

## “Shame, Shame”

If the comments, cards and e-mails after the start of this series last week mean anything then I have hit upon an issue with which a significant number of our membership wrestles with almost daily. I defined shame last week as a feeling of being inwardly flawed, of not measuring up. Shame also is manifest when we perceive a difference in what we have come to believe we ought to be and what we really are. Our perceptions of what we ought to be come from so many places but most of the time the perceptions that cause us the most shame are received from authority figures in our lives.

Shame is an excellent motivator when we are young and perhaps causes less problems when we are young because as children we seem to instinctively have a sense that we can work a little harder, grow a little more, get a little faster, a little smarter and we will eventually measure up. Often people get locked into a performance-based lifestyle at a very early age. But, frequently when we get old enough to realize that the “ought to’s” are unrealistic and unattainable or we realize that we are past the point where we will get faster, smarter and try as we might we won’t ever have the physical or mental acuity to reach the “ought to” shame sets in and all sorts of accompanying feelings, depression being the most prevalent. Some live with low levels of shame, like a low-grade fever, making life manageable but mediocre. Others have so much shame that life and relationships produce constant pain. Come with me to the dog track and let me illustrate performance based shame.

The sport of dog racing finds its roots in ancient Greece. The modern version, however, found its genesis in Tucson, Arizona. In 1919 a man by the name of O.P. Smith perfected a realistic mechanical rabbit for dogs to chase. He had altruistic aims for the sport to stop the killing of the jack rabbits, which I have been told, was quite gruesome, especially when the dogs in a frenzy tore the hapless jack rabbits to pieces in front of the spectators. I don't know if you have ever seen greyhounds race but the dogs are poised behind their gates, clad in colorful numbered coats. The number tells the bettors, who cheer or bite their nails depending how much money they have wagered on their dogs position in the contest.

As the mechanically-propelled rabbit sprints in front of the dogs, the gates open and the greyhounds blast out of their confinement at full throttle. The dogs possess a singleness of focus. Get that thing! Get that rabbit! Be there first! Somebody's dog wins. Somebody's loses. Some fans take home cash. Some leave broke. It's called gambling. The winner might get a treat from his owner. Another, a trophy for his dog house. But get this...NO dog gets the rabbit. They NEVER do. Greyhounds are among the fastest animals on the planet but their brains must not be as fast as their legs. Wouldn't you think that after sprinting around a track...what four, six, twenty-six times in an attempt to get a rabbit that NO dog actually ever gets, you might reconsider the motivation behind the mad dash? After how many times would you say to yourself, "Oh no, not that bunny again. I'm not going to run my legs off for an unreachable rabbit. Let 'em bet on somebody else. But the gullible dogs line up over and over in their gates the next day. Day after day, certain that THIS TIME, they'll finally catch the robotic rabbit.

If I were Dr. Doolittle, I'd have a little counseling session with these sleek, handsome greyhounds. I'd let them in on a little secret, the rabbit is a ruse, a trick. It's just a dream dangled in front of their noses for the express purpose of getting them to run in a circle, and guess what, even if you would catch the thing, it would not satisfy their hunger.

I guess the dogs will keep chasing old O.P. Smith's mechanical rabbit as long as they think the rabbit can be caught. But what happens if one day the dog admits to himself that he will never be able to catch the rabbit? How could a dog live with himself if he finally admits, no matter how fast he runs, he'll never be fast enough? How could you handle it if you realized that no matter how good you became, you'd never be good enough? Wouldn't anxiety grow? Wouldn't hope disappear? Wouldn't depression start to creep in? Haven't you run like a dog yourself at some time in your life? Maybe you feel like you're running like a dog now. After all I've run like a dog too. I've run after the rabbit of acceptance. Man..how I wanted to catch it. I've chased at it with every fiber of my being. I suppose I could have spent my whole life leaping after it until I collapsed, spent and unfulfilled. Who knows what I might have sacrificed on the way. Health? Marriage? Children? Peace?

People everywhere, all over the world, chase elusive rabbits Maybe you're one of them. Always thinking if I do one more good thing, I'll get noticed. If I just go to one more meeting, serve on one more committee, write one more check, go on one more trip with the guys or gals, I will have done enough. What does your rabbit look like?

We run harder when we are shamed because we are utterly desperate for love. From the first shock of cold air in the delivery room to the last gasp for air on our deathbeds, we crave love. We instinctively yearn for it, gravitate toward it and feel like starving people if

we are deprived of it. Our need for unfettered, unconditional, lavish love is so massive, we'll do almost anything to get it. The drive to attain love, and its benefits of acceptance and significance in us that we'll devote everything we have to lay hold of it.

I want you to honestly and in the quiet of your minds to take this self inventory of what kind of family you grew up in and how you think and talk about yourself today. If you identify with any of these statements there is a high likelihood that you have shame issues you need to deal with.

### **Belief and rules in your family:**

**Performance over person:** How well you do determines who you are.

**Not allowed to make mistakes:** Stay in the lines, don't let others do better than you

**Can't do it well enough:** You always do that wrong, you could have done a better job.

**Conditional support:** If you perform well enough I'll really be proud of you.

**Undiscussed issues, secrets:** In our family we don't talk about things like that.

**Your own self talk:** (What you believe about yourself learned from your family.)

**Human doing vs Human being:** My worth depends upon my ability to always do well.

**Perfectionism:** If I blow it people will not accept me, appreciate me or love me.

**Success sabotaging:** Somebody else could probably do it better than me, that is too important for me to accept.

**Self-worth contingent on others:** Do you think I did well enough? I'm OK if you approve.

**Fear of Discovery:** If people really knew the real me they would think less of me.

If you're not aware of just how far you'll go to get love, you can be sure of this: Somebody else is. Chances are that someone has discovered that he or she can get you to run after the rabbit called acceptance dangled in front of your panting soul. And if you are

like most, someone found out that the easiest way to get you to run harder and be better and do more was to dangle that love in front of you...just out of reach. But no matter how hard you tried, no matter how good a little boy or girl you were, the affirmation you wanted so deeply was never fully given. It was withheld so you would keep running and you did.

Now let me say this, I don't think that this happens as much purposefully as ignorantly. It was withheld because it was the only way they knew, they had run after rabbits all their lives and they thought that was the only way it could be done. It was withheld because they were empty themselves, the ones you wanted love from just didn't have it to give. It might have been withheld because they wanted you to do well and they saw how fast you were willing to run.

For whatever reasons, people everywhere have tried and tried to catch up to love. But despite heroic efforts millions have never tasted the real thing. Plainly put shame is the painful feeling that there is some flaw in you that keeps you from catching the rabbit. So you just try harder and harder.

We all want people under our influence to be excellent and accomplish great things. Parents want their children to behave. Teachers want their students to excel. Pastors want their parishioners to show the face of Jesus. That's why so many have championed the expression "Shame on You." That's why we live in an atmosphere of shame. It's everywhere because it works...on the surface. I believe people use shame to motivate others because they don't know the way of God. God never uses shame to motivate us toward right living or excellence. He never motivates us by withholding his love from us.

He motivates by giving love. In fact, our scripture passage today, which goes all the way back to the very beginning of God's activity directly with people, portrays God's motivation with love instead of withholding love. Let's look at it together:

“God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.”(Genesis 1:28) Does God want us to be fruitful? Absolutely. Does God expect big things from us? He sure does. Does God bless his people because they are fruitful or do big things? Nope.

Look again at the sequence in Genesis 1:28. The sequence is everything. God blessed them and THEN told them to be fruitful. The blessing came first. The affirmation of their worth did not rest upon their fruitfulness. Instead, their fruitfulness depended upon them knowing their self worth. The knowledge of their blessedness fueled their capacity to subdue the earth. Most people imagine the message of Christianity runs something like this: Love God, do good, give generously, live right, serve God and the Lord will love you and bless you.

But listen and listen carefully...that is not the Christian gospel. The gospel contains those elements but in a different sequence. Here is the biblical formula, the formula with which Jesus ministered and for which he was ultimately killed. God really loves you and has blessed you; therefore, love the Lord, do good, give generously, live right and serve God.

Shame does change behaviors but shame does not and never has changed hearts. In our efforts to control others, our shame seems to improve their outward lives but inwardly, it

sabotages their souls. That is a price that God never intended us to pay, our souls, our joy and our peace...and it does pass all understanding.

I want to share with you a story as told by Alan D. Wright, a pastor, author. Alan tells a story about Grace McCracken. Grace was a middle aged woman who was a product of a broken home that occurred when she was eight years young. Grace had assumed, at eight years young, that she had had a role in her parents divorce. Her assumption had been that she was'nt good enough to make her parents want to stay together. We all know that is an irrational assumption but one that is made more often than any of us would want to know. A broken home always breaks a child's heart. Always. I don't know why rejected wives and husbands feel that way either. I've counseled , wept, prayed and watched souls bleed. But on the day that Grace McCracken was told by her mother about the break-up she also saw her strong willed mother cry for the first time and on that day she made a vow to herself that no eight year old should make and no eight year old can keep. Her vow was this, "I will never let my mother cry again, I will be so good that she will always be happy." See what I mean? So Grace began to work, she worked very hard but her mother never did get happy, for very long periods anyway. So grace decided to work harder. When her aging mother grew infirmed, had heart surgery and came to live with Grace and her husband, she made another vow, "No matter what, the end of my mother's life will be happy." So obsessively, compulsively, Grace sought to be the perfect daughter. Despite giving her all, Grace could not make that happen and her forty-five year attempt to win her mother's acceptance and love went unfulfilled to the grave. She imagined all things she

ought to have been but there came that shame foothold, the chasm between what we “ought to be” and what we really are.

Alan relates that when he met Grace she was like a bruised reed, one more stiff wind and she would break. Wracked with self doubt, depression on several medications. She had even given serious thought to suicide. From the outside, you might not have seen it. After all, she had a nice house a caring husband. But, her private world was filled with pain, physically, mentally and spiritually. Medication didn't heal it, Psychotherapy didn't relieve it, sleeping pills at night and stimulants in the day couldn't touch it and hiding in her house didn't restore it. Grace had no real friends, no hope and no relief from her pain. But Grace had run out of doctors and had grown desperate and thought, “Why not try church?” So she showed up and on her own testimony, was frightened by the mere interaction with people. She seemed ashamed to be there, feeling unworthy to occupy the space. She openly wept as worship enveloped her and God appointed worshippers smiled at her and spoke to her. Sometimes we just weep at the thought that real love might actually exist. Just a taste of the real thing and we would climb Mt. Everest to taste it again. We always feel like we need to do something. But Grace heard one thing, God always appoints one thing, it is different for every person. But Grace heard these words, “The gospel is like this: God has written you a check. It's yours free and clear. But you must accept, endorse and deposit it in order to make us of it.”

Grace then spoke four words that changed her life forever, “I want that check.” It was like saying, “I want to live.” Grace met the only Person in the world who truly has life to give. Grace met the source of grace, Jesus Christ.” When Grace encountered the expansive

unmerited affection of the Messiah, she found herself approved, not because she had performed well, but because Jesus had. It was a gigantic reversal of all that she had believed since childhood, that love is a reward for good behavior. She assumed that perfect love was reserved for perfect people. All she had known was to try harder. But Grace didn't need to try harder. Neither do you.

Pause for a moment, breathe it in deeply as I tell you again. You don't need to try harder. You are already loved. Take the check. Look into the face of the Savior, behold his smile, feel his affection, accept his provision and know yourself to be a creature of infinite worth. Only Grace could have healed Grace. Only grace could have healed me. Only grace can heal you.

How ironic. As long as we strive to be strong and earn another's love, the fruits of your efforts are shame. When you give up trying to measure up, stop your dogged pursuit of perfection, let the rabbit go, rest in the expansive love of God your fruit will be joy, peace and a whole family full of those who experience grace and not shame. That's what can happen when shame becomes grace.