

## **Holiness and Shame**

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It is not often that one finds a bit of wisdom from cartoons, but the Walt Disney movie “Mulan” has an important lesson about holiness. Based on an ancient Chinese tale, this story is about a young lady named Mulan who is more adept at riding horses than curling her hair as she prepares to meet the match maker. When her elderly and scarred father is called into battle against the invading Huns, Mulan loudly reacts before a crowd, bringing dishonor to the family. Out of her love for her father, Mulan sneaks out in the middle of the night to join the army, pretending to be a young man named Ping. Through feats of bravery, Ping single-handedly destroys the army of the invaders, but afterwards is discovered to be a woman, a crime so shameful that it is punishable by death. Her life is spared by the young captain who will later fall in love with her. The army leaves Mulan wounded and alone in the snow, disgraced before her comrades. She sees a small handful of Huns dig themselves out of the snow and then sneak their way into the imperial palace, capturing the emperor. Once again, brave Mulan destroys the invaders, rescuing the emperor and kingdom, and most importantly, bringing honor to her family.

One of the most powerful social forces in much of the world is shame. Shame leads Asian businessmen to commit suicide when their businesses fail, keeps children obedient to their parents, and urges teenagers to conform to peers. Shame results from alienation or disgrace before a community or from the failure to live up to one’s own expectations. People are honored when they are given worth by a peer group, large or small, because their actions represent the values of that group. These

values must be instilled within the group and recognized by the members. When people step out of the accepted norm, they dishonor themselves and may also bring dishonor to the group before outsiders. A sense of alienation occurs that may even lead to the individual being ostracized by the group. Dishonor, therefore, must be avoided at all costs.

The Bible is full of stories of alienation, exile, and shame. In the history of salvation, both God and God's people have used exile as a form of discipline. In 2 Corinthians Paul appeals to the church to restore a sinful brother who had caused pain to the whole community (2:5). Paul does not say what this "pain" was, but it must have been something that went against his norm for the church, thus bringing dishonor to both Paul and the group. This brother was disciplined by being removed from the fellowship. This isolation would have shamed the man before the church. Paul writes that the punishment of exclusion had been enough and had served its purpose. The church should forgive and comfort this alienated brother. Forgiveness would be seen by accepting him back into the community. The church was to reaffirm their love for him, not simply with verbal cues but with outstretched arms of welcome and acceptance.

The key to restoring a person's honor is to renew relationship and not to use law to punish. Shame disrupts relationships more than guilt. Shame isolates and alienates. A person might be guilty before the law but honored within a group. Corrupt people can maintain a position of power because they are honored before a group and not because of personal integrity. Opponents try to shame such people by breaking their relationship with their followers, sometimes through revolutionary force. If a person has sufficient honor before the group, appeal to the law will be not strong enough to end a relationship.

An effective way to punish people in an honor/shame culture is by exiling them from that which they honor. God used exile to punish ancient Israel for its apostasy. Israel found itself alienated from the promise of land and God's presence in the temple.

Reading sacred history from this perspective forces us to redefine sin, not as "a violation of a known law of God," which indeed it is, but also as defilement or uncleanness which makes one unworthy to be in relationship with God. Indeed, a sinner is guilty before the righteousness of God, but a sinner is also alienated from relationship by disobedience. God called out to the shamed Adam and Eve, "Where are you?" God knew, but did Adam and Eve?

Honor cannot be restored by punishment or paid for substitutionary compensation or retaliation. To heal the brokenness of shame, the salve of forgiveness through reconciliation must be applied. The only way for honor to be restored is through forgiveness and renewing the alienated person to a place of worth within the group. The *good news* is that the God of reconciliation restores us to relationship and gives us worth.

The salvation process not only impacts our inner being but incorporates us into fellowship with Jesus Christ and His body, the church. The power of sin that isolates is replaced by love that incorporates. What moves God to restore us from sin and shame is his love for desecrated creatures. The power of the gospel is that God became a man and died in the most shameful way because of His love for us (Rom. 5:6-8).

Jesus identified with the lowest, despised, alienated and shamed of his day. The cross represents the depths of this identification as he died in the most dishonorable way in the first

century. Isaiah foretold of Jesus' identification with the alienated: "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hid their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not" (Isa. 53:3).

Jesus despised the shame of the cross (Heb. 12:2) and thereby revealed the raw emptiness of the human condition and at the same time opened the way to restoration in the image of God (2 Cor. 3:18). Our identification with the shame of the cross opens up the possibility of our identification with the hope of the resurrection. The co-crucified rise to newness of life (Rom. 6:4-5). We find freedom in the Spirit as we get our identity not from anything in this world (represented by the "flesh," Rom. 8:5-8) but in Christ. This identification is not simply cognitive or emotional but an empowering presence, for it is the Holy Spirit that brings new life, providing resource for living by a deep, inner sense of direction and purpose. Not only are we free from condemnation (guilt) but from alienation (shame).

Because of the emptiness of shame, we are left powerless to be restored to communion with God. Yet God leaves us with a choice. It takes a willful act on our part to be co-crucified, but again the good news is that we are carried along as if on eagle's wings (Isa. 40:30-31). The Holy One comes to us as we are and where we are to meet our deepest need of living within His life.

We are empty people seeking for meaning, happiness, fulfillment, and hope. Unless we find community, we will experience none of these. The "church" is the community of restored individuals who find their identity in Christ and no longer in things of this world. As the church gathers, a new group identity forms. The bond of love lifts those shamed before the world and raises them to places of worth—Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female (Gal. 3:28). Those united with Christ

find a place of honor in loving, unified churches. This is what it means to be a “holy church.” What preserves unity and honor to all is union with Christ that comes only in worship. This life of perfecting love brings a welcoming message to those realize their shame before God and for those victimized by the powerholders of the world.

Jesus! what a friend for sinners!  
Jesus! Lover of my soul!  
Friends may fail me, foes assail me;  
He, my Savior, makes me whole.

Hallelujah! what a Savior!  
Hallelujah! what a Friend!  
Saving, helping, keeping, loving,  
He is with me to the end.

(J. Wilbur Chapman, “Our Great Savior”)