

Whatever Happened to Shame?

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Shame is a powerful emotion. We have all felt the burning ears, the knot in our stomach, the horrible exposure of our mistake to the world and the eyes of our critics staring holes through us.

Such self-awareness is an outgrowth of the conscience. Conscience is the mental capacity to judge our own behavior and assess its consistency against what we believe to be right. When we have been persuaded (by the rebuke of others or our own judgment) that we have behaved unacceptably, then the physical reactions of shame appear.

But so unpleasant are these reactions that we can minimize or suppress them. To do this, we must convince ourselves that our deviant behavior is actually normal or inconsequential – no matter what our upbringing or public opinion says to the contrary. This is called “searing” the conscience (1 Tim 4:2). Certain elements of our society have long been devoted to searing our collective conscience – and succeeding.

At first it may seem liberating to be rid of shame, but as Dr. Joyce Brothers noted in a *Parade* article there are many harmful consequences that accompany shamelessness: “Rather than increasing our self-esteem, the suppression of shame does just the opposite: the lowering of our sights causes a deep discomfort. As psychiatrist Leon Wurmser wrote, ‘Where there is an unrestrained exposure of one’s emotions and of one’s body, a parading of secrets, a wanton intrusion of curiosity, [it has] become hard to express tender feelings, feelings of respect, of awe, of idealization, of reverence ... The culture of shamelessness is also the culture of irreverence, of debunking and devaluing ideals’” (2/27/05). I don’t often agree with psychologists, but I do this time. Our culture is becoming more coarse, where profanity and nudity and rudeness are paraded in the public square and good people are dared to object.

What is God’s guidance in this matter? First, exposure to the truth helps recondition our conscience according to divine standards. Some of the Gentiles, who had long before lost their sense of shame and common decency, had learned the truth of the gospel. Paul says to them: “*What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death*” (Rom 6:21). Satan can persuade us to boldly practice and trumpet to others behavior that is eternally fatal! But with proper instruction the conscience is restored and shame returns to help us make better choices.

Secondly, shame and embarrassment are not pleasant. They aren’t meant to be. But the proper reaction is not to kill shame but use it as a motivator. Peter says we should maintain “*a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed*” (1 Pet 3:16). Shamelessness despises goodness. This is because goodness is a constant thorn in the side of evil, refusing to play along as if nothing is awry. But it is much more affirming to stand for what is right and suffer “false shame” than give in to the self-degradation of a world without standards.

Warning: The searing of our conscience is often a gradual process, a slow erosion encouraged by the popular culture and media. We are sometimes very naïve about the potential of these forces to dull the edge of our conscience.