

Dr. David deSilva, Cultural World of the New Testament

Session 1, Introduction, Honor and Shame

Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Study Guide, 4) Briefing Document, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of deSilva, Cultural World of the New Testament, Session 1, Introduction, Honor and Shame, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

Dr. David deSilva's lecture introduces the cultural context of the New Testament, focusing on the concepts of **honor and shame** prevalent in the first-century Mediterranean world. He contrasts these values with 21st-century Western perspectives, highlighting the significance of group identity and social approval in shaping behavior and decision-making. The lecture explores how honor and shame impacted social dynamics, particularly concerning gender roles and interactions between different cultural groups, such as Jews and Gentiles. DeSilva uses examples from ancient texts and the New Testament to illustrate how understanding this cultural framework is crucial for accurate biblical interpretation and application. Finally, he examines how minority groups, like early Christians, strategically navigated these cultural pressures to maintain their identity.

2. 17 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. deSilva, Cultural World of the NT, Session 1 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (New Testament → Introduction → The Cultural World of the NT).



**DeSilva_CultureNT_
Session01.mp3**

3. Cultural World of the New Testament, Session 1, Introduction, Honor and Shame

Cultural World of the New Testament: Honor and Shame Study Guide

Quiz

Instructions: Answer each question in 2-3 sentences.

1. Why is it important to consider the cultural context when reading the New Testament?
2. How does the concept of "family" differ between 21st-century North America and the 1st-century Mediterranean?
3. According to the lecture, what is the fundamental value that drives decision-making in the 1st-century Mediterranean?
4. Explain the difference between "ascribed honor" and "achieved honor."
5. How do seating arrangements function as a display of honor and shame?
6. What role does shame play in an honor-shame culture, and what are its dual meanings?
7. How does the lecture describe the differences between men's and women's honor in the 1st-century Mediterranean?
8. How does an honor and shame culture contribute to social control within a group?
9. Give an example of how minority groups in the 1st-century Mediterranean maintain their cultural identity in the face of outside pressures.
10. Briefly describe how the story in Luke 13 about Jesus healing a woman exemplifies the competition for honor in the ancient world.

Quiz Answer Key

1. The cultural values and social practices of the 1st-century Mediterranean differ greatly from those of the 21st-century Western world. Failing to understand these differences leads to misinterpretations of the text, potentially imposing modern cultural assumptions onto ancient contexts. This prevents the reader from understanding the original author's intent and meaning.

2. In the 21st-century, the family structure is generally nuclear or a limited extended family, whereas in the 1st-century Mediterranean, family meant an expansive group that included relatives, household members, and slaves. This larger understanding of family ties dictated many relational responsibilities and expectations.
3. Honor is the fundamental value that drives decision-making in the 1st-century Mediterranean, often trumping considerations of security, pleasure, or advantage. People's actions and decisions were primarily motivated by a desire to gain or maintain honor and to avoid shame or disgrace within their social group.
4. Ascribed honor is the honor given to individuals based on circumstances at birth, such as family status or ethnic background, and does not depend on an individual's actions. Achieved honor is obtained through actions and deeds that reflect the values of their social group and demonstrates individual merit.
5. Seating arrangements were a tangible display of honor, with higher positions indicating more honor and authority. Those seated at the right hand of the host typically enjoyed a position of prominence, which demonstrated their precedence in social situations.
6. Shame, in an honor culture, can mean the disgrace or dishonor caused by the group's disapproval and a message that someone's actions do not contribute to the group's well-being. It can also be a positive nuance of modesty and a concern for the group's approval.
7. Men generally sought honor in the public sphere through competition, while women's honor was primarily tied to their private roles within the household and their modesty. Women's honor was considered an extension of a man's honor, making them a vehicle for male honor in society.
8. Because individuals are driven by a desire for social approval, an honor-shame culture can exercise significant social control. People are inclined to conform to group values and practices to avoid shame and gain honor, leading them to prioritize group needs over self-interest.
9. Minority groups define their own versions of what constitutes honor, thus providing a framework for members to achieve honor within their group and reinforcing group identity by prioritizing those values. Furthermore, they redefine or ignore outside opinions, and offer rewards for faithfulness to group ideals.

10. Jesus' healing of the woman on the Sabbath is a competition for honor. Jesus' actions and teaching are challenged by the synagogue leader, yet the crowd ultimately vindicates Jesus' actions, thus according him honor in the public sphere and shaming his opponent.

Essay Questions

1. Discuss the significance of understanding honor and shame in interpreting New Testament texts. How might a lack of awareness about these cultural values lead to misinterpretations of scripture?
2. Analyze the various strategies that minority groups used in the first-century Mediterranean to maintain their cultural identities in the face of dominant cultures. How are these strategies reflected in the writings of the New Testament?
3. Compare and contrast the concept of honor as a driving motivation in the first-century Mediterranean culture with the concept of individualism in 21st-century Western culture. How do these different values impact the way people relate to their community?
4. Explore how the concept of "court of reputation" or "court of opinion" functions in the first-century Mediterranean. How is God positioned within the "court of opinion" and how does this affect social control?
5. Examine the complex and often contradictory ways in which gender roles and expectations are presented in the context of the first-century Mediterranean's honor and shame culture. How do these affect our understanding of the New Testament?

Glossary

Ascribed Honor: Honor assigned at birth or by circumstance, like familial background or ethnic group. It is considered a collective honor and not achieved through individual merit.

Achieved Honor: Honor earned through one's deeds and actions that are consistent with the values and virtues of a particular group. It is considered a sign of individual worth within the group.

Agonistic Culture: A culture characterized by competition for honor, where it is seen as a limited good. This often resulted in public contests for public approval.

Court of Opinion (or Reputation): The group of people whose opinions and judgments are deemed most important and that shape an individual's experience of honor and shame.

Cognitive Dissonance: The mental discomfort experienced when a person's beliefs, values, and actions conflict with one another, sometimes resulting in changed behavior.

Free Gift of Grace: The idea that God's favor is not earned through human action, but freely given. In the lecture, its cultural context is explored to clarify its meaning in the 1st-century.

Honor: A primary social value in the ancient Mediterranean, signifying positive social standing within a group that is publicly bestowed. It is typically derived from the group's positive assessment of worth.

Patriarchal Society: A societal system in which men hold the primary power and authority in the family and in the public arena.

Pollution (Religious/Ritual): A state of impurity or defilement, often due to religious practices or ritual offenses, which affects a person's ability to approach God.

Shame: The experience of dishonor or disgrace, resulting from actions that violate the values of a group. It can also mean an awareness of the group's expectations and a desire to avoid dishonor.

Social Control: The various ways that societies regulate people's behavior and ensure conformity to cultural norms and values.

4. Briefing Document

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the key themes and ideas from the provided lecture transcript by Dr. David deSilva:

Briefing Document: Cultural World of the New Testament - Session 1: Honor and Shame

Introduction

This document summarizes the key themes and ideas presented in Dr. David deSilva's lecture on "Honor and Shame" in the cultural context of the New Testament. Dr. deSilva emphasizes the critical importance of understanding the cultural values of the first-century Mediterranean world to accurately interpret scripture. He highlights how modern, Western cultural assumptions can lead to misinterpretations of biblical texts, particularly regarding the concepts of honor and shame.

Key Themes and Ideas

1. The Importance of Cultural Context:

- Dr. deSilva asserts that cultural context is paramount in understanding any text, especially scripture. He states, "It's particularly important for us to read scripture because the cultural values and social practices that we are introduced to and that become part and parcel of our way of thinking by virtue of being brought up in the 21st century... are very different from those cultural values and assumptions... experienced by people living in the eastern Mediterranean of the first century A.D."
- He warns that imposing our modern cultural logic onto ancient texts leads to misinterpretations and risks us "hearing them back from the text, now vested with divine authority," even when those texts might actually challenge our cultural presuppositions.
- To understand the New Testament effectively, it is essential to "immerse ourselves in the cultural values and the social matrix of the first-century Mediterranean."

1. Honor and Shame as Foundational Values:

- Honor and shame were central, "pivotal values" in the first-century Mediterranean, often driving decision-making. As Seneca, a first-century Roman philosopher, put it, "that which is honorable is held dear for no other reason than because it is honorable."

- Considerations of honor, including how to gain it, maintain it, and avoid losing it, were paramount. DeSilva explains that people moved "from consideration of what is honorable to the proof of other points." In other words, honor was the primary consideration.
- While other values existed (security, pleasure, advantage), honor would often supersede them in cases of conflict.

1. **Honor as a Social Construct:**

- Honor is not an individual possession, but a social value "ascribed by a group of others". It is not enough to have self-respect; one needs the affirmation of others. Dr. deSilva notes, "I don't have honor until other people say I do and reflect their positive assessment of my worth as a member of their group."
- Groups decide what constitutes honorable behavior; often those are actions that contribute to the well-being and survival of the group. This creates a powerful form of social control, where individuals conform to group values in pursuit of honor.
- Shame, in this context, is the experience of group disapproval and a signal that one's actions do not align with what the group values.

1. **Types of Honor:**

- **Attributed/Ascribed Honor:** Inherited through birth into a family, ethnic group, or social class. DeSilva calls this "accidents of birth."
- **Achieved Honor:** Earned through deeds that reflect the values of one's group. These actions "augment my honor".

1. **Public Displays of Honor and Shame:**

- Physical actions and arrangements are significant. Seating arrangements, treatment of the head (anointing, crowning, slapping), are all methods of displaying relative honor or dishonor.
- Name and reputation serve as "metonymy", or symbolic representations of one's honor. Speaking well or ill of a person's name is an indication of honor or shame.

1. **Honor and Gender:**

- A woman's honor was often tied to her modesty, chastity, and removal from public view. It was seen as an extension of the honor of the male she was connected to (husband, father, brother).
- Men competed for honor in the public sphere, while women's honor was centered in the domestic sphere.
- While women could be recognized for traditionally male virtues like courage, even then it would always be within the broader confines of female modesty.

1. **Honor and Social Control:**

- The drive to gain honor and avoid shame is a powerful mechanism for social control. It causes individuals to conform to the group's values, often placing the group's interests above their own.
- This is very different from the Western emphasis on self-interest which is very rare in the first-century Mediterranean culture. DeSilva said, "It would be the anomaly in that world. It would be the shameless person, the person whom society just didn't know what to do with, who was able to pursue self-interest over group interest."
- Examples include military service (courage as essential for the survival of the group) and generosity (rich individuals funding public improvements to gain honor).

1. **Complications of Overlapping Groups:**

- Individuals in the first century often belonged to multiple overlapping groups (family, ethnic group, religious group) with possibly conflicting ideas of what is honorable.
- A Jew in a Greek city faced the challenge that what was honorable within their Jewish community (observing dietary laws, avoiding idolatry, circumcision) could be dishonorable in the eyes of the dominant Greek culture. This meant they were often scorned and labelled as "atheists" for refusing to worship Greek gods.
- This caused minority groups to create specific strategies to retain members and focus them on group honor.

1. Strategies of Minority Groups to Retain Members:

- **Defining what is Honorable:** Minority groups define what makes a person honorable, often based on their own religious or cultural values, often above and beyond worldly recognition. Ben Sirah notes "Those who fear the Lord" are worthy of honor, a definition that shifts the focus away from things like wealth or power.
- **Defining the Court of Reputation:** They establish who determines what is valuable, centering it around their God or shared core values, as opposed to the prevailing societal norms. God is the "ultimate Court of Opinion" for Ben Sirah.
- **Devaluing Outsider Opinions:** Minority cultures may explain the rejection or scorn of outsiders as a reflection of their ignorance or moral failings. The Wisdom of Solomon suggests that those outside the group "simply don't have all the facts."
- **Reinterpreting Disapproval:** Experiences of shame from outsiders are reframed as tests of faith or character, leading to greater honor within the group and before God.
- **Using Athletic Imagery:** The hardships of minority group membership are compared to the training and contests of athletes, where endurance leads to ultimate victory and honor. Dr. DeSilva highlights a quote from 4th Maccabees: "My sons, you have been summoned to an honorable contest in which you will give evidence that will prove your nation's worth."
- **Using Honor and Shame within the group:** The concepts of honor and shame are used as internal tools, reinforcing adherence to group values and discouraging deviation.
- **Honor as Limited Good:** Honor is thought of as a limited good in the agonistic Mediterranean world, meaning one person gains more honor at the expense of another.

1. Competition for Honor:

- The ancient Mediterranean was an agonistic, competitive culture, where individuals and groups competed for honor in the public sphere.

- Dr. deSilva uses Luke 13 (the story of Jesus healing a woman on the Sabbath) as an example of this competition. Jesus' healing was a claim to honor, but his actions were questioned by the synagogue leader. The audience's reaction determined who won honor in the exchange.

Conclusion

Dr. deSilva's lecture underscores the importance of understanding the cultural values of honor and shame in the first-century Mediterranean world for accurate biblical interpretation. By recognizing how these values shaped social interactions, decision-making, and the formation of group identity, we can gain a richer understanding of the New Testament and avoid imposing our own cultural presuppositions onto ancient texts. This first lecture on honor and shame lays the foundation for future lectures where he plans to apply this framework to an in-depth analysis of a particular New Testament text.

This briefing doc provides a comprehensive overview of the lecture and should be a useful resource for understanding the significance of honor and shame in the context of the New Testament.

5. FAQs on deSilva, Cultural World of the New Testament, Session 1, Introduction, Honor and Shame, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

FAQ on Honor and Shame in the First-Century Mediterranean

- **Why is it important to understand the culture of the first-century Mediterranean when reading the New Testament?**
- The cultural values and social practices of the first-century Mediterranean, particularly regarding honor and shame, are significantly different from those of the 21st-century Western world. We tend to think in terms of individual rights, legality, and commercial transactions, whereas first-century Mediterranean people prioritized relationships, group values, and public reputation. Failing to recognize these differences leads to misinterpretations of scripture, causing us to impose our own cultural logic on the texts and potentially hearing our own presuppositions reflected back as divinely sanctioned, which may not be what the texts originally intended to convey.
- **What was the primary driving force in decision-making in the first-century Mediterranean?**
- The primary driving force in decision-making in the first-century Mediterranean was the pursuit of honor and the avoidance of shame. Honor was a foundational value, and choices were often made based on whether they would enhance one's standing within the group or lead to disgrace. While other values like security, safety, pleasure, and advantage existed, they generally did not override the pursuit and maintenance of honor when a conflict between values arose.
- **How was honor understood and acquired in this culture?**

Honor was a social value ascribed by a group, not simply self-respect. It was both "attributed" or "ascribed" through family background and social status, and "achieved" through deeds that reflected the virtues of the group. The desire for honor led individuals to conform to group values and practices to secure the affirmation of their peers, thus allowing the group to exercise social control over their members. In this culture, one's self-esteem was often tied to how well one fulfilled group expectations.

- **How did shame function in the first-century Mediterranean?** Shame had two primary meanings. The first was a negative experience of dishonor or disgrace resulting from the group's disapproval of one's behavior, signaling that the actions were not valuable or did not contribute to the group's identity or survival. The second, more positive meaning of shame was related to modesty and concern for the group's approval, driving individuals to avoid actions that could bring negative public attention and threaten their social status.
- **How did gender roles affect the perception of honor in the ancient Mediterranean?**
 - In the heavily patriarchal societies of the ancient Mediterranean, men and women possessed honor differently. Men generally competed for honor in public spaces, whereas women's honor was primarily tied to the private sphere of the home and the control of male family members (father, husband, brother). A woman's modesty, chastity, and limited public presence were essential components of her honor, and any perceived violation would be a threat to the honor of her family.
- **How did minority groups, like the Jews in a Greek city, navigate issues of honor and shame?**
 - Minority groups, like Jews living in a Greek city, often faced conflicts in honor because what was considered honorable within their community might lead to disgrace in the eyes of the majority. They developed strategies to maintain their cultural identity and group cohesion. These strategies included carefully defining what constituted honorable behavior according to their values, determining whose opinion mattered most (with God as the ultimate arbiter), and reinterpreting external experiences of shame as tests or trials from which they could derive internal honor and reward. They often used athletic imagery to show endurance in the face of trials as a competition leading to divine honor.

- **What were some specific strategies used by minority groups to maintain their identity and cohesion in the face of external pressures?**
- Minority groups used several strategies. They redefined what is honorable within their specific community, emphasizing adherence to their own cultural and religious laws and practices over the values of the dominant culture. They emphasized that God's opinion, not the opinions of outsiders, should be valued most. They reinterpreted negative experiences with outsiders as tests of faith that ultimately strengthened their group's integrity and honor. They used athletic and competitive imagery to frame their situation as a fight for honor, not something leading to defeat. Finally, they actively reinforced the importance of in-group honor and shame to ensure the members' continued conformity.
- **How does understanding the honor-shame dynamic of the first-century Mediterranean help us understand specific stories within the New Testament?**
Understanding the honor-shame dynamic helps us see the implicit claims to honor made by figures like Jesus. For example, in the story of Jesus healing on the Sabbath, his act was not only a display of power, but also a challenge to the religious leaders' authority. The synagogue leader's critique was an attempt to put Jesus in his place, a common occurrence in a culture of public competition for honor. The reaction of the crowd, as an ultimate verdict of who had won honor in a public debate, demonstrates how the New Testament stories are rooted in the societal emphasis on public perception. This perspective helps us grasp the social significance of those actions and the strategic maneuvering that occurred within a culture that was heavily focused on social status and public reputation.