



The Cud...a little something to chew on.

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Shame, Guilt and David Mamet

In David Mamet's compelling movie, *The Edge*, there's a piece of dialogue I've never forgotten. During the film, three men find themselves stranded in the wilderness, chased by an angry bear and struggling for survival. They grow angry with themselves and their circumstances. And in an effort to motivate his companions, the older character played by Anthony Hopkins recounts something he once read: "Most people lost in the wild, they die of shame. They wonder 'What did I do wrong? How could I have gotten myself into this?' And so they sit there and they die."

Shame can immobilize the best of us. But not all shame is created equal. It's one thing to be ashamed of getting yourself lost in the great outdoors; it's another to be ashamed of behavior that betrays the Lord you claim to follow. Nothing knocks the wind out of you quite like the sickening realization that you're not who you thought you were or who you ought to be. Disappointment in oneself can be paralyzing from the neck down and disorienting from the neck up. For repeat offenders (and who isn't?), repetitive disillusionment only amplifies the distress.

Yet shame's potential to paralyze doesn't mean that it's altogether unhealthy. Shame is a normal by-product of sin and guilt. And it's an uncomfortable but necessary step toward repentance and restoration. Shame indicates the presence of a conscience, and ideally, fosters a humble and contrite spirit – qualities our Lord calls indispensable (Isaiah 66:2; Psalm 51:17).

Years ago I heard someone draw a distinction between guilt and shame that went something like this: Guilt is the recognition of a wrong done, shame is the feeling of disgrace that results from guilt. Guilt admits, "I was wrong." Shame laments, "I can't believe that was me."

God's answer to my guilt is His gracious promise of forgiveness based on the sacrifice of Christ. But forgiveness doesn't necessarily alleviate my feelings of shame. I can be counting on God's forgiveness judicially, but relationally, still feel alienated from myself and from Him. In short, I can believe I am forgiven but still feel deeply ashamed.

After years of waging the same battles with my sharp tongue, my short fuse and my asinine attitudes, I'm frequently filled with self-loathing. It's hard enough looking at my own face in the mirror; I can't imagine looking my Lord in the face. I believe God is gracious, but knowing myself as I do (and not as well as He does), sometimes it can be hard to believe that He would continue to be gracious to me. In the worst of times, my shame tempts me to give up any hope that I can actually be "found" and delivered from this wilderness of sin.

And then I discover hope in the oddest place. I find hope, not so much in God's grace (though it's a close runner-up), as in His omniscient election.

Over the years, the only thing that has prevented me from "dying in the wild because of shame" is my belief that the Lord knew what He was getting when He bought me. History is not unfolding for God the way it is for you and me. He sees the end from the beginning. I surprise myself, but I never surprise Him ([Psalm 139](#)). And since God always makes His redemptive purchases with full disclosure, He's never subject to buyer's remorse.

In human relationships, the unforeseen is always a threat. Whether it's a skeleton in the closet or a fresh carcass, the potential for surprise can lodge uneasiness and uncertainty between two people. Conversely, nothing is unforeseen for God and He has no uncertainty with regard to you and me. The Lord will never look at us and say, "If I had known you were going to do *that*, I never would have chosen you." Nor will He say, "Now that I see how slow you are to respond, I can't keep you in My family any longer."

I may sadden my heavenly Father, but I don't surprise Him. Again, He knew what He was getting when He bought and adopted me. My sense of security and my ultimate comfort isn't rooted in my performance, but in His all-knowing, sovereign and gracious commitment.

Which brings me to what prompted my musings in the first place: The New Year I wanted, and the New Year I got. A New Year rolls off the calendar like a new car rolling off the lot. There are no scratches, no stains, and it has that unmistakable smell – the smell of hope. The hope of a better *me*. Of course the "newness" of the year is little more than a ledger entry, but I still love the symbolism of a fresh start, a clean slate and a new day – it plays into my perfectionism, well, perfectly.

After only a month of road testing 2006, I've managed to do more than just scratch the paint. I've spoken regrettable words, I've acted in regrettable ways, and I've had to apologize to at least one cab driver. The accident report is looking hauntingly familiar. The only thing I've done well this year is to procrastinate.

Looking over my dinged and dented year, the perfectionist in me wants to start over – or hurry to the next symbolic, new beginning. The defeatist in me figures, since I've already ruined the paint why not drive with abandon? But the Spirit in me reminds me that I don't need a perfect driving record, nor do I need a shorter calendar with more figurative fresh starts. What I need is endurance. I need to press on. I need to persist in the journey of faith, with all its demands, and all my deficiencies. "For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised" (Hebrews 10:36).

Shame gives way to hope because He who "knows the end from the beginning...chose us in Him before the foundation of the world...and He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Isaiah 46:10; Ephesians 1:4; Philippians 1:6).

"I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13-14).

By His grace. For His glory. Until that day.

David