

Humiliation to Glory

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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Lent 2

¹⁷ Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. ¹⁹Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.

²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

⁴¹Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

I

In this part of Philippians, Paul says Jesus Christ is a “Savior.” We and other Christians in the world often say Jesus is our Savior. It’s one of our favorite ways of talking about Jesus. “Jesus saved me from my sins,” we might say, “and he can save you from your sins too.” Through his death, Jesus offers to save humanity from sin.

So it might surprise you to hear that “Savior” is not one of Paul’s favorite words. In fact, this is the only time Paul uses the word Savior in any of his undisputed letters.¹ He uses the word “Lord” at least 175 times, but the word “Savior” only once.

It may also surprise you to hear that here in Philippians 3:20, Paul is not thinking about sin. The problem that Jesus saves us from in verse 20 is not sin. In fact, nowhere in Philippians does Paul use the standard Greek word for “sin,” *hamartia*. He talks about sin in Romans, mentions it 4 times in the letters to the Corinthians, 3 times in Galatians, and once in 1 Thessalonians. But he does not use that word *hamartia* in Philippians.

So we have two oddities. Philippians 3:20 is the *only* time Paul calls Jesus a Savior; and even then, sin is *not* the human problem that Jesus saves us from. Paul affirms that Jesus Christ does save us from something, but that something is not sin. What’s going on here?

¹ The undisputed letters are Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon; scholars don’t agree about the authorship of Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, and Titus. The author of Ephesians, who may not have been Paul, uses “Savior” (Gk. *sōtēr*) once, in 5:23.

II

To find the answer to this question, let us look at the dynamics of honor and shame. The Mennonites from Saskatchewan who prepared our worship materials suggest that during Lent we pay attention to the dynamics of honor and shame that pervade the Bible. People in the ancient Mediterranean world lived the intricacies of honor and shame in their daily lives, as do many people today in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. We Americans, Canadians, and Europeans are the oddballs for not thinking as much about honor and shame. If we want to understand the Bible and many other people in the modern world, then we will want to understand the culture of honor and shame.

Even though American culture doesn't emphasize honor and shame as much as other cultures do, honor and shame are prominent in some parts of our culture. In the military, for example, honor and shame is a big deal. For decades the Marines in particular have portrayed themselves as devoted to the highest ideals of honor. You can also see honor and shame at work in sports teams: when a team wins they get honor; when they lose they get shamed. Latinos, African-Americans, and Asian-Americans can display a deep sense of honor.

III

The Mediterranean world of the first century was steeped in honor and shame. Nearly everyone worked hard to keep whatever honor they already had and to get more honor if they could. For many people, honor was even more important than money.

Verse 21 makes it obvious that Paul is thinking about honor and shame. He writes: "Christ will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory." Those two words, "humiliation" and "glory," refer to shame and honor. To be humiliated in that world was to be shamed, and to be glorified was to receive honor.

Paul says we human beings, specifically we Christians, have bodies of humiliation. It's hard to know precisely what kind of humiliation Paul has in mind here, but we can make two educated guesses.

The first possibility is that Paul is thinking about social class. The most honorable people in Greco-Roman society belonged to the upper class. In Rome the upper class included the emperor, the senators and their families, and the equestrians and their families. In a Greco-Roman city like Philippi, the most honorable people would have been city officials and large landowners, both members of the local upper class.

Throughout the empire, the people with the least amount of honor were slaves. Freed people had a little honor, but not much. Lower-class people had relatively little honor, including camel drivers, shepherds, and other animal handlers; farm and mine workers; day laborers; people who lived in apartment buildings; and so on. Most Christians came precisely from these lower classes. A few Christians were “powerful” and of “noble birth,” but “not many” (1 Cor. 1:26). Though we don’t know exactly who belonged to the church in Philippi, we can guess with a high level of probability that most of them came from the lower classes. Some might have been slaves. On the social scale members of the Philippian church probably had very little honor. Throughout their lives, they may have endured humiliating words and deeds from people in the upper class. The members of this church knew quite well what it was like to be humiliated.

The second possibility is that Paul is thinking theologically. One of the most humiliating things that could happen to anyone in the first century was to get crucified. When a crucifixion happened, the shame of crucifixion automatically spread to everyone in the crucified person’s family. Well, Jesus had been crucified, which meant the shame of his crucifixion automatically spread to all Christians, who in a theological sense were members of Jesus’ family. This meant even upper class Christians were shamed simply because they followed Jesus, a crucified man.

For this reason, everyone in the Philippian church could identify with the dynamic of humiliation. To be a Christian in the first century was to be humiliated, to carry around with you a sense of shame. Very likely this sense of humiliation and shame was a daily reality for most Christians. It was always somewhere on their minds. Indeed, it’s possible that many Christians in the first century worried a lot more about humiliation than they worried about sin. For most people the problem of shame was probably bigger than the

problem of sin. They needed a savior from humiliation a lot more than they needed a savior from sin. Paul read his culture perceptively. He knew that if people were going to experience Jesus as a savior, if they were going to be attracted to Christ, then they would have to see in Christ an answer to their experience of humiliation. In his preaching, teaching, and writing, Paul knew had to tackle the dynamics of honor and shame.

How does Christ save us from humiliation? To answer this question fully, we'd have to look at a wide range of Bible passages across the New Testament. But the answer in this passage comes in the middle part of verse 21: Christ will conform us "to the body of his glory." That is, our true citizenship is in heaven (v. 20), not in the Roman empire or Canada or the United States. From heaven we expect Jesus Christ, who will save our bodies of humiliation by conforming us to the body of his glory. Jesus may have been humiliated in the crucifixion, but he's now in heaven; and like all heavenly beings, Jesus Christ is now highly honorable. His shame was transformed into glory and honor. Therefore Jesus now has the capacity to do the same for us—to transform our shame into honor and glory.

IV

What does all this have to do with us? I'm going to propose something a bit radical for us to think about. I have a hunch that in general Americans are becoming less and less concerned about the problem of sin. Of course for some people, sin is a huge personal problem because they feel guilty for doing things they think are wrong. For those people the language of salvation from sin will continue to make a lot of sense. However, it seems as if fewer and fewer Americans are concerned about sin and guilt. I can only speak from my own experience on this, but it appears to me that language about sin and guilt simply isn't grabbing people like it once did. What if we Christians are speaking the wrong language to our culture? What if we're still talking about human problems that folks don't care so much about anymore?

I'm beginning to wonder if shame and humiliation are much bigger problems for some people. If you lose your job or you can't find a job, I think it's more likely you'll feel

a sense of shame rather than a sense of guilt. If you have a mental illness, are an alcoholic, or use illegal drugs, I'm guessing shame is a bigger deal than sin and guilt. If you get arrested or sued, you might experience shame sooner than guilt, especially if your name gets printed in *The Goshen News* or aired on WNDU TV. If you're a single woman and you discover yourself accidentally pregnant, a sense of shame might be more overwhelming than a sense of guilt. If you're a man who gets caught with a prostitute, shame is more likely than guilt.

I point to two other realities. First, for large numbers of women, shame may be a bigger problem than guilt.² Second, the racial-ethnic composition of America is changing. In the future, higher percentages of Americans will come from cultures or subcultures where honor and shame are more important than in white culture.

What if we proclaimed a gospel of salvation from humiliation and dishonor? What if we read the Bible with an eye for the language of honor and shame? What if we reflected on our own individual lives to recognize when and where we've felt shamed or humiliated? In our worship, what if we had confessions of shame rather than confessions of sin? What if we thought more carefully about how God saves us from dishonor?

The overall theme for this series of Lenten worship service is "Ashamed No More." Could it be that this is a meaningful and dynamic way to articulate the good news of Christ in our time?

Thanks be to God that we have a savior with the ability to deliver us from shame.

² Resources on women and shame include "Motherhood, Shame, and Society," The Mother's Movement Online, http://www.mothersmovement.org/features/bbrown_int/bbrown_int_1.htm; Brené Brown, *I Thought It Was Just Me (but it isn't): Making the Journey from "What Will People Think?" to "I Am Enough"* (Gotham, 2007).