

Understanding Guilt and Shame¹

Dave Thurston

Guilt & Shame	Guilt: 'I've done something wrong.' Shame: 'Something is wrong with me and others can see it.'
How guilt and shame communicates	We can experience guilt and shame in the one event such as a public sin or failure eg we blow up at church and lose our temper. Guilt and shame can appropriately let us know that there is something I have 'done' that I shouldn't have. But in a world twisted by sin, guilt and shame can also be used against us inappropriately and we can use it against ourselves. We can say to ourselves, 'I am too sinful and broken to be forgiven'. Inappropriate guilt and shame can undermine the wonderful promises of God in the gospel of Christ.
How guilt and shame relate	Both guilt and shame are part of our God-give emotional dashboard warning system that there is a break in a relationship with others (including God) but also possibly with our 'self'. Guilt alerts me to the fact that I have missed the mark of how I'm supposed to live in right relationship with God and my neighbours. Shame indicates that my problem isn't just 'skin deep'; I don't just have bad behaviours, there is something wrong with the core of who I am - my heart (Matt.15:19). Shame in the garden was misused and led to covering up and blaming others – these are dead-end strategies if we want to be whole and Christ-like.
How guilt and shame motivates	Healthy guilt brings us to repentance. As Paul says in 2 Cor.7:10, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." When we don't heed the warnings of guilt and overstep the mark and get 'caught out' ,we experience shame, people see us for who we are, not as we wanted to be seen. We are brought face to face with the reality of our situation. Guilt is the internal light of a healthy conscience telling us we need to change but shame is an external spot light that lets us know that we need to stop pretending we have it all under control.
How to...	
Identify guilt and shame	Adam and Eve and their response to guilt and shame is instructive for us in learning how to identify guilt and shame in our own lives. Adam and Eve tried to hide from each other by making fig-leaf clothing, then tried to hide from God by hiding in the bushes and finally Adam blamed God and Eve, and Eve blamed the serpent. Hiding (avoidance) and blaming others (anger) are good indicators that something is wrong and needs attention.
Examine guilt and shame	We need to examine guilt and shame because we can be misled and mislead ourselves about them. For instance, you can not feel guilty about things you should feel guilty about (looseing your temper – 'they made me angy') and feel guilty about things you shouldn't (disappointing someone who wants you to do something you shouldn't.) Shame can be confusing as well – you can feel shame and you can be shamed. Shame is when you have been caught out sinning (you knew it was wrong because you hide it from others but now they know). Being shamed is being sinned against. It is a tactic as old as Adam telling God that it was Eve's fault he ate the fruit not his own failure. A very helpful diagnostic for guilt and shame is to continue asking, <i>Is this moving me away from God and others, or toward them?</i>
Evaluate guilt and shame	Let's face it, often there is little ambiguity about our guilt and shame, we have done something wrong and we need to acknowledge it and repent, and the same with shame. What is important about guilt and shame is, as C.S. Lewis says in <i>The Great Divorce</i> , what we do with it; " <i>Don't you remember on earth there were things too hot to touch with your finger but you could drink them alright? Shame is like that. If you will attempt it—if you will drink the cup to the bottom—you will find it very nourishing; but try to do anything else with it and it scalds.</i> "
Acting in response to guilt and shame	God's love, expressed in the cross of Christ, is the answer to our guilt and shame; our failures in what we have done and who we are. Christ died not only for sin (guilt), but also and especially, for the sinners we are (shame) (1 Tim.1:15). Our Father invites us to trust in Christ's sacrifice for our sin, and provides us with Christ's righteousness that is a better covering than anything we could manufacture with lame excuses and the desperate blaming of others. The gospel of God's love in Christ brings us to the place where we can aknowledge our guilt and shame, and be transformed through the Spirit's renewing power and presence, as we learn to die and rise again.

¹ Based on *Untangling Emotions* J. Alisdair Groves & Winston T. Smith p197-208.