Dr. Mark W. Baker

overcoming shame

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Contents

INTRODUCTION:

What God's Grace Can Do for You

Shame. Everybody feels it, but nobody wants to talk about it. Because no one's life has been perfect, everyone has feelings of shame—just to a different degree. I would like to invite you to go on a journey of discovery with me. This journey is not to some distant place. The journey we are about to take is inward, inside of you. That is where shame hides, and that is where we need to go to bring it out into the light of day so that you can be healed of it.

Fortunately, you and I can take this journey of self-discovery in the privacy of your own home, or backyard, or wherever you like to go to read books. You don't have to come to my psychotherapy office, attend a conference, or even let anyone know you are about to explore your shame. That should make your exploration a little easier. But it does require courage on your part. Admitting you have feelings of shame is not an easy thing, so I applaud your courage for picking up this book. Over many years, I have worked with countless people who have been greatly helped by having the courage to admit to their feelings of shame; and their ability to be vulnerable enough to ask for help has paid off. They have been richly rewarded

for taking similar journeys with me, so I have an idea that you are about to receive some benefit for your efforts as well.

In my work as a psychologist, I have found that chronic feelings of shame have caused more problems for the average person than any other feeling out there. The good news is that ongoing feelings of shame are only a problem if you never address them, and you just took the first step toward doing something about that. Now I'll do my best to help you get to the root of any problems you may have with shame and show you how to overcome them.

God made us with the capacity to feel shame for a good reason, and he has not abandoned us to a life of painful feelings without help. Thankfully, he sent his Son as an example of how to live well. You and I can benefit from the life of the only person ever to have walked this earth shame-free. He showed us how the grace of God can overcome anything in this life and how it can overcome any feelings of shame in yours.

> Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.
>
> **HEBREWS 12:1-2**

CHAPTER ONE

Do You Have a Problem with Guilt or Shame?

I feel really bad," Ethan confessed, looking down.

"Okay," I responded, trying not to interrupt what he was struggling to say.

"I mean, I think I'm a good person—*aren't I*?" he said, looking up at me.

I gave him a slight smile, encouraging him to go on. I could tell this wasn't actually a question, but more like he was pleading with me to talk him out of what he had already concluded—that he *wasn't* a good person.

"You know me. I'm a 'by the book' kind of guy," Ethan continued. "I follow the rules, and I expect others to do the same. That's the only way you can get respect these days. Our world is so out of control; it's just crazy out there. I've provided for my family and always tried to do the right thing. Well, until now, I guess. I don't know…I mean, I don't know how this happened. I feel so bad."

Actually, Ethan *was* a pretty good person. I had come to know him well since he started therapy with me. He originally called me for help because his wife had discovered some e-mail messages

between him and a woman at work. She was a colleague, one whom he respected and considered a friend, a good friend. At first they found themselves talking about work, and both felt supported by how much they had in common and the perspectives they shared. Then, over time, their conversations became more personal. They started sharing feelings about other people at work, friends they had in common, and eventually about their marriages. This became a slippery slope into even more intimate conversations that they weren't having at home with their spouses. Now they were saying things to each other that were far too intimate for just friends. Without realizing it, Ethan had fallen into an emotional affair. It wasn't something he was looking for. It just happened.

The most common place for affairs to start is at work. Most people don't see affairs coming because in most situations they think they are just talking to a friend. But if a person isn't careful, *just friends* can change into something more than that very easily.[1] And since Ethan's wife had gotten involved, he had been struggling to figure out just how he felt about everything—especially himself.

Ethan was confused just as most people are confused about how they should feel when they do hurtful things. Was he feeling guilt for what he had done, or was he ashamed of himself? Often we use the terms interchangeably, so that makes the dilemma even more confusing. All he knew is that he felt bad, and he had come to me to help him sort out his feelings.

Guilt or Shame?

Guilt and shame are not the same. Guilt is the bad feeling you have for having gone too far. You did something you should not have done, and now you regret it. Shame is the feeling you get for not going far enough. You feel regret for being inadequate. Guilt is

about what you *did*; shame is about who you *are*. Both are bad feelings, but knowing the difference is imperative.[2]

If you never felt any guilt or shame, you would be what psychologists call a *psychopath*—a person with no conscience. Psychopaths don't feel bad about anything they do, and they never feel bad about themselves despite the horrible things they are capable of doing. We don't know exactly what causes psychopathy, but you don't want it—trust me. I've been to a maximum security prison and talked to psychopaths. There are some very bad people on the planet, but ironically the reason they are so bad is because they never question their badness. If you feel guilt and shame, you should be grateful. At least you are not a psychopath.

The Bible has a lot to say about guilt. Mostly guilt feels bad, but it exists to help us. Paul talks about a "godly sorrow" that leads people to repentance and produces good things in their lives (2 Corinthians 7:11). So guilt is a useful antipsychopathic tool for normal folks. What I call *healthy guilt* is the capacity to feel bad when you have hurt someone else, God, or even yourself. Healthy guilt is motivated by love. You want to be a good person, and if you hurt someone, your healthy guilt stimulates you to do the loving thing. In most cases, you take action to make amends for what you did wrong. Guilt comes from *doing* something wrong, so it is corrected by you *doing* something right. Healthy guilt motivates you to do the right thing to restore damaged relationships. It comes from having a conscience, and that in itself is a good thing. God created guilt to guide us toward restoring our relationships with him, but it works as a guide for restoring relationships with one another as well.

Not all guilt is productive. I call this kind *neurotic guilt*. It is not motivated by love and is rooted in underlying shame. Neurotic guilt is not about making amends or figuring out the loving thing to do to make things right in your relationships. Neurotic guilt is

about self-preservation and the fear of getting caught. If your guilt is focused on you taking care of yourself, it rarely produces anything good. Sure, you feel bad because of something you did, but you are not really motivated by your love of God or others to make things right with them. You are more concerned about being exposed and getting in trouble. Neurotic guilt is better than being a psychopath, but it's not really about making things right with others because its real motivation is to cover over painful feelings of shame that you don't want anyone to see. In other words, neurotic guilt is about saving your own skin.

Sadly, neurotic guilt is pretty popular. Because we were designed by God to feel guilt, we all have the capacity for it. It's just that sometimes we are not clear about its underlying motivation. Do you feel bad because you have hurt someone and want to bring your offense out into the open for healing even if you have to risk looking foolish? Or do you feel bad about something that happened and hope no one will ever bring it up again? If the fear of getting caught wins out, you are suffering from neurotic guilt, and it is likely to be with you for a long time. Neurotic guilt lasts, sometimes for a lifetime, exactly *because* we don't want to talk about it. Or if we do, we never get to the root of the problem to restore relationships in any meaningful way.

I'm going to talk about forgiveness later, which is the best solution for guilt, but I'll just say at this point that neurotic guilt isn't really about seeking forgiveness; rather, it is a form of self-punishment that substitutes for restored relationships and keeps people stuck. If you think you can solve your problems with guilt all by yourself (by punishing yourself with neurotic guilt), you are likely to be wrestling with your bad feelings for a very long time.

Shame feels bad too. But it is different from guilt. Shame is the painful feeling of disconnection from others that comes from feeling defective. You may think you feel bad because of things you have

done (and can give anyone a long list of screwups that you are ready to confess if you need to), but the truth is that shame is a bad feeling you have about yourself, and you had that feeling long before you committed any of the things you think caused it. In fact, your shame is probably *the reason* you did the things you did wrong in the first place. Feeling shame makes you feel bad about yourself for being who you are and thus predisposes you to act in bad ways. So as you can see, getting a grip on your shame becomes pretty important. Shame is a deeper and more toxic problem than your guilt, and one that needs your attention. I say "your" here because we all feel shame, at least to some degree.

So what was going on with Ethan? Did he feel guilty, or was he dealing with shame? Well, mostly it was guilt. Ethan didn't have as big a problem with his self-worth as he did with *bad boundaries*. And failing to maintain boundaries is a major culprit when it comes to affairs at work. It is true that Ethan's hidden feelings of shame (hidden from him anyway) did cause him to need the attention of an attractive woman at work, and the compensatory need for this type of affirmation was part of what was going on. But the biggest problem Ethan had was that he had hurt the woman he loved more than anyone in the world, and he felt terrible about that. He never stopped to ask himself when he was flirting with his colleague, "How much would it hurt my wife if she heard me saying this right now?"

His actions were very selfish, and it was going to take years to repair the damage he caused, but Ethan truly felt bad for hurting his wife, not just because he got caught doing it. He didn't blame his actions on her with things like "Well, if I got a little more attention at home, I wouldn't need to look elsewhere" or try to wiggle out of his hurtful behavior in any way. He was wrong, and he could see that now. He learned the hard truth that it takes years to build up

trust with someone, but you can lose it in an instant if you are not careful. I believe Ethan is basically a good man and is going to do what it takes to regain the trust he lost with his wife. I believe this because his godly sorrow is directing him to do it. If his biggest issue was with shame, well then, that would be a different story.

The Deafening Silence of Shame

One of the things that makes shame so difficult to deal with is silence. By its very nature, shame seeks to hide itself, and us with it. Some people love to talk about their guilt, as if to elicit our sympathy either to reassure them that they are not bad people or to confirm for them that they should feel bad, and that they are not wrong for feeling that way. But shame is different. Even though some people want to talk about having done bad things, no one wants to talk about being a bad person. Shame motivates us to want to keep secrets. And the toxic power of shame only grows stronger in the dark.

Many years ago I was invited to preview the movie *The Prince of Tides* before it was released in the theaters. Barbra Streisand directed the movie and asked me to give her my opinion of it as a psychologist. The movie is about a psychiatrist, played by Streisand, who has a suicidal patient who has no memories of her childhood, so the psychiatrist develops a relationship with her patient's brother, played by Nick Nolte, to try to find out what happened to her. I didn't like that the psychiatrist became involved in an affair with her patient's brother, but I did like the movie.

I will never forget sitting there in the theater watching as Streisand and Nolte acted out the effects of childhood sexual abuse on adult survivors in her psychotherapy office. In his Oscar-nominated performance, Nolte skillfully depicts a repressed southern gentleman with a failing marriage and an inability to connect

intimately to anyone, even his own daughters who obviously love him. He describes himself as "the champion of keeping secrets," but in his attempt to help his hospitalized sister, he finds himself opening up to her therapist. He begrudgingly admits to Streisand's character, "For a man who never talked, I was doing nothing else."

In one gripping scene, Nolte's character reveals for the first time ever that he, his sister, and their mother were all raped by escaped convicts who broke into their home one rainy night when their father was away. His now-deceased older brother came in with a shotgun and killed two of them while his mother stabbed the third to death in the back.

"I'm surprised you and Savannah survived at all. You were just a boy. What happened after that? How did your family deal with it?" Streisand asks.

"We didn't tell anyone," Nolte whispers.

"You didn't tell anyone? Not even the police?" she responds incredulously.

"Mama said, 'It's over. Take these carcasses outside and clean this mess up,' " Nolte continues, as if in a trance.

He says his mother just kept repeating, "This did not happen. This did not happen," over and over again. She threatened to disown any of the children who breathed a word about the event to anyone. They buried the bodies outside and never mentioned it again, not even to their father, who came home later for a family meal with them. Then, Nolte utters one of the most profound statements about sexual abuse that I have ever heard in a movie. With an almost expressionless face, he says, "We sat around and ate as if nothing was wrong. God help me. I think the silence was worse than the rape."

Three days later, his sister tried to kill herself for the first time. All Nolte's character can say about that is, "She could keep quiet. But she couldn't lie."[3]

Here I was sitting in a special movie theater, two seats away from Blythe Danner with her skinny (at that time unknown) teenage daughter between us, named Gwyneth Paltrow, doing my best to try to act professional, but I was fighting back a tear forming in the corner of my eye as I grasped the profound nature of Nolte's words. Streisand's direction of the film cut straight to the heart of the disastrous relationship between silence and shame. The tragedy of childhood molestation and rape is that the victim has done nothing wrong. But so often the perpetrator feels no guilt, so the victim is left to try to make sense out of a senseless act of violence to the human psyche.

Some trauma specialists call this the *transfer of guilt*, because the person who should feel guilty doesn't, so the guilt is transferred to the victim instead. But I think it is worse than that. When something as horrible as rape happens to someone who is powerless and who didn't *do* anything wrong, that person is left with the shame of feeling that they *are* something wrong. If you are treated as though you are a worthless "piece of meat" (as one of the convicts in the movie actually said), you come away with the belief that you are. The real damage done to victims of molestation and rape is not just guilt but soul-crushing shame. All trauma experts will tell you that the worst thing you can do to victims of this type of crime is to tell them never to speak about it. They often feel just as Nolte said, that *the silence is worse than the rape*, because the damaging effects of the rape are not only perpetuated for years without anything changing, but they actually get worse, as we saw depicted in Nolte's suicidal sister's inability to function in life.

Streisand goes on to have Nolte's character open up his feelings about the trauma, breaking a lifetime of silence for him. His character is not only transformed by this shattering of silence but is able to facilitate his sister's healing through emotional honesty and to return to a life of sanity as well.

Once shame gets its claws in us, silence only makes it worse. Shame disconnects us from others and causes us to doubt our worth, as if we don't have anything of value to offer others. This lie is perpetuated by silence, and it can be exposed as false only through having the courage to speak honestly about how we feel to others who will listen. Our fear is that our worthlessness will only be confirmed if we open up to others, but the irony is that only by opening up to others can the toxic power of shame be dispelled.

The psalmist tells us that we are "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14). This is the truth about us. Shame is based on the lie that this is not true, and that our worthlessness disqualifies us from the right to connect with God and others. Believing this lie leaves us feeling profoundly alone and incapable of the intimacy for which we were designed. Marital difficulties, family troubles, psychological problems, workplace relationship conflicts, authority clashes, and multiple other tragic effects will follow. Your own doubt about your self-worth is one of the greatest sources of dysfunction in your life, and refusing to keep silent about the sources of your shame is one of the most significant things you can do to help you be the person God created you to be.

Guilt as a Defense Against Shame

As you can see, shame is more difficult to deal with than guilt. Guilt is something you can speak about, confess, and even manage if you know how. Thankfully, God has given us the wonderful tool of forgiveness and has spelled out for us in the Bible how it works. Shame, however, is more challenging. No one wants to feel it, speak about it, or even believe they have a problem with it. So what do some people do as an alternative? They try to pretend that they feel guilty instead. Cute trick, if it worked.

Olivia came to therapy because of the problems she was having in her marriage. Relationship difficulties are one of the most common reasons people seek out therapy. Our relationships are valuable to us, so when things are not going well, we are wise not only to seek help from a marriage counselor but to look at ourselves to see how we can do things better on our end. Individual psychotherapy is a great resource for people today, and smart people take advantage of great resources.

Olivia is bright and insightful, and she has always been a thoughtful person who tries to take responsibility for herself and improve her situation whenever she can. She married early in life and now has a wonderful daughter with whom she has a good relationship. But over the years, her relationship with her husband has become increasingly dissatisfying for her. Because he has been successful in his career, she was able to stop working and devote herself to their daughter. They both felt this was a good thing for her to do, and she didn't have any complaints about this arrangement. But she was growing increasingly unhappy with the distance she felt in her marriage, and she wanted to get some perspective on how she could change to help make things better.

"I don't want to be negative, but I'm just not sure we are making any progress in our marital counseling," Olivia stated apologetically.

"Well, these things can take time. What are your concerns?" I asked.

"We go every week. We've been pretty good about that, but I still have this sense that something is just not right. I mean, he has become so secretive over the past several years. He must feel the distance that has grown between us, but every time I ask him how things are going, I always get the same answer: 'Fine.' *Really?* How can he believe things are *fine* when I'm not sure I even know what he's thinking half the time? It sure doesn't feel fine to me."

"You want more of a connection with him," I said.

"Exactly!" she responded quickly. "It's like I'm bugging him when

I try to talk about how I feel. You're a man. Do I seem like some nagging female to you?"

"You seem like a woman who needs to express herself to her husband and longs to have him respond in the same way with you," I said.

"Yes, that's it. I have a longing for more of an emotional connection with him. I just must not be doing it right." Then, somewhat hesitantly, she said, "I don't mean to be difficult or anything, but all this insight you are giving me is nice and everything, but really, *what should I do*? If I could only figure out what I'm doing wrong, I would change it. You can be honest with me; I can take it. Just tell me what I'm doing wrong."

This is a very common question that psychologists get—and we hate it. There is no good way to respond to the question "What should I do?" In Olivia's case, if I told her what to do, I am certain that she would go right out and do it. She doesn't have any difficulty with following instructions or problem solving. In fact, she is pretty good at it, as evidenced by her friends frequently seeking out her advice on things. So if I told her what to do, my counsel would probably confirm her suspicion that something was wrong with her for not being able to figure out a solution on her own. She didn't truly need my advice on what to do; a deeper problem was going on that we needed to work out.

After a number of sessions with Olivia pleading with me to tell her where she was wrong, I was able to get her to take the focus off of her performance in her marriage and place it on how she felt about herself. Eventually we were able to determine that this feeling of disconnection she had in her marriage was not new, and that she had felt this way pretty much all of her life. She was raised by a punitive, inconsistent mother and a distant father who failed to protect her from her mother's frequent outbursts of anger. She would hide in her room to avoid the conflict that her mother seemed to

thrive on, and she never invited anyone over for fear of her mother doing something that would humiliate her in front of her friends. The result was that Olivia grew up feeling disconnected from almost everyone. She married her husband when she was only eighteen to escape the turmoil of her home life, and then she moved as far away as she could as the solution to that unsolvable problem. Her husband was a quiet, hardworking man, much like her father, and one she was convinced would never treat her as her mother had.

Over time Olivia came to see that she hadn't married her husband for an emotional connection; she married him because he was safe. Emotional connection was a luxury she had never considered at age eighteen. Olivia came to realize that when she got married, not only was her need for safety from abuse more important than emotional intimacy, but she didn't really believe that she actually deserved this type of deep connection. Olivia's greatest problem was not that she felt guilty for not knowing what to do about the lack of connection in her marriage; it was that she felt too ashamed to believe she was worth having emotional intimacy.

Often when people ask me what to do, I hesitate to respond because I'm not sure if they are trying to use guilt as a defense against shame. If you feel guilty for what you have or have not done, that is preferable to feeling shame for not being who you feel you should be. In Olivia's case, her shame was causing her to accept a level of disconnection that was dissatisfying on the one hand but strangely congruent with her feelings of worthlessness on the other. She had great advice and wonderful insight, but she had painful feelings of self-doubt that prevented her from being vulnerable and emotionally connecting in the ways she truly longed for.

Gradually I was able to witness Olivia overcome those feelings of shame that had been thwarting her connection to others throughout her life. As much as I would like to say that my brilliant insights

are what cured her, Olivia and I know it wasn't as much those as it was the safe place we created for her to be vulnerable with me about her deepest longings and feelings. Shame was healed not through better performance but through vulnerably exposing shame's lie that Olivia wasn't worth being connected to. Once that lie was brought into the light, her shame of worthlessness gradually lost its grip on her. Then, quite naturally, her connection with her husband began to change—in subtle ways at first, but then more obviously as she became convinced that she had something of value to offer. She even was able to set boundaries with her mother that she had never felt entitled to do before, and she developed new relationships with others that were more satisfying emotionally and spiritually. And not surprisingly, she stopped asking me what she should do.

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Both guilt and shame are strong emotions that you must acknowledge and deal with for your relationships to go well. To manage your guilt, you must *do* things differently. Being honest about wrongdoing, repenting of it, and seeking forgiveness are things you can do in response to your guilt. To deal with your shame, you must actually *be* different. That is, you must be vulnerable and experience what it is like to share feelings honestly with others in ways that change you. This type of emotional vulnerability creates an atmosphere where you can expose the lie that you are worthless and replace that lie with the truth that you are fearfully and wonderfully made. Many people do not even know they believe the lie in the first place. So being emotionally vulnerable is how we find it out.

Being vulnerable is not easy, especially when you have been hurt. Let's take a look at where shame comes from and what you need to know to deal with it.