

RJC (Reaching Japan for Christ) Webinar on Shame in Japanese Women

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Introduction

Just to give you an idea of where we're going, here is an outline of my talk: I'll give you a brief discussion of guilt vs. shame in two different kinds of cultures. I'll then give you a definition of shame. Next I'll talk about how shame can manifest in the lives of Japanese women. Finally I'll talk about the need to deal with our own shame in order to become safe people for our Japanese friends and to offer them an environment of grace and acceptance.

Guilt vs Shame

I did a quick word search of "shame," "shameful," and "ashamed" in the Bible and found they are mentioned 224 times, whereas "guilt" and "guilty" are mentioned 28 times. By the way, "sin" and "sinful" are mentioned 456 times.

Put simply, guilt says, "I've done something bad," and shame says, "I'm bad." But in order to understand shame better, let's look at it in its cultural context. On the handout I compare two different cultures in terms of the way good and bad are perceived and processed: innocence/guilt culture vs. honor/shame culture.

The White Americans may have an innocence/guilt culture (although young people are changing into an honor/shame culture), The Black Americans seem to have an honor/shame culture. The Japanese culture and a lot of other Asian cultures including the Middle Eastern cultures are concerned with honor rather than innocence. There are many examples of honor/shame in the Bible (The hypocrites in Jesus time Matt. 6 were concerned about receiving honor from men).

Some Characteristics of Innocence/Guilt vs. Honor/Shame Cultures

Innocence/Guilt Culture	Honor/Shame Culture
People are Concerned with having a clear conscience	Concerned with becoming a person of honor
The society Addresses wrong-doing and freedom from sin	Addresses core identity and sense of duty
We are Responsible for individual sin	Responsible for corporate honor Shame occurs as a result of perceived identity
Guilt occurs as a result of individual action	Hide, flee
We Confess, apologize	Shame says "You are a mistake"
Guilt says "You made a mistake"	Shame is Absolved by grace and acceptance
Guilt is Absolved by confession and forgiveness	

A more detailed explanation of honor/shame cultures can be found at Honor and Shame 201 on Youtube by HonorShame.com

What is shame?

I would say shame is some feelings that arise out of the belief that I'm not OK in the eyes of others.

1. feelings of shame arise when we sin:

Num 12:14 (Miriam was punished with leprosy and 7 days of shame because she questioned Moses' authority)

Pro 11:2 shame follows pride but wisdom follows humility.

Pro 13:5 the wicked is shameful

2. shame arises when others sin against us: 2 Sam 10:5 (David's men were shamed because Hanun shaved their beard) and 2 Sam 13 (Amnon raped Tamar)

3. shame is also inherent in us:

Gen 2:25 "Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame." Gen 3: 7-10 "they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves...[Adam] answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid." Adam and Eve's sin resulted in shame and guilt. And we have inherited their sin and shame.

We experience this inherent shame, identity-level shame, even when we don't sin or others don't sin against us. There's a sense of "there's something wrong with me," "I'm a failure," "I'm not good enough," "I'm not perfect," etc.

How does shame manifest in Japanese women?

In order to cover up their shame, Adam and Eve used fig leaves and hid from God. In the same way shame sends us to a place of hiding, we use some strategies to cover up who we really are apart from Christ.

1. shame might be present when we are controlled by other's and our own expectations. The underlying belief might be "I must become who others say I am or I should be." Expectations of my husband, my mother-in-law, my neighbors, my friends. For instance, when my mother was alive, my sister-in-law was very fearful of my mother because my sister-in-law knew that she could not meet my mother's expectations.
2. As we saw earlier, in honor/shame culture, mistakes and sins can shake the core sense of who we are---"I'm a failure," rather than "I made a mistake." "I'm no good because I made the mistake." I experienced this sense of shame recently when I realized that I inadvertently let my green card expired. It was

a terrible realization, and when I told my husband about it, he asked me, “What could you have done to prevent this from happening?” By the way my husband is a Caucasian, coming from innocence/guilt culture. I interpreted his question as accusation and attack to my personality, so I responded to him, saying, “I’m not usually sloppy about these things!” You see the clash of the two cultures? My husband was simply addressing my mistake and how to prevent it from happening in the future whereas I thought he was shaming me as a careless person.

3. Shame can be behind our conformity to the society---The underlying belief is “I have to do what others do,” 出る杭は打たれる “A nail sticking out will be hammered in.” I was once a bit stunned by a story a Japanese acquaintance told me about her son and his backpack. She lived in the US with her family for about five years and they were returning to Japan for good. Her son was to enroll into a Japanese grade school as a six grader, and she was telling me that her son would have to use his brand new backpack in the school and that she was concerned about what his classmates would think of that. The other kids’ backpacks would be worn out after the five years of use, but her son’s would be brand new, and therefore, he would stand out. Living in the US, I can’t imagine this level of conformity, but for someone like her it was a concern. Conformity also can be found in disciplines of children. I’ve heard Japanese mothers say to their kids, 誰もそんなことしないよ “Nobody does such a thing,” そんなことしたら恥ずかしいでしょう “If you do that, it’s shameful.”
4. Perfectionism can be a cover-up for shame---I’ve seen on Facebook incredibly elaborate lunch boxes Japanese mothers prepare for their kids. Or I’ve seen my Japanese acquaintance bring a perfect looking cake to my lunch gathering.
5. Shame can send us to Comparison and competition---(related to the above, the best lunch boxes, best birthday cakes, etc.) “I have to send my kids to the best schools,”

6. Depression---(this is one result of not being able to keep up with others and one's own expectations)
7. the most devastating cover-up for shame is Suicide---“Rather than facing the disappointment or disapproval of my family and/or society, I'd rather die.”

At the core of our shame that drives us to a place of hiding, we have the desire to be known and accepted as we really are. My last point is,

Embracing our own shame through vulnerability and the gospel (Heb 12:2) and becoming an instrument of God's grace:

I grew up in an alcoholic family in Okinawa and I had significant emotional wounding and shame although I was not aware of them until much later. When I came to Washington, DC, as an international student, I came to know Christ through the love and friendship of an American hospitality family, Jack and Barbara. Jack and Barbara continued to love me even after I moved away as if I was their daughter. Some years later when I was in a dating relationship, I started to experience emotional struggles, which I found out were related to some shameful and wounding events from my past. God led me to share this painful and shameful part of my past with Jack and Barbara. After listening to my story, the first thing I heard them say to me was, “Minako, what you told us does not change a bit about how we feel about you. We love you.” The love and acceptance they displayed to me was very healing and moved me closer to them and to God.

Over the years I have continued to process my wounding and shame pertaining to these past events. The shame I carried was a combination of the same as a result of my own sins and as a result of sins committed against me, and of course, my own inherent shame as a descendent of Adam and Eve. But God gives us freedom from shame through the cross. Hebrews 12:2 says, “For the joy set before him [Jesus] endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of

the throne of God.” Through the cross Jesus not only took care of our sin but also our shame.

So in order to understand the shame that Japanese women carry in their lives and to journey with them toward healing and freedom, you need to understand and grapple with shame in your own life. Ask God to help you become aware of your own shame...how does it manifest in your own life? How do you cover it up? How can God free you from it?

Then we can discern and embrace shame in others’ lives in a redemptive way. When you accept and embrace your own shame, you can come out of hiding and you can be vulnerable about your shame with those you trust. Then they can feel safe to talk about their shame with you. Their sharing may take some time (or years) to come forth, but when you show them that you are safe and that you have also experienced shame, you’re giving them a signal that you love and accept them no matter what they may share.

As I have prayerfully and vulnerably shared my own shame with people, they have become open with me about their wounding and shame and given me permission to go to those wounded places in their hearts. It is such a privilege. God has transformed even my relationship with my sister-in-law in Japan over the years. Years ago I inadvertently shamed her when she shared her relational struggle with one of my cousins. I didn’t try to take time to understand her struggle, but instead I simply quoted a Bible verse, criticizing her for gossiping. As a result she felt judged, and she remained distant from me for several years. In the meantime I realized what I had done and sought God’s mercy and counsel and humbly tried to ease the relational tension with her. I don’t remember exactly when our relationship turned around for the better, but as I have become more vulnerable about my struggles and wounding, she has shared with me her emotional pain and fears when I see her in Okinawa and during our weekly Bible reading via Skype. I praise God for this transformation in our relationship.

To sum up, I talked about what shame is...that it is feelings that relate to our sense of identity: that we’re not OK in the core of our being. And it’s not only what the

Japanese people face but all descendants of Adam and Eve face. Shame sends us to a place of hiding despite our deep longing for being known and being accepted. I also talked about how shame can manifest in Japanese women. I then talked about dealing with our own sense of shame in order to become an instrument of God's grace and acceptance.