

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

Podcast Audio Summary

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome to another Deep Dive, this time one that might just kind of turn your understanding of the New Testament upside down. Oh wow. Today we're exploring the world of honor and shame.

Okay. Forces so powerful in the first century that the philosopher Seneca actually said losing honor was a fate worse than death. Wow.

To guide us, we've got a lecture by New Testament scholar Dr. David deSilva. Yeah, deSilva is a really interesting guy. What I think is so fascinating is that these concepts of honor and shame they weren't just like these abstract ideas, you know; they were like woven into every interaction, every social ritual, every decision people made back then.

It's almost like I don't know, we're talking about it like a completely different species, not just people from a different time period, you know. Yeah. But if we can understand this like honor-shame dynamic, Dr. deSilva argues that the New Testament comes alive in a whole new way.

Oh absolutely, a hundred percent. Imagine a world where belonging and your community's approval mattered more than almost anything else. I mean, that's the world of the New Testament.

So it's not about, like, you know, feeling good about yourself; it's about the esteem granted by your community, right? Exactly. It was social currency, and the community wielded immense power because of it, right? You wanted to be in their good graces or, at the very least, avoid their disapproval. Which brings us to, you know, the concept of shame.

Now this is where it gets a bit tricky because shame has had two sides in this culture. Okay, so let's unpack that for a sec. We tend to think of shame as purely negative, but you're saying it was a positive side too? Precisely.

There was the negative side, you know, that gut-wrenching experience of disgrace that everyone credited, but there was also this more positive sense of shame. Almost like modesty or a deep concern for your group's approval. You know what I mean? So like you wouldn't want to do anything that would like make your family lose face, that kind of thing.

Exactly. And this is where we can really see the community's power to shape behavior. Imagine trying to navigate that constant tension wanting to stand out and be recognized, but also you know terrified of bringing shame upon yourself or your family.

Yeah, it's starting to make sense why the opinions of others were so important in this culture, but didn't some people kind of have a leg up in this honor game? That's a great question, and it leads us to the two types of honor that Dr. deSilva lays out. There's

attributed honor, the kind you're born with, you know, family status, that sort of thing, and then there's achieved honor, which you earn through actions that uphold your group's values. So it's like some people started the game with more chips, but everyone was still playing by the same rules.

Precisely, and those rules were woven into the fabric of everyday life. I mean Dr. deSilva uses some fascinating examples. Like, let's take seating arrangements at a meal, right?

It wasn't just about who got to sit closest to the food. It was a public declaration of your honor. Like the most honored person sat at the host's right hand, and the least honored might be, you know, tucked away in a corner somewhere.

Wow, so where you sat could like make or break your reputation. Absolutely. Everything was symbolic: the way a person's name was spoken, the type of head covering they wore.

I mean, it all contributed to this complex system of honor and shame. It sounds incredibly intricate, almost suffocating, you know. No wonder people were so concerned with what others thought.

Right now, imagine being part of a minority group in this environment. Dr. deSilva talks about the challenges faced by, you know, Jewish communities living in Greek cities. Their practices, right, brought them honor within their own community but often, you know, led to scorn and ridicule from the dominant Greek culture.

Yeah, that's a tough position to be in. So how do they navigate that tension, like fitting in but staying true to their identity? Well, that's where things get really, really interesting.

They develop these fascinating strategies almost like mental gymnastics to make sense of their place in the world. Right. One way was by reinterpreting the very definition of honor.

You know, they'd say, look, the Greeks might think we're shameful because we don't, you know, we don't worship their gods or eat their food, but we know that true honor comes from God, not from them. So they flip the script basically. They redefine the game to make their own values, you know, the winning ones.

Precisely, and there's this amazing passage in the Wisdom of Solomon that perfectly captures this mindset. It talks about how the ungodly look at the righteous and scoff, but ultimately, like, their opinions don't matter, right, because God is the one who judges. It's almost like they're saying, you can laugh at us all you want, but we answer to a higher power.

Yeah. Yeah. It's a powerful way of reframing the situation, taking what could be seen as a weakness and turning it into a strength.

But it couldn't have been easy to maintain that kind of perspective day in and day out, especially when they were facing real persecution. Right. And that's where Dr. deSilva brings in this incredible athletic imagery that was so common in the ancient world.

Minority groups, especially early Christians, used this imagery to reframe their suffering as a competition for divine honor. Wait, so they saw themselves as like athletes competing in some kind of like Cosmic Olympics or something. Exactly.

And the prize wasn't a gold medal, right? It was eternal life, the ultimate honor. Dr. deSilva shares this gripping story from Fourth Maccabees about a mother encouraging her seven sons to face torture and death with courage, framing it as a contest where God crowns the victor.

Talk about turning shame into a badge of honor. It's hard to even wrap my head around that kind of mindset, to be honest, but I can see how it would have been incredibly empowering, you know, for early Christians who were facing similar persecution. Oh yeah, totally.

It gave them a framework for understanding their suffering, you know, for finding meaning in it. They weren't just victims, right. They were warriors, athletes fighting for a cause far greater than themselves.

And this this mindset wasn't just limited to the Jewish community right. Dr. DeSilva says early Christians adopted it as well. Absolutely.

And it's all over the New Testament. Think about the Apostle Paul. He constantly uses athletic imagery to describe the Christian life, you know, running the race, fighting the good fight, pressing on toward the goal.

It's all about endurance, perseverance, pushing through pain to achieve victory. It's like they were tapping into this cultural understanding of competition and channeling it toward a spiritual goal. Exactly.

They took something that was familiar and used it to communicate a whole new way of looking at the world. And this brings us to a really interesting point that Dr. deSilva makes about the nature of honor in this culture. It wasn't just about being a good person; it was about winning.

Winning. So it was actually competitive; people were actually trying to one-up each other. Very much so.

Dr. deSilva describes it as an agonistic culture where honor was a limited good, a prize to be won at someone else's expense. You see this playing out in all sorts of social interactions, from debates to political speeches to even, you know, everyday conversations. So it wasn't enough to just be honorable.

You had to prove it to assert your dominance to come out on top. Precisely. And this competitive aspect of honor is crucial for understanding certain passages in the New Testament.

For example, Dr. deSilva analyzes the story from Luke 13 where Jesus heals a woman on the Sabbath. Oh yeah, right, right. That's the one where the synagogue leader gets all bent out of shape because he claims Jesus is breaking the law by, you know, working on the Sabbath.

Exactly. But when you look at it through the lens of honor and shame, you see this whole new layer of meaning. Jesus's action, you know, of healing was actually a claim to honor, a challenge to the authority of the synagogue leader.

So it was like a power move. You know, he was saying, I have the authority to heal, and your rules don't apply to me. Yeah, you could definitely see it that way.

And the synagogue leaders' response to Jesus' rebuke was essentially a counter challenge, an attempt to put Jesus back in his place and reassert his own authority. And all of this is happening in front of a crowd who are essentially acting as judges deciding who comes out on top in this honor contest. Precisely.

Dr. deSilva emphasizes how important public perception was in this culture. It wasn't just about what you believed; it was about how your actions were perceived by others. Winning the crowd meant winning the honor game.

Wow, so even a seemingly simple act of healing could become this high-stakes drama about who has the most honor. Absolutely, and that's why understanding this honor-shame dynamic is so crucial for interpreting the New Testament. It's not just about the words on the page, right? It's about the cultural context, the unspoken rules, the underlying power dynamics that were at play.

This is all starting to click now, but we're only scratching the surface here. Dr. De Silva's lecture focuses specifically on the book of First Peter, and I'm really curious to see how these ideas play out in that context. That's where we're headed next.

First Peter is a letter written to, you know, a group of Christians facing persecution and social marginalization, and it's through the lens of honor and shame that we can truly understand the power and relevance of Peter's message. I'm ready to dive in, so let's shift our focus now to First Peter and see how these ancient concepts of honor and shame come to life in a very real and challenging situation. Okay, so we've established that honor and shame were like the operating system of the first-century world.

Now let's boot up First Peter and see how this plays out for early Christians. Yeah, it's fascinating because Peter's writing to these believers scattered throughout Asia Minor, and a lot of them were facing real hardship because of their faith. We're not talking about the wealthy elite here.

These were everyday people, many of them probably slaves or lower class, trying to navigate a society where their beliefs made them, you know, outsiders. But they were already dealing with the challenges of being a minority group, and then on top of that they had this added layer of being Christian in a predominantly pagan culture. Talk about an uphill battle.

Exactly, and remember how we talked about the importance of community honor? Well, for these Christians, their commitment to Christ often meant, you know, sacrificing the approval of their families and their friends and their neighbors. They were basically choosing a new family, a new community with its own set of values and expectations. And that came

with a whole new set of challenges, right? I mean, they were accused of atheism because they wouldn't worship the Roman gods.

They were seen as subversive because they claimed allegiance to a different King, Jesus, and their beliefs about love and forgiveness and equality were often ridiculed and dismissed by the dominant culture. It's almost like they're living in a constant state of potential shame, you know, always at risk of being ostracized, ridiculed, or even persecuted for their beliefs. So how does Peter address this in his letter? Does he just tell them to suck it up and deal with it? Not at all; that's what makes first Peter so powerful.

He acknowledges the shame they're experiencing, but then he reframes it; he reminds them that, you know, even though they may be losing honor in the eyes of the world, they have a much greater honor to strive for: the honor that comes from God. So he's basically shifting their focus from the temporary approval of the world to the eternal approval of God. Exactly, and he does this in some really clever ways.

For example, he constantly reminds them of their new identity in Christ, right? He calls them chosen peoples, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. These aren't just like nice-sounding phrases, you know; they're loaded with meaning, especially in a culture obsessed with honor and status. So he's not just telling them like they're good people; he's saying they've been given a special status, a unique honor by God himself.

Yeah, and that elevates their whole perspective; it gives them a sense of belonging, of purpose, even in the midst of suffering. It's like he's saying, don't let the world define you; you know, you have a new identity, a new family, and a new source of honor. You know, it's funny because we still do this today, don't we? We join groups, we identify with certain labels, we seek validation from specific communities. It's all about, you know, finding our place, our tribe, the people who get us and make us feel valued.

Absolutely, it's a fundamental human need, and Peter was tapping into that need, but he was pointing them toward a source of honor that transcended the fickle opinions of the world. But it wasn't just about words, right? He also encouraged them to live in a way that reflected this new understanding of honor. Exactly, he challenged them to live lives that were worthy of their calling, worthy of the honor that God had bestowed upon them. He told them to abstain from the passions of the flesh, to be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, to live as God's slaves.

Wait, be subject to every human institution that seems a little odd considering they were being persecuted by some of those institutions. Yeah, that's a great point, and it highlights the complexity of their situation, but remember, Peter isn't advocating blind obedience to corrupt authorities, you know; he's talking about living in a way that honors God, even when it's difficult, even when it means enduring injustice. So it's about choosing the higher path even when the world doesn't understand or appreciate it. It's about maintaining your integrity and moral compass even under pressure.

Precisely, and by doing so, they were actually challenging the world's definition of honor. They were saying true honor isn't about power or status or social approval; it's about humility, service, and living a life that reflects God's character. That's a pretty radical concept, especially in that culture where honor was so often tied to outward appearances

and social standing. It was a complete paradigm shift, and it wasn't easy. Peter knew his audience was facing intense pressure to conform, to blend in, to avoid the shame of being different, but he encouraged them to stand firm, to resist the temptation to compromise their values.

So how did he do that? How did he, like, give them the courage to go against the grain to embrace this new way of thinking about honor? Well, he reminded them that they weren't alone; they were part of a larger community, a global family of believers who are all facing, you know, similar challenges. He also appealed to their sense of hope, reminding them that their suffering was temporary, but the glory that awaited them in heaven was eternal. It's that idea of the eternal crown, right- that image of them being athletes competing for a prize that will never fade away.

Exactly, and he also encouraged them to, you know, lean on their faith to resist temptation and to pray for strength. He basically gave them a battle plan for navigating a world that was hostile to their beliefs. This has been such an insightful deep dive; it's amazing how understanding the cultural context of honor and shame unlocks so much meaning in First Peter.

It really does; it's like we've been reading the text with one eye closed, and now we're finally seeing the full picture. So as we wrap up, what are some key takeaways for our listeners? Well, the biggest one is that the Bible wasn't written in a vacuum. It was written in a specific cultural context, and understanding the context can profoundly change the way we read and interpret the text.

And in this case, understanding the dynamics of honor and shame helps us see that First Peter isn't just a collection of moral platitudes; it's a powerful message of encouragement and hope for people who are struggling to live out their faith in a hostile world. It reminds us that true honor isn't about what the world thinks of us but about what God thinks of us, and that's a truth that can set us free from the need to please everyone, from the fear of being judged, and from the pressure to conform to the world's standards. It's a truth that can empower us to live lives of purpose and integrity, to stand up for what's right, and to make a difference in the world even if it means facing opposition or ridicule.

And for those of us who are struggling, it's a reminder that we're not alone; there's a whole community of believers out there who are facing similar challenges, and we can draw strength and encouragement from each other. So as you go about your day, think about the ways that the dynamics of honor and shame still play out in our lives today. Yeah.

What are the unspoken rules that govern our interactions? What are the pressures we face to conform? And how can we, like the early Christians, find our true source of honor and live lives that are worthy of our calling? Keep exploring, keep questioning, and keep seeking the true source of honor.