

Cultural World of the New Testament

Session 1: Introduction: Honor and Shame

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Abstract

This introductory lecture by Dr. David deSilva establishes the pivotal values of honor and shame as the foundational cultural matrix for interpreting the New Testament. He contrasts the relational, group-oriented Eastern Mediterranean world of the first century with the individualistic, commercialized assumptions of modern Western society. The lecture explores the dynamics of ascribed and achieved honor, gendered boundaries, and public competitions like 'challenge and riposte' interactions. Additionally, it examines how minority communities, such as early Jews and Christians, used specific cultural strategies to redefine their court of reputation around God and transform external social stigma into eternal badges of honor.

Outline

I. Introduction

A. Speaker Introduction

1. Dr. David deSilva, Professor of New Testament and Greek at Ashland Theological Seminary (since 1995)
2. Ordained United Methodist Elder in the Florida Conference
3. Academic work undertaken in service to the Church
4. Developed interest during doctoral dissertation research on the letter to the Hebrews

B. Importance of Cultural Context in Scripture Reading

1. 21st-century Western assumptions (North America/Western Europe) differ fundamentally from 1st-century Eastern Mediterranean views
2. Modern focus on individual rights, legality, and actionable issues vs. ancient focus on group values and peer response (face/value)
3. Modern commercial/monetary access to goods vs. ancient relational/obligation-based access
4. Limited nuclear family model vs. ancient expansive extended family concepts

5. Modern hygiene-based concept of pollution vs. ancient religious/God-oriented purity and defilement
6. Danger of misreading sacred texts by imposing modern cultural logic, which can mute biblical challenges to our assumptions
7. Example of Grace (charis): Modern view of "free gift" as no-obligation vs. Paul's view of an uncoerced gift that establishes an ongoing relationship of obligation and discipleship (e.g., Romans 11; 2 Corinthians 5:15)

II. The Pivotal Values of Honor and Shame

A. Centrality of Honor in the Mediterranean World

1. Foundations of ancient decision-making (Seneca: what is honorable is desirable simply because it is honorable; the bottom-line reasoning)
2. Rhetorical handbooks on persuasion (e.g., *Rhetorica ad Herenium*, Aristotle): Honor as a primary motivator that always trumps security, pleasure, or advantage in public conflict
3. Biblical Commendation in Wisdom Literature (e.g., Proverbs, Wisdom of Ben Sirah): Praising behavior as noble (kalon) or warning against actions as disgraceful/shameful as sufficient ethical argument

B. Social Nature of Honor

1. Requires external recognition (esteemed by peers) to match internal self-respect
2. Functions as an effective tool for social control and conformity to group-benefiting behaviors
3. Cognitive dissonance occurs when internal adherence to values is denied peer affirmation

C. The Two Meanings of Shame

1. Negative: Dishonor, disgrace, and public disapproval
2. Positive: Modesty, sensitivity to public opinion, and concern for the group's approval

D. Types of Honor

1. Ascribed (Attributed) Honor: Accidents of birth, family heritage, lineage, or ethnic background
2. Achieved Honor: Earned through deeds and actions that embody the group's values

E. Physical and Verbal Displays of Honor and Shame

1. Spatial arrangements: Seat placements (e.g., sitting at the right hand)
2. Treatment of the head: Anointing for office (priest/king), crowning/wreathing for athletic victory, or slapping/striking as status degradation and mockery (e.g., trial of Jesus)
3. Name and reputation: Names as metonymy for honor (slander vs. being well-spoken of; "hallowed be thy name" as prayer for God's honor to be recognized)

F. Gender and Honor

1. Spatial division: Public sphere for male honor and competition; private indoor sphere for female honor
2. Modesty and chastity as the core of feminine honor; females viewed as extensions of the patriarch's household honor

3. Exceptional female virtues (e.g., courage/manliness in Judith, Mother of Seven Martyrs in Fourth Maccabees, Plutarch's On the Bravery of Women) still balanced with traditional modesty and removal from public gaze

III. Social Control, Virtue, and the Group Over Self

A. Honor-Sensitivity as the Foundation of Ancient Ethics

1. Contrast with Western individualism and self-interest (where self-interest is normal, whereas in the ancient world it was an anomaly of the "shameless" person)
2. Socialization of Courage: Classical Greek military service (Athenian city-state survival) where honor and funeral orations motivated soldiers to choose courage over physical safety, comfort, or life
3. Socialization of Generosity: Civic improvements (baths, theaters, roads) funded by wealthy patrons (e.g., Erastus in Corinth carving his fame in stone) in exchange for public honor, fame, and reputation

IV. Minority Culture Strategies in the Diaspora

A. The Challenge of Overlapping Groups with Competing Values

1. Conflict of values for Jews in Greek cities (Alexandria or Caesarea)
 - a. Jewish honor (avoiding idolatry, keeping Sabbath, circumcision, dietary laws) looks like impiety, lazy weekly inactivity, barbaric body mutilation, and baffling food choices to Gentiles
 - b. Gentiles view monotheistic Jews as "atheists" due to denial of other gods
 - c. Resulting social pressure: Minorities are scorned by the majority; some Jews are tempted to apostatize to gain social honor in the dominant culture

B. Key Strategies for Minority Retention and Stigma Defusal

1. Redefining what is truly honorable (e.g., Ben Sirah: worthy offspring are those who fear the Lord and keep the commandments, regardless of wealth, power, or poverty)
2. Redefining whose opinion matters (The "Court of Reputation" / "Court of Opinion") focusing on God as the ultimate significant other whose eyes are "10,000 times brighter than the sun" and who sees into secret chambers
3. Critiquing and devaluing the opinions of outsiders (e.g., Wisdom of Solomon: Gentile persecutors are short-sighted, spiritually blind, "empty-headed by nature," and ignorant of God's plan; their lives are characterized by vice, unnatural relations, and drunkenness, invalidating their moral authority)
4. Deconstructing idolatry as a foolish longing for dead, lifeless statues, showing majority practices as the truly deviant ones
5. Transforming external shame into a badge of honor by viewing suffering, ridicule, and martyrdom as divine testing ("like gold in the furnace") to prove real honor for eternity

6. Utilizing athletic imagery (e.g., Fourth Maccabees: a mother exhorting her seven sons to view torture as an honorable athletic contest; Eleazar as first competitor, the tyrant as opponent, the world as audience, respect for God as the champion crown)

7. Maintaining internal group reinforcement (mutual commendation, praise, and internal honor for group conformity, alongside using peer pressure/shame to dissuade wavering members; Ben Sirah's hymn of praise of ancestors showing covenant-keepers win everlasting honor and covenant-breakers win everlasting shame)

V. Agonistic Dynamics and Public Competition for Honor

A. Honor as a Limited Good

1. Competitive ("agonistic") culture where gaining honor often requires another person to lose it

B. Luke 13 (Jesus Healing the Crippled Woman on the Sabbath) as a Case Study

1. Implicit Honor Claim: Jesus heals the woman, she praises God, representing a divine endorsement of Jesus

2. Public Counter-Challenge: The synagogue leader indirectly rebukes Jesus by telling the crowd to seek healing on the other six days

3. The Repost (Parry and Thrust): Jesus calls out their hypocrisy (untying animals on the Sabbath) and defends the work of liberating a "daughter of Abraham"

4. The Verdict of the Onlookers (Court of Reputation): The opponents are put to shame, and the crowd rejoices, declaring Jesus the victor of the honor exchange

VI. Conclusion and Outlook

A. Summary of Session 1 Themes

B. Preview of Session 2: Applying honor-shame dynamics to 1 Peter