

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Shame & Grace:

Healing the Shame We Don't Deserve

by

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1. Lewis Smedes defines shame as “a very heavy feeling . . . that we do not measure up and maybe never will measure up to the sorts of persons we are meant to be. The feeling, when we are conscious of it, gives us a vague disgust with ourselves” (p. 5). Before you read this book, how did you define shame? Has your definition of shame changed? Why or why not?
2. Smedes makes a distinction between shame and guilt. He says: “The difference between guilt and shame is very clear—in theory. We feel guilt for what we *do*. We feel shame for what we *are*. A person feels guilt because

he *did* something wrong. A person feels shame because he *is* something wrong” (p. 9). Have you ever considered the notion that shame and guilt are different? Do you agree with the distinction Smedes makes, or would you define the two in another way?

3. “We are destined to feel frustrated at times,” Smedes notes, “because we have the power to imagine that we can defy our limits. In our imagination, we may enjoy the illusion that we have no limits, but we reach them sooner or later, and when we do, we chafe. To be frustrated by our limits is our destiny and our discomfort; it is our challenge to reach beyond them” (pp. 14–15). Think of the times when you feel the most frustrated—what do you think is the cause? When you reach your limits, does that frustrate you? Or do you accept the fact that you tried your best and move on? Can you think of a time that you were frustrated by limits but were able to reach beyond them? How did that feel?
4. Smedes lists people he calls “candidates for shame.” These people have not built up the immunity to shame that the rest of us have, and guilt manifests in their lives in such a way that they become one of the following: a guilt spreader, an overly responsible person, an obsessive moralizer, a compulsive comparer, an approval addict, someone who never feels deserving, or a person who feels condemned by bad memories, stuck in the shadow of a parent, or condemned by his or her dreams. Do you recognize yourself in any of these “candidates for shame”? If so, how?

5. Consider the following statements: “Shame may be a symptom of something going wrong” (p. 34). “Shame protects us from our falseness” (p. 35). “Shame is a chance to understand ourselves” (p. 36). Do you think that shame can be healthy? After reading chapter 4, has your opinion changed? Why or why not?
6. Smedes believes that the three most common sources of the false self are secular culture, graceless religion, and unaccepting parents. Have you ever experienced shame from one of these sources, or do you know someone who has? What was the effect of that shame?
7. Smedes states that unhealthy shame can make people who are prone to shame proud of their shame. He says, “The shame-bent person reasons this way: Only someone with a profound nature and noble ideals could feel as rotten about himself as he does. So if you are happy, you must be a moral commoner, if not a moral clod, and you should be ashamed of yourself” (p. 43). Have you ever known a person like this, or have you felt this way yourself? How does such an attitude affect people’s outlook on life and their relationships with others?
8. Lee Travis was a man who initially made Smedes feel dissatisfied with himself. However, as Smedes spent time with Lee, he began to feel “better and more worthy for being with him” (p. 50). Do you have friends or family members who made you feel this way? What was it about them that at first shamed you before elevating you? If you have not known people who made

you feel this way, how might knowing them be beneficial to you in the future?

9. In Chapter 7, Smedes states that the fear of rejection by those in our community can prevent us from misbehaving. “For those of us who are neither supremely good nor supremely evil, our sensitivity to social shame is a shield against our worse impulses. What keeps us on the straight and narrow is not so much fear of the judgment of God as the fear of being despised and rejected of men” (pp. 57–58). Do you think people behave because they truly fear the judgment of God, or is it because they do not want to be expelled from their communities? How does this fear of rejection factor into one’s decision to keep or break the laws of our society?
10. Smedes obviously puts great stock in privacy. Do you agree with him that privacy is so vitally important? Is it possible to lose your mystery, depth, sacredness, or identity, if you have no privacy? Why might privacy protect these things, or a lack thereof destroy them?
11. Smedes sums up his opinion of healthy shame thus: “Our sense of shame may be one of the most critical defenses of our personal mystery and personal depth. This is all the more reason, then, to keep ourselves a private preserve where no one else—except people bonded to us in committed trust—may come in. We show a healthy respect for our own selves when we keep our material and spiritual clothes on most of the time” (p. 66). It seems our culture does not agree with

Smedes regarding the importance of privacy. For example, the immodesty that pervades our society and the voyeuristic way we treat celebrities are evidence of that. Do you think that he has it right while our society has it wrong, or vice versa? Or do you think that there is some middle ground?

12. In Chapter 9, Smedes likens being a parent to owning one's children rather than possessing them. He also describes how one who is owned might feel. What is your response to his descriptions of these two facets of parent-child relationships? If you are a parent, do you feel that you own your children in this way? As a son or daughter, do you feel owned in the way Smedes describes? If not, how do your experiences differ from his descriptions of owning and feeling owned?
13. The "law of life" according to Smedes is as follows: "Disown a child, and when she is older she will disown herself" (p. 74). Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Have you ever known individuals disowned by their parents who later disowned themselves? Or have you known those who were disowned, but who did not disown themselves later in life? What do you think causes some people to disown themselves while others overcome their difficult relationship with their parents?
14. About grace, we read: "I have since learned that the amazing grace that saved a wretch like me brings with it the discovery that I am worthy of the grace that saves. I know that wretches like me do not *deserve*

amazing grace; it would hardly be amazing grace if we had it coming. But we can be worthy of it even though we do not deserve it” (p. 81). What do you think is the distinction between deserving grace and being worthy of grace? How can a person be undeserving and yet worthy of grace?

15. Smedes writes that shame-prone people shame themselves by discounting their positives, magnifying their flaws, judging themselves by undefined ideals, translating criticism of their actions into judgments about what they are, reading their own shame into other people’s minds, and doubting their shame but acting as if they believe it (Chapter 11). After reading this chapter, did you recognize any of those characteristics in yourself? If so, did Smedes’s thoughts on these actions change how you will think of yourself or how you will act in regard to your shame-prone tendencies in the future?
16. “As true as it is that shamed people do bad things to escape from their shame, it is just as true that shamed people escape their shame by doing good things” (p. 92). Does this statement surprise you? What do you think causes some people to escape shame by doing bad things, while others escape shame by doing good things? Can you think of examples of each?
17. “Being accepted is the single most compelling need of our lives; no human being can be a friend of herself while at the edges of her consciousness she feels a persistent fear that she may not be accepted by others”

(p. 107). Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? If you don't, what do you think is the most compelling need in our lives?

18. Cal Bulthuis was a good friend of Lewis Smedes. Just before he died, he spoke to Smedes about a few flaws he saw in Smedes's life that he hoped he would work on. Smedes advises: "If you wonder where God's grace can be found, find yourself a critical friend. A friend who wants you to be as good a person as you can be, a friend who dares to confront your flaws and failures, and then accepts the whole of you in grace" (p. 126). How do you think Smedes saw grace in that interaction with Bulthuis? How might you see grace in interactions with a friend who knows you well enough to know your flaws and who encourages you to overcome them?
19. "Forgiving is difficult; this is the first thing we need to know. The second is that the first and often the only person to be healed by forgiveness is the person who does the forgiving. The third thing we need to understand is what we actually do when we forgive someone" (p. 136). Before you read this chapter, what were your thoughts on forgiveness? Has reading this chapter changed how you think about it? Have you ever experienced a time when forgiveness healed you, but not the other person or people involved? How about when forgiveness healed not only you, but the other person or people involved as well?
20. Smedes says that "when we genuinely forgive, we set a prisoner free and then discover that the prisoner set

free was us” (p. 141). Have you ever forgiven someone and experienced this, realized that the weight had been lifted off your chest? If forgiving is so freeing, why don’t we do it more?

21. “Oddly enough, hubris is often born of shame. Shame-prone people are tempted to overcompensate by pretending that they are not only acceptable but also more acceptable than anyone else. . . . There is, however, a healthy pride that comes with grace. A person who has experienced grace knows that what she is and what she has are gifts of God, so when she feels pride, she feels gratitude with the same impulse” (p. 150). Have you ever felt the pride that comes from grace? Have you known anyone who exhibited that pride? How did that affect your interactions with this person? How does pride from grace contrast with the feeling of pride (or hubris) that comes from shame, and how does that form of pride affect your relationships?
22. In Chapter 19, Smedes says, “Shame is heavy; grace is light. Shame and grace are the two counterforces in the human spirit: shame depresses; grace lifts. Shame is like gravity, a psychic force that pulls us down. Grace is like levitation, a spiritual force that defies gravity. If our spiritual experience does not lighten our life, we are not experiencing grace” (p. 153). Does your current spiritual experience lighten your life? If not, why not? How might you change your spiritual experience so that you can find the grace that lightens?

23. Smedes states that sometimes joy comes when events turn out well, but it also may come when things are not going well. We have all experienced joy in good times, but have you experienced joy when things were not going well in your life? If not, how might you look at hard times differently to experience joy in those times?