

Dr. David deSilva, Cultural World of the New Testament, Session 1, Introduction: Honor and Shame

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This is Dr. David deSilva in his teaching on the Cultural World of the New Testament. This is session 1, Introduction: Honor and Shame.

Hello, my name is David deSilva. I'm professor of New Testament and Greek at Ashland Theological Seminary in Ashland, Ohio, where I have taught since 1995. I'm ordained a United Methodist Elder in the Florida Conference and regard my work in academia largely as something undertaken in service to the Church. I became interested in the cultural environment of the New Testament long ago while researching my doctoral dissertation, which really seemed to make quite a difference in terms of reading a particular New Testament text.

In my case, it was the letter to the Hebrews. It's important for us to think carefully and critically about culture as a major context or environment when reading texts of any kind. 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, especially in North America and Western Europe, are very different from those cultural values and assumptions and ways of doing things experienced by people living in the eastern Mediterranean of the first century A.D. For example, we rarely think about honor and shame.

At least, I rarely think about these things moving about in 21st-century Florida as I do. I think much more, or I see people thinking much more in terms of individual rights, of legality, questions of what is actionable or not, as opposed to questions of what embodies the values of the group and whether or not those values are going to be reflected in our practice or not. Therefore, what will the response of our peers be? Will it be to value us or to honor us, or will it result in a loss of face or a loss of value? Our ways of doing business, of getting access to goods, is primarily commercial as opposed to relational.

When I need almost anything, I get it by offering something and exchanging it right there on the spot for something else, generally cash or credit for the goods in question. It's not a relational approach to accessing goods or opportunities, whereas the first-century Mediterranean was very much the latter. I think about family very differently from the way a first-century resident of Asia Minor, Judea or Egypt would think about family.

Our notions of family in the United States are quite limited by comparison. We have our nuclear families, and if we talk about an extended family, it's still quite truncated by comparison with how ancient people conceived of families. And, of course, values like purity and pollution have very different resonances for us in the 21st-century Western world than they did for Jesus moving about first-century Galilee or Judea.

For us, pollution is largely an environmental issue, or if we think in terms of defilement or cleansing, it's often transferred to a kind of the realm of hygiene or microbes as opposed to the realm of religion and relating to God and one's ability to come before the presence of God. Cultural values and social practices have changed immensely as we moved across 20 centuries and moved across continents, but cultural values and social practices have their own logic. They have their own presuppositions, and we need to take great care in interpreting ancient texts so that we do not impose our cultural logic or our cultural presuppositions upon those texts.

Those texts are written out of a very, for us, foreign culture with a foreign cultural logic and foreign social presuppositions. If we don't gain an awareness and knowledge of that difference, we will inevitably misread those texts. I find this to be a great danger when those texts have the authority of sacred scripture because the risk we run is reading our culture's presuppositions into the text and hearing them back from the text, now vested with divine authority, whereas in many instances those texts would challenge our cultural presuppositions and call us, in some ways, to begin living quite counter-culturally in that regard.

An example that is of great importance, I think, to Christian theology and discipleship is simply the concept of the free gift of grace. Our cultural location tends to cause us to read this phrase to mean that there is no obligation on the recipient of such favor. We hear the free gift of grace, and we interpret that to mean this must be free because it costs us nothing.

Paul would never have thought in those terms as he wrote about God's free gift of grace, but we assume this is his meaning, and therefore, we suffer a great divide between an understanding of God's gift of grace and our discipleship, our response to God. We tend not to hear Paul when he says that Jesus died for the sake of all so that those who are alive should live not for themselves but for the one who died for them and was raised. For Paul, the free gift of grace speaks to the fact that the giving was free.

The giving could not be coerced by any act of our own. As he writes in Romans 11, who has ever given to God that God should repay them? The giving is free and uncoerced, but the receiving creates a relationship of obligation to God. The fact that we may be uncomfortable talking about this shows how far removed we are from Paul's own cultural values and social practices and how much work we need to do if we really are going to hear him.

Hence, I find it to be very important for us as foreigners reading the New Testament to immerse ourselves in the cultural values and the social matrix of the first-century Mediterranean so that we can pick up on what will motivate those ancient hearers in a text and why, and so that we can understand better the argumentative connections that the author assumes that his hearers will supply instead of assuming and supplying our own, which tend, as in the example just shown, which can be quite foreign to the logic that the ancient author is assuming. Attending to the cultural matrix of the New Testament also helps us to discern more clearly the challenges facing those ancient hearers in their contexts, as well as the challenges that the New Testament authors are posing to their audiences in order to shape them into a new distinctive kind of community. Finally, attention to these cultural values and practices helps us to think more clearly about how to apply the challenges of the New Testament authors to ourselves and our churches in a new culture.

In this opening lecture, I want to focus on the cultural values of honor and shame in the ancient world, particularly the first-century Mediterranean environment of the New Testament writings. Honor is a principal value among the residents of the Mediterranean world. It's difficult and perhaps in some ways unwise to make broad generalizations, but this one particular generalization that Mediterranean people in the first century tended to value and think about honor seems quite justified on the basis of the widespread evidence that points in that direction, at least from Italy all the way around the eastern Mediterranean to North Africa.

For example, we read in a treatise called *On Benefits* by Seneca, a first-century Roman philosopher and statesman, an elite author who happened to be the tutor of Nero as Nero was coming of age. Don't judge Seneca on that, please. But Seneca writes that the one firm conviction from which we move to the proof of other points is this: that which is honorable is held dear for no other reason than because it is honorable.

Seneca here speaks out of the first century to talk at a meta level with us about the values of his world, and he identifies the foundational value to be the value of honor. If something is honorable, it is automatically desirable. Conversely, we could infer if something is dishonorable or will lead to disgrace, it is inherently, fundamentally undesirable for the people whom Seneca knows.

What he also tells us is that considerations of honor, how to gain it, how to preserve it, and what might cause us to lose it, considerations of honor are foundational to making decisions. When he writes that he and his peers move from consideration of what is honorable to the proof of other points, he is telling us that the bottom line reasoning for people, as he has observed it is whether or not something is honorable or disgraceful. Other values are often held up as important considerations alongside

what is honorable, but these will tend not to trump the honorable if the conflict is made explicit.

For example, we have a large body of texts from the ancient world that talk about how to persuade people, how to get people to do what you want them to do, or how to make the decision that you want them to make. These are the ancient or classical handbooks on rhetoric and persuasive speech. In these handbooks, we read about a number of motives that drive people alongside the honorable, which is always mentioned.

Alongside the honorable, you could encounter that which makes for security, that which makes for safety. For example, the *Rhetorica ad Herenium*, a Latin book on persuasion from about 50 BC, says that the two driving motives in decision-making are honor and security. But the same author says if there's a conflict between these two values, honor will always win out.

You can never admit that the path that leads to safety is dishonorable and expect to persuade your audience. Or if we were to go even further back to Aristotle in his books on ethics, Aristotle identifies, again, honor as a driving concern but also a pleasure and advantage. But he, too, will say where there's a conflict, honor will be the primary consideration.

If you want to win over an audience, you will never win them openly to the dishonorable path. All of this to say, we have a lot of evidence that points to honor and shame as fundamental, pivotal values. And that even though they exist alongside other major values and considerations, quite a few ancient authors identify these as the bottom-line drivers of decision-making.

A useful exercise might be some time to scan the book of Proverbs or the somewhat later apocryphal *Wisdom of Ben Sirah*. Notice how many times the authors of those books commend a behavior or a practice simply by saying it is honorable or it is good too, as it often gets translated. But the word that gets translated is often, at least in Ben Sirah, *kalon*, noble.

It is noble to do this. And how often an action is advised against simply on the basis of it being called disgraceful. It is shameful to do X. And very often, that is considered by one of these authors to be enough argument to dissuade the pupil from doing X. Now, honor is a social value.

That is to say, honor is ascribed by a group of others. I might have self-respect, but 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. Every group for whom honor and shame are important values, every group decides what constitutes honorable behavior and what makes an honorable person.

And very often, those are the things that, if a person does them, contribute to the well-being and the survival, the maintenance of the group. And so, in an honor culture, the others in my society have a great deal of social control over me because I seek their affirmation. I seek their reflection back that what I am doing, what I am practicing, and the attitudes and actions I exhibit are valuable in their sight.

Therefore, I am very likely to do what the group needs me to do in order for the group to flourish and survive. And I will probably have self-respect or self-esteem on the basis of my own assessment of my fulfilling those values. But honor, again, requires esteem by others to match.

There's also the potential for great cognitive dissonance, where a person might believe in fulfilling those values but be denied the affirmation of the same by his or her significant others. In this context, shame essentially has two different meanings. We can talk about shame in terms of dishonor, disgrace, and the experience of the group's disapproval.

The group is sending the message that what you're doing is not valuable. It is not good for the maintenance of this group's identity and its survival. In a completely other sense, shame has a more positive nuance than modesty or concern for the group's approval.

So, people in an honor culture often have an acute sense of shame, which leads them to try to avoid shame in the negative sense, often at all costs. In the first-century Mediterranean, we can talk about honor being gained or enjoyed on the basis of two kinds of quality or activity. One of these would be components of what we could call attributed honor, also called ascribed honor.

These are more or less accidents of birth. I am born into a certain family, and that family has a certain status and a certain collective honor. I am heir to that status, that collective honor, by virtue of having been born to that family.

Sometimes an ethnic group has a certain honor or lack thereof. And different ethnic groups, as we read ancient literature, different ethnic groups are often competing over their relative claims to honor. But then there are also ways in which I can augment my honor.

We might speak, therefore, of achieved honor. This would be in the deeds I perform and what I do to the extent that these deeds reflect the values or the virtues of the group with which I belong. Honor and the lack of honor, shaming, can also be displayed in a number of ways.

As we read ancient texts, we should be attentive to what happens to physical bodies, how they are placed in relationship to one another, and how they are treated. So, for example, seating arrangements often reflect decisions about relative honor. Hence, invitations to sit at my right hand are typically invitations to sit at a place of honor and, therefore, enjoy precedence over other people in that gathering.

How a head is treated, as well as how a physical head is treated, reflects honor decisions on the part of a group. If that head is anointed, that person is being vested with the honor of a particular office, perhaps that of a priest or a king. If a head is wreathed or crowned, that person is being honored visibly and publicly.

For example, the victor of an athletic contest will receive a wreath. The action of putting a wreath around the head is a symbolic display of honor being conferred and enacted. Or if that head is slapped, for example, in the trial and the mocking of Jesus, it is an ascription of dishonor, of shame, a challenge to honor, part of a status degradation ritual, stripping away any sense of honor that that person might have.

We should also be attentive to the mention of name or reputation in these texts. Reputation is kind of obvious; that is fame, that is, the honor that one enjoys beyond one's physical presence. But the name itself becomes a kind of metonymy, a kind of symbol or figure for a person's honor.

Is a name slandered? Is a name well-spoken of? That is kind of a code for the ways in which a person's honor is being represented out there verbally in the world. When we pray, hallowed be thy name, we are in part at least praying that God's honor will be more and more widely recognized on earth in the same way that God's honor is recognized in the heavenly realms. A word is probably in order about honor and gender.

In the first-century world, and this really actually persists in many Mediterranean cultures even to this day, and Semitic cultures and Middle Eastern cultures even to this day, a woman's honor is thought of quite differently from a man's honor. Men tend to be out there in public, often competing to honor one another. But in many ancient texts, we read that a woman's sphere for possessing honor is really indoors.

It's the private spaces of the house, or if it's outside of the house, it's in the public spaces frequented by women or chaperoned by a man, a husband, a father, or a brother, some representative of the family within which the woman's honor is embedded. Obviously, we're looking at patriarchal societies here, heavily gender-biased societies in the ancient world, in which a woman is not regarded as an independent entity but always as somehow an extension of some male's household and, therefore, that male's honor. And so we read a lot about modesty as the core of feminine honor in this world, keeping oneself from the touch, from the gaze, from the converse of other men.

Any sexual attempt on a woman outside of marriage, consensual or otherwise, is, among other things, a threat to the honor of the male in whom she is conceptually embedded, whether her husband or her father. Women can be, in ancient literature, extolled as examples of virtues that men typically are associated with. For example, courage.

Courage, we could call a manly virtue because, in Greek, the word, in fact, is *Andra*. It could be translated as manliness quite appropriately. Many women are extolled in ancient literature as courageous, for example, the heroine Judith in the apocryphal book by that name or the mother of the seven martyrs in Fourth Maccabees, another apocryphal text.

Plutarch, a Greek author from about 100 to 120 AD, wrote an entire treatise called *On the Manliness, On the Bravery of Women*, extolling historic female figures for their courage. But in all these cases, even alongside holding up women as more manly than men, in some cases, there is also attention given to female honor in the more traditional senses of modesty, chastity, removal from public space and public sight and touch as much as possible. Now, if a person is brought up to value honor and to fear shame as perhaps the most fundamental good and evil that he or she might experience, then that group of which the person is a part can very effectively exercise social control over that individual, over all those individuals.

If I am brought up seeking my peers' approval, those peers have a great deal of power to enforce my conformity. This is an essential feature of ethics in the ancient world. Because of drivenness for honor, groups are able to keep people conforming to those values that the group needs people to embody for the good of the group.

I will embody those practices and values that the group of which I am a part values and wants me to embody. Therefore, I am willing, throughout my life, to serve the group's best interests even over my own from beginning to end. This is another major difference between 21st-century Western culture and 1st-century Mediterranean culture.

Even as I stand here, I am aware that self-interest is a really strong driving factor. Even in my own life, the work of the spirit notwithstanding. But self-interest, to the extent that we foster it, honor it, and live by it in the 21st century, is a product of Western individualism.

It is hardly a possibility in the 1st-century Mediterranean world. 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.

A few examples of how this works. In the ancient world, actually as today as well, courage is an essential virtue, bravery, fortitude, and the willingness to endure physical harm for the good of one's group. I myself have never served in the military.

Those who have know what I'm talking about. But in the ancient world, a whole lot more people could be called on to serve in the military than is the case in the West today. And if you were to go back, say, to the 4th century BC, any male in Greece could be called upon to serve in the military.

And the survival of your city-state depended upon your willingness to go out there and take a spear in the thigh, or worse, for your city-state. Hence, city-states honored the courageous. And I, as a 4th century BC Athenian, am reared from birth to regard courage as a great virtue to embody, as more valuable than security, comfort, and life itself.

And so, as I hear soldiers, especially the fallen soldiers, praised, as I hear funeral orations pronounced over their immortal fame, I am socialized into being willing to go and do likewise. And so, the city-state survives. And so, the rebellious province, for example, Judea in the 66 to 70 AD, is able to pull off some of what is able to mount against Rome, ultimately terribly unsuccessfully.

But because of this commitment to put the good of the group, no matter what the cost to the self, first, courage. Generosity would be another exemplary value. In this world, if there was going to be a civic improvement in your city, in your village, it was going to become, it was going to, sorry, it was going to come because some rich person was going to make it happen.

It wasn't going to happen because the taxes that had been farmed had a percentage going to road improvement, building temples, or putting a nice new public bath in downtown Sepphoris for you all. It was because someone was going to be inclined to be that generous. What would make someone part with that much money to make a civic improvement? The hope for honor and the fact that cultures around the Mediterranean rewarded the generous person with what the generous person wanted most, with what all people, except the shameless, wanted most.

Honor, affirmation, fame, the reputation of being a virtuous and valued human being, in many cases, above other human beings. And so, Erastus, who might even be the Erastus we know from the Corinthian church, lays a pavement in front of the Corinthian theater at his own expense when he's granted the civic office of being Edel, because he wants to commemorate the event with a generous act that will literally carve his fame in stone for over 2,000 years. You can still see it there today.

And so, this craving for honor becomes a very effective means of social control and a way to get us as individuals to put ourselves out for the good of the whole. Now,

everything I've really said up to this point has assumed that there's one group that I'm dealing with and in whose eyes I want honor. This is almost never the case in any given locale in the first-century Mediterranean world.

There are complications because there are overlapping groups, each one of which might have slightly or widely differing values and different definitions of what is honorable. For example, since it's relevant to students of scripture, I'd like to take the case of a Jew in a Greek city, be it Alexandria or Caesarea by the sea. What is honorable to the Jew often loses him or her honor in the eyes of non-Jews.

For example, to be an honorable Jew, one avoids idolatry at all costs. One just doesn't go within a sniff's distance of a temple. One avoids every connection with the pollution of foods sacrificed to idols, the meats that came from sacrificial animals in temples.

That is just an abomination, is detestable, that is not part of my life. What makes an honorable Jew is to be circumcised and to circumcise one's male children, one's male slaves, and what have you. To observe the Sabbath, that essential reminder every week of falling in line with the rhythms of God, the one God who created everything in six days and rested on the seventh.

And to observe the dietary regulations laid out in the Torah, whereby by eating beef, but not pork, by eating tuna, but not eel, we imitate God's own movements, God's own actions of choosing the Jewish people, but not the Gentile people. All these things make one honorable in the eyes of one's fellow pious Torah-observant Jews. But how would the Greeks in the city look at these activities? As a pious Jew, my avoidance of all gods besides my own would simply look like arrogant atheism.

My denial of the existence of everyone else's God would come off as the worst kind of impiety. And so ironically, to us moderns, Jews are often spoken of as atheists in the ancient world. Not because they have no gods, they've got one, but they only affirm the existence of that one, no other.

So, they were essentially atheists. They cut the what off their young? Circumcision is regarded as a barbaric mutilation of the body, not a praiseworthy inscribing of a divine covenant on each male body. Taking off one day out of every week to do absolutely nothing earns Jews the reputation of being lazy.

And the dietary regulations are perhaps what leave Gentiles scratching their heads most. Because pork is the other white meat, it is delicious. Nature has provided it as part of its bounty.

To avoid it as something unclean is an injustice to the gods or to nature that has provided it alongside so many other wonderful, tasty, nutritious things. So, I can have

the honor of a pious Jew in the sight of other pious Torah-observant Jews, but those very activities will bring me into disgrace in the eyes of many, probably the majority, of the non-Jewish population of the city. To be fair, there are always some Gentiles, especially among the philosophical class, who look at Judaism as a kind of rigorous discipline that has its own virtues.

But they're the academics of the ancient world, and no one listens to them. By and large, being Jewish means being scorned in the eyes of many Greeks and Romans. If I want honor, what am I going to do? If I'm part of a Jewish minority group in a largely Greek city, what am I going to do? Many, well, I shouldn't say that because I've never actually quantified it, but we know of particular Jews whose desire for honor led them away from their training, from their way of life of origin, to apostatize to some degree, and in some cases to a complete degree, so that they might enjoy honor in the sight of the larger dominant culture.

If a minority group, such as the Jewish people, were in the ancient world, if a minority group is to retain its members, its honor-sensitive members, it needs to develop certain strategies that will keep them focused on group honor as the valuable good, to keep its members focused on attaining honor in line with those practices and commitments that will maintain the group's culture and the group's identity, rather than be drawn away to some competing group's culture because of the potential for honor or disgrace in the eyes of that competing group. So, I would like to take some time now in the last part of this lecture to run through those strategies because they're strategies that we will find operative throughout the New Testament because early Christianity was the minority group par excellence in the ancient world. If you think it was tough to be a Jew in Ephesus, perhaps a community of a hundred thousand, try being a Christian in Ephesus, perhaps a community of 50.

So, we really had to, in Paul's time, you know, very small, we're just talking scores of people, not even hundreds of people. So, we do find the authors of the New Testament being particularly attentive to this matter of how to focus their converts on what the group, Christian group defines as honorable and to diffuse the appeal of honor from the outside and the sting of disgrace from the outside. So, one thing we find minority groups, in particular, doing is carefully defining what is honorable.

I have an example here from the wisdom of Ben Sirah. Ben Sirah was a Jew who taught in a school in Jerusalem. He kept a house of instruction in Jerusalem.

He was probably active between about 200 and 175 BC. And he writes this: whose offspring are worthy of honor? Human offspring. Whose offspring are worthy of honor? Those who fear the Lord.

Whose offspring are unworthy of honor? Human offspring. Whose offspring are unworthy of honor? Those who break the commandments. Among family members,

their leader is worthy of honor, but those who fear the Lord are worthy of honor in his eyes.

The rich, the eminent, and the poor. Their glory is the fear of the Lord. It is not right to despise someone who is intelligent but poor.

And it is not proper to honor one who is sinful. The prince, the ruler, and the judge are honored, but none of them is greater than the one who fears the Lord. In this text, Ben Sirah does a number of things.

First, he identifies the bottom-line definition of what makes a person honorable. The question of whether or not that person observes the Torah, the law of Moses. That's what differentiates a person from a person, an honorable from a dishonorable person.

And he also says that this is ultimately a person's claim to honor above any worldly considerations. The rich, the powerful, the wealthy, and the well-placed were honored back then as they tend to be now. But Ben Sirah says none of those external characteristics is at the heart of what makes a person honorable.

The rich, the eminent, and the poor. Their glory, their claim to honor alike, is their fear of the Lord. Ultimately, honor is wrongly given on the basis of anything else if a person is also a transgressor of the commandments.

So, in texts like this, we find the representative of an increasingly minority culture, even in Judea in the second century. Because the impetus to become like the nations, to take on Greek culture, and Greek forms, and Greek names, and thus join that larger world, and get on the map, and have the potential for honor within that larger world, was gaining ground. Even there, we find Ben Sirah using this strategy.

It's also very important to define whose opinion matters. Anthropologists have talked about the Court of Reputation or the Court of Opinion. Who are those significant others whose opinion of you counts? And thus, in whose eyes honor and shame count? Again, turning to Ben Sirah, we find him defining this Court of Reputation to be centered around God himself.

So, he writes, He said to them, God said to them, Beware of all evil. And he gave commandments to each of them concerning the neighbor. Their ways are always known to him.

They will not be hidden from his eyes. And a bit later in the same book, the person who commits adultery, his fear is confined to human eyes. And he does not realize that the eyes of the Lord are 10,000 times brighter than the sun.

They look upon every aspect of human behavior and see into hidden corners. In both of these texts, Ben Sirah reminds his pupils that God sees everything. And he is the ultimate Court of Opinion, before whom they play out every second of their lives.

The hours they spend in public and the hours they spend in the most secret internal room of their home. And, Ben Sirah warns, the Lord will reveal your secrets. He will overthrow you in the midst of the congregation because you didn't approach with proper regard for the Lord, and your heart was full of insincerity.

So, ultimately, one's honor in society is in the hand of God to preserve or to cast down, depending on whether or not one has pursued what is honorable in God's sight, first and above all else. Another second-century BC writing known as Baruch is written as if from the pen of Jeremiah's scribe, Baruch, speaks about Israel, again already aware of its being a minority culture in the world, Israel being blessed because it knows what is pleasing to God. It knows who the ultimate significant other is.

It has information about how to live honorably before that significant other so as to enjoy the kind of grant of honor that will last not merely for this lifetime but forever. Another important feature of talking about the Court of Reputation that matters is talking about where outsiders get their opinions from. That is to say, if outsiders to my group, members of the dominant Greek or the dominant Roman culture, if outsiders of my group express disapproval of my life choices and my practices, where does that come from? How valuable is their opinion? A text written probably in Egypt in the first century BC, possibly early in the first century AD, is the Wisdom of Solomon, another falsely attributed book.

It was not written by Solomon, the son of David, but by someone who inherited Jewish wisdom tradition. And he writes about how the powerful, rich, ungodly people look at the godly person. And he describes at some length how the ungodly regard the pious Jew as a kind of living reproach because the pious Jew's values and practices are so different.

And because of his testimony to God and to God's approval of his own life, because he is walking in the way of God's law. And so, the author writes about how the ungodly test the pious Jew with insult, with reproach, with violence, and finally with a shameful death. And looking at that kind of scene, which the author no doubt had heard about happening in real life, might even have witnessed in real life, writes about the reasoning of the ungodly and why all that they do, all the shame that they inflict on the pious person is valueless.

So, he writes, this is how the ungodly reasoned, but they were mistaken. Their malice completely blinded them. They didn't know of God's secret plan.

They didn't hope for the reward that holiness brings. They didn't consider the prize they would win if they kept their souls free from stain. He goes on to write later in that book about the majority Gentile world: all humans who don't know God are empty-headed by nature.

In spite of the good things that can be seen, they were somehow unable to know the one who truly is. Though they were fascinated by what he had made, they were unable to recognize the maker of all things. So, in these two texts, we see that the author says that the people around you who may despise you because of your commitment to the Jewish way of life do so because they simply don't have all the facts.

They don't have all the facts about who the real God is, as opposed to the false gods whom they continue to worship. They don't have all the facts about life and judgment and the life beyond. And therefore, being so short-sighted, they're going to make bad decisions about their own lives and about their own worth as human beings.

And they'll judge you to be stupid and shameful, while really, they only do that because they are stupid and shameful. They lack the revelation that we have received. As the text, Wisdom of Solomon, goes on, they live badly.

They live shamefully. It was not enough for them to err about the knowledge of God, but though living in great strife due to ignorance, they call such great evil peace. And if we were to read the larger paragraph from which that verse comes, we would see the author saying, look at how Gentiles live.

Drunkenness, murders, thefts, unnatural sexual relations. Actually, a text very close to what we find in Romans 1:18 to 32. Look at how they live.

And now consider, how can people who are so shameless, in terms of virtue and vice, have anything important to say about your honor or about your shame? Idolatry was actually an idolatrous religion, a major stumbling block or potential stumbling block for Jews living in Gentile cities because Jews were a minority. And as they looked out around themselves, they saw a whole bunch of other human beings, far more than their own number, worshiping these other gods with the same fervor, with the same devotion that they themselves felt toward the God of Israel. And so it might be a constant temptation to wonder, do they also have legitimate religious practice? Should I be so closed-minded as to think mine is the only God? My way of life, the only God-approved way of life? And so, authors like The Wisdom of Solomon, wanting to promote, wanting to help facilitate the maintenance of Jewish identity in this diaspora, in these kind of non-Jewish lands, gives attention to explaining idolatry as a phenomenon.

So, he writes, The misguided art of humans didn't deceive us, nor did the fruitless labor of clever painters, even when they created an image that was dazzling in its combination of colors. The sight of idols, however, creates desire in fools. They begin to long for a dead statue's lifeless image.

Those who make them, those who want them, and those who worship them are all lovers of wicked things. They all deserve to have their hopes misdirected in this way. And so that which non-Jews value, and the kind of piety that non-Jews honor, is also something that this author from the Jewish minority culture will address, so as to defuse its potential appeal and to explain the opinion and the practice of the majority culture as ultimately the deviant one, not our minority view.

Another thing that we find these minority cultural leaders doing for their group members is reinterpreting experiences of disapproval from outsiders in ways that contribute to honor within the minority group. That is to say, they turn the experience of being shamed by outsiders into a badge of honor in the sight of God and the sight of the group. Again, sticking with the Wisdom of Solomon, the author writes that the souls of the righteous that have died were disciplined a little bit, but they will be rewarded with abundant good things because God tested them and found that they deserve to be with him.

He tested them like gold in the furnace. He accepted them like an entirely burnt offering. The author is writing about those pious Jews whom their Gentile neighbors, or perhaps even their apostate Jewish neighbors, ridiculed, scorned, insulted, abused, and eventually even murdered.

He writes about that experience of having their honor stripped away by these other people as actually an experience of having their real honor tested and proven for eternity by God. Thus, the negative experiences of being shamed by outsiders become transformed into the experience of being tested and granted eternal honor within the group. One set of images that minority cultural authors use frequently is athletic imagery.

There's a natural correlation between the rigors and the hardships that the ancient athlete endures, perhaps the modern athlete as well, but certainly the ancient athlete endured. The rigors of training, the pain of training, the pain of a wrestling or a boxing match in a world before protective padding and helmets and gloves and what have you, all the pain that such a person endured for the hope of honor, for the hope of a victory, a parallel between that and what a member of a minority culture might experience when abused by when reproached by, members outside of his or her group. And so, we find the author of Fourth Maccabees using athletic imagery to transform an experience of utter degradation into a competition for honor.

This excerpt that I'm about to read comes from the speech of a mother to her seven sons before they are about to be tortured to death in the most brutal and inventive ways, perhaps in ancient literature. And she writes my sons, you have been summoned to an honorable contest in which you will give evidence that will prove your nation's worth. Compete willingly for the law of our ancestors.

It would really be a disgrace if you young men lost their nerve in the face of this torture after an old man endured so much suffering out of respect for God. I should have mentioned that this was after an old priest named Eleazar was first tortured to death. Here, we find the image of the honorable or the noble contest and the idea that facing degradation could actually be seen as engaging in a contest.

And the outcome might be in the sight of outsiders complete degradation, but in the sight of insiders and in the sight of God, so those insiders would claim, the end would be a glorious victory, the honor and fame of which would last forever. As this next excerpt brings out, the competition in which they were engaged was truly divine. Virtue itself, the moral character itself, handed out awards that day, having proved their worth through their endurance.

Victory brought immortality through an endless life. Eleazar, the aged priest, was the first competitor. The mother of the seven children and those brothers competed also.

The tyrant who was torturing them was the opponent, and the world and the human race were the audience. Respect for God won the day and crowned its champions. Who wasn't amazed at the athletes who were competing in the name of the divine law? Who wasn't astonished? As we read from the New Testament also, we would find athletic imagery similarly being used to transform the dominant culture's rejection and attempts to shame the Christian converts into returning to their old way of life into an athletic competition where victory consisted not in giving in, but holding out to the end and thus receiving a wreath, or in more popular translations, receiving a crown at the end of the day.

All of this that we have been speaking about, talking about the, or I should say, defusing the sting of shame from outside the group, all of this is balanced with the use of honor and shame within the group, on the group's terms. That is to say, Ben Sirah, the author of Wisdom of Solomon, the author of Fourth Maccabees, all would have their Jewish audiences continue to vitally engage one another in such ways that they reinforce the value of Torah observance as the way to honor. That in their interactions with one another day by day, they approve, they applaud, they commend, and thus they reinforce one another's commitment to live out the Jewish way of life.

Conversely, shame within the group should be used to dissuade individuals who waver in their commitment to the Torah-observant way of life. One fine example of this, which I'll only mention, is the hymn in praise of the ancestors, a kind of six-chapter coda at the end of the Wisdom of Ben Sirah, in which Ben Sirah goes through, in effect, the whole history of the Jewish people from Adam to the most recent high priest, Simon II, Simon the Just, showing how those who lived out God's covenant won everlasting honor, while those like the wicked kings of Israel and Judah who departed from God's covenant won for themselves everlasting shame, and won actually for their nations, shame by virtue of being conquered by other nations. One final aspect of honor in the environment of the ancient world that I want to dwell on has to do with competition for honor and competitions for its reward in the public sphere.

The ancient Mediterranean, like some pockets of the modern Mediterranean, has been described as an agonistic culture, a culture of competition, in which honor is regarded as a limited good. There's only so much of it to go around, and for me to get more, you have to lose some. I've got to win it at your expense somehow.

I simply want to introduce us to this by looking at a passage from Luke's gospel, perhaps a very familiar story of Jesus healing on a Sabbath from Luke 13. Now, Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath, and just then, there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for 18 years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight.

When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, woman, you are set free from your ailment. When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd that there are six days on which work ought to be done.

Come on those days and be cured, not on the Sabbath day. But the Lord answered him and said to him, you hypocrites, does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the manger and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for 18 long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day? When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing. Now, in this interaction, in this episode, we find what we could describe as a somewhat typical challenge and repost scenario, a typical competition for honor, typical except for the fact that a woman got cured of an 18-year-old ailment.

But in seeing this need and in speaking to the woman, saying you are healed from your ailment on a Sabbath day, Jesus was making an implicit claim to honor. It's not foregrounded in this story, but we do encounter it in another healing story, the healing of the paralyzed man recounted in Mark 2. So that you might know that the

Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath, he says, take up your bed and walk. So, Jesus claims to have the right to heal on the Sabbath day, and the woman who is healed immediately acknowledges that.

She praises God for what happens, which implicitly is a statement that God just did something through this man, Jesus, right here. What happened here in the act? Then, of course, the counter challenge comes.

The leader of the synagogue intervenes and attempts to put Jesus in his place indirectly. He doesn't speak to Jesus; you shouldn't be healed on the Sabbath, but indirectly, he says to the crowd, don't come on the Sabbath to be healed. This is not the day to do it.

There are six other days to do it. Of course, that is much more directed to Jesus. What you just did was wrong.

You shouldn't be healing on the Sabbath. You're breaking the law. Jesus responds to this challenge.

He poses a repost to use the language of fencing, where someone thrusts another, parries and reposts, thrusts back, and says, you would break the Sabbath too, just to help an animal. You take care of your livestock on the Sabbath. Isn't it a much more pressing need than to take care of a human being? Isn't the Sabbath the perfect day on which to undo the works of Satan, who has bound this woman? Now, the important I should say is that the verdict over this exchange doesn't come from Jesus, and it doesn't come from the synagogue leader.

They have both launched their volleys at one another. The decision comes from the onlookers. They're the ones who decide who's won honor and who's lost honor in this exchange.

Luke is very attentive to this as their role, for he writes in his concluding sentence that his opponents were put to shame. The entire crowd was rejoicing at the things that Jesus was doing. So, in this exchange, it was Jesus who came out ahead in the honor game, as it were, having been challenged but having successfully defended his authority in the eyes of public opinion.

In our next lecture, we will look more closely at a single New Testament text. Our goal will be to show how these topics that we've talked about in this lecture, pertinent to the honor culture and the honor-shame dynamics of the first-century Mediterranean, help us enter into the pastoral situation of and the strategic response to the situation of a particular New Testament text, namely 1 Peter.

This is Dr. David DeSilva in his teaching on the cultural world of the New Testament.

This is session 1, Introduction: Honor and Shame.