

Dealing with Shame

How do I know if it is from God?

By Dave Batty

“I remember being at the police station, being finger-printed, and having my picture taken,” shared Yvonne. “I remember the handcuffs and leg shackles put on me. I felt so ashamed when I had to call my pastor and family and tell them about my hidden addiction.”

“But mostly I struggle with being 42 years old, having been arrested, and now having a record,” states Yvonne. “I feel shame for having nothing to show for all those wasted years.”

Shame is a powerful force in the lives of many teens. Some struggle with issues related to their home life—especially if their parents are alcoholics or drug addicts.

One mom shared about her troubled past, “I was so wrapped up in my addiction that I failed to properly care for my children. My

15 year old daughter was taking care of my children due to my addiction. My daughter also had her first child when she was only 15.”

The power of shame can be rooted in memories of childhood experiences, like what Harvey experienced when he was only 5 years old. “One day we were going somewhere and my dad was in a

When my dad kicked me, it wasn't the physical pain that hurt so much, it was the shame that he would do that to me.

hurry. I wasn't getting into the car fast enough, so my dad became very angry and kicked me. The physical pain was not what hurt—it was the shame of what he did to me,” states Harvey. “This abuse was repeated all during my childhood. I grew up hating my father and myself.”

The path to shame

So what takes a person down the path to shame? There is more than one path to the bondage of shame.

For some, this sense of shame was instilled by their parents who

taught the difference between right and wrong, and would say, “Shame on you!” to the child who behaved badly. The disappointment in the parental tone of voice burned those words deep into the heart and soul of the child.

Others grew up in quite different settings, around adults who had little time for God. Without a moral compass, they saw little reason to feel ashamed of their sinful actions.

“I used to self mutilate,” states Lisa. “I now have scars on my arms that remind me of my past sin. I was ashamed of the scars. I never knew it was a sin to cut and burn myself until I came to Teen Challenge and learned about God.”

Some with a Christian background have painful memories as they reflect on their failures. “After being a Christian for 5 years I had an affair with another woman,” confessed Juan. “Even now, 16 years later, I still struggle with the guilt and shame of hurting my wife, my work, my church, myself, and God. Every time I see my ex-wife, I feel pain and shame.”

Meeting Christ on the road to shame

At the age of 32, Tina met Christ in a personal way. Though she had been to church as a child, she had never developed a personal

- ❖ **What causes people to be confused about how God wants them to respond to shame?**
- ❖ **When is shame a delusion?**
- ❖ **What triggers your shame?**
- ❖ **How can you get out of the shame trap?**

relationship with Christ. Now for the first time at age 32, she began to understand what it meant to follow Jesus.

She began to understand the conviction of the Holy Spirit as He pointed out the sins in her life. This motivated her to change her way of living, and begin to walk in obedience to Christ.

The more she studied the Bible, and attended church, the more she

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understood God's view of truth. She gained a new awareness of her past actions. "In my addictions, my mind was in such a fog that I failed to see how destructive my lifestyle had been—deeply damaging my own life, as well as affecting my family."

Another new Christian states, "Shame became a bigger issue in my life after I became a Christian. But I have learned to work through this, and release this feeling to God every day."

The shame delusion

With a greater desire to serve God, many Christians develop a growing sensitivity to the conviction of the Holy Spirit. And here is where many fall into the trap of shame. We miss God's truth by focusing on our feelings instead of God's truth. We fail to distinguish the difference between the genuine conviction of the Holy Spirit and the lies of the devil.

God says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." 1 John 1:9 (NIV)

When a Christian confesses a sin, rarely does the memory of that experience instantly disappear. In a few days, or weeks, or even years later, the memory of that sinful action will flood your memory. And with the memory comes a tidal wave of shame.

Reflecting on that memory, you can't help but feel the shame. It feels so much like the conviction of the Holy Spirit that you can easily jump to the conclusion, "It's the Holy Spirit." You find yourself embracing the condemnation, telling yourself how big a failure you are.

But here is the trap—we have allowed our feelings to lead us to a conclusion, rather than using God's truth. "It must be God, because I feel so much shame about my past sins," we tell ourselves.

Satan comes as an angel of light pretending to be the Holy Spirit. He floods us with feelings of

Feeling shame for what others have done to you?

For those who have been sexually abused, shame is many times a huge issue in their lives. This shame often causes the person to feel like they are "damaged goods."

In 1 John 1:9 God promises that when we confess our sins, He will forgive us, and purify us from all unrighteousness—including the sins that others have committed against us. We do not need to live in shame for what others have done to us—God sees us as pure—and He loves us.

shame—not just once—but over and over—daily, weekly, monthly. We assume, "If I still feel so bad about this, it must be the Holy Spirit showing me how miserably I have failed Him."

Satan wants to destroy your freedom in Christ. If he can get you to believe a lie, it can rob you of the peace and power Christ wants you to experience in your life each day.

How to get out of the shame trap

To get out of the shame trap we must focus on God's truth—not our feelings. Ask yourself, "Have I already confessed this sin to Jesus?" If so, God is not sending new shame into your life for a sin He has already forgiven.

You must take hold of this truth, not because you *feel* it, but because you choose to believe what God says in 1 John 1:9. Plus there are so many other promises of God that help us combat the lies of the devil.

Romans 8:1-2 says, "So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. ²For the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you through Christ Jesus from the power of sin that leads to death." (New Living Translation)

God is not always going to change your feelings or sound a clanging alarm in your heart saying, "Don't believe those feelings of shame—they are a trick of the devil." We have to learn how to stand on God's truth even when our feelings seem to contradict that truth.

It's so easy to believe, "If I feel so bad inside, I must be wrong." When we embrace the feeling without first submitting it to the test of God's truth, we easily walk into Satan's trap.

Do we need to be sensitive to our feelings as a Christian? Yes—because the Holy Spirit will convict us when we sin or fall short of His standard for our daily living. But we also must become sensitive to God’s truth—and that sensitivity is not to a *feeling* of truth, but to an understanding of truth—based on the facts in the Bible.

If you are going to correctly respond to the genuine conviction of the Holy Spirit, and also correctly identify the tricks of the devil, you must study God’s truth. “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” 2 Timothy 2:15 NIV

What triggers your shame?

Every time shame floods your heart, you need to ask yourself—what has triggered this feeling of shame? For Debra it was the memories of the many times she neglected her young children when she was living in her addiction. “Shame always sets in when I think of all the times I

Feeling ashamed of Jesus?

Being ashamed to speak up about being a Christian keeps some in bondage. Whether it is shyness, fear of what others will say, or the hostility from others—the reality is that some Christians are ashamed to let others know they are a Christian.

Jesus has an answer: “If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father.” Luke 9:26 NIV

reverted back to alcohol. Guilt, shame and condemnation haunt me when I think of what I’ve done to my three children, and my mother.”

But it doesn’t just have to be memories of huge sins of the past. It can be the sins of others that have damaged you. For Miriam, it was the painful memory of how she was sexually abused by her father and brothers when she was a child. The memory comes back over and over, with powerful feelings of shame each time.

Or shame can be triggered by little memories that were not even sin. It may be the memory of a recent conversation with a friend, and as you reflect on it, you hear a voice in your head saying, “You really blew that big time”—when all you remember is a comment that may have been less than perfect.

Small incidents of the past can carry with them great waves of shame just as much as big failures of the past. Satan doesn’t really care how big your sins of the past are. All he cares about is seeing if you will fall for his deceptions.

So what triggers your shame? Have you already confessed this sin—if it is a sin? If you have, then this shame is not from God. You need to respond appropriately to this feeling of shame attached to this memory—speak God’s truth to it.

You need to tell yourself, “These shameful feelings are not from God. Therefore I reject them, and give them no place in my heart. I do not deny my past or ignore it. I accept responsibility for all my actions (not the sins of others), and I commit myself to following Jesus today.”

You must stand on God’s promise of Romans 8:1 that there is no condemnation to those who are in

Christ Jesus.

It’s a choice—you can choose to embrace the feelings of shame, and the condemnation that comes with it, or you can choose to embrace God’s truth, and walk in it. You must speak God’s truth to the memory of the past. You must speak God’s truth to the present feelings of shame.

Jesus said, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:36 NIV) You must choose to walk in His freedom on a moment by

Every time shame floods our hearts, we need to immediately bring it to Jesus, and ask, “How does this measure up to Your truth, Jesus?”

moment basis. The feelings of shame may keep flooding your heart. But you have to stand in the truth—God’s truth—not the “truth” of your feelings.

Does this mean I just ignore the feelings of shame in my life? Yes—some of the time—especially when the devil comes with the same old memories of past sins you have already confessed.

Why do I still feel shame?

So why do I still feel shame? The devil doesn’t give up just because you say “No” one time. He keeps coming back with the same feelings with the same old movies of your past failures. He may give you a rest for a few days, or weeks, or even months, then he starts in again.

Why does the devil keep coming back with the same old

memories? He wants to destroy your joy and peace today. He's hoping that you will believe your feelings instead of standing on God's truth.

The key to your victory over shame is not some huge spiritual battle with Satan, with demons flying all over the place. Our victory is realized in fixing our heart on following Jesus, one day after another.

Every time the shame floods your heart, you need to bring it immediately to Jesus, and say, "How does this measure up to Your truth, Jesus?" If it is related to an old sin that you have already confessed, then immediately reject the feelings of shame, and fix your eyes on Jesus and step out in His freedom, His peace, and His joy.

If you cannot remember confessing that sin before, then do it now—very specifically ask Jesus to forgive you and cleanse you. Then stand on the promise of God in 1 John 1:9 that He has forgiven you.

Jesus may be looking for you to do more than confess the sin to Him. He may be convicting you to also go to that person and ask forgiveness for what you did. But make sure it is His leading, not simply your feelings leading you.

If you have already gone to that person and confessed your past sin, don't go back and do it again. Stop bringing it up in conversation with that person. Even if you still feel the shame, leave the past behind, and move ahead in a positive way in your relationship with that person.

God has called us to a life of freedom—His genuine freedom. We find His freedom by living according to His truth, not according to our feelings.

The devil may keep coming back with his shame deceptions, but you can stand firm in God's truth.

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Discussion Guide

The following questions can be used for your personal reflection on this topic, or it can be used as a guide for a group discussion. If this is used in a group setting, please understand that you are not required to disclose the specific details of past sins, failures, or personal experiences.

1. Read 2 Corinthians 11:14.
 - A. How big of an issue is shame in your life?
 - B. How difficult has it been for you to understand the deception and shame that Satan tries to use in your life?
2. Read 1 Samuel 20:27-34.
 - A. How did King Saul try to bring shame on his son Jonathan? (vs. 30)
 - B. How did Jonathan see shame in this incident? (vs. 34)
 - C. Has your family been the place where you have experienced shame? Explain.
3. Read Romans 8:1-2 and 1 John 1:9. What challenges have you faced in trying to apply these scriptures to your life in responding to shame?
4. Read 2 Timothy 2:15. What strategies using God's truth have helped you most in responding to shame in your life?



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