

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

6-min. Video Overview

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

So, what if I told you there's a hidden key to understanding ancient texts? You know, like a cultural master code that could completely change how we read everything from the Bible to Homer, revealing a world we've, well, we've pretty much totally misunderstood. Let's just start with that big question right there. Is it possible we're getting it all wrong? That the values we just take for granted today are actually blinding us to what ancient authors were really trying to say? I mean, just look at this.

The sheer difference in our cultural software is staggering. We think in terms of individual rights and what we can sue for. They thought in terms of the group's honor and what everyone else thought.

We're all about commercial transactions. For them, it was all about relational access. Our entire operating system is just fundamentally different.

So what happens when we try to run their ancient software on our modern hardware? Well, you get some major glitches in our understanding. It completely distorts the original meaning. Let's see exactly how.

Okay, let's take a really famous concept. This one's from the Christian New Testament. The free gift.

Now, to our modern ears, that sounds pretty straightforward, doesn't it? Something for nothing. Well, here's the twist. When we hear free, we think no strings attached.

But to a first-century person like the Apostle Paul, free meant something totally different. It meant the giving was uncoerced, that the giver wasn't forced to do it. Receiving that gift, however, oh, that absolutely created a binding relationship.

It created an obligation to be loyal, to be responsive. It completely reframes our understanding from just a simple transaction to a deeply relational commitment. So, if our modern lens is failing us, what's the alternative? Well, the answer lies in understanding the fundamental operating system of the ancient Mediterranean, the world of honor and shame.

And here is the crucial point. Honor wasn't about self-esteem or how you felt about yourself. Not at all.

It was your public reputation, your social credit score. It was a claim to worth that had to be publicly recognized and granted by your community. It was, and I mean this quite literally, everything.

And this wasn't some minor value, okay? Listen to Seneca. He was a Roman philosopher writing at the exact same time as many of the New Testament authors. He tells us flat out that honor was the bottom-line foundational value.

If something was honorable, you did it, period. It trumped your safety, your comfort, even your own personal advantage. So how did you get this all-important thing? Well, some of it was just given to you at birth.

Your family name, your gender, your status. That's what we call ascribed honor. But you could also win it or lose it through your actions by perfectly embodying the virtues your group prized.

That's achieved honor. Now this brings us to a really fascinating question. What happens when different groups with completely different ideas of what's honorable are forced to live side-by-side in the same city? I want you to just try and put yourself in this situation.

Imagine you're a member of a Jewish minority in a big, bustling Greco-Roman city. The very actions that earn you respect inside your community make you a laughingstock, an object of shame to the dominant culture outside. So you're honoring God by resting on the Sabbath? Your Greek neighbors just see you as lazy.

Circumcision, a sacred sign of God's covenant? To them, it's barbaric mutilation. Worshiping only one God? That's not piety to them. That's arrogant atheism, a direct insult to all their gods.

The very same act brings honor from one group and shame from another. This creates a huge problem, right? Everyone craves honor. It's a basic human need.

But if you're in the minority, the only way to gain honor in the wider world means abandoning your own culture and your own values. So what do you do? How does your group possibly survive that pressure? They develop these incredibly clever social survival strategies. First, they redefine honor itself.

They say, look, it's not about wealth or power. True honor is faithfulness to our God. Second, they decide whose opinion actually counts.

Who cares what outsiders think? God is the ultimate judge. And finally, they completely reframe shame. That ridicule from outsiders? That's not a disgrace.

No, it's a badge of honor, a test from God that proves your loyalty. Okay, so we've got our new honor-shame lens. Let's actually put it on now and reread a familiar story to see just how much we've been missing.

First, one last piece of the puzzle. You have to understand that honor was seen as a limited good, like slices of a pie. Life in the ancient Mediterranean was what scholars call an agonistic culture, basically a constant public competition for status.

For me to gain honor, someone else often had to lose it. So every public interaction was a potential contest. Now let's look at the story from the Gospel of Luke.

Seen through this lens, it's not just a miracle. It's a public honor contest. Jesus throws down a challenge by healing the woman, a public claim to authority.

The synagogue leader fires back a rip-off, trying to shame Jesus for breaking the law. But the verdict? That comes from the crowd. They're the public jury.

And when they rejoice with Jesus, they publicly shame his opponents and declare him the winner. The story isn't just about compassion. It's a public battle over who gets to define what is truly honorable.

Once you see this dynamic, you start seeing it everywhere in ancient texts. It's a key that unlocks a new and frankly much richer level of meaning. It changes how we understand morality, conflict, community, everything in these ancient worlds.

And that leaves us with a final thought. What other familiar stories might look completely different if we trade our modern lens for theirs?