then the formerly leprous person would be shaved...because, obviously, they wouldn't have been able to groom themselves...they're appearance would match their former social condition - rough, unkempt, ungroomed...but, they'd actually wind up shaving their whole body, including their eyebrows.

And then they would bathe in clean water...and it was basically like this little ancient way of saying..., “You're like a baby. You're being born fresh...born new. God has given you a brand-new life.” All of which should sound *very* familiar to you if you're a Christian.

And then the priest would declare them cleansed...and everything that they had been held from in society - relationships with other people, being welcomed into homes, being able to worship at the temple...all of it would be restored to them. And would result in basically a week-long party, full of sacrifices and worship to God.

Could you imagine that for this man?

- What if he had a family? A wife, kids, a brother or sister, a mom and dad? How long since he hugged them, kissed their faces, shared a meal, just talked?
- He's not had dinner at anyone's home. He's not hugged anyone.
- He's not been invited to a party. He's not sat down to eat a meal with anyone.
- He's not been able to go to the temple or sing praises to His God.
- He hasn't been able to have a job or do anything of use to others. He'd been of no use.

It's been years...

- And now, he's fully restored. He's back in right standing; a full participant in his community.

And towards the end of it, the priest would do a really interesting thing. He would take some of the blood from one of the sacrifices of an unblemished lamb, and he'd place it on the man's ear and on his thumb and on his big toe.

Which I know seems weird to us, but it was this ancient way of saying: You belong to God now, listen to him. You belong to God now, serve him. You belong to God now, walk in his ways.

Point being, this was a ceremony to affirm and celebrate this person's restoration to the community of God. And this is why Jesus commands the man to go to the priest. To receive this restoration...

And so, here's why I tell you all of that and what I need you to see... **what Jesus is doing here is restoring this man's honor.** He's not simply telling him, you have nothing to be ashamed of... He is - like the bird that was sent away - carrying his shame away, and restoring to him the dignity, worth, and honor of a member of God's family.

You are no longer an object of shame. You are an object of honor. This man gets to go home to his community. He gets to have a job, he gets to take care of his family, he gets to sit and chat with friends, he gets to worship with his community. I want you to picture shame as head down, shoulders slouched. This man goes home with honor, head held high.

### **Zephaniah 3**

**19** And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.

And, in Christ, that is precisely what He is doing for you, too.

That's exactly what life, in Christ, is supposed to be. Jesus sheds his blood so that we can be forgiven and cleansed, our shame removed; and now that we belong to him, we should listen to him, serve him, follow him.

And be brought back into honor.

In Christ, you're clean.

In Christ, you're not worthless or gross or dirty or unwanted. It isn't true that if the worst thing about you was known, then no one would want to associate with you; because God knows the worst thing about you, and he gave his son so that he could adopt you as his own. By the power of the Holy Spirit, you're cleansed. To what? To commission your ear, your thumb, and your toe to God and say, "From now on, I listen to Him, I serve Him, I walk with Him." We are co-heirs with Christ, seated with Him in the heavenly places; we reign with Him... That's honor language. That's 'head held high' language.

Jesus, in touching this man, does the same as he does for us. He takes his shame away, he gives his dignity back, and the man gets a brand-new identity to go live a new life as if he was reborn.

**And here's why I make specific mention of this: Some of you live like you have leprosy.**

You believe that if people knew the real truth about you, then they would never want anything to do with you. So, you self-protect and hide. You don't want to let anyone close to you. But, as a church family, we get to be the people who come around each other to celebrate our shame being cleansed and removed, just like the leper would've had. We get to practice honesty, and transparency, acceptance that is a reflection of Jesus.

Think of how this transforms communities of people. The fact that we can give our shame to Jesus. Be cleansed. That the gospel speaks a louder word over us than our shame does. We can now begin to be honest. Transparent. No reason for all the self-protecting.

You understand that shame lives on secrecy and privacy? But, where you've got a community of people who live authentic lives with honesty, loving each other the way Jesus has loved them...shame can't survive. It just isn't soil shame can grow in.

Shame cannot survive in loving light. To be known in your worst, and still be loved and accepted will change your entire life. There is freedom and joy that many never taste. This is what is available to us as God's people. This is what we are called and equipped to be as God's people.

You are not an object of shame. You are an object of honor. You belong to God now, listen to him. You belong to God now, serve him. You belong to God now, trust Him. You are an honored child of God, seated with him in the heavenly places, you will reign with him, and until then you get to join him in his work.

Pray.