

The Cultural World of the New Testament, Session 2:

Reading 1 Peter Attuned to Honor and Shame

Author: Dr. David deSilva | Session Number: Session 2

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1 Peter, honor, shame, slander, deviancy control, resident aliens, community, suffering, vindication

Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. David deSilva analyzes the First Epistle of Peter as a pastoral strategy designed to help early Christians navigate social pressure, slander, and shaming from their non-Christian neighbors. By utilizing the cultural values of honor and shame, the letter insulates believers from societal censure by redefining the court of reputation, making God's approval the only estimation that matters. The suffering of Christ is presented as the normative pattern for disciples, transforming earthly degradation into a path toward divine favor and future glory. Ultimately, the epistle seeks to fortify internal community relationships, establishing the church as a supportive social matrix necessary for enduring marginalization and resisting assimilation.

Outline

I. Introduction: The Cultural Value of Honor and Shame in Reading 1 Peter

- A. Emerging from and addressing situations shaped by the ancient Mediterranean culture
- B. Experiences of being shamed as the primary motivator for writing the epistle
 - 1. Slander and accusation from those outside the church
 - 2. Enduring unjust affliction and suffering on account of Christ

II. The Motivations Behind Outsiders' Shaming Tactics

- A. Shaming as a mechanism of social control ('deviancy control techniques') to correct deviant behavior
- B. Non-Christian complaints and suspicions against early Christians
 - 1. Eschatological hope perceived as threatening the Roman peace and world order
 - 2. Withdrawal from civic and private social gatherings associated with idolatry and pagan gods
 - 3. Surprise and estrangement (ksenizdontai) of former associates at the converts' new lifestyle
- C. Options available to Christian converts
 - 1. Yielding to social pressures and returning to former practices
 - 2. Finding ways to cope with shame without compromising their faith

III. Rhetorical and Pastoral Strategies for Deflecting Shame

A. Devaluing the Court of Reputation of Outsiders

1. Exposing the non-Christian lifestyle as dark, ignorant, and conformed to futile ancestors
2. Demonstrating that the censurers themselves live dishonorably
3. Shifting the designation of 'deviant' to the non-Christian persecutors

B. Philosophical and Scriptural Parallel: Who is Being Judged?

1. Epictetus's syllogism analogy: The one making the false judgment is the one condemned
2. Old Testament Scriptures on Jesus as the Living Stone rejected by builders but precious to God
3. Realization that God's estimation is the only court that matters

C. Developing Self-Respect through Virtue and Mastery of Passions

1. Abstaining from fleshly desires to keep conduct honorable
2. Alignment with Greco-Roman philosophical ideals of virtue (Stoic/Aristotelian)

D. Specific Empowerment of Slaves

1. Submit to unjust suffering while maintaining a pure conscience before God
2. Slavery in Greco-Roman world empowered to evaluate their masters
3. Seneca's On the Constancy of the Wise Man: Assessing whether shame is deserved

IV. Reinterpreting Shame as a Venue for Honor

A. Hardships as the Proving Ground of Faith

1. Hardships test the reality and genuineness of virtue
2. Rejection leads to greater praise, glory, and honor at Christ's return

B. Defining Marginalization as the New Normal

1. The example of Jesus: attaining honor through rejection, suffering, and crucifixion
2. Expectation of future vindication after walking in the footsteps of Christ

C. Historic Identity: Resident Aliens and Diaspora

1. Acknowledging displacement as 'resident aliens and sojourners'
2. Drawing parallels to Israel's historical experience of scattering

D. Proof of Divine Favor and Spiritual Warfare

1. Suffering according to the will of God, not as a sign of divine displeasure
2. Association with the Holy Spirit of glory resting upon the sufferer
3. Cosmic framework of spiritual war: Satan using social pressure to devour believers

V. Cultivating a Distinctive Christian Repost

A. Rejecting retaliation with reviling or violence

1. Following Jesus's example of committing himself to the one who judges justly
2. Returning blessing for insult to silence the ignorance of foolish people

B. Preparing an apologia (defense speech) with gentleness and respect

VI. Affirming Present and Future Honor in God's Sight

- A. Future vindication: Isaiah 28:16 ('whoever trusts in him will not be put to shame')
- B. Present high status in God's eyes
 - 1. New birth to an imperishable, undefiled, and unfading inheritance
 - 2. Purchased with the precious blood of Christ
 - 3. Avalanche of honorific titles applied to the community: 'chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, people of God's special possession'

VII. Strengthening the Christian Community as a Social Matrix for Perseverance

- A. Critical need for mutual support to maintain alternative definitions of honor
- B. Exhortations to mutual love, harmony, hospitality, and humility
- C. Redefining domestic relationships (husbands and wives as co-heirs of grace)

VIII. Implications for the Global Persecuted Church Today

- A. Relevance in non-Western contexts where honor and shame dynamics persist
- B. Practical actions for believers outside restricted areas
 - 1. Direct prayer, advocacy, and material support
 - 2. Verbal and global affirmation of their honor and dignity