Biblical Counseling's Approach to Shame:
Conversations within Biblical Counseling

Moderator: Brad Hambrick
Conversationalists: Anne Dryburgh, Joseph Hussung, Omar King, Allen Mayberry

Guilt and shame are two emotions that are often difficult to distinguish. These two emotions share a lot in common; both in terms of what prompts them and how we experience them. Yet if we are unable to differentiate these two emotions, we can do a great disservice to those we counsel.

Historically, the biblical counseling movement has spoken about guilt more than shame – at least in my reading and interactions with our movement. In many ways, this correlates with our movement's emphasis on sin more than suffering. The contributors to this conversation may disagree with my assessment on the origins for why biblical counseling's has emphasized guilt more than shame.

I value that kind of dialogue and its one of the reasons I'm looking forward to this conversation. As the moderator, I want to learn alongside our readers as we focus on: *how are shame and guilt different, and how do we, as biblical counselors, care for the experience of shame effectively?*

Before we engage that topic, I would like to invite each of the contributors to introduce themselves.

Anne Dryburgh: I have been a missionary with Echoes International since the 1990s. I coordinate a European network as part of the Biblical Counseling Coalition Council. As well as this, I am on the board of Confident to Counsel, the advisory board of The Baptist Initiative for Biblical Counseling and Evangelism, coordinate I.B.C.M.'s care network, and teach workshops and in seminaries internationally. In addition, I host the YouTube channel Conversations for Change, have a website also called Conversations for Change, and am the author of *The Emotionally Abusive Parent*, *The Emotionally Abusive Husband*, *The Emotionally Abusive Mindset,* and *Good News for Victims of Rape: Biblical Counsel for Women*. I have a Ph.D. in biblical counseling, an M.A. in Christian counseling, and a B.A. in biblical counseling.

Joseph Hussung: I am the Director of Recruitment and Senior Counseling Supervisor for Fieldstone Counseling. I live in Hopkinsville, Ky with my wife, Sarah, and my 3 children. I have served in various ministry roles in local churches over about 15 years and biblical counseling has always been a very important aspect of my ministry in many of those roles. I have a MDiv in Christian Ministry, and DMin in Biblical Counseling from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. I love writing, all things sports, and reading anything theology or counseling. I also have a book coming out next March entitled *Learning to Listen: Effective Skills for Every Counselor* through New Growth Press.

Omar King: I am a 46 year old native New Yorker who's lived in the Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina for 30 years. I currently work at a parachurch organization, Bridgehaven Counseling Associates, as a staff counselor since its inception in 2012. I am also an ordained minister and member of the Summit Church. I've received my Bachelor of Science degree in psychology from UNC-Charlotte, my M.Div in Biblical Counseling from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and am currently attempting to complete my Ed.D. also at Southeastern. I'm happily married to my wife LaToya of 17 years. I love the sport of table tennis. My favorite movie is the Count of Monte Cristo. I enjoy fashion and fragrances. And my dream is to one day retire in Florence, Italy.

Allen Mayberry: I currently serve as a staff counselor at Rocky Creek Baptist Church in Greenville, South Carolina. Previously I have served as a state-licensed LPC in North Carolina and at a couple parachurch counseling ministries. I have received an M.Div., an M.A. in Biblical Counseling, and a D.Min. in Biblical Counseling, all from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. I have been married to Katie for nearly 8 years. We have four children. My hobbies and interest areas include anything sports-related, working in the yard, and hanging out in coffee shops (I don't love coffee, but I love the coffee shop vibes).

It seems like this would be a topic where beginning with definitions would be helpful. How do you differentiate the experience of shame and from guilt? How would these two experiences be different from an experience like regret? As much as possible, answer this question in a way that helps the reader "sort their own emotional laundry," that is to organize their emotional experience in a way that sets them up to respond well (i.e., in God-honoring and healthy ways) to their emotions.

Anne Dryburgh: How someone experiences guilt or shame can feel the same. You feel wrong. You feel bad. Most of the explanations that I have read say that the difference between guilt and shame is that guilt is for when you have done wrong, whereas shame is where you think that you are wrong as a person. Guilt is about your feelings or status after breaking a standard of right and wrong. Shame is what you feel when you think something is wrong with you.

Building on what shame is, in my experience, it is usually a response to not meeting a person or a group's expectations. A personal or collective standard has been broken. This standard does not need to be biblical, just one that the other person or the group holds to. The shamed person has failed to meet human expectations. There is something wrong with them; they are a letdown.

In this way, I understand shame to be largely relational. It is the feeling you get when you let down or fail to meet the expectations of a group of people with whom you have a relationship.

This often leads to what is known as shaming. This would include being shunned, not just by the person whose standards have been broken, but by the group. I live in an honor/shame culture. If you displease the person with authority, you can be shunned. The other members of the group will then choose sides. Since they don't want to be shunned either, usually they decide to please the one with the most power or is the most important. The one on the receiving end can lose all relationships, often without even knowing the cause of the shunning. The fear of being treated this way leads to people second-guessing what others will think and do if they act in certain ways. So, they live in fear.

When we are helping people in these situations, as well as looking at heart issues such as the fear of man, we also need to think about how we, as a church, can practically care. For example, imagine a woman with two kids. If her whole family shuns her, and these things happen, who will help her with house or car repairs? What about the kids during Christmas and birthdays? Imagine the shunning occurred because she had become a believer and would not recant. It is really important that we offer practical care alongside helping people with heart issues.

If someone feels guilty or ashamed, regret will probably involve asking themselves why they did that. They might go over and over in their minds about what they did say and do and what they could have said or done instead. This regret is like a destructive vortex. It doesn't resolve anything and only makes their lived experience worse.

This is where breaking down what has happened and how they have responded is helpful. They could write down what they said or did that makes them feel guilty. Then, they could examine that with Scripture to see if they have sinned. If they have, to the best of their ability, try to resolve the issue by seeking to talk to the people involved. If it is due to not meeting someone's expectations, they could write down the expectations they have not met and how they have responded. Ideally, it would be great if they could talk to the person about this and resolve the issue. However, since life is complex, if the other person holds to their own, it is essential to help the person focus on life-giving Scriptural truths with their desire to please the Lord and bless others. The apostle Peter is a helpful example of how to live after being guilty. While he probably regretted tremendously betraying the Lord, Peter became the apostle of hope. When addressing guilt and shame, it is important to focus on the Lord's life-giving hope.

One of the most powerful messages of hope in addressing guilt and shame is found in Jesus' sacrifice. His words, 'It is finished!' on the cross signifies that he has fully paid for our guilt and that we are declared righteous in him. This reassurance can help us understand that living in guilt is not what he desires for us. If we do feel guilty, Scripture provides answers on how to address it, and we can continue to live as justified, redeemed, and loved believers in Jesus.

Omar King: I think the question asked this way appropriately highlights the **experience** of shame, guilt, and regret, understanding that all three can feel similarly although they are defined differently. Most people use these terms interchangeably. They're close cousins as they share the same emotional valence. It's why we might say I "feel guilty" even though the primary definition of guilt is as a noun and a statement of fact as opposed to an emotion. All three of these can fall on the same spectrum along with other synonyms like culpability, disgrace, indiscretion, remorse, stigma, malfeasance and many others.

In the last decade the subject of shame has become popularized by authors like Brene Brown and her viral Ted Talk and subsequent publishing's. Amongst Christians and Christian counselors, books like *Shame Interrupted* by Ed Welch serve as a biblically sourced and guided option about shame. Recent and more commonly understood definitions of shame and guilt distinguish the two this way: when someone experiences shame they feel like something is wrong with their being, conversely, someone may experience guilt as feeling something they did was wrong. Guilt is often attributed to our actions whereas shame is attributed to our personhood. Regret is closer to shame than it is to guilt. But most of us don't pay attention to these nuances nor are interested in semantics, understandably.

With so many terms having similar meanings, what's more instructive and helpful is how we use them and what they signify for the individual. Here's what I mean; someone can feel ashamed, guilty, or regretful for

something they have done wrong and ought to bear responsibility for without also believing they are condemned or that their life should be annulled. Meaning they can ascribe either three terms to themselves and their accompanying emotions without thinking "My humanity is wrong" or "My existence is bad." On the other hand, that same person could use any of those terms and feel their accompanying emotions and interpret them as "I am bad" or "My existence is wrong."

Scripture uses terms like ashamed, guilt, and blush, among other like terms to describe emotions and feelings we ought to feel about our sin and wrongdoing. The prophet Ezra, for example, says "O my God, I am **ashamed** and **blush** to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our **guilt** has mounted up to heavens." (Ezra 9:6, ESV) And Jeremiah repeats "Were they **ashamed** when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all **ashamed**; they did not know how to **blush**. . ." (Jer. 6:15, 8:12) Here we see how these words reflect emotions and a posture that are prerequisite to turning away from sin and toward God.

The major differences between shame, guilt, and regret is that they are hitched to the interpretation of the individual. We must understand their definition. That means asking more probing questions and trying to get a better idea of how they are using these words and what they connote. For example, a tell that could prompt additional questions or deeper examination might be when someone says "I feel ashamed", "I feel guilty", or "I am embarrassed" versus "I'm an embarrassment" or "I'm a disappointment." Is their description of themselves a verb or a noun? Or even if someone does describe their actions using the appropriate verb, how do they follow it up? Do they pile on self-loathing or are they able to speak about their shameful emotions without minimizing or exaggerating.

Joe Hussung: I love the way that David Powilson defines shame and guilt. He says, "Guilt is an awareness of failure against a standard…Shame is a sense of failure before the eyes of someone else." I think Omar and Anne have done a really great job describing the experience of shame, guilt, and regret. I'm not sure I can add a lot more to what they have already said about our modern concept of shame and guilt.

Here is where I might offer a slight slant on what has already been said. If we start with the Bible and what it says about guilt and shame, it may help us in the work of connecting our modern experience of guilt and shame to the scriptures. Omar started laying down how the bible speaks about shame and guilt, though I might have one small difference in the way I see the bible speaking to this issue. I could be wrong, but I don't see the bible using guilt to describe an emotion, I think the bible uses the term exclusively to describe a status. When we sin, we are guilty. Think courtroom, not counselor's office. Shame, on the other hand, is a more expansive term. It primarily is an emotion or sense attached to the status of guilt against a standard. We should see a couple of significant things attached to shame biblically.

1. *Shame is a self-perception* – Eve's nakedness didn't change from Gen. 2 & 3. Her perception of her nakedness changed. She perceived that it is was wrong for her to be naked and her nakedness was something to be covered.
2. *Shame has the larger community at play* – The bible was written within a shame/honor culture and shame had allegiance and community aspects to it. Shame was attached to those who were disloyal to the community and separation was often the result. This happens in Gen. 3 by the covering of their nakedness but ultimately by the being put out of the garden.
3. *Shame can be legitimate or illegitimate in scripture* – we see this because Paul says that he "is not ashamed of the gospel." (Rom. 1:16) But there is also shame that is a legitimate extension of guilt, and even if the

person isn't experiencing it…. They should. Think of Rom. 2 where people "commit shameless acts." Or the passage that Omar quoted from Jeremiah.

So, our modern concept of feeling shame and feeling guilty map onto various ways in which shame is understood in scripture, rather than on the way guilt functions in scripture.

The last thing that I might add to the discussion is that there is something very foundational to how shame speaks to us as human beings. We were created to be known and be loved by others and to know and love others. This is why we have a very real and natural desire toward that end. We have something in the core of our beings that seeks to know others and viscerally desires to be known and loved by others. God made us in such a way that knowledge and love should be reciprocal. As we know more, we love more, which feeds our desire to know more and love more. Shame reverses this desire into fear. Eve's fear after sinning in the garden, and our fear when we sin or even perceive that we are less than loveable, is the inverse of this desire. If I am known more, I will be loved less, so I should hide, run, cover.

This is why our compassion, understanding, and empathy in counseling can be so helpful. It can show a counselee something about God. Keller said, "To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything. It liberates us from pretense, humbles us out of our self-righteousness, and fortifies us for any difficulty life can throw at us."[1] This is also why we shouldn't be the language police with these terms. Even though I don't think we use these terms in modern life the same way the scriptures use them, our goal shouldn't be for them to regurgitate the words in the way we want them to but to perceive themselves, others, the world, and God the same way God does. So, as we approach counseling those who struggle with shame and guilt, our ability to listen well, understand their experience, and love them well can show them the way that God loves them.

Allen Mayberry: As has been mentioned already, guilt and shame are often used as synonymous terms when it simply comes to how people generally think and speak about them. To some degree, this is understandable. Historically (at least in relatively recent times), they seem to often get lumped together even in Christian circles. Furthermore, feeling guilt and feeling shame are experiences that *sometimes (not always)* should go together. That said, though they can be felt simultaneously, guilt and shame are not the same experience.

Guilt is objective, having to do with a standard that has been violated. I have committed wrong (sin). Someone above used the visual of a courtroom to highlight this reality. Even if an individual speaks of "*feeling* guilty," actual guilt is tied to actual wrongdoing. Shame is more subjective, meaning it has to do with a felt sense of being inadequate or unworthy, and this usually is connected to how a person views him/herself in relationship to others. We have done something wrong or had something wrong done to us, and we are afraid of how others will perceive us if they found out. For example, Joe pointed out that Adam and Eve's shame was brought to the surface because–at least in part–they were in each other's presence. They didn't just observe each other's nakedness (which had been there before sin came into the world); there is also evaluation language used in the Gen. 3 narrative. Shame may or may not be tied to objective guilt. As Anne alluded to, a helpful summary is that guilt says, "I *did* wrong" whereas shame says, "I *am* wrong."

Shame is tricky to nail down. Shame has more and more come to be seen for all of its flaws in recent years. In other words, shame has come to be viewed as inherently a bad thing to be avoided (e.g., "You should not

[1] Tim Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitments with the Wisdom of God* (Penguin Publishing Group, 2013), 101.

feel like a failure for _____."). The suffering-based causes of shame have taken center stage, both in secular and Christian circles. However, the Bible seems to affirm that shame is sometimes good and sometimes bad (Joe pointed this out in his remarks). Said differently, God *intends* shame to serve a helpful function when it follows on the heels of actual sin. In this scenario, shame is what a person feels (or should feel) in their conscience that is meant to wake them up to the reality of their guilt, so that they will turn to God (and perhaps other individuals as well) for forgiveness and possibly make reparations. This is what Paul intended for the man in 1 Corinthians 5 to feel for publicly living in sin.

God does *not intend* shame to be present after repentance for sin has occurred, after being personally sinned *against,* or for experiencing some form of personal weakness. Shame that persists after repentance for sin is not from God, and this kind of shame is likely more rooted in suffering, not sin. After a person has been sinned against or experiences personal weakness (e.g., various forms of limitations and inadequacies), God intends to comfort. An individual may feel shame (i.e., a sense of being unworthy or "wrong" to others), but this is not from God nor intended by him. And God defines what is truly shameful.

In terms of differentiation from shame and guilt, regret–in the way I'm thinking of it–has to do with simply wishing past sad/bad events had turned out differently. Regret is closely linked to grief. Grief is not bad, but it is hard. However, I've also seen individuals struggle with "regret" in a way that makes regret look much more like ongoing shame. In other words, they so regret some aspect of their past that their past continues to haunt them, crushing them like shame would. At the risk of perhaps oversimplifying things, this person either hasn't yet quite embraced God's forgiveness and acceptance (if the "regret" is for their own sin) or is still on the journey of learning how to "grieve with hope" (in cases of personal weakness or being on the receiving end of others' sinful actions).

Each of you, in one way or another, emphasized the importance of understanding the experience of the person to differentiate guilt and shame. You also emphasized that how someone interprets their experience is the key factor in whether they label an experience as guilt or shame. Could each of you provide an example, a brief case study, where a counselee interpreted an experience that would be better understood as shame as guilt (or vice versa)? Use the case study to help us understand the urgency (or lack thereof) to help a counselee rightly name their experience early in the counseling process. Is it more important to work from a counselee's initial understanding or to correct their interpretation early in counseling? If the latter, how do you avoid aggravating a sense of guilt (I was wrong) or shame (I am not smart enough) as you help them modify their perception of guilt or shame?

Allen Mayberry: As I'm thinking about this cluster of questions, I really like what Joe said above: "Even though I don't think we use these terms [guilt and shame] in modern life the same way the scriptures use them, our goal shouldn't be for them to regurgitate the words in the way we want them to but to perceive themselves, others, the world, and God the same way God does." I agree. Our goal is less to be picky about language (this is not saying that terminology is unimportant) and more to understand what someone *means*. Imagine how it would go if you were talking with your spouse and held them hostage for every technically incorrect term they used, all while suspecting what it was they were trying to communicate. In a similar manner, it's more important – especially at the beginning of a counseling relationship – to strive to understand what someone means than it is to enforce correct dictionary definitions. That latter part will go much better when it's in service to the former part.

In terms of an example where a counselee interpreted the experience of shame or guilt as the other, one representative case study comes to mind. A middle-aged man cheated on his wife by reaching out on social media to a woman he had previously known through work connections. The content of the social media interactions between the man and this other woman was sexual in nature, and this continued off and on for a couple years. Finally, this Christian man could withstand the guilt on his conscience no longer, and he confessed to his wife and asked forgiveness from both God and his wife. He cut off the extra-marital relationship cold-turkey. By the time he and his wife came for marriage counseling (a couple weeks after he confessed to his wife), he was speaking of "all the guilt" he still felt, and he voiced the burden of this remaining guilt to the counselor. In listening to this man, the counselor got the impression very quickly that it was – biblically speaking – shame, not guilt, that the man was experiencing.

If I am this counselor, a couple things are going through my mind. First, I am eager in this case to help this man quickly understand the difference between guilt and shame. But I've got to set it up. If I jump to the distinction between the two too quickly, I may be missing something important in his experience. So I would ask him to tell me more about what "all the guilt" means. What thoughts come to his mind when he sees his wife, recalling again and again what he did to her? Why does he feel guilty? How does he believe God perceives him? I think this last question is absolutely essential. In all likelihood, this man is going to say that he thinks some version of "God must be disappointed and disgusted with me." After all, he's disgusted with himself.

Second, I would affirm that his actions were wrong and understandably had disastrous consequences. But then I would get more gently and firmly didactic. He needs to be reminded that if he has genuinely confessed and repented of his sin, God really has forgiven him – his guilt itself has been cleared (Rom 8:1; 1 Tim 1:15-16; 1 John 1:9). He is experiencing shame now, but shame was properly what he felt *before* he confessed his sin. It was shame that woke him up to the reality of his guilt. But now, any ongoing shame ("guilt feelings" is a synonymous term I've heard utilized) may be present, but it is not from God. If we think in terms of the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15, the son was certainly both guilty and ashamed. But the father's response – given that the son expressed godly sorrow for his actions – was to not only *forgive* his son's sin, but to also *accept* him with profound joy, thereby doing his part to combat any felt experience of crippling shame still existing in his son. (On a related note, just pointing out these distinctions does not mean the shame will dissipate immediately, but hopefully it paves the way for its grip to be lessened.)

I have found that when I attempt to gently but convictionally make this distinction for someone in the position of the man in our case study, he or she is usually grateful to hear someone else voice these category differences. So in answer to the original question, I would say "yes" – it is "...important to work from a counselee's initial understanding [**and**] to correct their interpretation early in counseling." Sequentially, the starting point is the counselee's initial understanding, but then I would want to quickly move towards reframing their interpretation via biblical categories.

Anne Dryburgh: Several years ago, a young woman struggling with addictions asked for help. She had suffered a traumatic assault about ten years before we met and, understandably, used alcohol to relieve her extreme emotional distress.

Compounding the horror of what she suffered was what she believed was a failure on her part. Since she was strong all her life, she thought she could fight off any assailant. But on that day, she didn't. She froze. The poor woman, believing that she had done wrong, lived with guilt for her perceived failure to fight off her assailant. Even though she was not guilty, she believed that she was. Adding to her suffering were nightly sleep disturbances she believed she should have grown out of. Whenever she experienced a sleep disturbance,

she thought she was a failure. She believed that she was no good. In her mind, she was defiled. Believing she was defiled, no good, and a failure, she would drink.

We spent much time looking at Jesus and what he has done for her, especially in Isaiah 53 and Ephesians 1. I talked to her at an appropriate time about people's physiological responses to being overwhelmed (fight, fight, freeze). For the first time, she understood that freezing was a normal physiological reaction to trauma. It was not morally wrong and not sinful. This freed her from living under the burden of years of (false) guilt.
Whenever she experienced a sleep disturbance, she would spiral in her thoughts about how defiled and shameful she was. She prayerfully talked herself through Ephesians 1 the next time she experienced it. Her relief was almost palpable that she had been able, with the Lord's help, to break the negative vortex that led to addiction.

She went to a medical doctor about the sleep disturbances and discovered that her experience of trauma was manifesting physically, which was cured after a short course of medical treatment. This poor woman had been experiencing both guilt and shame, from which she was freed by understanding the human body, taking medical treatment to be cured, understanding precious truths about who our Lord is, his love for her, who she is in him, and living these truths in the specifics of her thought life.
It was crucial while helping her to speak about our loving, gracious, caring Lord and who she is in him while also addressing her physical issues. Love for our Lord motivated her to let him change her and to work on addressing her addictions and the guilt associated with them.

Joe Hussung: Let me offer another case study. Imagine Jerry, a mid-30's student who is struggling with panic attacks. He has been recently struggling with panic attacks as he has been doing Psych ward rotations as a part of his degree program and been trying to help some of the most difficult cases. As he speaks to these poor people struggling with various different significant psychological problems, he starts recognizing that he thinks and fears some of the same things that they do. As he struggles to finish his rounds he decides to sign up for counseling and see what is going on.

As you start listening to Jerry, he starts revealing that when he was a kid he was molested by an uncle over several years when he was in 3-4th grade. You help him to keep articulating this experience and as he talks about it you hear him say a couple of things that strike you as significant. First, he says, "I know it was wrong to take part in that." Second, when you explore what he means by that he says, "I could have stopped it if I had just told someone. I just felt so ashamed and confused I didn't know what to do." Much of Jerry's insecurities with his current struggles come from fear that he is "as messed up as the people that he sees on the Psych Ward." This is a good example of a counselee that needs to differentiate shame and guilt.

First, Jerry will need to be able to see that it wasn't him that was "taking part in anything" but his uncle who was manipulating and abusing him. A relationship that God meant for nurturing and encouragement was taken advantage of and violated. For whatever Jerry feels guilty for in this particular experience, he should trust in Jesus' words that say, "But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to fall away—it would be better for him if a heavy millstone were hung around his neck and he were drowned in the depths of the sea." (Matt. 18:6). The acts that he was subjected to as a child, do not rest on his shoulders but on his uncle's.

Second, Jerry will need to wrestle with the shame that emanates from this experience. On the one hand, shame should be recognized to express something real about his experience. Ed Welch says, "Paradoxically, it is so helpful to people to hear this experience you have of feeling icky or dirty or naked or contagious or whatever,

that's not a problem in your head that you just need to get your thinking and get over. You're actually experiencing something real. You have indeed been shamed. You have been brought into something that was not what you were made for or created for, that you have been marked by this experience in some negative and lasting way." In some sense, Jerry needs to recognize that what has been done to him is tragic, evil, shameworthy…His experience is real and not to be shrugged off. But on the other hand it shouldn't be accepted as an identity marker, but something that should be warred against. The cross of Jesus was shameworthy…and yet he "despised" it. Jesus' perspective on the cross was that it was something that was different than what was meant to be imposed by it. Jerry's uncle used these evil acts and the shame that naturally flowed from them to keep Jerry in a place of shame and fear. Now, Jerry will have to despise the shame imposed on him just as Jesus did.

Finally, in this example Jerry is experiencing shame and guilt in one experience but I think helping Jerry separate his experiences of shame and guilt would be clarifying for Jerry to see how God's word speaks to it. However, this process will likely take time and even repetition. Early in counseling this would look like understanding every facet of his experience with guilt and shame and trying to understand the language he is using to describe it. I would also want him early to know that shame won't come from me and assure him that God is not ashamed of him either. I'd like to engage some of the fear Jerry has and why he would want to hide what happened to him. Engaging Jerry's fears in a safe, loving environment can help shed light and bring truthfulness to an area he has wanted to keep in the shadows.. Then we would get into the more difficult task of helping him see where his perspective is different about himself and his past than God's is.

Omar King: I hope the proceeding example fits, albeit adjacently. One client, a precocious and compassionate young lady, who admittedly is beset by identity, self-esteem and trust issues, frequently conflates shame and guilt. She was adultified at a young age by parents whose drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence issues, and neglect of a live-in grandparent under hospice, effectively rendered her simultaneously a perfectionist and invisible. Most of her upbringing signaled her existence as primarily utilitarian, and therefore, her wants and needs were dismissed. She learned to defer her self-worth to the gaze of others. Constantly preoccupied with how she is seen made her vulnerable to real or perceived slights and swimming in insecurity.

In one session she inquired about whether it was okay for her follow-up with an acquaintance in a text exchange where she solicited recommendations for activities to enjoy on her upcoming vacation destination. She had not heard back from this person in a while, and apparently, this wasn't a one-off. Her childhood acquaintance was a repeat offender, ignoring return texts even after initiating communication and expressing interest and enthusiasm. My client was ambivalent, vacillating between feelings of being bothersome, wondering if she had offended in some way, and being hurt again by someone who claimed to care about her. Plagued by ambivalence and dissonance, she was unsure about how to proceed. She was reluctant to expose herself again to the possibility of future hurt, but also yearned for resolution. She also garnered just enough confidence and self-efficacy prior to our working relationship to understand the importance of boundary setting, and suspected this was a fitting opportunity to practice.

You can see her dilemma. She was unaccustomed to advocating for herself, believing to do so was selfish and pompous—false-induced-guilt. On the other hand, she assumed her so-called friend was upset with her about some unarticulated and unknown reason, though in her mind, whatever the reason, must be legitimate—self-derived shame. Both guilt and shame were present. Both were false, or at least, for the time being, undetermined and premature. In her case, she was all too willing to heap guilt on herself before any evidence justified doing so. Her shame which communicated, "You're not allowed to ask for anything, definitely not

twice, even if someone promises to deliver on a request" engendered both guilt and resentment. She was stuck.

Together we parsed and tried to bring clarity to her conflicting thoughts and emotions about the situation. We discussed the possibility of ascribing guilt to her friend, as she was the one up till now who failed to text her back after making a few attempts to correspond with her, and, ostensibly, had a habit of doing so. Whether malintent was involved or not was currently irrelevant, the fact was her friend's radio silence at the very least was inconsiderate and my client had a right to confront and try to rectify the situation. But our first task was to help her see how her shame—diminished self-dignity—was producing imaginary guilt and causing her to question the validity of her experiences. I recommended she reach out one more time, but this go-round, explicitly state in an amiable and matter-of-fact manner that if she doesn't hear from her friend in the next week or so, she will assume she is too busy (give the benefit of the doubt), will formulate an agenda without her input, and they will talk sometime in the future.

At this point, my client was unwilling to confront her friend about her pattern of unresponsiveness directly, but in the interim, she was willing to exonerate herself of adopted and unsubstantiated guilt while recognizing her shame as the culprit, which also needed recalibrating. Years of familial neglect misaligned her conscience, weakening it through oversensitivity. She needed Christ to restore her with a good and clean conscience she could trust and rely on.

Regarding the question of timing around correcting a counselee's understanding or interpretation of their experience earlier or later in the counseling process, in most cases, it is better to correct earlier rather than later. I like Allen's approach, "gently but convictionally", which prioritizes tone over order of placement. How this distinction is conveyed seems to matter most. We should not rush to correct, especially before the counselee reveals the entire corpus of their current emotional and perceptual framework. We don't want to cut in, correct too quickly, and unintentionally send the message that only adjusting their theology matters and not understanding their pain. We want to be counselors full of grace and truth.

As our discussion unfolds, I get the sense that some subcategories are emerging for both guilt and shame. For guilt, I've noticed different ones refer to true/accurate guilt for sins committed in contrast to false guilt for things someone did not do.

For shame, I think I've picked up on at least three types being mentioned:

- **A. shame as a lingering troubled conscience from true guilt that lasts after repentance,**
- **B. genuine shame as an appropriate reaction to an intensely dishonoring experience like abuse, and**
- **C. false shame as an inaccurate self-perception of being socially deficient.**

Are there other categories for guilt or shame you would introduce? Is it important for every counselor or counselee to use these categories the same way, or is it more effective for these categories to be adaptable to each person?

Allen Mayberry: Off the top of my head, I think those categories for guilt and shame are fairly comprehensive. That said, they are – especially shame – on a spectrum. These categories should not be a "straightjacket" for counselees. I think guilt is likely easier and more straightforward to assess and understand (hence perhaps why there are fewer categories pointed out above for guilt than for shame).

Shame, on the other hand, feels much more thorny. It doesn't feel nearly as "straightforward" an experience as guilt. I would also add that "having the right biblical answers" may feel more cut and dry when related to guilt than to shame, because there's just something emotionally about shame that often doesn't allow an individual to heal quickly. There's often a "yeah, but…" response for someone experiencing shame. I would add that this is why the relational component is so important when it comes to gradually overcoming the felt experience of shame. Shame is usually relational in terms of what feeds shame (i.e., someone else caused or exacerbated the shame or witnessed a shameful act), so it takes relationships to heal from shame as well. Relationships (to God and to others who love and accept) are what gives life to biblical doctrine; relationships to people serve as an extension of God's love and makes his love and acceptance more readily able to be believed.

The only other unnamed category I might mention is one that involves shame. Perhaps the reason it's unnamed is because this category is one we already assume as having biblical warrant, and most of the time the counselees we help are experiencing shame from a suffering perspective (i.e., all three shame categories mentioned in the prompt were not "deserved" by the individual experiencing them). The category I have in mind is shame that takes place as a result of guilt whose corresponding sin has not been repented of yet. Unlike the other three types of shame mentioned, this is shame that is personally sin-oriented. In this case, shame is called for, shame is appropriate, and shame is good. This category is similar to the first type mentioned in the prompt ("shame as a lingering troubled conscience from true guilt that lasts after repentance"), with the main difference being that repentance hasn't taken place yet. Shame is good in these cases precisely because it is meant to result in repentance.

A lack of repentance in the immediate aftermath of their rebellion is why Adam and Eve ran from God (Gen 3). Shame leading to repentance is what Paul intended when he publicly called out a man in the Corinthian church living in gross sexual sin (1 Cor 5). When God's people in the Old Testament disregarded God, this appropriately led to shame (Hosea 4:7 – "The more they increased, the more they sinned against me; I will change their glory to shame.") It is this category of sin-oriented shame that should make us cautious in not too quickly striving to quell the feeling of shame. It may be there as an ally appointed by God to steer a person to himself.

Joe Hussung: I'm not sure I would add much to what Allen has said above in expanding the categories of shame and guilt. These 3 categories listed above, and the 4th category of legitimate shame that is meant to lead to repentance, seem like comprehensive categories of shame, in broad strokes. The one thing I might add is that shame seems to feel so nebulous, and thorny, and slow to heal because its effects on the person can be so multi-faceted, which also means the way we might apply scripture to it, depends on the category of shame, yes, but also on the way that shame has malformed the person in front of us. From what place is it coming? How has the person's actions been shaped by that shame? Here are some categories of shame's effects as I see it.

Shame can affect the way we view ourselves and our identity. Much of the self-talk our counselee's experience in the midst of shame is experienced by identifying ourselves with the shame we experience. "I'm just a loser." Or "I'll never be good enough…" are all narratives of shame that seep into our hearts.

Shame can affect how we relate to God and others. "God doesn't care about me because…." Or "It doesn't matter what I do, they won't ever accept me as I am. So, maybe I should be something else." Are narratives that say something about the way our sense of shame has changed the way we relate to God or others.

Shame can come from a place of inner turmoil, such as lingering sense of guilt which are reflected above, but it can also be a response to oppression from outside forces. People at work can call us bigoted and we feel a sense of shame over that even though we know our views are biblical, or we can feel shame because someone has tried to force their view on us to convince us what they are doing is right or at least we were equally at fault in the action.

There are likely more than these, but my point is, with these effects, that each of these examples would have us turning to different places to help the person's experience come more in line with scripture and God's heart for them. Shame doesn't have a "one-size fits all" approach. In fact, even if you look at the three effects, I listed above you can see there is obvious overlap between the 3. How many times, when dealing with shame that is forced on an individual by another person (like abuse), does shame associated with God's perspective of them get folded into the mix? Often. How often, when helping someone deal with the external pressure put on them from others do we also have to help them turn inward because what they have been told about themselves has taken root internally as its own experience of shame. The point is, it's messy. So, I might suggest we think of these categories and effects of shame as "more guidelines" to give us a starting point for people as we try to help them, than rules and buckets to neatly drop them into.

Omar: I concur with my colleagues and cannot think of additional categories for shame and guilt that would benefit the discourse. That does not mean there are no other categories, but the ones which have emerged appear most common. I air on the side of counselors/counselees taking a flexible approach to applying these categories. Being familiar with these categories—that they exist and when and how to identify them—is important, but their application can and should be adapted.

As an aside, it may be helpful to acknowledge why we need these categories. What inspires them? We understand that guilt and shame are outcomes of mankind's fall beginning in the Garden of Eden. There are "true" or genuine forms of these, as we've outlined, but there are also permutations which veer from legitimate experiences of guilt and shame. Why? Because of the noetic effects of sin—sin's pervasive and noxious effects on the mind. Sin compromises our appraisal and evaluative processes. We draw wrong conclusions, mis-define, mislabel, sometimes by exaggeration or minimization. We do not know or accurately articulate things as we should; another sign of our brokenness. Sins consequences, therefore, are compounded. We're in double trouble. We experience guilt and shame for things we ought not to and fail to experience them during moments we should. Guilt and shame are twisted and distorted to mean what they shouldn't, more or less than they are.

The emotion of shame is particularly susceptible to misconstrue due to its ambient and diffuse quality. One thing we can ascertain is how we respond to shame, through hiding and defense mechanisms, fending off our humiliation, exposure, and vulnerability. Shame makes us feel, to use a biblical concept, defiled or unclean. It is this sense of sullying that ostracizes, compelling withdrawal from God and others. Shame weakens our conscience—the moral compass and leveling mechanism that gauges our standing with God and others. A good and clean conscience is one unencumbered by shame. A good and clean conscience is a blessing from God and one Scripture also reminds us we should pursue. (Acts 23:1; 1 Tim. 1:5, 19; 1 Peter 3:16, 21) As Christian counselors we are tasked with helping our clients identify and distinguish between guilt and shame, but we also educate on the role and importance of maintaining a good conscience. Not an infallible conscience, which can never be obtained this side of heaven, but a trustworthy and reliable one.

I think it imperative when examining shame to also couple it with its biblical alembic, "the blood of Christ", that cleanses and purifies our consciences. Shame makes us feel dirty, the blood of Christ shed is the sign of the forgiveness and cleansing of our sins. I think this truth is paramount to helping clients understand how God deals with our shame and restores our conscience to a healthy state. As the Scripture dictates, when "we confess our sins, he (God) is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to **cleanse** us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9). David also alludes to his need for God's cleansing power inviting him to "purge me (him) with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me (him), and I shall be whiter than snow." (Psalm 51: 7)

Anne: A category I would add is how guilt and shame are often used to control and manipulate people. I will illustrate this with some stories.

During counseling, I have spoken to many people who have been put under pressure to do something that they knew was wrong and did not want to do. The perpetrator would use all kinds of tricks to get their own way, such as "You are a prude," "You are stuck up," "Everybody's doing it," "If you loved me, you would," "Why are you always against me," "You are just like everybody else, who doesn't care about the hard time that I am going through," "It is cultural to do it, you are reacting according to your culture so you need to change and adapt to this one that you are living in."

After a period of pressure, nagging, silent treatment, being shouted at, being mocked, or being wooed, the person caves in. Initially, things are great between them, but the next time they disagree with the perpetrator or don't want to do something because it is wrong, they hold this against them, saying, "You can't talk; you bought drugs even though you said it was wrong." I have often seen this happen in the area of intimacy. If the wife doesn't want to do something that she believes is wrong and demeaning, the husband has used her past wrongdoings as leverage. Guilt is used as leverage and control.

Shame is when the counselee has not been good enough for the perpetrator. I have seen this regarding gender, color, nationality, native language, and not being part of a biological family. People who do have these things are part of the "in" group and are given preferential treatment. To be included, the counselee has done all that they can to win the approval of the perpetrator. Examples are working late hours, sacrificing their health and family to do what the perpetrator wants, and giving up hobbies and friends to be with the perpetrator to win their approval. I have known women who have had operations to change their physical looks to win the approval of their husbands. The counselee has done all that she can to change and be accepted. She becomes as much part of the group and accepted as the perpetrator wants, and they keep doing what the perpetrator wants.

Shame is used as leverage to control and to get people to do what the perpetrator wants.

Let's conclude our conversation with words of hope and direction. We've spent a great deal of time differentiating guilt and shame. In that sense, we've been "sorting our moral-emotional laundry." But we don't sort laundry for the sake of creating piles. We sort laundry because each pile requires a different approach to cleaning. With the metaphor in mind, how does the gospel remedy or alleviate shame differently than it does guilt? As you answer that question, try to provide an example of how you would try to help a counselee who is frustrated because they are trying to apply a guilt-remedy to a shame-struggle and aren't getting the relief they believe their efforts would warrant.

Allen: I'll first try to speak to how the gospel provides help to guilt differently than it does shame, then offer an example of this reality in order to hopefully make it more understandable. The gospel remedies guilt via forgiveness. I say "remedies" because the pardon for our sin purchased by Jesus's life, death, and resurrection does actually cancel guilt. Jesus's pardon is the solution. Guilt is tied directly to sin. If a person has not sinned, this does not mean they won't necessarily feel guilty, but there is not actual guilt connected to them for the action or experience in question. And if a person has sinned but has turned to the Lord in genuine repentance, their guilt (which was real) is no more. In the courtroom of Heaven, so to speak, they are innocent. Not guilty.

The gospel interacts with shame differently. I would use the term "alleviate" more than "remedy" in this case. Guilt is objective – a person either has guilt or they do not. In this regard, guilt is analogous to a person having cancer. They either do have cancer or they do not. Shame, on the other hand, has a subjective aspect as well as objective. It is objective in one sense. If a person has sinned, they should feel some degree of shame (this is the objective component), for they have acted shamefully. The essence of shame is dishonor towards God, and sin always fails to give God the honor he is due. However, shame can also be subjective. That is, even when there is no guilt – either because true guilt has been forgiven or because there was no sin committed in the first place – it is possible for a person to feel less than, repulsive, incapable of being loved, etc. These are marks of shame. And the felt experience of shame does not necessarily go away just because a person knows they do not objectively belong to shame any longer. By way of analogy, shame can be more like an auto-immune deficiency. The deficiency may always be there (at least to some degree), and to expect it to simply disappear overnight is unrealistic. But there are ways to alleviate the symptoms of the auto-immune deficiency. A person can become more healthy, gradually build up their stamina, be able to enjoy longer stretches of unbroken normal activity, etc. This can be true, even as the underlying condition may go on beneath the surface for some time. This does not mean the progress made is not real. It is simply saying that progress occurs in small, often non-linear doses.

Now for the example. It is possible for someone to apply a guilt-remedy in cases that are clearly and exclusively shame-oriented (e.g., when an individual feels dirty for having been sexually abused). But in my experience, it is more common to come across individuals who really have done something sinful, have asked forgiveness of God (and any other individuals they wronged), and yet continue to feel stained. In other words, these are situations where guilt and shame can be categorically distinguished, but experientially they feel as if they blend together.

I'm considering an individual who struggles with same-sex attraction (SSA), though they earnestly fight against the urge to give in to their twisted desires. There are times when they have indeed compromised and given in to sin, but on balance their desire is to please God with their bodies. Each time they have sinned, they have repented anew to the Lord and sought wise accountability from a select few Christians of the same gender as them. However, their previous moral failings – along with the frustration and fatigue of resisting their flesh – leads them to feel "dirty," to wonder if God really loves them, and to cower in fear at the prospect of other Christians discovering their struggle with SSA. This results in a vague, unspoken but-nevertheless-palpable effort to placate God. If put into words, this would sound like "I'm going to show God I'm truly sorry by making restitution." This is guilt language, for humble acknowledgement of guilt leads to trying to make amends where damages have been inflicted. But in this example, on the whole there are no amends to make, for nothing can be "added" to Christ's sacrifice when it comes to repentance, and it is not likely that the pull of this person's same-sex desires are going to disappear (despite this person hating their struggle mightily).

In this situation, my goal is to help them 1) come to see same-sex attraction itself as a suffering-based struggle and 2) to embrace the reality that God has truly and happily forgiven them for instances of them acting on

the SSA. Both of these points are connected to God not "holding his nose" when they come near; he welcomes them as his friend. I want this person to accept these two points as fundamentally true and life-giving. And this may be just what they need to hear. Notice that these two points are not exactly novel, but they can easily be forgotten as the haze of their struggle makes it difficult to distinguish guilt from shame. Even if the individual in question already cognitively accepted these things, hearing it from another Christian may make these categories more "real" and substantial to them, enabling the heart to latch onto what the head already knew.

Joe Hussung: I think the best way I would try to describe the difference in the way the gospel addresses shame vs. guilt is to say that the gospel addresses guilt by way of reassuring us of Christ's forgiveness of sins and the standing we have before God because of that. Whereas the gospel alleviates our shame, whether warranted or not, by assuring and convincing us of 1) God's love and acceptance of us relationally and 2) God's determination to make all things new when he returns.

On the first point, when Christ goes to the cross, he carries with it all of the sin that we have or will commit. All our guilt was solved because Christ saves sinners. This is why Paul can write, "Therefore now, there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus!" (Romans 8:1). Jesus' death and resurrection takes away guilt. As Allen said, "In the courtroom of Heaven, so to speak, they are innocent. Not guilty."

The second way that the gospel remedies guilt and shame is through the sending of the Holy Spirit to change our perspectives and assure/convince us of the relational truths that accompany a "not guilty" verdict. Shame, if we follow the categories of shame above, is a matter of perspective. If we regard ourselves, our world, our story, and others in a particular way then the end result is shame. This type of perspective must change if shame is to end. However, we would be wrong to assume that perspective is an entirely cognitive thing. Meaning, it doesn't work in terms of thought processes only but lives more in the area of intuitions and feelings, so it isn't a matter of simply rehearsing truths but actually going to the Lord through all of the means with which he has given us to run to him. This would include scripture, prayer, and community through the church. Again, I agree with Allen above. Shame, in this sense, is a subjective reality, which means it lives in the heart and the way we "are" in the world. Undoing this requires the Spirit's power, and slow and patient ministry of the truths of the gospel to the heart of the individual. People tend to get frustrated with their shame primarily because they 1) see it as a lack of faith in Christ and 2) because they think that they should be able to reason their way out of it.

The truths of the gospel that are most important to reinforce in the life of the people who struggle with shame are:

1) God loves them and is not ashamed of them because they are in Christ,
2) A truthful look at the cause of their shame to see if there is anything that is truly shame worthy,
3) A reinforcing of shame that is not biblically shame worthy should be pushed against like Paul does with the shame that may potentially be associated with believing in Christ.
4) being in a community of believers that will reinforce their lack of shame before their eyes. Over time these truths can help a believer untangle their web of shame.

Omar: My answer is a continuation and partial reiteration to the previous question, that is, the gospel addresses shame through the atonement which is Christ's blood shed for both the remission and cleansing of our sin. Some of the most potent passages capturing the both-and-effect of Christ's finished work on the

cross to forgive and cleanse sin is explained in Colossians 2 and select portions of Hebrews chapters 9 and 10.

In redressing guilt for sin, Paul points to Christ reminding the reader, "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, [14] by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. [15] He disarmed the rulers and authorities[b] and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him." (Colossians 2:13-15) The statement "having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debts that stood against us with its legal demand" resolves the lawbreakers' guilt and justifiable punishment for sins. When Jesus died "he set aside" the aforementioned "nailing it to the cross" effectively paying for our sins.

This essential biblical truth applies to clients who, for example, feel the urge to engage in their own self-imputed penance. Counselees who either don't fully comprehend or whose hearts haven't fully absorbed the effect of the atonement, will have difficulty differentiating natural consequences for sin from biblical justification. Doubt can linger causing clients to resort to an amalgamation of partial acceptance for payment for sin (Christ) plus their own draconian self-flagellate practices. Counselors should dissuade counselees whose lingering shame tempts them to self-punish for their sins and instead help counselees deepen their faith and trust in Christ's completed work. Lingering shame is often the culprit which tempts clients to apply a guilt-remedy to a shame-struggle. It is important for that counselee to understand shame can reverberate even after their guilt is exonerated. They suffer from the misconception that guilt is only resolved when shame is absent. Thus, an urge to heap upon themselves additional punishment to reduce shame to it dregs.

So, addressing guilt requires repeated reminders that Christ's death is a fait accompli—a done deal. No more sacrifices for sins are necessary. However, that same sacrifice also resolves lingering shame, but for a different reason. Consider these verses from Hebrews 9 and 10 (emphasis added).

> *By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing [9] (which is symbolic for the present age).[d] According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that* ***cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper,*** *[10] but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.*
>
> *[13] For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify[f] for the purification of the flesh, [14] how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God,* ***purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.***
> *For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. [2] Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered,* ***since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins?***
>
> *[19] Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, [20] by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, [21] and since we have a great priest over the house of God, [22]* ***let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*** *[23] Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.*

Notice the bolded portions. Notice the effect relationship the writer highlights between the sacrifice of Christ by his blood and the resultant perfecting/cleansing/purifying of the conscience. If my hermeneutic is correct, it is at this crucial juncture where Christ's blood and a purified conscience dovetail and where the believers shame melts. A counselee's relief from shame is located where he/she repeatedly applies the blood of Christ to their off-kilter conscience. This is a process not an event. Shame must be treated like a wound that requires constant pressure applied to it before the bleeding permanently stops. We must apply fresh bandages to a wound in the process of healing. Similarly, we must keep applying pressure via prayer, meditation, and contemplation on the truth of Christ's efficacious blood that cleanses our conscience and takes away our shame.

Applying the gospel to guilt and shame in these ways, can chart a path toward clarifying, untangling, and resolving each of them.

Anne: As we have discussed, people experience shame when they think they are failures or inadequate in some way. There is something inherently wrong with them. The feeling of guilt occurs when someone has done wrong by breaking a standard of right and wrong.

Christ is the answer for the shamed person. In the gospels, we see that Jesus associated with those who were shamed by others because they were seen to be inferior. Examples are the woman at the well (John 4:1-45) and the tax collectors and sinners (Matthew 9:9-13).

By dying on the cross, Jesus died in a shameful way, being naked and exposed to everybody who was looking at him. He fulfilled Isaiah 53:3-5, knowing the shame of being "as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not." Even though he was innocent, he suffered shame so that others would be made righteous. As a result of Jesus' work on the cross, instead of being naked, they have been clothed with the righteousness of God (Isaiah 61:10; 2 Corinthians 5:21).

When helping a person struggling with guilt, it is really important to understand the work of Jesus on the cross. Through Jesus' death on the cross, they have been made righteous before God (2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 3:24; 8:30). Since they are in Christ, there is now no condemnation for them (Romans 8:1).
Being justified in Christ, they are to become like him in their character. Since God is for them in Christ, if they confess their sins, they will be forgiven by Him. He is their Advocate with the Father who is faithful and just (1 John 1:9-2:3).

As you can see, helping the shamed or guilty person involves helping them live out being righteous in Christ. Both involve trusting the Lord because of his work on the cross and living in the freedom of being clothed with his righteousness. The difference is whether or in what way a person has broken God's standard of right and wrong. If they have, confession and repentance are essential.

If they are confusing shame and guilt, it is important to work this through with them and think about how the Bible views what they are experiencing. In a previous post, I mentioned a young woman who felt both guilt and shame after being sexually assaulted. Her guilt was because she thought she had done wrong by not fighting off her attacker. This guilt contributed to feelings of hopelessness and depression. She came to understand that what she experienced was a normal physiological reaction to danger and that she was in no way guilty for freezing. As she sought the Lord and lived in the light of what he had done for her, the shame she felt lifted. With time she experienced a preciousness in her closeness in her relationship with the Lord because of his love for her and the dignity he gave her.

Thank you all for your contribution to this conversation. I believe the fruit of this dialogue is something that will serve our readers, and those they counsel, well. My hope for our readers is that they take away the need to listen carefully and assess the categories being used by a counselee before offering advice.

It is easy in counseling to give the right answer to the wrong question; that is, we can offer a theologically sound answer to the question our counselee asked, but inadvertently reinforce the miscategorization of their struggle. If we give good guilt-counsel to a problem of shame or good shame-counsel to a problem of guilt, we have not been a faithful ambassador of Christ.

Again, I believe each of you have helped our readers avoid this error. I am grateful for the time you invested in this conversation and appreciate the humility with which you have engaged. I pray this conversation becomes a model for how we, as biblical counselors, grapple with the hard questions that emerge as we care for people.