

Thoughts on Guilt and Shame

Scripture uses the terms 'guilt' and 'shame' in both an objective and subjective sense. It is important to distinguish the two uses of each of these terms.

Objective Guilt

Pilate said of Jesus, "I find no guilt in Him" (John 19:4). In other words, Pilate saw no violation of law committed by Jesus for which he could hold Him responsible. This is objective guilt. The Psalmist says, "You forgave the guilt of my sin" (Psa. 32:5). Here, the problem is sin, violation of God's commandments. Guilt refers to responsibility. You have guilt; you are held responsible for the violation of God's commands. Forgiveness means that Christ pays the penalty for your sin. As a result, God declares you not guilty. Which means that He will never hold this sin against you. All of this is objective reality.

Subjective Guilt

On the subjective side, you may feel guilty. This means conscience accuses you. This work of conscience is true of believers and unbelievers. "They show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them" (Rom 2:15). There is a linkage between what you do and how you feel about what you have done. What you have done and how you feel about your actions are two different things. There is the objective side, your actions, and the subjective side, how you feel about what you have done.

However, for the best operation of conscience, you need a good conscience. That is, you need a conscience that says, 'yes,' when God says, 'yes,' and, 'no,' when God says, 'no' (1 Tim. 1:5). And to have a good conscience, you and I need to be cleansed from an evil conscience. "Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled *clean* from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb. 10:22). Notice that the Hebrews text links 'full assurance of faith' and cleansing from an 'evil conscience.'

Objective and Subjective Shame

The Apostle John makes a similar linkage between having a sense of confidence and feeling shame. "Now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming" (1 John 2:28). In this text, feeling shame refers to you being embarrassed before God and wanting to hide from Him. In this context, shame is also a subjective feeling you have because of what you have done. You could say that feeling shame is an extension of feeling guilt. Shame can also have an objective side. What do you mean when you say, 'Shame on you'? This usually means that you have caught someone doing something wrong.

Sometimes, you may say that the person you catch doing something wrong is bad. You exclaim, 'Bad boy!' Think this through. You may mean one of two things. You may mean that the boy committed an act you consider bad, wrong, or evil. On the other hand, you may mean the boy himself is bad. In the latter case, you are referring to human depravity and to total depravity. Total depravity means that sin affects every part of your being. The person hardened in sin may very well do something wrong, such as tell a lie or steal some money, but not feel bad. Such a person has neither a guilty conscience nor a sense of shame.

Combinations of Guilt and Shame

This discussion raises the fact that you may experience a variety of combinations of guilt and shame. As just mentioned, if you have a hard heart, when sinning, you may feel neither guilt nor shame. For example, a young college student exclaims, 'I'm living with my girlfriend. I have the joy of Jesus in my heart, and you cannot tell me anything different.' However, it is possible for you to sin and feel guilt, but then there is no shame. You push aside your guilt and forge ahead in your sin. On the other hand, you may feel shame but experience no feelings of guilt. For example, the Apostle Paul says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel" (Romans 1:16). You might feel shame when challenged about your faith in Christ. But you experience no guilt because you have not sinned in lovingly speaking about Christ. You may also have a proper experience guilt and shame. You sin by violating God's Law by lying to your parents, spouse, or other family member. As a result, you feel guilt. When discovered, you are embarrassed and you feel shame. Finally, you may have an over-scrupulous conscience because you were trained to follow extra-biblical requirements. For example, a woman whose husband left her for another woman explains she has no ground for divorce. She was taught that marriage is forever. Even after hearing the Biblical teachings on marriage and divorce, she feels guilt and shame at the very prospect of divorce.

Conclusion

Both objective and subjective 'guilt' and 'shame' are real. Your personal experience of guilt and shame should comport with Scripture and with Spiritual renewal so that you have a conscience that says, 'yes,' when God says, 'yes,' and, 'no,' when God says, 'no.'

Denny Prutow