

I have mentioned the concept of Honor/Shame a few times before in these Bible Studies. I thought that it would be good if I covered the subject more in depth since it is one of the best ways to understand the actions of the people in the Bible.

Honor/Shame vs. Right/Wrong

The entire issue of honor and shame is a bit of a mystery to us in the western cultures. Individualist cultures tend to be right/wrong (innocence/guilt) cultures, while collectivist cultures tend to be honor/shame cultures. Our American culture is largely a guilt-based culture; the stress is more on guilt rather than innocence. Yet in many non-western cultures, the stress is more on honor than shame.

Defining Right/Wrong

The formation of the individual self is a central value in individualist cultures such as that of the United States. We are expected to know the difference between right and wrong, to choose the right and avoid the wrong. This is expected to be internal, within our heart and mind, and we are expected to choose right behavior on the basis of our conscience. Rules and laws, both civil and biblical, are established to guide us in the right path. Ultimately the goal is that we will internalize the code of conduct so that it becomes not a matter of external influence but of internal guidance. Our decision to act rightly is not necessarily made with other people in mind but on the basis of an individual sense of right and wrong. Since we believe we should be internally motivated to do the right thing, we also believe we will be internally punished if we don't. We typically believe that our consciences won't let us rest until we confess and set things right. In fact, it is hoped that the conscience will discourage us from breaking the rule in the first place.

Defining Honor/Shame

Things work differently in shame cultures. People are more likely to choose right behavior on the basis of what society expects from them. It is not a matter of guilt, nor an inner voice of direction, but outer pressures and opinions that direct a person to behave in a certain way.

Rules and laws are less of a deterrent for bad behavior than the risk of bringing shame on oneself, one's family, ones church, or community. When a person performs any act in the interest of the community, there is no concern about the rightness or wrongness of the act. If he commits violence that is approved by the community, then he has no reason to feel shame or guilt. A critical value in this sort of culture is preserving the honor associated with one's name. If a person from a shame culture commits a "sin," he will not likely feel guilty about it if no one else knows, for it is the community, and not the individual, that determines whether one has lost honor. In a shame culture, it is not a guilty conscience but the community that punishes the offender by shaming him.

In an honor/shame society, such as that of the Bible and much of the non-Western world today; the determining force is the expectations of your significant others. Their expectations don't override morals or right/wrong; they actually **ARE** the ethical standards. In these cultures, you are shamed when you disappoint those whose expectations matter. You do wrong by failing to meet the expectations of your community. One's actions are *good* or *bad* depending upon how the community interprets them. It would be good to consider this in light of our duty to God.

First, *shame* is not negative in honor/shame cultures; *shaming* is. Shame in these cultures is a good thing: it indicates that you and your community know the proper way to behave. You have a sense of shame; if you didn't, you would *have no shame*. This is different from *being shamed*.

How we view immorality, whether we view it as *wrong* or as *shameful*, affects the way we read the Bible.

Jesus promised an Advocate that will convict the world. The Spirit uses both inner conviction (a sense of guilt) *and* external conviction (a sense of shame). God can work effectively in both.

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