

# APPROVAL & SHAME

Counseling Guide



COUNSELING CENTER

DALLAS BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

# WHAT IS APPROVAL?

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Perhaps the question we need to ask is what is the *need* for approval? Where does it come from? Is the desire to be approved of and accepted ever a good thing? When does the need for approval become destructive?

The need for approval is an intense, inner desire to be accepted by people. Often we will attempt to please other people in order to gain this acceptance. Initially the thought of being liked and seeking to do good toward others doesn't seem so terrible. However, it's the *need* for approval that can grow in our hearts like a weed. We are crushed by the need to know that we are okay and look to others to answer the question that plagues us: "*Am I enough?*" In order to feel that we have self-worth, we look to others, believing they have the final word to our question.

Perhaps another way to describe approval is fear.

Why do we fear other people? Edward T. Welch in his book, *When People are Big and God is Small*, gives three reasons (Welch, 1997, p.23):

1. We fear people because they can expose and humiliate us.
2. We fear people because they can reject, ridicule, or despise us.
3. We fear people because they can attack, oppress, or threaten us.

Perhaps you struggled with feeling accepted by your family when you were growing up. This doesn't always have to be said with words in order for people to believe it to be true. Silence, abuse, or emotional distance cause many to grow up believing they were never truly wanted. Or maybe you find yourself coming from a loving family, but still constantly look for affirmation from friends and significant others to know that you are lovable, acceptable, enough. You live life like you're in a courtroom, waking up and looking for a new verdict on if you're worthy or not through every person you meet.

If any of this sounds familiar to you, you're not alone. Many people struggle with the need for approval and, like you, are searching for a greater hope they cannot find within themselves.

*"Saul said to Samuel, "I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice." -1 Samuel 15:24*

*"Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe." -Proverbs 29:25*

# WHAT IS SHAME?

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First of all, let's define the difference between toxic shame and healthy shame. To put it simply, toxic shame communicates that there is something inherently wrong, bad, or defective about *who we are*, not just what we've done. Healthy shame is the ability to know that you are a limited human being with legitimate needs and boundaries.

Guilt and toxic shame are profoundly different. Where guilt may tell you, "What I did was bad," toxic shame subtly whispers, "You are bad." It tells us that there is something inherently defective about us. Toxic shame can lead us to believe that we must be perfect. It is often what eventually leads to addiction, infidelity, perfectionism, eating disorders, anxiety, etc. To numb the pain of shame, many people may turn to alcohol or drugs. Maybe our hope is found in our appearance, through which we believe we will be satisfied, and shame will finally be silenced.

Dr. Curt Thompson in his book, *The Soul of Shame*, recognizes a few voices that if you're hearing, may be a sign that you're struggling with toxic shame (Thompson, 2015, p.27). Do any of the below sound familiar to you?

*"I should have been better at that."*

*"Sooner or later I'm going to be found out to be the fraud I am."*

*"When it will count most, I will not be enough."*

If you've found yourself saying or thinking these things, you may struggle with shame. When one is convinced that their inner self is unacceptable, they feel a need to hide or cover up what has been exposed and made vulnerable.

*"Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So, Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters." -Hebrews 2:11*

When did this begin? Consider Genesis, when God provides Eve for Adam. Genesis 2:25 states, "Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame." When Adam and Eve eventually disobeyed and sinned against God, we're told that "the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden" (Genesis 3:8). What did they do? They hid. In their shame, they ran. In response, the Lord made a sacrifice of an animal to cover them. "The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them" (Genesis 3:21). This sacrifice would mirror the ultimate sacrifice of Christ that would resolve the problem of sin and shame.

# WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN APPROVAL AND SHAME?

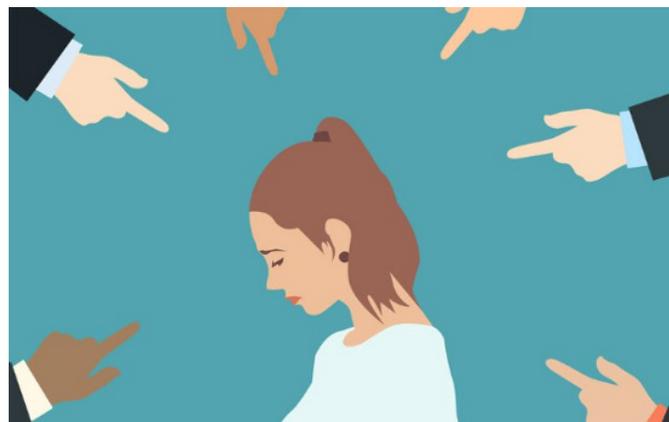
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Shame causes us to want to hide or be covered up. It is often a *sensation* or *experience*. Shame exposes us when we're not expecting to be exposed, and this produces internal pain. That pain is so powerful we'll do anything to make it stop – including running away or putting on a mask to feel protected.

Often in covering up, we seek to present a version of ourselves to the world that we hope will be acceptable. If we feel insufficient, anxious, incapable, a fraud – then we do everything within our power to keep this hidden. We put on our best face and stuff our insecurities. In the meantime, we desperately hope and work for all people to like us. We seek the approval of others to ease the story shame has told us all our lives: *we are not enough*. We believe that if people think we're successful enough, intelligent enough, attractive enough, nice enough, liked enough, then we finally will be... *enough*.

When people compliment or affirm us, for a moment the pain of shame is silenced. Unfortunately, this does not last. The opinion of man changes as quickly as the days pass.

How do people get here? Sometimes an approval addiction or struggle with shame stems from childhood abuse or simply not feeling like your parents or primary caregivers really accepted you for you. Sometimes other significant figures in our life, such as boyfriends or girlfriends, teachers, pastors, or family members, only showed us love when they felt we were lovable. This taught us that if we just worked hard enough at being good, we could earn love. This is a devastating cycle that leads to a heavier addiction of approval while shame weaves its dark web.



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## DO YOU STRUGGLE WITH...

Check below what describes you:

### Symptoms of Shame:

- Self-loathing and low self-esteem
- Suicidal thoughts
- Self-harm
- Anger
- A deep sense of inferiority
- Expecting punishment
- Feeling alienated from others
- Self-martyrdom and self-victimization
- Difficulty apologizing
- Feelings of being a “fraud” or phony
- Fears of being “found out”
- Dysfunctional relationships with others
- Feelings of chronic unworthiness
- Addiction
- Frequently feeling a sense of irrational guilt
- Depression
- Perfectionism
- Defensiveness

### Symptoms of Needing Approval:

- People-pleasing
- A deep need to be accepted
- Worrying what other people think
- Apologizing too much
- Social anxiety
- Saying yes when you want to say no
- Always putting others needs first
- Difficulty setting personal boundaries
- Trying to blend in
- Passivity / going along
- Inability to handle criticism
- Over-explaining yourself
- Passive-aggressiveness
- Fear of being judged
- Relying on compliments
- Feeling responsible for others’ emotions
- Experiencing shame regarding your skills
- Being easily offended

If you checked yes to even a few symptoms on each list, you are likely struggling with shame and approval.

*Adapted from GoodTherapy.org*

# WHAT'S THE CURE?

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Read the passage below that comes from Zechariah 3, ESV (*emphasis added*):

“Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to **accuse him**. <sup>2</sup>And the Lord said to Satan, “**The Lord rebuke you**, O Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a **brand plucked from the fire**?” <sup>3</sup>Now Joshua was standing before the angel, **clothed with filthy garments**. <sup>4</sup>And the angel said to those who were standing before him, “**Remove the filthy garments** from him.” And to him he said, “Behold, I have **taken your iniquity away** from you, and **I will clothe you with pure vestments**.” <sup>5</sup>And I said, “Let them put a **clean** turban on his head.” So they put a **clean** turban on his head and **clothed him** with garments. And the angel of the Lord was standing by.

<sup>6</sup>And the angel of **the Lord solemnly assured** Joshua, <sup>7</sup>“Thus says the Lord of hosts: If you will walk in my ways and keep my charge, then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you **the right of access** among those who are standing here. <sup>8</sup>Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men who are a sign: behold, **I will bring my servant the Branch**. <sup>9</sup>For behold, on the stone that I have set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven eyes, I will engrave its inscription, declares the Lord of hosts, and **I will remove the iniquity of this land** in a single day. <sup>10</sup>In that day, declares the Lord of hosts, every one of you will invite his neighbor to come under his vine and under his fig tree.”

So, what do we notice in this text?

- Joshua was the high priest, shown by the turban
- Satan is described as someone who is ready to accuse
- The Lord rebuked Satan
- The Lord calls Joshua a “brand” ie. a stick in a campfire
- The Lord plucked Joshua, the brand, out of the fire
- The Lord removed Joshua’s filthy garments and took his iniquity (sin)
- The Lord clothed Joshua with pure, clean clothing
- The Lord promises that if Joshua walks with Him, he will have rule and access to Him
- The Lord provides a prophecy that He will bring the Branch, Jesus, to remove sin and provide fruit and peace (his vine and fig tree)

# WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

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Note that in this text, Joshua is covered in filthy garments. He's covered in sin, in shame, and Satan is ready to accuse and torment Joshua. Based on what we can read, it seems that he would have reason to, given that Joshua is described as filthy and as someone who has iniquity, or sin. Perhaps Joshua felt shame not only because he was accused but *also because those accusations were true*. No man has lived a perfect life except Jesus, and this means Satan has some ammunition to accuse Joshua. So, what does the Lord do? Does he stand with Satan and accuse Joshua for all his impurity and imperfection?

No., the Lord shuts down Satan's accusations. The Lord, the Judge, *acknowledges* Joshua is just a brand, a stick in the campfire, (ie, helpless, ripe for judgment) and plucks him out of the fire. He plucks Joshua out of judgment and offers forgiveness. This is not because Joshua is so great, but because He is Lord and chose to do so.

Note that the Lord *solemnly assures* Joshua that if he walks in the ways of the Lord, he will rule the Lord's house and have charge of His courts. By removing Joshua's sin, the Lord was able to restore Joshua to his vocation, calling, and mission.

He removes the filthy covering Joshua has and clothes him with *pure* and *clean* garments. The Lord promises access to Himself. He promises to send the Messiah, the Branch. He promises to remove sin. He promises peace between humanity and Himself.

What did Joshua do to deserve purity and the promise of a beautiful future in Christ?

Absolutely nothing. The Lord did it all.

*"The Lord is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? The Lord is on my side." -Psalm 118:6*

# WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YOU?

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This text validates that drenched in our sin, we wear filthy garments. In a beautiful picture of what Jesus ultimately accomplished on the cross, God removed Joshua's sin and covered Him with purity and cleanliness. Satan's accusations have no merit any longer.

On the cross, Jesus took our shame. He took your shame. He took upon Himself every wrong you've committed and every wrong committed against you and paid for it on the cross. He took the weak, insufficient covering we've made for ourselves through man's approval and people pleasing and redeemed it for His perfect covering. "For our sake, He who knew no sin became sin so that we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

This means that you have freedom to acknowledge your sin. You have freedom to acknowledge where Satan's accusations have caused you to feel a sense of deep shame. This also means that Jesus already knows all your sin and He has plucked you from the fire of judgment. Instead of judging you, Jesus took your place and our sin was crucified on the cross with Him. When Jesus rose again, He conquered death and sin and yes, *shame*. When God looks at you, He no longer sees your sin, He sees the perfection of Jesus. This means that shame and the desire to be approved of no longer have the authority to reign over the life of a Christian.

Jesus came and was accused so that you wouldn't be. Jesus was shamed to remove your shame. He was raised to life so that you could have life. Jesus was mocked and hated to provide you God's final approval over your life.

God's approval isn't swayed by what others think of you. It's the final verdict. It cannot be overturned.

*"For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ." -Galatians 1:10*

# PRACTICAL ACTION STEPS

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So, you've identified that you struggle with shame or have a need for approval, or both. You've heard the gospel applied to this. Maybe you've heard the gospel all your life and are having difficulty applying it to your life. What do we do with this truth? How does God's Word prompt change in our lives?

Here are a few practical action steps:

1. **Tell your story.** Find a couple safe friends and tell them your life story. If there's a part of your story you're afraid to share, that probably means it's what you need to share the most. Shame grows and multiplies in darkness. Bring your shame to the light and it will crumble.
2. **Rewrite your story.** What have you believed about yourself because of shame? What does the Word of God have to say about those beliefs? Write these down and practice challenging your automatic negative thoughts with Scripture that is true and helpful.
3. **Practice vulnerability.** Brené Brown once said that vulnerability is the cure to shame. Letting people see your weakness is a practical way to challenge the lie that people will only love you if you're perfect.
4. **Accept that not everyone is going to like you.** This is a tough one for many. The truth is, if you're being yourself, you will not win the approval of everyone you meet. When this happens, it's a perfect opportunity to practice preaching back to yourself that the acceptance of God over you, if you're in Christ, is sufficient.
5. **Memorize Scripture.** When you are accused or begin to accuse yourself, have a fighter verse to turn to, such as "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).
6. **Share your pain with God.** Express to Him where you've been hurt, accused, mocked, and scorned. Allow yourself to feel and then allow Him to heal your inner and most painful wounds.

# REWRITE THE STORY SHAME TOLD YOU

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Where did your shame originate and how have you perpetuated it?

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What shaming statements do you often make about yourself?

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What does the Word of God have to say about that?

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What story do you want to tell? How do you want to live as a person who has inherent worth?

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"Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy--the experiences that make us the most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light."

Brené Brown