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**The Paradoxical Dilemma of Divine Forgiveness
and Human Shame**

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Introduction

*Those who look to Him are radiant;
their faces are never covered with shame.²*

There is a blatant misconception that a salvific experience with Jesus the Christ provides ultimate emotional healing. Some believers claim victory via the “Blood of Christ”; yet, shame-based identities may be displayed in their personal lives. There also seems to be a disconnect regarding the holistic dimension of the person and the purpose of Christian salvific orthodoxy. A poignant concept within the context of Christian salvific orthodoxy is epistemological

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² Psalm. 34:5, NIV.

sanctification. Epistemological sanctification is the unequivocal knowledge of tenets which provide the basis for securing divine forgiveness from God. For instance, within the context of experiencing epistemological sanctification, it takes a total transformation of the mind, will, body and soul in order to abdicate mental sequelae³. One must truly grasp the theological reality of salvation in order to pardon/forgive oneself from the shame of past mistakes. What is this unequivocal knowledge of tenets? It is embracing the reality of the subjective self within the context of God's objective reality.

For instance, Perfect God made man in His perfect image (Gen. 1:27). Perfect man sinned against Perfect God (Gen. 3:6-24). Perfect God cannot participate, condone, nor accept sin (Is. 59: 1-2). Perfect man became imperfect as a result of sin's ability to separate Holy God from sinful man (Col. 1:22-23). Holy/Perfect God provided a means by which sinful/imperfect man could once again share intimacy with the Eternal One (Heb. 4:14-16). However, God required blood as a requisite for sin atonement (Lev. 4:13-21). For instance, God accepted the sacrifice of animals as a periodic basis of appeasement. In His character of mercy and grace, God himself would become fully man and provide a perpetual basis for infinite atonement via the person of Jesus the Christ (Heb. 10:1-18). In essence, there needs to be clear articulation regarding the efficacy of submitting past issues to the authoritative power of Jesus' atoning blood. Acknowledgment of epistemological sanctification provides a delineation of external and internal healing processes. As a result of understanding the magnitude of omnipotent power within the context of love and acceptance from a Divine God, perhaps one is better able to embrace the present reality of Divine forgiveness (i.e., due the ultimate sacrifice of God the Son).

**A. Holistic Healing of the Human Self:
Internally and Externally Based**

Within the Christian faith, there is a need for a person to ascertain forgiveness internally and externally. Internal healing is the result of acquiescing to the authoritative power of Jesus the Christ. According

³ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado: NavPress, 2002), 29-38.

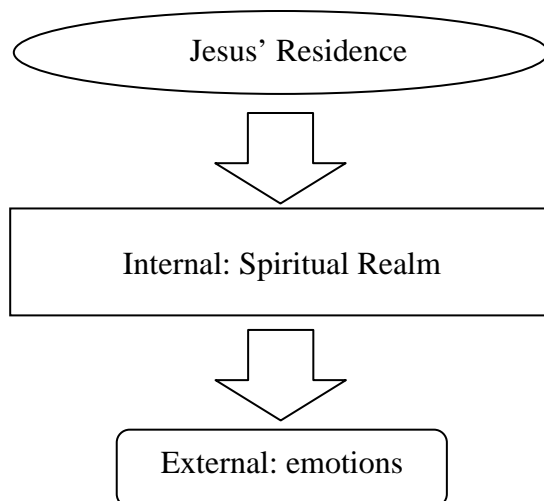
to the prophet Isaiah⁴, those who accept Jesus as their personal Savior receives spiritual healing as a result of His death, burial and resurrection. It means that one has received acceptance into God's familial heavenly kingdom. Moreover, according to Willard, Christ resides in the internal and wishes to work through the external.

This author wishes to provide a paradigm which illustrates the pattern of placing much emphasis on the internal while treating the external haphazardly. For many, the internal may be a much safer place than is the external realm. For instance, the internal realm of a person is subject to spiritual vicissitudes. This means, for example, that God is conscious of the spiritual dimension of the person. Unconsciously, one may presume that God is aware of the external dysfunctions of the person; or better yet, God is only concerned with one's new spiritual life. Embracing God does not remove dysfunctional elements resulting from past issues of the external. Consider the following vignette:

For half her life Samantha has lived a life diametrically opposed to that of the God of the Bible. She was a foster child growing up in the inner city of Philadelphia, PA. In addition to her lack of forming positive attachments, no one seemed to address her moral development. She grew into an antisocial personality with the impression that the world owed her something. She was physically, sexually, and emotionally abused as a child. Finally, at the age of eighteen she decided that she wanted to find her own way in the world. She lived on the street for several years; as a result, she witnessed a woman being beaten by a man, a homeless man murdered as a result of a robbery, and a thirteen year old girl prostituting herself for a hot meal. Samantha has been married four times. She never saw a positive relationship between a man and a woman. Now that she has committed her life to the teachings of Jesus the Christ, she feels as if He is all she needs. She has now maneuvered from one extreme to another. She refuses to associate with anyone who is a "sinner." She refuses to have an intimate relationship with a man. She refuses to talk about the things of her past; when asked about her past, she references the ubiquitous statement found in Philippians 3:13.⁵

⁴ Chapter 53.

⁵ NIV (©1984): "Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead."



It is evident that Samantha's external world is filled with shame from past issues. Rather than allow an unconditionally loving God penetrate this dimension of her life, she resorts to spiritual pontifications as a means to cope with the unattractive reality of unconscious dysfunction. Although one may come to know Jesus as their personal savior, there still remains past issues which may influence their dimensional wholeness.⁶ The external dimension of the self has the capacity to harbor emotions such as hatred, fear, frustration, contempt, anger, and malice.⁷ According to the Apostle Paul, it is quite probable for professors of the Christian faith to live in such a dysfunctional state (Gal. 5:13). However, the contextual meaning of Paul's overall theology is a call for internal cleansing and external pronouncement⁸. It is the external pronouncement which seems to be problematic for Christian suffering with shame-based identities. For it is in the external realm where past issues fester and are likely to become unexpressed inhibitors; despite spiritual astuteness, it is quite probable for a Christian to harbor a self-loathing attitude.

⁶ Jennifer Kennedy Dean, *He Restores My Soul*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 20-21.

⁷ Galatians 2:19 (NIV).

⁸ James Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Cambridge: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 114-124.

The external dimension has a propensity to enhance one's ability to feel unworthy of God's love. On the other hand, one may also feel self-righteous as a result of submitting to internal cleansing. As seen in the case of Samantha, the proper response is to avoid situational extremes and place full attention on establishing and maintaining a balance view of self ; that is, in relation to shared intimacy with a loving God. Research suggests that such an intimate relationship with God should provide a healthy mental state.⁹ Newberg and Waldman suggest that one should change one's inner reality in order to achieve some sort of functionality regarding human existence.¹⁰ It is probable that authentic meditation alerts one to external factors which impede shared intimacy with God, others, and self. The internal validity of the self will not suffice in terms of embracing a successful relational Christian life. How is one able to love another unconditionally, as Jesus commanded, when, in fact, one does not love self?

B. Human Shame

Research suggests that shame has several behavioral responses.¹¹ For instance, responses such as hiding, withdrawal, and escape seem to be common themes for those suffering from shame-based identities.¹² This type of behavior is visible via everyday empirical lenses. For instance, the young girl who is systematically told that she is worthless may exhibit hiding gestures as a means to communicate her disdain for self. The young man who frequently isolates himself from intimacy with others may choose not to develop relationships on the false premise that all relationships end badly. The older woman may choose to become inebriated as a means of rejecting the reality of her true self: a person not worth loving. In essence, the former anecdotes provide a glimpse into psychological maladies one endures as a result of shame: unexpressed emotions.

Cognitive-behaviorists would suggest that behavioral patterns, although important, should not be the primary focus in terms of addressing the issue of shame. What is the ... as it were? What is the

⁹ Andrew Newberg and Mark Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2010).

¹⁰ _____.

¹¹ Michelle Schoenleber and Howard Berenbaum, "Shame aversion and shame proneness in cluster C personality disorders." *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 119, no. 1 (February 2010): 197-205.

¹² Time Sledge, *Making Peace with Your Past* (Nashville: Lifeway Press, 1992).

underlining cause of human shame? One would first have to consider the thought process of the individual. Moreover, the thought process does not reside in the internal (i.e., the spiritual realm); just the opposite, it resides in the external (i.e., the psyche; the emotional realm). Shame is primarily caused by emotions generated in the external dimension of the self. Therefore, shame can be operationally defined as living a reality of internal self-contempt which will eventually manifest itself externally. The overall effect of shame is the deleterious state of depression.¹³

The emotion of shame differs from the emotion of guilt. For instance, rather than consider a situation to be a mistake, a person suffering from shame would have the automatic thought of viewing their entire existence as the primary cause of a mistake. Conversely, guilt may produce a sense of remorse for acting a particular way or experiencing a particular situation. Guilt is considered a self-conscious emotion; however, guilt response, unlike shame, provides a means by which one embraces change. Guilt arises when one feels that their actions have, advertently or inadvertently, caused harm to another person.¹⁴ Shame, on the other hand, is a self-conscious emotion by which many find no purpose in changing self—this is the underlining factor for shame sufferers—a pessimistic view of self.

Shame can be pedagogically viewed within the context of human personality.¹⁵ According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed, text revision; DSM-IV-TR),¹⁶ Cluster C personality disorders are examples of shame harboring in the human psyche. As a result, they eventually manifest via the external: human personality. The first component of the Cluster C is found in the analysis of Avoidant Personality Disorder (hereafter APD). APD involves fears of criticism and inevitable rejection. Symptoms are presented largely in adult populations. Individuals presenting signs of avoidant personality disorder tend to navigate to controlled environments in which they are the primary custodians. Unfortunately, avoidant personality sufferers will likely attempt to

¹³ _____.

¹⁴ Rob M.A. Nelissen and Marcel Zeelenberg. 2009. "When guilt evokes self-punishment: Evidence for the existence of Dobby Effect." *Emotion* 9, no. 1:118-122.

¹⁵ Michelle Schoenleber & Howard Berenbaum.

¹⁶ American Psychiatric Association (2000), 718-729.

avoid situations which can lead to fulfilling relationships. In essence, they reject situations and people before they themselves get regretted. APD is diametrically opposed to the maxim: It is better to have love and loss than to have never loved at all. APD's may exhibit the belief that God would never accept them based on the dysfunction of their past. Why should this emotional response be any different within the context of embracing God? Although they may audibly hear that God is the manifestation and representation of unconditional love, they do not, however, have the emotional faculties to ascertain the validity of such a statement. APD's identify with their perceived reality of rejection.

Also within the Cluster C paradigm, Dependent Personality Disorder (hereafter DPD) promotes a self-perception of being unable to function without the assistance of others. This behavior is often exhibited in early childhood. DPD's are prone to stay in abusive relationships (emotional and physical) as a means of not being alone; the dysfunction is so great, one is willing to die in an abusive relationship rather than live with the reality of being alone. DPD's have difficulty with daily mundane activities such as selecting clothes to wear, food to eat, where to take up residence, whom to patronize, and whom to love. It is stated that current relationships resemble family reunions—save that names, places, and faces change.¹⁷ This behavior can be seen in a person who may have had an abusive earthly father; as a result, they equate God the father to exhibit traits which are exclusive to the earthly father. As a result, epistemological sanctification is replaced with an idealistic perception of spiritual demagoguery (e.g., God should be worshipped due to punitive nature). The emotional state of a DPD provides a frame of reference from which to believe that God is needed to avoid ultimate condemnation; DPD's do not understand that God is needed in order to lead a life of functionality.

Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder (hereafter OCPD) is the final member to the of Cluster C personality disorder family. OCPD's exhibit forms of rigidity and control presenting in early adulthood. They constantly look for flaws in themselves as well as in others. They have difficulty just enjoying life. Every minute is spent

¹⁷ Sandra D. Wilson, *Released from Shame* (Illinois: InterVarsity, 2002), 125.

developing the “potential productively of their lives.” This potential productively can be viewed in the desire to control all situations. The end result could hinge on the probability of overdoing things. For instance, OCD sufferers are never satisfied with “good” situations; according to their brain functioning, good becomes great—even if there is absolutely no evidence of change—after their nature is satisfied. According to Tim Sledge, compulsive behavior has several characteristics: repetitive and ritualistic, hidden causes, requirement of inordinate amounts of energy, and avoidance of feelings. Individuals presenting signs of OCPD develop operating systems. As in any field of human endeavor, operating systems are developed as a methodical means of producing results with consistency. Unfortunately, systems fail and often require implementation or upgrading. OCPD’s often reject the notion that their operating system is flawed. They reject the need to consider other alternatives. Hence, OCPD’s find themselves doing and redoing particulars as a necessity to “get it right.” Obsessive compulsive behavior requires a suffering individual to expend energy that may not be readily available. This often breeds frustration on behalf of the sufferer for not having the wherewithal to “get it right.” This type of behavior can be seen in a Christian obsessed with pleasing God. They will expend inordinate amounts of energy on obtaining membership in auxiliaries and committees. As a result, they may grow frustrated with the emotional cost; yet, refuse to relinquish titles for fear that it subtracts from their connection to God.

C. Divine Forgiveness

Secular academic literature defines forgiveness as an ongoing process.¹⁸ Moreover, it is a process placing emphasis on an alteration of cognitions, emotions, and behaviors towards the initial transgressor.¹⁹ As previously discussed, cognitions, emotions, and behaviors reside in the external dimension of self. The process of altering how one perceives reality does indeed require effort. A noted

¹⁸ Man Yee Ho and Helene H. Fung. 2011. “A dynamic process model of forgiveness: A cross-cultural perspective.” *Review of General Psychology* 15, no. 1:77-84.

¹⁹ _____.

clinical neuroscientist, Daniel Amen,²⁰ suggests that the prefrontal cortex is the most evolved part of the brain. The prefrontal cortex is a component of the brain which enhances focal capability. As such, one must be totally focused on altering cognitions and emotions in order to endure the rigors of processing forgiveness. In other words, it takes time and effort for the abused to forgive the abuser; even in this respect, the mental compass of the abuse has omnipresent overtones.

The external dimension of a Christian may house mental disturbances--for all emotional issues are rooted in the external dimension. Cognitively speaking, one can only address issues which are made conscious. Freudian psychology posits that the unconscious psyche must be made conscious in order to address mental maladies. Considering the reality that God is the architect of humanity; thus the programmer of human psyche, it is not improbable to suggest that He could address the issue of shame from psychological faculties. If God were not concerned with the healing process of the external, that would make him less than His biblical pronouncement. He is a God who embraces and cares for His creation. A proper identification with the God of the Bible may provide a basis from which a person is better able to embrace epistemological sanctification: divine forgiveness. There is Divine forgiveness whenever there is human shame. Divine forgiveness is categorically opposite of academically defined forgiveness. Although, both share similarities in that they do not place much emphasis on the objective view of the transgressor. For instance, secular mental health professionals, as well as Christian counselors, would suggest that the transgressed should never consider the acquisition of forgiveness as an indication of approval for the acts of the transgressor. Just the opposite, one forgives in order to release oneself from the dysfunctional attachment of anti-cathartic emotions.

God's forgiveness is divine. Unlike human beings, God's forgiveness does not register in the external--nor does it reside in the internal for that matter. It simply resides in the very essence of God: Love. Agape is the Greek translation for what Christians define as unconditional love. In essence, embracing God's unconditional love is the prerequisite for epistemological sanctification. Understanding the

²⁰ Daniel G. Amen, *Change Your Brain, Change Your Life*, (New York: Three Rivers Press), 134-149.

extreme nature of the salvific experience may enable one to observe the importance of self. This can only be achieved via a contextual grammatical hermeneutical interpretation of Scripture. Once proper theology is obtained in light of experiencing God, then one is better able to consider self as seen via the merciful eyes of God. Research, however, suggests that people indeed view God as harsh and unloving²¹. This rationalization of the nature of God is based on the belief that God only embraces people who live up to His standard. In essence, epistemological sanctification is rejected based on a presupposition regarding God's conditional basis of love. The former statement is an example of how improper theology changes one's view of self in relation to God. God's objective reality does not change based on one's subjective analysis. One must begin to define self within the context of the actualized nature of God. Christian existential thought would posit that the actuality of God is seen in the realities of God as Being, God as living, God as creating and God as related. ²² Within Christian dogma, it is appropriate to posit that God is being—itself. Proper theology attributes ontological transcendence to God—the creator of all beings. He supersedes and transcends all aspects of finiteness. According to Scripture, the cosmos would cease to exist without the intimate care of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent power—God (Col. 1:15-20). God is intimately invested in the relational dimension of His creation. For instance, He knows the life-span of human beings (Ps. 139). As a result, He is not a God who reacts to any situation. Therefore, it may be suggested that God allows the vicissitudes of life to work towards a positive end in a person's life (Rom. 8:28). Within the context of justification and sanctification, God will even allow painful emotions to come to the surface of the human psyche. If God is so loving and forgiving, why would He bring shameful thoughts to the consciousness of one's psyche? Why not heal emotions via osmosis? Doing so will be counter to His nature. He understands that the emotional state of a believer cannot be negated as a testament of devotion to Himself. For if this were the case, those who profess faith in God via Jesus the

²¹ Benjamin T. Wood, Everett L. Jr. Worthington, Julie Juola Exline, Ann Marie Yali, Jamie D. Aten, and Mark R. McMinn. 2010. "Development, refinement, and psychometric properties of the Attitudes Toward God Scale (ATGS-9)." *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 2, no. 3:148-167.

²² Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol I*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 235-286.

Christ would immediately transition into heaven at the moment of acceptance—for what use is there in being human if one cannot experience life via emotions. The plan of redemption even provides a means by which God experiences the emotions of humanity within the context of mental anguish and physical turmoil (Luke 22:39-46). C.S. Lewis in *The Problem of Pain* asserts that pain hurts. Pain --by any measure-- does not feel good. Unfortunately, the price for God to unconditionally forgive mankind for sin was costly: pain, agony, and death. According to God, this pain was a necessary reality (Is. 53). Oswald Chambers posits that humans close some emotional doors once they come to believe in God via Jesus the Christ.²³ Unfortunately, closing the door does not eradicate painful emotions. In the spirit of C. S. Lewis, dealing with the emotional state of past mistakes hurt, whether they happened ten years ago or ten minutes ago, not having a proper understanding of the nature of God will make it hurt longer than necessary.

Justification is a legal declaration by God. It is a not guilty clause implemented in God's heavenly court due to the righteous, perfecting, and atoning work of Jesus the Christ. In other words, Jesus puts His stamp of approval on the one who surrenders self-sustaining life. The justified must not attempt to live as spiritual beings in a human context. Justification is then translated into a term called sanctification.²⁴ Sanctification is a progressive phenomenon.²⁵ Although sin is forgiven and a person has allowed Christ to reside in the internal, the external is still a viable reality. Issues of the self are present still; for instance, issues such as self-centeredness, self-worshipping, self-focused and self-trusting.²⁶ One has to willingly allow Christ to reside in the internal; and yet, work via the external. Divine forgiveness means that there is no sin, past or present, substantial enough to warrant God's rejection. However, due to the nature of His holiness, His place of residence (i.e., life of the believer) is influenced by His holiness. This holiness is not quantified in terms of positive or negative acquisition of sin; just the opposite, it is

²³ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest* (Grand Rapids: Discover House Publishers).

²⁴ Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing), 292.

²⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 722-762.

²⁶ Jennifer Kennedy Dean, pp18.

holiness predicated on imperfect humans trusting a perfect God to embrace them where they are; and yet, too loving to allow them to stay there.

Conclusion – Obtaining Freedom

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord!²⁷

– Paul, the Apostle

Divine Forgiveness means that God alone has the power to forgive on this level. Human beings have the propensity to base the vicissitudes of life in subjective terms. For instance, one may have the notion to posit the following: “I would never have done that.” There are myriad of scenarios which place one in any particular emotional state. Only a divine heart can look on human frailties and consider the cause rather than the effect. Even though one may intellectually understand the notion that God is omniscient, shame causes a person to limit their relationship with God; thereby, developing a meaningless existence based on inauthentic worship to God and, an inauthentic relationship with people. For if one is not emotionally available to an infinite God, how can one possibly share intimacy with finite man? As such, further research should be done to address the operational vehicle which will escort one to the emotional state of not withholding emotional issues from God. Friedrich Nietzsche once asked, “What is the seal of attained freedom? -No longer being ashamed in front of oneself.” This author subscribes to the idea that freedom from shame

²⁷ Romans 31b-39, NIV.

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is achieved when one is able to embrace catharsis in the presence of a forgiving and unconditionally loving God.



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