

## *“No Shame!”*

*Psalm 146; Romans 1:8-17*

September 25, 2022

I remember many years ago taking an art class at Charlotte Country Day. It was a class on sculpting with clay and to say I wasn't a very diligent student would be an understatement of correct proportions. I was a senior in high school and cared very little for things other than parties and coeds at the time, much to my parent's chagrin. But this class had a final project. We were supposed to make some Greek god or goddess and present it to the class. Well, not having worked very hard (or at all really) on it, what I had to present was, well, laughable. It was especially embarrassing when it was compared to the last classmate who presented right before me. Wouldn't you know it, the student who presented her beautiful piece on Aphrodite was a girl named Krista. Krista, just so you know, had walloped me pretty good in an election to be class president so I was already feeling a little touchy around her to begin with. But then to have her present her truly amazing work on clay before my own was especially embarrassing. In fact, as I was up there with my poorly executed lump of Hercules, I was ashamed of what I had done.

Shame, as it would turn out, is a very corrosive emotion and can come about for many reasons in the course of our lifetimes. It can cause us to be silent when we ought to be proclaiming the gospel and it's identified by our Author Paul as being something of concern for Christians who handle the Gospel. Paul, as we've noted, is our author of Romans and two things bear very heavily on this particular letter. First of all, that he's writing this letter to a congregation he does not know yet. In other letters of Paul, he's addressing groups he knew well having evangelized in the region. In Romans though, he's speaking to a relatively unknown group of individuals. He knows some but not nearly all of this burgeoning group of Christians in Rome. Because he doesn't know them, Paul goes to extra lengths to explain his understanding of the Gospel in order to avoid confusion. It's for this reason that Romans can be so thick a work. It is thick because it is necessarily meant to carry the weight of the theology of the Christian faith.

The second item requiring our attention is that Paul writes Romans as a changed man. As we know and have talked about over the last couple of weeks, Paul wasn't always Paul. In fact, he was born Saul, a faithful Pharisaical Jew. A Jew who was furthermore entrusted with persecuting the Gospel and followers of Jesus from the Sanhedrin, the highest authority in the Jewish territory outside of their Roman overlords. Yet this Saul had seen his life turned around on the road to Damascus. There, he's confronted by Jesus Christ, blinded and led into protective care. As he emerges from his blindness, Paul is energized by the Holy Spirit and set upon the work of evangelism. Very early on, Paul is authorized by Jesus' followers in Jerusalem to share the Gospel with the Gentiles. And, to that end, Paul is amazingly successful. But one should never overlook the fact that his success is likely linked to his persecution from previous times. Paul would've likely known more about Christianity because of the people he'd persecuted. People like Stephen, the very first Deacon in the Church. Paul is present at his stoning execution.

Paul is, as I've said, a changed man. A man who had seen his priorities completely altered. The very person in Jesus he'd gone out to persecute had become his master. Now, Paul felt an obligation to the Gospel. Having been saved, Paul now felt obligated by God to share this same message with the world that had brought him so much comfort and joy. And, although his turnaround is quite spectacular, we can't overlook the fact that all Christians have been changed in a very real, very sustainable way. We've all been acted upon by the Holy Spirit of God. We declare things to be truths that a great many people disagree with.

Have you been changed? This is a vital question to ask and one that is seldom considered within mainline denominational churches. Can you look back on points in your life and say, yes, unequivocally, I am no longer that person? These are the kinds of changes that the Holy Spirit brings about. Even though you might not have been blinded by the Gospel, there should be some point at which there was movement away from the darkness and into the light.

We believe that Jesus Christ is the only means to be saved from the wrath of God which is rightly and richly deserved by us, sinners. These statements alone are the kind of comments which are richly rejected by today's society. They are mocked as being fanciful beliefs by people who don't quite have their heads screwed on right in the first place. After all, everyone knows the only person who can save you is yourself, right? But that's not what we say. We Christians have the audacity to lift high the cross and declare that Jesus Christ is the only way

to salvation, that He alone is the way, the truth and the life and that no one comes to the Father apart from Him. And those kinds of claims are going to put us at odds with the world around us from time to time. It's for that reason Paul claims that "he is not ashamed of the Gospel."

What does it mean to be ashamed? John Piper, a Christian pastor, uses four illustrations to help us see what shame really is and how we need to be relieved of it. First, he asks us to imagine, four different shame-based scenarios.

*First*, suppose a boy brags to his friends that he can outrun the skinny new kid in the neighborhood. So, the kids set up a race — say, once around the block. Both boys walk the route and see where all the obstacles are and where the turns are made. Then they line up. The neighborhood kids are all out watching. Someone says, "Ready. Set. Go!" And the bragging boy is simply left in the dust. The skinny new guy finishes 40 or 50 yards ahead of the braggart. When that happens, it is very likely that the braggart feels ashamed. He feels that he has made a fool of himself. *Second*, suppose someone you don't like at school has a dad who is in jail. And suppose that you make fun of him for this and call him names and point out to people that his dad is a crook. And you boast that your dad is a successful financial officer at a major bank. Then one day you go home to the terrible news that your dad has been arrested and charged with embezzling hundreds of thousands of dollars. The next day you don't even want to go to school because you are so ashamed—both of your father and of yourself. *Third*, suppose you put a lot of stock in how you look—having your hair just the way it is supposed to be and your clothes in perfect taste. You are invited to a party and you check with people whom you think are reliable advisers about what to wear and how to look. But when you get there, you realize that you are totally wrong in the way you dressed. You are so embarrassed that you don't want to go into the room. *Finally*, suppose you have a part in a play—just a small one perhaps, because you are nervous and not very good at acting. Maybe you have two lines at some key point in the play. You memorize the lines. The play begins. Your heart pounds out of your chest. The audience is large. Everyone is doing beautifully and setting a high standard. Your moment is drawing near. And at the exact moment, you freeze. You try to say the two lines. Everybody is looking at you. But you can't do it. Someone whispers to you your lines—o no avail. Somehow, they get around you. You run off the stage, and want to run off the planet. You feel so ashamed.

We all know what it is to be embarrassed—or to be ashamed. What would keep you from being embarrassed or ashamed in situations like that? Well, one answer would be that stronger legs would have kept you from losing the race and being put to shame by the new skinny guy. And a more honest dad would not have embezzled, so you wouldn't be ashamed of him. And with better counsel from your friend, you wouldn't have dressed all wrong for the party. And better nerves in front of a group would have let you remember your lines and speak them with excellence. *In other words, you could avoid being ashamed if you and your family and friends could always keep yourselves in the best light and never let anyone feel negative things about you.*

Now when Paul says in [Romans 1:16](#) that he is "*not ashamed of the gospel*," is this what keeps him from being ashamed? Does he escape being ashamed because he keeps himself in the best light? No. Exactly the opposite. Believing and preaching the gospel constantly put Paul in a bad light. It constantly stirred up other people to shame Paul. He gives us a list of ways that he was shamed in the ministry of the gospel (in [2 Corinthians 11:23–26](#)): "*In far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren.*" In other words, Paul's way of not being ashamed of the gospel was *not* that he could keep himself in the best light or that he had enough savvy that people always liked him and approved what he did. Look back at [Romans 1:14](#): "*I am under obligation [I am debtor] both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish.*" When Paul looked out on the huge world of unbelief in his day, he felt a debt to all. He didn't look with utter disdain on the pagans of his day.

Paul really felt that obligation as a changed man. Paul would've known acutely the wrath of God he himself deserved. Yet Paul knew he was spared this by a loving, merciful God who acted through Jesus Christ in a way specified prophesized by the Old Testament, we talked about that last week, how Romans embraces the New Testament as the means by which Jesus Christ was proclaimed before his arrival.

What this means is that it isn't by sanitizing the Gospel that we are somehow freed from being ashamed, rather that the Gospel is a cause for shame in a world set on its own destruction. What does that mean now to you not being ashamed? Know that the world will shame you for believing as a Christian. Consider this, to the world, resurrection is ludicrous. It doesn't happen and you shouldn't believe in it. Yet we hold that it is the power of the resurrection that declares Jesus to be exactly who he claimed to be, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. What you need to know is that if you're doing this thing well, the world will be trying to shame you, trying desperately to silent you. If you're already silent, you're not doing your job the right way.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.