

Shame

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] That's... Well, I think we have to pray still, so let's just bow our heads for a moment.

And our God, as we are gathered for these few minutes together in this place, and as we have the enormous subject and complex subject of shame, we ask that by your word and through the working of your Holy Spirit, that you will allow me to speak and all of us to hear the things that you are saying to us concerning something which is deeply personal.

Father, because some of us have a fairly low opinion of ourselves, we want your Holy Spirit to guard us from despair.

Because some of us have a very high opinion of ourselves, we want you to guard us from the great illusion. So grant us grace now to see your word and to hear it and to obey it.

In Christ's name. Amen. Father, I'm sorry, man. Which is the other mic?

[1 : 50] Oh, I see this one over here. Okay. All right.

All right. All right. I've got it. This is getting to be a more highly technological process week by week. The first passage is the one from Genesis, which is sort of the discovery of shame at the dawn of history, when Adam and Eve in the garden discovered they were naked, and when God came to visit.

Same in all of us, that when somebody comes to visit, we look around our house and want to cover up a little of the general melee that's there.

So out of this story, there comes three basic questions. The first one is, is where? And this is, I don't know whether you can see this.

Anyway, the answer is that they're hiding. The second one is, who? That is, who told you you were naked? And the answer is, of course, that somehow deep within them was the reality of their nakedness.

[3 : 22] And they had before been quite unconcerned, and now we're deeply concerned about it. In the Jerusalem Bible, it goes on to a third question, which isn't worded quite the same way in the text that you have in front of you.

And it asks the question, why? That is, why did you have to eat the forbidden fruit? Why were you compelled to do that? And of course, those are three sort of basic questions that everybody has to face in terms of their own life.

And the way I want to deal with those three questions is to talk about, to try and talk in a personal way about my secret self of whom I am ashamed.

And that is that this is my world here. This is the side that everybody sees. Here I am. And this is the side which is cloaked in darkness and nobody sees.

So that you get to this side, which is your public image. And this is your personal awareness of yourself. And this is where Adam and Eve knew themselves before God.

[4 : 41] And this is where they started to hide. And we try and make sure that this side of our life is hidden because shame is a reality of that side of our life.

Now, it's a convention that we have. And, you know, I live with the happy assumption that you think better than the truth of me.

And I suspect you live with the fact that Harry thinks, I think, better than the truth of him.

And so we're both quite happy and we can reciprocate it, you know, that you think I think better of you than actually you are. And you think better of me than actually I am.

And that's how society works. And so that's the world in which we live. But I have this sense that there are things of which I don't want you to know about my life.

[5 : 58] And the reason is, basically, because I don't think you could handle it. You know, so I try and keep them from you for your benefit, you know, so that you don't have to you don't have to deal

with that.

And that kind of benevolence goes on, you know, that when you misbehave, you don't tell your wife because she couldn't really handle it. So, well, you could go on from there and see how the story develops.

But it's that kind of thinking. So, the difficulty with all this is, and I'm very conscious of this as the minister of a church, is that one of the great functions of religious activity is they help to enshroud this more deeply.

And they, you know, tend to develop this part of you more. So that what you do in going to church is to enhance this side of your life and vary more deeply this side of your life.

And that's what religion is for in the minds of most people. So that you discover, as I think Karl Barth pointed out, that the best place to hide from God or from the gospel is in church.

[7 : 19] You know, you never look for you there. It's almost like, you know, if you've murdered somebody, it would be good for you to get put in jail for five years for robbing \$10,000 so that nobody will find out what you've really done because you're in jail anyway.

And they won't discover the reality. Well, that's the way we use church sometimes, is that it's a kind of place where you can hide from the deeper realities of your life. And I apologize that that's the case, but that's the way human beings tend to use religion.

The fact of the matter is, of course, that while the church is the best place to hide, the pulpit is the best place in the church to hide. And it's quite a lot easier telling other people that they're going to hell in a handbasket than to face your own judgment on your own life.

And it's a bit startling to find out that Martin Luther, in his usual blunt way, said that the road to hell is paved with priest skulls.

That's that sense, because it's a very dangerous place to be. Underneath all this, you see, is something, and this is where we get into the counseling business in a big, big way, is counselors come along and say to you, what about this person over here?

[9 : 03] And the thing that the counselors are after in a sort of general principles is, is that you will begin to acknowledge this person and the sense that this person has been abandoned, that they are God forsaken and man forsaken, and they live with the fear that this person, when he is discovered, that this person will be totally eliminated, and this will be all you're left with, is this person over here, who is a kind of God forsaken person anyway.

And then they go deeper than that, and they find out that deep in your heart is the sense that not only are you forsaken by man and God, you've forsaken yourself because basically you look on yourself as one of God's mistakes, and that you hope that nobody will find out.

And so this is the thing of which we are ashamed, and this is what we lock in the cupboard so that nobody sees it.

And the difficulty is, of course, that we, lots of us are really quite successful at it, and we manage to do it. There's a, I mean, an interesting story of a young doctor and his wife.

And the doctor started administering drugs to himself to the point where he had this large practice, and he was maintaining this large practice and fighting this terrible battle.

[10 : 38] He and his wife knew what the problem was, but nobody else did, until somebody from the medical association came along and put the finger on him and lifted his license.

He said, thank you very, very much. Because he just couldn't stand it any longer. You know, he couldn't go on with the duplicity. And that was a great relief to him that somebody even came along and said, look, you can't go on like this.

So this is the, this is how we lock ourselves in the cupboard. And when a homosexual says he's come out of the cupboard, what he means is that this guy here, who we didn't want to tell you about, is now public.

And I think that that can be very therapeutic in some ways, but we have a fair amount of perversity to deal with in any sense.

So what I want to tell you about secondly then is another, another kind of world in which we live.

And this, this is a world which looks like this.

[11 : 49] And you can see this, can you? It's, it's a world, a broken world, which is held together with string.

And I use that broken world image because that's what Gordon McDonald used when he wrote his book, you know, recovering, you know, remaking your broken world.

I think that's the name of it. And he described in a very personal way, how he, as a very senior Christian elder in the United States, a very senior pastor and Christian writer, got clobbered, you know, by a personal circumstance that disgraced him publicly and, and tore his family apart and everything else.

And he's, he's lived through it. And he's lived through his broken world. And you know how we get caught in the situation where we're, we're afraid that the cracks in our world will begin to widen and our world will fall apart.

And so we, we struggle to tie it together as best we can to hold our world together against the eventuality, which we all regard as almost unthinkable.

[13 : 09] And I think that's why Gordon McDonald's book is such a help, because his world came apart. And a number of years ago.

And he's, he's working at putting it all back together again. He says that there are far more broken worlds out there than anyone realizes or admits.

You know, that, that, that are being held together with Scotch tape and crazy glue maybe. But that, that, that, that that is a fairly universal kind of experience.

That there is a broken world which we're holding together so that the, the thing we fear is that it, it won't be revealed. He goes on to say, and these are just, these are just chapter headings from his book, but they, they tell a story in themselves.

He said, almost no one bears a heavier load than the carrier of personal secrets of the past or present. You know, you know, you know where the great fissures are, along, along which line your world is going to collapse.

[14 : 24] And you know where the weaknesses are and you know how, perhaps, perhaps visibly or perhaps quietly your world could come apart.

And he says, the person who carries a secret has sentenced himself to a dungeon, you know, that, uh, locking this secret in.

And, uh, and you, you are really imprisoned by it, by trying to hold your world together. He also quotes D.K. Chesterton, uh, to deal with our smugness and D.K. Chesterton was very good at that. He said, the only spiritual disease is thinking that one is quite well. And, uh, I, you know, that that's, uh, I think fairly penetrating, uh, in terms of my experience.

And he warns about this thing, about how the fissures come, how the breakdown comes. He says, when the body and the emotions and the minds and your mind is stretched to the limit, which is almost a way of life for many people.

[15 : 36] When your body, emotions and mind are stretched to the limit, the risk of sinful choices climbs out of sight. And, uh, so that, uh, we are very subject to this kind of thing happening to us.

And only we just desperately hold the world together for fear of the shame that's involved. And so, uh, what you need, what all of us need, uh, is a church community, a Christian community, in which, uh, uh, the people who can handle your broken world.

Who can help you to put it together again. You know, so that you don't have to spend all your time in this sort of a desperate effort to hold your world together.

And, uh, somebody who can come along and say to you what God said to Adam and Eve. Where are you?

Why are you hiding? Why did you have to eat the forbidden fruit? Why? Because once you can sort of face those questions, then your world can begin to be put back together again.

[16 : 58] See, but most, I mean, our, our, our whole tendency humanly is that we don't want to face those questions. Uh, until, I mean, we put them off as long as we can.

Now, the third picture I want to show you, uh, there was the, the sort of dark world and the, and the, uh, the, the, the secret world and the open world. There's this broken world.

There's this broken world. Then there is, uh, there is, uh, this other world, which, uh, which Paul talks about, you know, which is, is the crucified world.

And, uh, this is, this is important. And, uh, this is why I put in that passage on Luke 14, 8 to 11. Uh, where it says, uh, when you were invited by anyone to a marriage feast, don't sit down in the place of honor, lest a more eminent man than you be invited by him.

And he who invited you both will come and say to you, give place to this man. And then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place.

[18 : 05] Now, the human tendency is to recognize that there is sort of, there is room at the top and you want to be in that chair up there. And so every effort is bent to take the highest place possible for you.

And so, as you know, people, uh, according to a certain principle, tend to get way up beyond their level of competence and to blow their brains out because they can't sustain it.

It's too high. It's too high. Now, but it's also a very clear picture of what Jesus did in his own personal life.

He came as King of Kings, Lord of Lords, bearing a name which was above every name. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us so that Jesus, who deserved to sit in the very highest place, took the very lowest place.

[19 : 11] A condemned criminal hung naked on a cross in public. The very lowest place. And you see, that really is the secret of the kingdom is to get to the lowest place.

The secret of the world is to get to the highest place. But the secret of the kingdom is to get to the lowest place. And that's what Paul meant when he said, God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which I am crucified to the world and to that desire to get to the highest place.

And the world is crucified to me. That is, that's not where I belong. And so what Paul says is that this is no longer the thing that sets his goal.

And that he is happy to be related to the despised and rejected one who is Jesus Christ. That's where he wants to identify.

And that's what basically Gordon McDonald says in this story of his own broken world. That here he discovered a reality when his whole world came apart.

[20 : 44] And all the reputation that he built up over years and years and all his social standing and everything else was smashed on.

And he says, don't fool yourself. When you get caught in that situation, there's no such thing as damage control. You don't have control. The damage just goes on and on and on.

And in many cases is quite irreparable as far as this world is concerned. But you see, in that broken world, he found that there is a reality about the lowest place.

Which makes sense. And we wonder why we have to be driven to it. Just let me conclude by saying this to you, to try and summarize it.

For me, and I, you know, I'm just trying to put myself on the spot here. Just because I want to put you on the same spot. For me, my shame is the existential secret that cannot be told.

[21 : 53] I don't want you to know. That's the reality of my life. At a certain level. I don't want you to know.

The second reality is that the existential secret must be told. I can't live with it. Unless somehow I can acknowledge it.

You know, I mean, it may be in a very private situation. But somehow it must be told. And you see, the third thing is that having told the secret, it's not, you don't make a return to innocence.

You can't go back to the Garden of Eden. You know, Adam and Eve didn't go back to the Garden of Eden. They went on to, well, it was the beginning of God's purpose of redemption, which spoke of a new Jerusalem, a new creation, a new heaven, a new earth.

Something beyond where we were. We don't go back to innocence. We go on in the fulfillment of God's purpose of redemption towards us. And that's, that's my experience.

[23 : 16] You see that my shame cannot be told. My shame must be told. The direction for me is I can't return to innocence. The reason I tell you that is because I know certain therapy groups, which after extensive therapy and sharing intimately with one another, then have a kind of ritual bathing ceremony in which they strip before one another and bathe together in the nude.

A sort of, a kind of acting out of a return to innocence. But you don't go back to innocence. You go forward to something else.

And, and that's, you know, why it's important for Paul to say that it doesn't happen here. Okay.

So that's, that's the way it works. The three things I, I can't tell my secret. I must tell my secret. And it's not a return to innocence. Well, then you see what happens then is you discover that at the heart of the Christian gospel is the story that can't be told.

God was crucified. You know, I mean, that just can't be. That God should be totally humiliated.

[24 : 43] He wouldn't be God if that could happen. Unless you come to recognize that only God could allow that to happen. God's secret is that, I mean, the secret that can't be told or can't be faced perhaps more by us is that God was crucified.

And the folly of preaching is making that a public secret. That God came in the flesh and was crucified and died on the cross.

And I want you to know that that's what happened. In the same way that you have your secret and your secret ultimately has to be made known. And that the kingdom, therefore, is open.

Because we meet play, we meet with God in the place of our humiliation and his. We meet with God in the place. You know, that at the point of our own deepest humiliation, our shame.

We meet God. Who was humbled on the cross. And that's where life begins. It's not where it ends, as we suspect. I mean, most people stay away from there because they say that would be the end.

[26 : 03] To admit that guilt, to admit that situation, that would be the end. But the secret of the kingdom is that it's not the end.

It's the beginning. That's why shame, which starts in the beginning of the Bible with Adam and Eve, finds its fulfillment.

And that when Christ said, don't look for the highest place. Look for the lowest. Then when the host comes along, he will say, go up higher.

And that's the story. Let me pray. God grant us understanding that as we think about these things, and as we try and deal with the secrets of our own lives, we might find the redemption and the good news of your kingdom as we face the bad news of our own lives.

We ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.