

201.02 | Overcoming Shame

Big Idea!

To grow in embodying love, we must face our shame. Shame is *the intensely painful feeling that we are unworthy of love and belonging*. As we learn to recognize our “shame voice” for what it is, God’s love can break through and set us free.

Overcoming Shame

As we begin to see the vows hiding beneath the surface of our lives, we can hardly avoid the topic of shame. It is shame that often triggers the creation of our vows, and it is shame which supports and maintains the false self and its agenda – to hide, to protect, to stay safe. If we want to experience a breakthrough, we must learn to recognize shame’s presence in our lives and to overcome its power.

I sometimes think that shame, mere awkward, senseless shame, does as much towards preventing good acts and straightforward happiness as any of our vices can do.

– C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

What is Shame?

How would you define “shame”?

Shame is a human experience and is becoming a prevalent topic in our culture. In 2010, Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, shared [a TED Talk on the power of vulnerability in the face of](#)

[shame](#). Brown’s presentation resonated deeply, receiving millions of views on YouTube and ranking in the top 5 TED Talks of all time.

Brown defines **shame** as *the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging*. It is a fundamental emotion that begins in the primitive parts of the brain, which are wired to signal us that we are in danger—in this case, the threat of losing the acceptance and affirmation of those who care for us.

It is important to notice the following:

- (1) Shame is a **feeling** or an **experience**, not just a set of thoughts and beliefs. In fact, shame can be an intensely **painful** experience.
- (2) There are two critical beliefs associated with shame: “**There is something wrong with me**” and “**I am unworthy of love or belonging.**”

In the Bible, we are only a few pages in before we are faced with the insidious power of shame. In Genesis 2, we read of God’s *good* world, which is crowned by His *very good* creation – you and me! We are formed “in His image,” blessed to join Him in the care and stewardship of this earth, and designed to live in community (Gen 2:18). The final verse of the chapter sums up this perfect state: *Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.* – Genesis 2:25 (NIV)

Yet, the narrative continues. In Genesis 3, we witness the disastrous results of Adam and Eve’s decision to doubt God’s goodness and go their own way. It is at this point that shame enters the world for the very first time. *Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden.* (Genesis 3:7-8)

Instead of seeing God man sees himself.

– Dietrich Bonhoeffer

To be clear, our first parents were guilty, partaking of what God explicitly put out of bounds. But beyond their transgression, notice the entrance of shame: “*they realized they were naked*” (the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed) and “*they hid from the Lord God*” (and therefore unworthy of love and belonging). It’s important to realize: God didn’t speak these things over them – they accused and passed judgment upon themselves.

Shame, Guilt & Embarrassment

Considering language differences, it's important to distinguish between the human experiences of shame, guilt, and embarrassment:

- **Guilt** is a normal, healthy emotion that lets us know when we have violated our sense of right and wrong. Given to us by God, guilt prompts us to clean up our messes and seek forgiveness. When we have done that, the feeling of guilt lessens. Although we may still have feelings of sincere regret, the guilt loses its power over time.
- When we are **embarrassed**, we tend to understand that we are experiencing something that happens to everyone and we don't tend to think that we are personally defective or unworthy. Although we may want to run and hide at first, we are also likely to want to tell someone what happened to us, maybe as a funny story. Like guilt, when handled in a healthy way, embarrassment diminishes over time.
- **Shame**, on the other hand, grows in intensity if it goes unaddressed. It flourishes in secret and makes us feel compelled to hide from others, either literally or figuratively. Sometimes shame can be tied to a specific event, but often it is just a general feeling that "there's something wrong with me." There is a strong correlation between shame and perfectionism.

Note: In the Bible, the distinction between "guilt" and "shame" is fuzzy at times. In some cases, it seems we are told to be "ashamed" for our sin (for example, see Jeremiah 3:21, 25; 8:12a). But the overwhelming testimony of Scripture is that shame should not be a regular experience of God's people (see Psalm 31:1, 16-17; 34:4-5; Isaiah 50:7-9; 61:2, 7-8). In any case, we find it helpful to distinguish clearly between the two for the purposes of this conversation.

***In the New Testament, there's only one kind of sin:
The kind that God has forgiven in Christ.
The invitation is to trust that this is actually true.***

- Rob Bell ¹

How Does Shame Relate To Our Vows?

Let's use Adam and Eve's experience to illustrate how shame is connected to our vows and patterns of brokenness. We see a really clear picture of this in Gen. 3:7-8:

¹ Rob Bell, "What is the Bible? Part 59: Sin." <http://robbellcom.tumblr.com/post/80913487032/what-is-the-bible-part-59-sin> (accessed February 2, 2015).

They realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves...and they hid from the Lord God.

We've said that shame is the feeling that something is wrong with us. A vow, then, is the decision we make to "show up" differently in the world, so that others won't be able to see what's wrong with us. For Adam and Eve, their nakedness was the source of their shame. They felt like something was wrong with them and didn't want anyone else to see them that way, so they covered themselves with fig leaves. In this illustration, the decision to cover themselves with fig leaves is like making a vow. You can imagine the internal dialogue going something like this when they first realized they were naked:

"There's something wrong with me. I'm not supposed to be like this. What if somebody else sees? That can't happen. I won't let that happen. I'll cover myself up if I have to. Yeah, maybe if I cover myself up, no one will see me for what I really am."

Do you see the shift from shame to vows? It's a quick, almost seamless jump from "there's something wrong with me" to "this is how I will show up in the world to make sure no one finds out." And thus, the false self is born – that version of ourselves that we present to the world in order to protect our true self from scrutiny and shame. And out of our false self flow patterns of brokenness. If Adam and Eve's vow was "I will never let anyone see my nakedness," their pattern of brokenness was hiding from God.

Your family, like mine, is marked by the consequences of the disobedience of our first parents as described in Genesis 3. Shame, secrets, lies, betrayals, relationship breakdowns, disappointments, and unresolved longings for unconditional love lie beneath the veneer of even the most respectable families.

– Peter Scazzero²

And doesn't it work much the same way for us? We make vows in an attempt to diminish our shame, and then we continue living into them to ensure that we never have to feel that way again. ("So that I won't feel unworthy, undeserving, or unloved, I will..." or "I will never...") For Adam and Eve, there was probably a certain amount of guilt mixed up with their shame. But we often experience shame even in situations where we've done nothing wrong – when we were hurt or wounded, when we were rejected or humiliated, when a legitimate need wasn't met. Sometimes we even feel shame for having those legitimate needs in the first place!

² *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, p13

Over time, the false “way of being” becomes so ingrained that we forget who God created us to be and start to believe that this is the way things have always been. We forget something that God put deep in our hearts when He created us - that we were meant to share in the very life of God, walking in boundless freedom by His side.

What connections do you see between your experience of shame and your vow?

The Gospel & God’s Grace

Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame. He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? Let us face each other! Who is my accuser? Let him confront me! It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me. Who will condemn me? – Isaiah 50:7-9 (NIV)

Living in shame denies the power of the Gospel and the possibilities of grace. Although we “*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23), that is not the shame that most of us feel. We are not talking about the experience of our common human fallenness. When we are in shame, we feel that we are *uniquely* flawed. Shame does not say, “There is something wrong with us.” It says, “There is something wrong with *me*.”

While guilt convicts and prompts us to ask for and receive forgiveness, shame drives us to hide from God and others, and it refuses to be forgiven. We cling to our unworthiness and reject the message of the Gospel, that “*in Christ there is no condemnation*” (Romans 8:1), that we are called to love others as we love ourselves.

Take a moment and meditate upon a snapshot of God’s grace toward us by reading Romans 8. For an especially fresh reading, take a look at [Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of the chapter in *The Message*](#).³ Journal your impressions here:

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³ See [Appendix B](#) –OR- <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=romans%208&version=MSG>

When God thinks of you, love swells in his heart and a smile comes to his face. God bursts with love for humans. He is far from being emotionally uninvolved with his creation. God’s bias toward us is strong, persistent and positive. The Christian God chooses to be known as Love, and that love pervades every aspect of God’s relationship with us.

- David Benner ⁴

Our “Way of Being” in the Face of Shame

Because shame is helping to create and reinforce your vows, shame also helps to create your patterns of brokenness. When you are “in shame,” you have a way of being. According to Karen Horney, we learn in childhood and adolescence to do some combination of the following:

- We may “**move toward**”—developing patterns of compliance and seeking approval, even at the expense of our sense of self.
- We may “**move away**” by distancing, avoiding, and hiding.
- We may “**move against**” and act out patterns of conflict, persuasion, or trying to change others, even with the best of intentions.

These ways of dealing with shame become entrenched patterns in our lives, learned in childhood or adolescence. Whatever we do, we do unconsciously, as part of our “default” way of being. We may even be unaware that there are other ways of responding. When we see these behaviors in ourselves, it’s time to consider the possibility that we are dealing with shame.

As if that weren’t challenging enough, shame is also activated when we begin to deal with our vows in healthy ways. This happens in two ways.

- **As we acknowledge areas of brokenness, woundedness, or need:** We want to act as if we have it all together, so we feel shame when we begin to confront areas of

⁴ *Surrender to Love*, p16

disobedience or wounding. Even the simple act of acknowledging that we have legitimate needs that weren't met can stir up shame.

- **As we step into new ways of beings:** As we begin to experience transformation, our actions may provide the most intense feelings of shame. Why? Because our old vows “worked” for us. They kept us safe. As we live into new ways of being, we may feel particularly susceptible to feeling re-wounded.

We can also become particularly ashamed about our ineffective efforts to change. Living into a new way of being is challenging and it will not happen quickly. If we are not careful, shame will creep in and cut off the transformation process.

But don't despair—just as shame teaches us a “way of being,” we can learn to be different in the face of shame. Although shame may seem like an overwhelming force at times, there are some very simple steps we can take that will begin to lessen its power in our lives.

Steps to Quieting the “Shame Voice”

1. Recognize your shame

Although shame is primarily a feeling, attached to the feeling are thoughts. These thoughts are usually repetitive and predictable, often laced with profanity and accusations. Here are some common thoughts that accompany the feeling of shame:

- “I'm never good enough. I'm worthless.”
- “What's wrong with me? Try harder.”
- “Who do you think you are?”
- “Stupid, stupid, stupid” or other name-calling
- “If you really knew me (or knew this secret about me), you would reject me.”



In the Faithwalking community, we call this aspect of our internal dialogue the “shame voice.” The very first step in quieting your “shame voice” is to become aware of what it is and how it speaks to you. This might sound strange, but before we can learn to ignore our “shame voice,” we must actually take time to listen to it closely. This is because, for many people, it is such a constant companion that we are not even conscious of the way it affects us. Disparaging thoughts have spun around and around in our minds for so long that we have come to accept them as the truth, rather than as lies that we can choose to accept or reject. Even worse, many people mistake their

shame voice for the voice of God. So take a minute to reflect on the last time you felt overwhelmed by shame – what was the internal dialogue spinning in your mind?

What does your “shame voice” say?

<i>Pause for a moment to acknowledge that this is not the voice of God.</i>

In the beginning, you may only be able to recognize your shame voice “in the rear view mirror.” While reflecting on some negative experience, you’ll realize that the track playing in your mind was your shame voice. Over time, it will become easier and easier to identify, so that even as those thoughts enter your mind, you will see them for what they are and be able to put them aside as untruths.

2. Receive God’s love

Here’s a terrifying thought: what if we recognize our shame voice, but we still kind of believe that what it says is true? It says: *You suck*, and you think, “Yeah, I kinda do.” It says: *What’s wrong with you?* And you think, “What is wrong with me? Seriously, something’s wrong with me.”

Facing our shame can be terrifying. These are the places we most desperately want to keep hidden, the things about ourselves that feel most unworthy, most unlovable. So why would we go through the painful experience of actually confronting our shame? Wouldn’t it be easier to just pretend it’s not there and get on with life? David Benner speaks to this fear in his book *Surrender to Love*:

“It is the things in ourselves that we refuse to face that have the greatest potential to tyrannize us. To deny the reality of fears is not to know ourselves, and then we risk becoming possessed by that which we refuse to face.” (p 49-50)

It may seem easier to ignore the things we’ve managed to keep hidden all these years, but the truth is that as long as shame has power over us, we will continue to seek refuge in our vows. Once we bring our shame into the light, it will begin to lose its power over us, and we will begin to see our vows for the unnecessary limitations that they are.

Of course, bringing our shame into the light is no easy task. Again, from Benner:

*“If it were easy to face our fears, we would have already done so. So something must be different to allow you to really face things you previously avoided. That difference is love. **The courage to face unpleasant aspects of our inner self comes from feeling deeply loved.** It also comes from the assurance that we are safe. Our gaze needs to go back and forth between divine love and our fears. We gain courage to face our fears as we soak in love.” (p 50, emphasis added)*

It is only when we bring our shame into God’s presence and let Him speak over us that we are able to see ourselves as He sees us. His words shatter our shame and allow us to walk in confidence as beloved children. As we spend more and more time listening to His voice and receiving His love, we will experience ever increasing courage to face whatever else may be lurking inside of us. As we experience God’s compassion toward us, we will learn, in time, to extend that same compassion to ourselves.

Take a moment and bring to mind the areas in your life where you feel the most shame. What areas have you taken great energy to keep hidden? What makes you feel most unlovable?

Bring these things into God’s presence and ask Him what He thinks about them. Ask Him how He feels about that particular aspect of who you are. Be as authentic as you can and let Him speak over you.

God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.

- Psalm 103:8 ⁵

3. Reach out to others

Once we have received courage from sitting in God’s presence, we can deliver shame its final blow by sharing our experience with a trusted friend. Because shame thrives in secrecy, we fight it by being authentic about our experience, even being willing to say, “I’m feeling shame right now.” When we reach out and share our stories, we realize that we’re not alone.

⁵ See also [Exodus 34:6](#), [Numbers 14:18](#), [Nehemiah 9:17](#), [Psalm 86:15](#), [Joel 2:13](#), [Jonah 4:2](#)

We often act like there are two kinds of people: those who give help and those who need help. Actually, we are both kinds of people all the time. It can be difficult to ask for help from a coach or a friend. When you are in shame, the last thing you want to do is engage in a coaching call. But consider the possibility that receiving compassion from a coach or friend is exactly what you need in those moments. Like any new skill, self-disclosure in moments of shame is incredibly difficult at first. However, as you make a practice of authenticity in this area, it will become easier and you will begin to experience the healing that comes from God in community.

While we may never fully eliminate the effects of shame, we can significantly lessen its power in our lives. As this happens, we will increasingly be able to embody God's love, confident in our identity as beloved children.

Week of _____

- (1) Read Session Five of the Faithwalking 101 Notebook—“[Vows: Looking Back, Moving Forward.](#)” (□)
- (2) Set aside at least 30–45 minutes for solitude. (□)
 - a. Think of one **recent** experience where you felt shame, and one **past** experience (from childhood or adolescence). What was the experience? What triggered it? What were you present to physically and emotionally? What does your "shame voice" typically say? Write down your observations in a journal or express them artistically.
 - b. Bring your shame into the presence of God. Ask God to speak to you through the Scripture passages below. Choose a few and meditate⁶ on them, taking as much time for each as you wish:

Ps 23, 91, 131 | Isaiah 43:1-4, 49:14-16 | Hosea 11:1-4 | Matt 10:29-31 | Rom 8:31-39

201 Homework Track: Vows #2

- (3) Work to clarify the **meaning** behind your vow. (□)

Review the work you've done around vows in previous assignments. Thinking back to the memories that have come to mind, consider what **meaning** you made in the midst of those experiences and notice where shame was/is present. (Look back at [Facing the Obstacles](#) in 201.1 for a review of meanings vs. vows.)

Journal or process out loud around the following questions:

 - a. What meaning(s) did you make as a result of painful formative experiences?
 - b. How does this meaning connect with what you've learned about shame?
 - c. What role did shame play in the formation of your vow?
 - d. Where is shame still present when you think about your vow?

- (4) **Speak out at least one thing you've seen about your shame to a trusted friend.**

Connection is the enemy of shame - speaking out what you become aware of is the most effective way to decrease your shame. (□)

⁶ A note on meditation from David Benner - "Christian meditation is like spiritual daydreaming. Rather than analyzing or thinking about the passage, simply let yourself soak in it. There is no need to do anything with the words you read. Instead, let them do something to you. ... Transformation demands more than a momentary experience of love. It demands sufficient basking in this love that being deeply loved becomes the foundation of your identity." – Surrender to Love, p32

Week of _____

- (1) **Write a journal entry in which you reflect on connections between shame and your experience of God:** (□)
- a. Where does shame show up in your relationship with God?
 - b. Think back to the messages you were given about God as a child - where was shame present?
- (2) **Engage in meditative daydreaming.** The following meditation is adapted from David Benner's *Surrender to Love*. You will need at least **20 minutes** of solitude to engage it fully. Select one of the following brief scenes and engage in meditative daydreaming. Picture yourself in each situation. Observe, listen and note all the sensory elements of each scene. Notice your feelings. Pay close attention to Jesus. Allow the experience to begin to teach you about being deeply loved. (□)
- a. Matthew 19:13-15 – Join Jesus as people bring little children to him to be blessed. Picture yourself coming to Jesus as one of those little children. Crawl up on his knee and feel his touch as he lays his hands on you and blesses you.
 - b. Matthew 22:1-14 – Read these words about the invitation to a wedding feast as if they were an invitation to you to bring all the lame, broken, and fearful parts of yourself into the banquet of love being prepared for you by the God of perfect love. Dare to bring these neglected parts with you. There is space reserved for each, and each is welcome in the circle of God's love. Allow these neglected parts of yourself to enjoy the warmth of God's love as they are honored with special treatment.
 - c. Or choose another scene from the gospels and try to engage it this way. (e.g., Luke 15:17-24, Mark 1:40-42, John 11:32-36)

201 Homework Track: "Breathe Out" #2

- (3) **Share the learning with a friend.** Consider: Who in your life might be encouraged by hearing the things you're learning about shame? Share with them anything from this session - e.g. the concept of a "shame voice," the 3 antidotes to shame, the difference between shame and guilt, etc. (□)

Appendix: Excerpts from Romans 8 (The Message)

With the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah, that fateful dilemma is resolved. Those who enter into Christ's being-here-for-us no longer have to live under a continuous, low-lying black cloud. A new power is in operation. The Spirit of life in Christ, like a strong wind, has magnificently cleared the air, freeing you from a fated lifetime of brutal tyranny at the hands of sin and death. God went for the jugular when he sent his own Son. He didn't deal with the problem as something remote and unimportant. In his Son, Jesus, he personally took on the human condition, entered the disordered mess of struggling humanity in order to set it right once and for all. (1-3)

This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It's adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike "What's next, [Daddy]?" God's Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who he is, and we know who we are: Father and children. And we know we are going to get what's coming to us—an unbelievable inheritance! We go through exactly what Christ goes through. If we go through the hard times with him, then we're certainly going to go through the good times with him! (15-17)

All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's within us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don't see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy. (22-25)

Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. He knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good. (26-28)

God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son. The Son stands first in the line of humanity he restored. We see the original and intended shape of our lives there in him. After God made that decision of what his children should be like, he followed it up by calling people by name. After he called them by name, he set them on a solid basis

with himself. And then, after getting them established, he stayed with them to the end, gloriously completing what he had begun. (29-30)

So, what do you think? **With God on our side like this, how can we lose?** If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing himself to the worst by sending his own Son, is there anything else he wouldn't gladly and freely do for us? And who would dare tangle with God by messing with one of God's chosen? Who would dare even to point a finger? **The One who died for us—who was raised to life for us!—is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us.** Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture...

None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. **I'm absolutely convinced that nothing**—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—**absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love** because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us. (31-39)