



Gospel-Centered Strategies for Counseling Shame

Made to Minister 2025 | Workshop Session 2 | Tim St. John

Case Study:

Arisa is a 35-year old single woman who asks for help. She comes up to you after church and she says that she is, “dealing with difficult relationships.” She doesn’t know to use the word shame, but the word starts to come to your mind while she tells you what her life is like.

She currently works as a 4th grade teacher and lives at home with her parents to save money. She has one sister, Namie, who works as a doctor while being married with three children. In almost every area of life, Arisa feels like a failure when she compares herself with her sister. She says, “I’m 35 and what do I have to show for it. I’m single, not dating, and in a job where I feel like I just give and receive nothing back.”

This is compounded by the fact that her mother frequently compares Arisa to Namie and regularly asks Arisa, “why aren’t you married yet?” She hears it from her grandmother as well. Her grandmother says, “your marriage is not about what I want, it’s about the good of our family.” Meanwhile, her father and grandfather remain silent and passive. Never in her life has she been close to her dad or granddad. Neither one has pursued her, either to correct her or to communicate any level of care, all she’s ever felt from them was indifference. She feels invisible to them and often wonders what she did to receive so much coldness from them.

Arisa trusted Christ back in junior high while visiting a friend’s youth group. She’s the only believer in her family and extended family. She tells you that she struggles to have hope in Christ consistently, and her family relationships make the struggle for hope worse by how they make fun of her faith. At their family gatherings, her cousins make fun of her and laugh at her for being a Christian. This incites her mother to lecture her on being disloyal to the family and dishonoring them. In addition to shaming her for her faith, her aunts tease her appearance calling her “fat” and saying that the way she dresses is “too boyish” and that’s why she isn’t married. At those gatherings, sometimes Arisa lashes out in anger and her parents respond saying, “Is this what they teach you in your church? You’re the same selfish girl you’ve always been.”

Her relationships within her family have been hard her whole life, and she’s regularly trying to live up to expectations and hide her weaknesses. She tries to remind herself that her family is wrong about Jesus, but she thinks they might have a point when it comes to her looks and her failure to succeed like her sister. Despite dieting and exercise, she is still overweight and feels constantly self-conscious.

Arisa rarely looks other people in the eye when talking with them. Anyone who tries to talk with her, she assumes they are moving toward her out of pity. She frequently blames herself when anything goes wrong and is left with lingering thoughts like: “I’m stupid,” “I’m ugly,” and “I’m useless.” When she goes to church, she’s often convicted over how angry she is toward her family, and she usually asks people to pray for the bitterness in her heart that she can’t seem to shake. She keeps confessing sin and asking for forgiveness, but she never seems to find relief from feeling like a failure.

I. Preparing to love wisely: how do we prepare to move toward those struggling with shame?

A. Build a Biblical Foundation of Emotions: Psalm 42:5

- Emotions are everything, so I start at the light –
- Emotions are nothing, so I ignore the light –
- Emotions are opportunities to see the worship of my heart –

“When you engage what you are feeling, you start to understand what your heart treasures. Our emotions reveal our hearts, and they help us see what we worship. Rather than minimizing emotions, it’s good to find as many as we can and listen to what they are saying. Understanding our emotions, allows us to better understand our hearts. Understanding and engaging what we feel is the beginning of how we turn to God and respond rightly to our situation.”¹

B. Build a Biblical Understanding of Shame:

- a. **Shame** – “Shame is the deep sense that you are unacceptable because of something you did, something done to you, or something associated with you. You feel exposed, contaminated, and humiliated.”²

Shame attaches a perceived failure to our identity and relationships, “I feel exposed, dirty, rejected, and unrighteous.” It says, “I’m wrong in the midst of my community.”

Words that help describe shame Biblically:

1. Unclean – Something is wrong with me. (Lev 13:45-46)
2. Exposed – Everyone sees what’s wrong with me (Heb 10:33)
3. Outcast – I don’t belong, I’m rejected (Zeph 3:19)
4. Unrighteous – My failures define me more than God’s grace (1John 3:20)

Sin-exposing Shame - *grieving the devastation of your sin within your community*

Prov 5:14, “I am at the brink of utter ruin in the assembled congregation.”

(cf. Matt 16:16-19, 18:15-20; 1Cor 5; 2Cor 2:6; Gal 6:1)

Wrongful Shame - *pain over wrongfully losing love and acceptance from community.*

Psalm 88:18, You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness.

Imaginary Biblical Case Study of Sin-Exposing Shame vs Wrongful Shame	
Peter after Paul’s public rebuke (Gal 2)	Tamar after she’s raped by Amnon (2Sam 13)
Imagine Peter says, “Why does this keep happening to me, I turned my back on Christ the night before he was going to be crucified, and I turned my back on the gospel in the face of the Jews, how can I ever show my face again. I’m supposed to be the leader of the church.”	Imagine Tamar says, “Where can I go with my shame? I’ve lost my community, my identity in the palace, my community, I’m unwanted, desolate, all because I was violated by my half-brother. What will become of me?”

How would you counsel them similarly and how would you counsel them differently?

- b. **Cultural Shame** – cultural values and norms exalted in such a way that brings shame on those who do not or cannot meet those values

¹ Tim St. John, *Diagnosing Your Emotional Health*. SOLA Blog.

² Ed Welch, *Shame Interrupted*, 2012. Page 2.

“How you express your values establishes a culture and the way we reinforce those values can bring shame.”

Examples of Cultural Shame:

- Meeting the values of masculinity in rural Alabama
- Meeting the values of career and financial success in LA
- Meeting the values of marriage, family, career, home, and finances for children of immigrants
- Meeting the values of an abusive parent or partner
- Meeting the values of certain Christian communities
- Meeting the values of education in Asian American Community
- Meeting the values of health and social functioning if you have a disability
- Meeting the values of beauty if you have a deformity

Questions to evaluate the values in your home and church:

- What are people afraid to say in your church or in your home?
- What disclosures are met with anger, fear, silence, confusion?
- What extra-biblical expectations does someone need to meet to be welcomed?

c. **Look for Shame in other struggles you counsel** (e.g. depression, anger, suicide, anxiety, etc.)

d. **Biblical Theology – the story of shame in Scripture.**

Gen 3: Adam and Eve – Sin-exposing shame (Aware of their sin and nakedness)

Gen 4: Cain – Sin-exposing shame (Known as a fugitive and wanderer)

Gen 16 and 21: Hagar – Wrongful shame (Severely mistreated by Sarah and eventually when Isaac was born she was banished along with her son Ishmael)

Gen 29: Leah – Wrongful shame (Looked down upon for her “weak eyes”)

Gen 37: Joseph – Wrongful shame (falsely accused and forgotten)

Job 4-31: Job – Wrongful shame (falsely accused of sin by his community)

1Sam 1: Hannah – Wrongful shame (Peninnah shamed Hannah because she was barren)

2Sam 13-18: Absalom – Sin-exposing shame (After killing Amnon, he fled for three years)

Jeremiah 37:11-21: Jeremiah – Wrongful shame (Wrongfully accused of treason and imprisoned for his message)

Mark 14-15: Jesus – Wrongful shame (Accused of blasphemy, despised, abandoned, and crucified)

John 4: Samaritan Woman – Wrongful shame (marginalized by her gender and reputation)

John 9: Blind man – Wrongful shame (the disciples assumed that either he or his parents had sinned to cause this disability)

Acts 6: Stephen – Wrongful shame (accused of blasphemy and stoned)

Acts 21-28: Paul – Wrongful shame (accused of blasphemy)

Gal 2:14: Peter – Sin-exposing shame (Paul rebukes Peter before everyone for his sin against the Gentiles because it led so many other Christians astray)

2Thess 3:14: Church Discipline – Sin-Exposing shame (Here and other passages shame is used in the process of church discipline as the call to restore an unrepentant church member involves the whole church)

e. **Comparing guilt and shame –**

Guilt – (2Cor 7:10) Guilt typically says, “I’ve done wrong” and shame would say, “I am wrong according to my community.”

f. Comparing shame to embarrassment, social anxiety, and fear of man –

Shame Related Struggles	Embarrassment	Shyness and Social Anxiety	Fear of man
Description	Momentary shame. This typically arises when a situation is perceived as uncomfortable or unexpected. It's usually connected to a minor social blunder, some small violation of a social norm. Within an hour or a couple of weeks at most you can laugh about it. But with shame you <i>never</i> laugh at it	Persistent social fear. It is more associated with the fear of shame than a true experience of shame. There can be excessive worry and even physical symptoms like sweating, trembling, and a racing heart. It's often a mix of four elements: 1) the sinful struggle of fear of man, 2) unique temperament (creational tendencies unique to them individually), 3) anticipation of life ruining humiliation and 4) possibly past shame in a social setting connected to a continual dread of it reoccurring. Someone struggle with social anxiety might experiences this struggle more closely related to a panic attack than to a sinful longing. Sironi states, "a better frame for the socially anxious is weakness or being overwhelmed, needing comfort and encouragement more than rebuke." ³	Idolizing the good opinion of others. This often can be a major part of the other shame related struggles mentioned. It is highly aware of how others view them and values the opinions of others above God's. Jon Bloom states, "The person(s) whose reward of approval we desire most — whose curse of disapproval we most fear to receive — is the person(s) we will obey, our functional god. That's why the Bible so often commands us to "fear the Lord." ⁴
Examples	John 13:6 – Peter's response to Jesus bending to wash his feet. <i>(e.g. spilling food on yourself, not dressing for the weather.)</i>	Exodus 4:10 – Moses' anxiety over speaking.	Gal 2:12 - Peter fearing the Jews. Prov 29:25 – Fear of man is a snare that trusts in man rather than God.
Statements	"oops" "sorry about that"	"I expect suffering and rejection." "I am not a gifted speaker" "Fear is my social reflex"	"I need other people to admire me." "I want people to appreciate my effort."
Questions that expose	How often do you think about what happened? How did other people respond to you and how significant was their response to you?	What does your community look like currently? How comfortably can you share in small group? Do you have anxious thoughts that keep you from opening up? How does you typically feel in social settings?	How often do you think about the way other people perceive you? Are there particular people that you long to be appreciated by? If so, how does pleasing them affect how you live?

³ Aaron Sironi, "Social Anxiety: Learning from the one who despised the shame." *JBC 34:1* (2020) 40-61, 47.

⁴ John Bloom, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/lay-aside-the-fear-of-man>, accessed on 4/13/2023

C. Have general goals for counseling shame

- a. Distinguish the Type of Shame they are experiencing.
- b. Address Immediate Dangers and Shaming Relationships (*Proverbs 31:8-9*)
- c. Encourage Childlike dependence on God (*Psalms 62:8; Matthew 18:3-4*)
- d. Acknowledge the Deep Suffering of Normalized Sin (*Luke 11:44*)
- e. Embrace a True Identity in Christ (*Gal 2:20*)
- f. Find Strength and Wisdom to Love their Enemies (*Rom 12:17-21*)

II. Actively Build a Relationship of Understanding. What is happening in their world? How can we build a relationship with them that understands their heart in the context of their life situation and history?

A. Questions to discuss or to assign as journal entries to help understand shame in a counselee and begin leading them toward Christ:

- a. What suffering for you feels most near right now? Are you able to be fully honest with God with what you are going through? Are you able to be fully honest with yourself and with at least one other person?
- b. Where do you feel trapped, exposed, and humiliated? (*e.g. social media, family gatherings, small groups, certain relationships, mealtimes, classrooms, work situations*)
- c. Because we all experience shame, we all have different rituals for covering it up: denial, lying, exaggerating, changing subjects, boasting, sarcasm, turning it into a joke, avoiding people, working really hard, proving ourselves, receiving compliments from certain people and the list goes on. How are you tempted to hide your shame? What typical methods do you use to cover up? What do you want to hide from people?
- d. In his book, "Shame Interrupted," Welch states that, "shame is crude, intrusive, demanding, and relentless."⁵ Write your schedule from yesterday or simply choose an average day, from the moment you wake up until you go to sleep. Where do you see shame show up? How do you see it influence your thoughts and actions?
- e. Can you see the benefit of putting the experiences that shamed you into words and actually speaking those words to someone?
- f. When you suffer wrong, or as you reflect on significant past wrongs that you experienced, how do you think about the wrongs?
- g. Have you experienced God helping you pursue his glory in present wrongs or past hurts? Do you find yourself becoming increasingly merciful, purposeful, and hopeful? What has that process been like?

B. Summarize the story and invite the counselee's help. When engaging with any counselee, it's vital to regularly summarize what you are hearing. It is one of the humblest steps we can take because we are inviting accountability from them, we want them to tell us how well we are understanding them. But additionally, your counseling summaries can lead them to better understand themselves through your gospel worldview. Use summaries to recap and expand the following areas during counseling.

- o Summarize the themes of sufferer, sinner, and saint clearly and ask questions or assign heartwork that helps you fill in the gaps.
 - Sufferer
 - Sinner
 - Saint
- o Summarize what you understand about their circumstances and ask questions to expand your knowledge of key situations and relationships connected to their shame.
- o Summarize with prayer. How would you bring the major themes of Arisa's story before the Lord in prayer?

⁵ Welch, *Shame Interrupted*, Page 10.

C. Ask questions to discern other ways God is working in their life:

- a. How have you been processing your struggle in your relationship with God? Can you breathe the word “help?”
- b. What passages from sermons, from small group, or from your own walk with God have helped most with this issue?
- c. Who else is praying for you and praying with you? What does that partnership look like?
- d. What worship songs help you articulate the burdens of your heart to God?

III. Suggestions for direct ministry:

A. Create a roadmap with short term and long-term goals for counseling ongoing wrongful shame.

- **Short term.** For those currently living in relationships that regularly seek to assign wrongful shame, we will create a customized plan to think through how to respond. Here is a sample short term plan we worked on with someone:
 1. **Step 1:** Find a private place to quiet your heart and calm your body.
 2. **Step 2:** Turn to God through prayer
 3. **Step 3:** Evaluate the situation and your heart
 - What physical and/or spiritual dangers that are present?
 - What am I tempted to believing that is not true?
 - What verses engage the lies I’m believing? How do they provide truth so that as you say, “this is not real” you are saying, “this is real,” “this is who God is.”
 4. **Step 4:** Reach out for help. While separated take time to pray for wisdom about stewarding your own safety. Then text/call a mature Christian friend and talk about the situation and create a plan for how to wisely love in the face of wrong.
 5. **Step 5:** Respond to the situation with wisdom.
 6. **Step 6:** Trust the outcome to God.
 - **Long term. Approach counseling wrongful shame in five stages:**
 1. **Step 1:** Address any immediate dangers and clarify the shaming relationships that currently exist in their life. (*Prov 31:8-9*)
 2. **Step 2:** Help them see that God wants us to come to him as humble children with our whole hearts (*Psalms 62:8, Matt 18:3-4*)
 3. **Step 3:** Help them slowly build the reality of intense suffering that exists when someone’s unrepentant sin is normalized in a relationship. (*Luke 11:44*)
 - Increased shame: I’m so stupid, “my stupid years,” I was so naïve. Why didn’t I listen to my friend who warned me? Why did I let this happen?
 - Increased anger: “How could they do this?”
 - Increased pride: “I am better than you.”
 - Increased cynicism: “You are just putting on an act to control me.”So, while we help those struggling with shame we try to anticipate the other spiritual struggles that could be on the road ahead.
 4. **Step 4:** Help them reclaim their identity in Christ from the lies of shame (*Gal 2:20*)
 5. **Step 5:** Help them seek daily strength and wisdom from God to love their enemies (*Rom 12:17-21*). Here we address the specific idols that keep us from loving like Christ those who have hurt us. When we are pressed but not crushed, the pressure will push out the fragrance of Christ.
- B. Helping people distinguish between sin-exposing shame and wrongful shame.**
- When do you feel unworthy? What standards are you not meeting that tell you that you are unworthy?
 - What standard do you use to measure your unworthiness? Paul said, “I don’t even judge myself.” (1Cor 4:1)

- Does this sound like God? (John 10:10, are you hearing God's voice or someone else's voice)
- Comparing God versus man's response to our unworthiness, but God's response is he sacrifices himself. But when you are treated unworthy by an abuser is what they want is for you to be perfect or be the solution to your own unworthiness.
- What direction does this move you in?

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES:

- 1) [Shame Interrupted: How God Lifts the Pain of Worthlessness and Rejection](#) by Ed Welch
- 2) [Shame: Being Known and Loved \(31-Day Devotionals for Life\)](#) by Esther Liu
- 3) [A Small Book About Why We Hide](#) by Ed Welch
- 4) [Making Sense of Forgiveness](#) by Brad Hambrick

SHAME COUNSELING ASSIGNMENTS:

