

Chapter Three

LEARNING TO RECOGNIZE SHAME



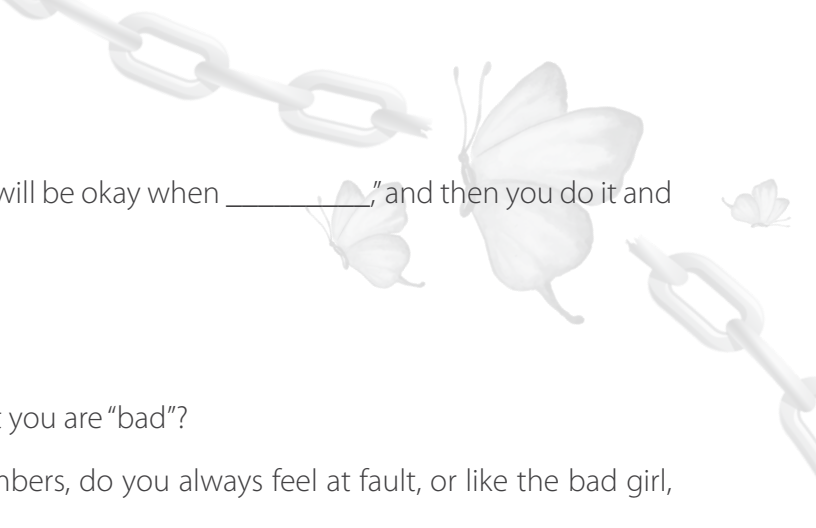
SHAME: THE ENEMY OF TRUTH

- There you are in a group of women, and the conversation is light and flowing. You say something you thought was witty, but it came off wrong, and women pause for a second—or was it an hour?—then go on talking. A simple thing, yet you run and rerun it through the theater of your mind. With each viewing, you sink deeper and deeper under the self-accusations of “stupid,” “worthless,” “unacceptable.”
- You have a hectic morning, and you dash out the door, forgetting something important. When it dawns on you, it’s too late. You stand there and start berating yourself. You ask yourself “WHAT is wrong with me? Why can’t I do anything right?! I am such a loser.” On and on it goes.
- A friend offers you some constructive criticism on how you could have handled something better. She isn’t harsh or condemning, but you are sure she is saying that you are a failure, hopeless, and unable to do anything right.
- An elder at church passes you in the hallway and seems not to see you. Your friendly hello dies on your lips. You drop your head. You feel rejected, “less than,” insignificant.
- You try so hard to change. You know you should act like a “good Christian,” and most of the time you do. But then something triggers you, and you revert to the “old you.” You feel hopeless, bad, like you will never change.
- You have a new position in your church’s women’s ministry. You sit at church and look around at all the church ladies. You are sure they are problem free and deeply spiritual. They have it “together,” unlike you! While you enjoy their company, you always have a nagging feeling that you are “less than,” unacceptable. You try hard to act like them, fearing they will find out the truth—that you’re a fake!

What you are feeling in each of these instances is **SHAME**. You probably do not recognize it. You might say, “I don’t have shame,” and believe that to be true. But shame has fingerprints. If it is there, the telltale fingerprints of shame will leave evidence in your everyday interactions and reactions.

1. Do you ever feel contempt for yourself or others? Do you see people as stupid, inept, always against you, or inferior to you? Or do you feel that YOU are stupid, inept, and inferior, especially when you make a mistake?
2. Does criticism cause you to become defensive, make excuses, or feel panicky if someone doesn’t believe you?
3. Do you have a consistent underlying, nagging sense of guilt?
4. Do you have an underlying feeling that you are an imposter, worrying that you will be found out, regardless of how successful you are?
5. Do you have a fear of being known for who you really are?
6. Do you feel like a “naughty little girl” when you do something wrong, make a mistake, or are corrected?



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7. Are you always striving to fulfill the statement: "I will be okay when _____," and then you do it and still don't feel "okay"?
 8. Do you never feel good enough?
 9. Are you always comparing yourself to others?
 10. Do you have a nagging, yet pervasive sense that you are "bad"?
 11. When you have a conflict with your family members, do you always feel at fault, or like the bad girl, even when you weren't?
 12. Do you feel the need to do things perfectly, despite evidence to the contrary?
 13. No matter how consistent your devotions are, do you feel you are not studying the Bible, praying, or reading devotionals enough?

The shame I am talking about is not based on regret or guilt for anything you have actually done. **The definition of shame is this:**

Shame is a soul-deep sense that something is flawed in me, that is not present in anyone else. It is not something I can fix, it is who I am—I am a hopelessly flawed human being, different from everybody else. It is a feeling that I am less than other human beings. It is a feeling of not being good enough, clever enough, hardworking enough, lovable enough.

Before I continue, I must make something clear. I am not talking about shame that you might experience for something you did, or something that was done to you. *This is shame for who you are.* It is deep and pervasive, something women are often not even aware exists. Yet many women live daily with the negative consequences, misconceptions, and emotional crippling that comes from this core of shame in their daily walk through life.

After going through one of my twelve-week courses, one of my clients wrote this profound assessment of shame:

"Shame is about feeling exposed. It's about having the sense that others can see right into the core of your being, and it triggers an intense desire to hide or escape.

"The internalized shame, or toxic shame, takes many forms, and it is often quite debilitating. Signs of internalized shame include feeling of inadequacy, rejection, self-doubt, feeling unlovable as a person, difficulty experiencing intimacy, never quite feeling good enough, feeling worthless, or feeling like a failure.

"These are some things I could relate to. The shame that was induced from some external source can now be induced solely from within. We don't need anybody else to tell us that we are no good or worthless. We tell ourselves; we shame ourselves, shedding a bright light on all of our perceived flaws. We get to the point that we can feel shame even if we are alone."





GUILT VERSUS SHAME

Shame is not the same as guilt. Guilt is about your actions—what you are doing, have done, or will do. Shame is about who you ARE. Shame is very different from guilt. Guilt serves a purpose. It isn't necessarily negative. For instance, when you do something cruel that hurts someone else, you should feel guilt. Guilt is what makes you aware that you have sinned. Guilt serves the purpose of driving you to God in repentance, seeking forgiveness. This is healthy guilt. Someone who cannot feel guilty about anything they do is a sociopath.

True guilt—guilt from a healthy conscience—is your friend, a godly companion who whispers truth and motivates you to repent and be free. False guilt is a relentless foe; it feeds shame and does not drive you to repentance. Rather, it drives you to self-hatred and self-condemnation. This keeps you focused on yourself and your failings, and it keeps you from seeking a real relationship with God. It is a very powerful lie of Satan that keeps women in bondage.

In contrast to shame's condemning accusations from false guilt, the Holy Spirit never condemns true Christians. Romans 8:1 says, "There is now no condemnation at all for those who are in Christ Jesus." The Holy Spirit, through the feeling of guilt over your sin, brings about godly sorrow in your heart and restores your relationship with God.

Guilt tells me that I **MADE** a mistake when I sin.

Shame shouts that I **AM** a mistake when I sin.

HOW DO YOU GET SHAME?

"Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame."

—Psalm 34:5 NIV

The question has been asked, if so many women have shame, is it something that is contagious? Well, in some ways it is. It is passed on from one generation to another. The problem with shame is that the person who has it usually can't define it and isn't aware of it. Still, in all her personal interactions, she reacts out of it. The one vague sense she does have is that she is flawed, not enough, unlovable, and an imposter, and she experiences the ever-present existence of guilt.

Shame takes root in a woman's heart at a very young age. The most significant years during which shame is laid down in a child's heart are birth through ten years of age. The experiences of the later years then keep adding on to it, like heavy layers of frosting on a cake. When this girl turns into a teenager, she acts out of that shame with bad behavior. And in her rebellion, she makes terrible choices that add layer upon layer of more sin and consequences. These consequences only reinforce her belief that when she makes a mistake, it proves she is a mistake. She suffocates under the belief that she is, indeed, different and disgustingly flawed. Promiscuity, abortion, drugs, drinking, and all that goes along with these lifestyles are sought after as a relief, only to become a tightening noose around her neck.

LEARNING OUR VALUE

To a young girl, adults can **ONLY** speak truth when it comes to her value as a human being. Children don't have the ability to assess what their parents say to them, nor come to the conclusion that their parents are lying about their value. That their parents could be to blame, and not them, is not even a possibility.

One young woman named Sandra was once talking about her childhood, and she said these tragic words: *"From the time I was little, my mom told me I was fat, useless, and a mistake. I mean, really a mistake. She told me she tried to abort me, but I hung on tight and lived. All I ever wanted was my mom to love me. Instead she beat me. I never knew what would set her off. A look. A stumble. A mistake. She would grab whatever she could find and start hitting me. I must have been a terrible little girl for her to treat me that way."*

The saddest part is that she now has a ten-year-old daughter of her own, and she is doing the same thing to her.

I have many granddaughters. I watch them go down my hallway with the mirrors on one wall. They will stop and pose, smile, and maybe even see in the reflection a beautiful princess. They don't think about it; they are just looking at themselves in the reflection of the loving and affirming treatment they receive, which defines who they are.

Yet, for a little girl who is being raised in a home with verbal, emotional, and physical assault, that mirror shows something much different. When she looks at it, she sees herself embodied as all of the harsh, demeaning, degrading words that are flung at her. How does she know her value? Where does she first learn about herself? From the adults in her life. If the words she hears from those adults are *"lazy," "stupid," "worthless," "mistake," "disgusting,"* or *"unwanted,"* then they take root in her little heart and become her identity.



Look at the last words of Sandra's statement: ***It was all about herself.*** At a very young age, before she could ever determine the truth of any statement, she could only come to one conclusion: that something was wrong with her! It must be her. Her mother would tell her to be "good" but never told her what that looked like. She was never good enough for her mother's approval. This sent its root of bitter lies deep into her soul, and her sense of who she was, as well as her intrinsic value, were established. As a teenager, she rebelled, stating that she hated her mother. She could tell you her mother's faults, how

messed up she was, and what she had done that was so cruel. But that teenager's identity was still built on the foundation of lies laid down by her mother much earlier. In the end, what she really wanted was her mother's love and acceptance. And she will go back again and again, hoping for a different outcome but always coming away wounded afresh. She simply does not realize that this is because of who *her mother is*, not who *she is*.

Parents don't have to abuse to lay shame in their child's heart. Shame always results from abuse. But it can also come from neglect. I was talking with a young woman who looked at me and said, *"Then why do I feel shame? I was never yelled at, hit, or called names."* The truth was, she wasn't interacted with at all by the adults around her. When she was sad, they ignored her. When she was hurting, they told her to be quiet. When she had something exciting to share, they turned away. They were so involved in their chaotic, dysfunctional lives that she might as well have been invisible. Her physical needs were met, but not her emotional needs. This speaks volumes to a child about her value. She wasn't even worth her parents caring about how she felt, what she thought, or what her needs were. Since the child looks to the adult for the truth of her value, she concluded that there must be something wrong with her that caused her parents not to care.



Shame can also come from well-meaning parents with unrealistic expectations. At one of my retreats, Carrie sat with a controlled, serene look on her face. She was one of those women whose hair, body, and appearance were always perfect. She read her Bible diligently and exuded Christian love and concern. Women looked at her and felt lacking in comparison. As the women in attendance started being honest and sharing, her demeanor cracked. She was plagued with feeling that she was not enough, less than, or never measuring up, and in all of that, she was bad. Not bad for what she had done—but bad in her core. Her parents didn't fit in the abusive or neglectful categories. But they did demand perfection out of their daughter, especially in her appearance. They constantly critiqued her weight, what she was wearing, or how her hair looked. Her value was established in this, not who she was inside. And the family itself lived under the same standard: *"appearance management."* They had to appear perfect. Problems weren't solved, they were denied, and strong emotions were never allowed. Feelings had to bend to the illusion of perfection, or they were not acceptable. The end result for Carrie was feeling that she never measured up or was good enough, pretty enough, thin enough, etc. Sadly, this also defined her relationship with God. She performed everything she thought a good Christian woman should do, but she never felt accepted for who she was inside. You can see the unhappy trap she was living in.



In all women who have shame at their core, it isn't just a feeling. For Carrie, it wasn't looking in the mirror and saying, *"I need to do my hair differently, and THEN I will be fine."* No matter how she tried, what she changed, or how much weight she lost, she had a soul-deep belief that she was flawed, never good enough. Nothing could change that. Her only recourse was to try harder to be perfect, and of course perfection is unattainable. That meant her shame was constantly reinforced. The fallout affected her marriage, her friendships, and her relationship with God.



Shame is like a Velcro strip on your heart. If you have too much shame, every interaction has the risk of sticking firmly to that Velcro. A mistake sticks fast and hard to the Velcro. A harsh word, a perceived rejection, or a criticism all go straight to the Velcro and won't let go!

If you have some shame, but mostly a firm foundation, then these mistakes and interactions will stick, but they will be released more easily.

For a shame-free person, mistakes are just that—mistakes. They don't reflect the value or character of the person. Other people's behavior doesn't reflect on them, but rather, on the person with that bad behavior.

On the next page is a chart from Dr. Sandra Wilson's book *Shame-Free Parenting* that will give you an idea of the levels and effects of shame.

	Childhood Experience	Parental Message	Childhood Perception	Childhood Choices	Adult Choices
Some Shame	Child sees the parent's developmental superiority. Parents use disrespect and dogmatism to reinforce their lifelong superiority.	You're just a human child. Children are never as strong and as smart as their parents.	My parents know everything about everything and always tell the truth. They will always know more than I do, so I will always need them to be safe.	I will figure out how to please my parents so they will continue to protect and direct me. I will always be safer living by all my parent's rules	Parents' rules rule forever. I am bad or stupid when I want to do anything differently. Something bad would happen if I ever did. Therefore, I will parent as my parents did.
Much Shame	Child sees significant family chaos of repeated crisis from consistently inadequate parental leadership. Parents don't get help for their problems because of shame lie. Child's legitimate needs are consistently neglected.	You have to be more than a human child. We "can't take" the pressure of trying to meet your needs and ours too. Our needs are more important than yours, because we are the parents. So, don't expect your needs to be met.	My parents "can't take" the truth about my real feelings or needs or anything else. When my parents feel better, I feel safer. I make my parents feel better when I have no real child needs. I am "selfish" and "cause trouble" when I do have personal needs.	I will have to protect, shield and "fix" my parents. I have to take care of them so they can take care of me and keep me safe.	I will protect and please my parents and other important people in my life so that they will like/love me and I'll feel safe. I would hurt my parents and "cause trouble" by doing things differently. Therefore, I will parent as my parents did.
Enormous Shame	Child receives "hands-off" abuse (ridicule, unfavorable comparisons, name calling) and "hands-on" abuse (molestation, incest, confinement).	You are less than a human child. You are such a disgustingly different and disappointing child, you deserve to receive the treatment we are giving you.	My parents know what/who I am and are good/right to treat me as they do. I need my parents to be good/right because they are the only ones I have to take care of me. I feel safer when I have "good" parents who treat their children the way they deserve.	I will believe that I am bad and worth less than other children so that I can have "good" parents to care for me and keep me safe. I will try to be good enough to earn less painful treatment.	I must take or do anything to earn the right to have people/parents in my life so that I can feel safe from abandonment. I am bad, stupid and evil. My parents are good and right. <i>Therefore, I will parent as my parents did.</i>



Before reading this chapter, when you heard the word “shame,” what did you think it meant?

Read over the definition of shame until you grasp it. Then write out the definition in your own words here.

Look over the twelve evidences of shame. Have you ever felt any of them? If so, list the ones you can identify with below.

When a child thinks changing their behavior can change the adult’s behavior toward them, what kind of thinking is this called?

Why do you think it is called this?

What is the difference between guilt and shame?

After going through this chapter, can you feel shame inside?



When you look at the Levels of Shame chart, can you determine what typifies your family?

Of everything you have read and discussed, what struck you as significant?

Your earthly parents can fail you, hurt you, and reject you. Look up 2 Corinthians 6:18, then write it out on a card and put it somewhere you can see it every day during this study.



Remind Me Who I Am
Jason Gray

