

God's Glory and Grace: Beyond Guilt, Shame, and Fear

David Davidson and Kenneth Hayward

- David Davidson (pseudonym) has served with the IMB for 20 years in East Asia, and can be contacted via teach2obey@gmail.com.
- Kenneth Hayward (pseudonym) has been with the IMB for approximately a decade, lives in Asia, and can be contacted at: backtoAsahelNettleton@gmail.com.

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Introduction

Meditate for a few moments on these words of life that spur us to worship our Lord:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them.
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.
(Psalm 19:1-4a, NIV)

These beautiful words stir the soul, and they also remind us of an important truth: In every place and in every culture, God's glory has been revealed. As Barnabas and Paul pointed out to the crowds in Lystra, "God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them . . . permitted all the nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness . . ." (Acts 14:15b-17a, NASB). Sadly, though, in every place and in every culture, every human has rejected God's glory. Paul later wrote to the Roman believers, ". . . since the creation of the world [God's] invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made . . ." (Romans 1:20, NASB). But tragically, "though [men] knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image . . . they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator . . ." (Romans 1:21-23, 25, NASB). Because human beings are created in the image of God, vestiges of our God-ward orientation remain in every culture – but they have been corrupted by sin and Satan and used by Satan to deceive the hearts of those who need Christ.

The Triune God's plan and devilish corruption

For example, it is good and right to worship God in awe, but Satan has twisted that original good into fear of the spirit world. It is good and right to depend on God for life and all we need, but Satan has corrupted that original good into asking dead ancestors– instead of the triune God – for protection and blessing. For each distortion there is something that was originally good, a legitimate response that should only be given to God but that has been

distorted by sin and rebellion. Table 1, below, lists several of these legitimate responses to God, along with several common distortions.

TABLE 1
CULTURAL IDOLATRY CHART

God's Character	Man's Legitimate Response	Cultural Manifestations of Idolatry	Man's Resulting Sinful Attitude & Behavior
Holiness	Joy, obedience, purity, honesty, truth, justice, ideas	Guilt	Trying to alleviate guilt (obtain holiness) by being self-righteous: setting up own codes of conduct, being judgmental, blaming . . . or disbelieving, denying God, shifting morality, filthiness. Approval-seeking as a society, preoccupied with self
Glory	Praise to God, humility, valuing all humans equally before God, honor in relationships, hospitality, unity among Christians	Shame	Trying to alleviate shame (obtain glory) by currying favor – with people, with dead ancestors, and with spirits: concerned with saving face, lying to cover up, pressure to meet social expectations, disgrace, extreme pride and nationalism, divisions. Title- seeking as a society, preoccupied with status (and, often, revenge)
Power	Tremble before God in awe and wonder, courage before men	Fear	Trying to alleviate fear (obtain power) by gaining control – especially control of the spirit world: constant anxiety, chronic anger, self-protecting, fighting, hiding. Power-seeking as a society, preoccupied with evil/magic

From our human perspective, then, how do we help people see the emptiness of Satan's deceptions, abandon these corruptions of God's glory, and turn to the One true living Lord? This is an urgent question. These words are being written in a small countryside village with no believers. We are here for the celebration of a baby girl's first month of life, and large red candles are burning in the most prominent spot in the living room as an offering to ancestors. What can we do or say, as God works in and through us, to expose Satan's deception? What can we do or say that will give this child a chance to grow up in a home full of the Light of Life, instead of the idolatry and darkness that currently fill this house and village?

Cultural awareness

Western missionaries are developing a greater understanding of and sensitivity to the fact that different cultures tend to approach the gospel from different vantage points. The designations of guilt, shame, and fear are sometimes used to describe these different cultural vantage points. Guilt, shame, and fear are three overriding emotions at work in the hearts of unbelievers – and the emotion that is most strongly felt is often tied to cultural conditioning. (See *The 3D Gospel*, by Jayson Georges, 2014, for a helpful and concise overview.)

Because of these different worldviews, it is possible to share the gospel in a way that is meaningful to the heart of the missionary but does not reach the heart of the listener. The Bible presents the Good News from each of these different viewpoints (and perhaps others, as well), but due to our own cultural biases, it is possible to share God's truth in a way that does not best connect with the heart of the person we are sharing with. As one presenter put it at a recent missionary gathering, "The gospel is already contextualized in the Bible, but we sometimes 'de-contextualize' it with our own biases." For example, there is far more "shame" vocabulary¹ in Scripture than "guilt" vocabulary,¹ and yet Western Christians tend to focus on guilt (legal terminology) as a way of showing our need for God.

Preserving the gospel

At the same time, it is important to ensure that the essence of the gospel is not lost in the attempt to be culturally relevant. The purpose of contextualization is for greater clarity, not for greater comfort on the part of the sharer or listener. Guilt, shame, and fear (and any other issues that emerge) are best understood as ways that we human beings realize, by grace, our need for the cross and new life in Christ. Guilt, shame, and fear are not what we primarily need to be saved from, as some seem to suggest,² but are symptoms of the deeper sin issue. Guilt, shame, and fear help us understand the gravity of our offense against God. So, while it is important to understand the cultural route that leads most deeply into the hearts of those we serve, the destination is always the same: Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection.

Of course, it is the work of the Holy Spirit using the gospel – through weak human beings sharing good news – that gives sinners a regenerate heart. Methods and cultural understanding can only take us so far; it is God Who gives the increase (1 Corinthians 3:7). But as the gospel is presented, with an emphasis on repentance and belief, it is necessary for individuals to realize why the wages of sin is death and that they personally deserve that death before the gospel has any meaning to them. And so the wicked human heart (experiencing guilt, shame, and fear) can possibly help us in that process. If we understand the culturally conditioned emotions that spring from deep within the hearts of those we serve, that understanding can help us explain more clearly how great God is and how deeply we human beings have offended Him. It is only when that understanding reaches the hearts of our listeners that they can begin to comprehend and appreciate and receive God's grace. And it is then that God replaces all the corrupted worship practices with worship of the One, True God and He receives the glory that is His due.

Interplay of guilt, shame, and fear

In a typical Western (guilt) culture, people feel their condemnation before God when they realize that they have not obeyed Him but have violated His law. So, legal terminology helps Westerners understand how deeply they have offended God. In a typical Eastern (shame) culture, people feel their condemnation before God when they realize they have not honored God as He deserves to be honored but have esteemed others instead. So, regal (kingship) terminology helps Eastern people understand how deeply they have offended God, the only One who is worthy of all honor and praise. In a typical animistic (fear) culture, people feel their condemnation before

¹ Georges, Jayson, "Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before?", *Missions Frontiers*, Jan/Feb 2015 issue, pg. 8 (see also Mischke, Werner, *The Global Gospel: Achieving Missional Impact in Our Multicultural World*, Scottsdale, AZ: Mission ONE, 2015, pg. 45-52).

² Georges, Jayson, *The 3D Gospel*, Time Press, 2014, pg. 10 (see also Mischke, Werner, *The Father's Love gospel booklet* at: http://www.mission1.org/get_involved/equip_your_church/the_fathers_love_gospel_booklet).

God when they realize they have not submitted themselves to the One who has all power but have sought power for themselves instead. In an animistic culture, then, military terminology and the associated language of rebellion, bondage, and freedom helps people understand how deeply they have offended God.

This does not mean, of course, that people in a particular culture cannot benefit from thinking of their condition and God's provision for it from multiple perspectives simultaneously. In fact, there may be some danger in creating an artificial separation between the three (guilt, shame, fear) that is not actually there. To put it another way, when we human beings face the living God with unregenerate hearts, we feel afraid because we are guilty of something shameful. So, it may be that any gospel presentation – in any culture – that focuses on one of those aspects to the exclusion of the others is a less than ideal gospel. Those gospel presentations in the West that talk only about guilt and leave out the resulting shame and fear are probably not really hitting the heart, either. And any “gospel” that is presented to Easterners that only addresses the issues of honor and shame but leaves out the resulting fear and guilt may also not be presenting the gospel as clearly as is needed. After all, unbelievers in the East will feel shame and fear when they meet God because they are guilty of something: they are guilty of not worshiping God as He deserves.

Obedience, esteem, and submission are simply different facets of what it means to worship God – and their lack stems from a failure to see God as He is. Our job is to help remedy that, depending on the Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of those who hear. Our ability is limited and, thankfully, God's grace goes beyond our ability to effectively communicate in various cultural contexts – but personally, we would like every individual we share with to experience guilt and shame and fear before Almighty God as He prepares their hearts to be made new.

Some words of caution

As we missionaries learn which issues reach most deeply into the heart of a culture, we will hopefully learn to use those same issues to remove obstacles to the gospel – but not the offense of the gospel. In fact, in a sense, we want to make the gospel as offensive as possible. Our goal is not to make our hearers more comfortable with the gospel by softening the blow, but to make it more attractive to them by humbling them before God (1 Corinthians 1:18-31; 1 Peter 2:8). It is only when people have felt the depth of their offense against a holy God that the gospel becomes Good News because of what Christ has done by dying on the cross and rising again.

Another problem arises when well-intentioned Christians begin to promote the gospel as a way of obtaining anything other than God Himself. As 1 Peter 3:18 (HCSB) says, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.” The text says, “to God.” God brings us to Himself. Most conservative evangelicals rightly object to the Prosperity Gospel that falsely promises, “Come to God and He will make you healthy and wealthy.” But many of those same evangelicals have also basically said (when sharing the gospel), “Come to God and He will give you pardon” (guilt culture). And some missionaries may be tempted to take the approach of saying, “Come to God and He will give you honor” (shame culture). Or, “Come to God and He will give you power” (fear culture).³

When we come to God in repentance and faith, we do receive pardon and honor and power – but these are the results of our new life in Christ. We don't receive innocence and honor

³ Georges, Jayson, *Theology Guide to Guilt, Shame, Fear*, PDF downloaded December 5, 2014 (see also Georges, Jayson, *Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before?*, *Missions Frontiers*, Jan/Feb2015 issue).

and power as “outside” factors – given to us as we are, layered on top of our unregenerate selves – but as a natural result of Christ's life in us. All three of the approaches mentioned above are man-centered rather than God-centered and fail to adequately take into account the magnitude and consequences of our sin against the Most High God. They fail to adequately picture the seriousness of our situation, and so they also miss the greatness of God’s grace. They merely want something from God rather than the triune God Himself. In this wrong, man-centered view, God is not what they pursue but “a someone” Who can get them what they really want – forgiveness, honor, power . . . along with (usually) money, marriage, ease, a big church, a good reputation, or any of a hundred other “blessings.” In this scenario God becomes a divine ATM.

The Giver and the gifts

Here is how one modern author helps us understand this all important truth about centering ourselves on God:

“God's gifts are precious beyond words, and we will sing of them forever. But the most precious gifts you can think of are not ends in themselves. They all lead to God himself. Ultimately, that is what all his gifts are for.

Take forgiveness, for example. When Christ became our servant as a ransom, he took away the curse of the law and the threat of punishment for all who believe. But to what end? That we might enjoy sin with impunity? No. That we might enjoy God for eternity! Forgiveness is precious because it brings us home to God.

Why does anyone want to be forgiven? If the answer is just for psychological relief, or just for escape from hell, or just to have more physical pleasures, then God is not honored.”⁴

We are not, of course, implying that we should come to God without any wants or needs. We all need many things from God – including the wonderful gift of His righteousness to replace our sinfulness, the gift of nobility as His children to replace our shame, and the gift of His power in us to replace our weakness. But ultimately we need Him, and we should come to Him for Him. Another modern author helps us think clearly about this when he says that God’s grace can make us more honest and less anxious, give us reason for hope each morning, encourage us in suffering, help us forget what is hurtful from our past, make us more compassionate, and confirm in our hearts that we are loved . . . and then adds this important clarifier: “All of these things are the beautiful harvest of grace. All of these are things for which we should be eternally thankful. But none of these good gifts is the ultimate goal of God’s grace . . . Sin kidnapped our worship, and grace works to restore it to its rightful owner – God.”⁵

A few months ago, I had the opportunity to sit in on an evangelism class for national seminary students, all of whom are respected and supposedly mature church leaders. At the end of the class, I took the opportunity to stand up and ask the question: “Why is the wages of sin death? Why isn’t it (for example) just a spanking?” That got a few smiles, but after several minutes it became sadly obvious that no one could answer the question, so I shared an analogy:

⁴ Piper, John, *The Dawning of Indestructible Joy*, Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2014, pg. 50

⁵ Tripp, Paul D., *New Morning Mercies: A Daily Gospel Devotion*, Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2014, Kindle version location 5029-5038; July 29.

If you are rude to me, it is no big deal. But if you are rude to the president of the country we live in, that is a very big deal (and you would probably disappear). And if you had been rude to one of the emperors of old . . . well, you would be a head shorter! You see, the magnitude of the offence does not depend so much on what you do to offend the person, as on Who it is that you offend. We have despised the living God by not worshiping Him as He deserves to be worshipped and by not thanking Him for giving us life (Romans 1) – and God is infinitely greater and higher than any emperor. That is why the wages of sin is death.

This simple analogy (using kingship terminology) seemed to reach into their hearts, helping them understand things more clearly and helping them see their own mistakes when it came to sharing the gospel. One of the older students said that they typically “tried to convince people to believe” by talking about all the benefits – God will heal you, help you in your marriage, help you raise good children, give you courage, etc. – and might not even mention sin for the first year or two! We hope that was an anomaly, but we are afraid that kind of thinking is far too prevalent.

A certain kind of disciple, the heart’s condition, and God’s tools

As another presenter at a recent missionary gathering rightly emphasized, “The gospel you preach determines the disciples you get. If you look at becoming a Christian as a ‘get out of hell card’ you get one kind of disciple, but if you look at it as giving allegiance to the King you get a different kind of disciple.” Producing disciples with minds set on heaven is great, but we maintain that it is even better if their minds are focused on God now as they journey daily towards heaven.

The point we are making is that guilt, shame, and fear are all designed by God to help us understand the true condition of our own hearts without Him – and that condition is more serious than we thought. We are actually “dead in trespasses and sins . . .” (Romans 5:8; Ephesians 2:1, 11–13; 3:6; 4:17–18; 5:5–8; Col 2:13). Not only do we deserve death, but we are already dead – flat-lined, without a spiritual heartbeat. And God sovereignly uses guilt and shame and fear to make us aware of our dead hearts and bring people to a place where they will repent and believe and receive new life. Of course, it is this Good News that our hearts can be made new that is God’s provision through Christ for all of our corruption, no matter what culture produced us.

So guilt, shame, and fear all bring us to the same conclusion: We need new hearts. And we can then use the language of death and life to describe what happens in our hearts. Something more than the heavens declaring the glory of God has transpired. Christ has come in the flesh. Because of His death and resurrection, God turns us “from death to life” (John 5:24, Romans 6:13, 1 John 3:14). We “die with Christ and are raised with Him” (Romans 6:4, Ephesians 2:6, Colossians 2:12, 3:1). “The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17) We are “born again” (John 3:7, 1 Peter 1:23). As this realization sinks in, converted sinners experience the wonder of God’s grace – not just in taking away our guilt and shame and fear, but in the gift of new life. And God receives the glory.

Words of life

As we bring these thoughts to a close, we would simply like to urge missionaries to first consider the cultural conditioning that Satan has used to warp and twist our host culture away from worship of the One, True God (see Table 1). Then, humbly seek for words and illustrations that reach deeply into the hearts of those we are serving by considering the cultural conditioning

that comes from guilt, shame, and fear. As God grants wisdom and opportunity, we would also like to encourage missionaries to move beyond thinking of a culture in terms of one category only and instead bring all three frameworks together so that our hearers feel the full force of the gospel. And finally, as God works in the hearts of those we serve, let us move beyond man-centered cultural desires and instead use the biblical, universal vocabulary of death and life to describe the condition of those without Christ and the wonderful miracle of new life that He offers us.

We don't mean to make sharing the gospel more complicated than necessary, nor more simplistic than it really is. All of us need to seek God daily, delight in Him, and study the Bible with a view to the language and culture of our adopted countries so that we can be the best servants possible. And we will all fail along the way; that's why the gospel is relevant for us too. God can certainly "strike many a straight lick with a crooked stick" – and we are all so grateful for that. Praise the Lord that we are not dependent merely on our ability to use the concepts of guilt/shame/fear, but can trust God's sovereign power and gospel to change peoples' hearts. Praise God that His glory and grace go beyond guilt, shame, and fear! But rather than giving up and settling for "pre-packaged" gospel presentations that may not be very effective at reaching the hearts of those we serve, we would like to encourage missionaries to keep looking for increasingly effective ways to point sinners to Christ – better ways to express the wonders of God's greatness, His love, and His grace.

God's glory has been revealed on the earth, but it has been corrupted in various ways in different cultures. We missionaries need to understand how it has been corrupted in our context. We can then, as the Spirit woos and draws people to God, use that knowledge to help idolatrous sinners understand and experience: God's holiness, majesty, and power; the magnitude of their offense against God; their deserved judgment in an eternal hell; their powerlessness to change their own hearts; their need for the cross; the necessity of repentance and faith; the wonder of God's grace; the joy of new life in Christ now; and the hope of heaven and complete restoration to come.

When that happens, those who have been made new in Christ join with a host of others, giving the Lord the glory due to His name!