

## **Retreat based on Shame**

Leader's opening remarks:

Welcome:

Arrange in small groups:

Logistics of day:

Today's theme is going to be shame. I know we have all experienced it. I know we all hate how it makes us feel. Hopefully by the end of today, we will know what to do about it.

Today you will be hearing some short talks and have some discussion and prayer time in your small group about what you hear.

The talks will be witness talks from the speaker out of their own life. They won't be theological teachings. None of the speakers knew whether they would speak at this retreat until our team meeting last night. They "volunteered," so to speak, because they have a story to share with you -- their struggle to walk with Christ in their environment as it applies to their topic and where they are in their own journey.

When they have finished speaking, there will be time for discussion in small groups. I ask that the discussions be very subjective...and share with the others in your group how you feel about what they said. How does it hit you in your attempt to walk with Jesus in prison? Then you will have about 10 minutes to talk and pray with your prayer partner. I know this freaks some of you out... but I asked that you do this and see what happens no matter if it makes you uncomfortable. This is the safest place to be inside the fence. These are the safest people to be with... I hope!

We'll give you ample opportunities for breaks, so please wait for the time that is planned into the schedule to go to the bathroom. Thanks...

Let's pray and then we will have the first talk about Shame in our lives.

## **Talk #1 Shame.**

### **10-15 Minutes**

Now, I would guess shame was not on your top-ten list of pressing concerns when you walked in this morning. Our concerns might be about our families, or about money, or maybe survival. . . Whatever the concerns are for you, they're often on other kinds of things, but I would suggest in the heart of every one of us there is an ongoing struggle and battle with shame. It's a battle about our worth. It's a battle about our identity. It's a battle about our value and where we find that value and what makes us valuable and what's going on in our lives that make us feel we're not of value...that we don't have worth. There is a struggle in each of us about shame and it comes from some story, some sin, something in our past somewhere where that hits home for you.

Can you remember something that was said to you that was negative? Can you replay it in your mind? Over and over. It came to define me.

*Share something that defined you that you had to get past.*

Has anyone here ever had a moment in your life where you feel that rush of heaviness of shame that something has marked you, defined you, and shamed you? Shame, just to be clear is not the same thing as embarrassment. People do embarrassing things all the time. Not long ago, I had a friend who saw a woman he knew who was expecting a child and he said, "So it looks like you must be getting pretty close to the big day." And she looked back and said, "I had the baby two months ago." It was an embarrassing moment. Awkward, but unlike shame, temporary. They're passing. They're often superficial.

Nor is shame the same thing as discouragement. At times in life we feel discouraged. Things don't go our way. I didn't do a good job at something. Things didn't turn out as I would have hoped. But shame is not the same thing as discouragement which is often about external circumstances, what's going on around us. Shame is not the same thing as guilt either. Guilt is a feeling of moral incrimination for some kind of wrongdoing. And yes, guilt can lead to or reinforce our shame, but they are not the same things. I once heard it put this way...*we feel guilty for what we do; we feel shame for what we think we are.*

There is an old kind of playground saying about shame. It goes, "Shame, shame, I know your name." Shame kind of renames us, doesn't it? It puts a new label, a new title on us, a new sort of defining marker. Shame works on the equation, *I did therefore I am. I've done this thing therefore that marks me as a person for now and forever more.* We've done a lot of things in our lives that probably have labeled us, have shamed us. So we carry these new names with us, don't we? Names like sinner or liar, or cheat, adulterer, addict, pervert, bad communicator, peeper...whatever the name, the title is. And on and on it goes.

There are a number of sources for this kind of shame in our lives. We can feel shame for something that goes way, way back to our childhood to how we were treated at home or in a school, something we did early in life. Shame can be the result of past or previous pain or hurt or a wound, especially when it comes to areas when it's been a broken relationship or potentially maybe abuse... violence, sexual abuse, physical abuse. Shame can be the result of poor choices

we've made, choices we might regret, and choices we might keep locked away as our secrets. Shame can be the result of compulsive habits that seem to control us. Promiscuity, substance abuse, pornography addictions...all are significant examples of markers of places we get labeled with this shame. We are left feeling like *I'm a fake. I may never measure up to what I'm supposed to be, and if there's a God out there He's probably pretty disgusted with a person like me.* Ever had a feeling like that? Know someone who has had a feeling like that?

We know from Scriptures we are not meant to be this way. You know, one of the subtle ironies about shame is it actually reveals how noble of a creature we were intended to be. Only something made in the image of a good and holy God could feel such pain at what our lives have come to. We were not intended to be this way. If you think back to the creation story way, way back in the book of Genesis, the first book in the Bible, the high point of God's creation is not the statement, "And there was no sin." Although that was a true statement. It could have been a true statement. Genesis 2:25, the high point of creation says, ***"The man and his wife were both naked and they felt no shame."***

It's not just a statement about marriage. This is a statement about the state of human identity and relationships. They lived in a state of perfect trust with each other and with God which meant they had absolute clarity about who they were. They had absolute confidence they were a son, a daughter of God in whom God is pleased, whom God loves. Can you imagine a day where it just feels like you can believe that with full and utter confidence? No shame. No hiding. No fear. But as you know things do not remain this way. In an act of distrust and self reliance, the first human beings broke off that relationship with God and it leads to a moment of shame. Listen to the story. Listen to how this plays out. ***"Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves."*** Shame leads to wanting to cover in fear. ***"Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden."*** Shame makes us want to hide and run. ***"But the Lord God called to the man, 'Where are you?'"*** I'd like you to notice God doesn't show up angry. God doesn't have lightning bolt in hand, ready to strike someone down. He comes walking, looking, "Where have you gone? Where are you?" ***"He answered, 'I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.'"*** It's one of the most tragic lines in all of Scripture. God draws close and for some reason we run in fear. The one being we should have no fear of, the one being we should be able to trust in all of creation at this moment is God, the one who had proven Himself to be good and generous and gracious, and they run and hide. In this breakdown of our relationship with God, it leads to a moment of shame where our identity, our worth, our security in God is lost. Our clarity about who we are, about whose we are, is lost. And when that happens, things begin to just spin out of control. If you know the story, that's exactly what happens. The human race begins to succumb to all sorts of what we would call sin, greed, envy, violence, lust, and the list goes on. But it all gets traced back to this moment of shame. God, I heard you in the garden and I was afraid, and so I hid. People have been on the run from God ever since...covering, hiding, fear. But while we are on the run we have not stopped trying to rid ourselves of these feelings of shame. We cannot live with those feelings for long and we will stop at nothing to try to rid ourselves of these things. In fact, there are some pretty clear patterns to how we do this in terms of getting rid of our shame. The first way, the first and maybe the most prominent way we do that is to just try to reject it...just rejection. I don't have a

problem. I'm doing okay. I don't feel so bad. I don't know what you're talking about. I'm doing just fine.

Like the first human beings, we find creative ways to cover ourselves to reject, hide, deny we have any issues at all. That is me. I have no problems...or any that you will ever hear about. We come to face a pattern or sin in our lives and we think, *If I could just cover it up or maybe if I just let some time pass, it will just somehow go away. Then I won't feel ashamed anymore.* Sound familiar?

Well that leads to another pattern we run into when dealing with shame, another way we would try to rid ourselves of that shame and it's to rebel...rebellion. If a person feels shamed by a certain action or attitude they are more likely to indulge in certain patterns of behavior as a way to try to normalize those feelings. Those of you who have raised children, you know this to be true. If you feel ashamed for something you are more likely to go out and do something else to try to make that feeling be more typical, normal, average, take its power away. Feel ashamed for deceiving others, you may be more likely to lie or cheat even more just so it feels normal. If you feel ashamed for acting out sexually, per say, you might act out even more. I won't even go there. Now this is not to say we are not to be responsible, we are not responsible before God for all of our choices. But it is to say much of sin is rooted in an attempt to normalize that shame, somehow make it go away. We act out so it won't seem like such a big deal anymore. Sound familiar?

Maybe it's only compounding the problem, which leads to the real question I would ask you this morning and it's this...*Do you think there is something you can do to make yourself worthy again? Do you think there is some way, some method, some approach you can take to make yourself feel worthy again?* Well the answer yesterday, today, and what will be true tomorrow is...no, you can't. You can't. But you see God has done something. God has done something. God has done something about this. The gospel of Jesus at its very core is God's way of reclaiming and restoring shamed people he loves. In spite of all our best efforts, worth is not something we can try to achieve. Worth is something we can only receive just as we did when God breathed His breath of life into us in the very beginning. The question is *how*. How do shameful people who are on the run from God, who feel helplessly scarred by their shame, who fear the very name of Jesus, who think that makes them want to hide and run and deny, and rebel, or earn it, or whatever...how do we receive new life from God? Well the gospel began even in that very story so many thousands of years ago. God came walking in the cool of the day, and He asked a question, *"Where are you?"* Not, "What have you done?" Not, "Promise you'll measure up." Not, "How dare you?" *"Where are you?"* Just trying to find you. And in Jesus, God has come walking into creation again, *"Where are you?"*

In God's eyes we are loveable, full of dignity, worthy of being loved. He rejoices over you, and sent His son to die in exchange for your sins.

#### Discussion Questions

1. How have experiences in your life made you feel distant and alienated from God?
2. How did your feelings of shame affect your relationship with God and others in your life?
3. Is there some shame in your life today that you would like to get rid of?

## **2nd Talk – Guilt vs. Shame**

### **10 -15 Minutes**

*Topic: Guilt and shame are two different feelings.*

*Scripture: Luke: 19:1-10.* <sup>1</sup>Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. <sup>2</sup>A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. <sup>3</sup>He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. <sup>4</sup>So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. <sup>5</sup>When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." <sup>6</sup>So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. <sup>7</sup>All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.' " <sup>8</sup>But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." <sup>9</sup>Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. <sup>10</sup>For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

Zacchaeus was a tax collector. Tax collectors were among the most unpopular people in Israel. Jews by birth, they chose to work for Rome and were considered traitors. It was common knowledge that tax collectors were making themselves rich by gouging their fellow Jews. But despite the fact that Zacchaeus was both a cheater and a turncoat, Jesus loved him; and in response, the little tax collector felt loved.

When I feel guilty, it's because I've done, said, or thought something which I find unacceptable, other people find unacceptable, and God finds unacceptable. Guilt is a sense of responsibility for doing something wrong. It is the awareness that "I have made a mistake."

Guilt can be a good thing if it makes me aware of behaviors and thought patterns I need to change to better relate to other people and to the rest of God's creation. When I lash out verbally in anger to someone I love, guilt lets me know that I need to apologize for the hurting words I have said.

But shame is an entirely different matter. When I feel shameful, I feel self-rejection. I feel that I am unacceptable to God, not just my behaviors—what I've done, said, or thought. It's not I made a mistake, it is "I am a mistake." See the difference? We are not bad people trying to become good. We are spiritually sick people trying to get well. God wants us to get well and has the power to heal us. God loves us unconditionally, no matter what we do, say, or think. He forgives us and gives us the power to change.

*Give a personal example of a time in your life when you felt healthy guilt and/or unhealthy shame. How has that shaped who you are?*

### Discussion Questions

1. In what ways has shame shaped who you are?
2. Which of those memories still holds power over you?

### **3rd Talk – Meditation on Jesus and Shame**

#### **10 -15 Minutes**

*Topic: Can we trust Jesus to help us look at ourselves honestly and to tell him who we are and where we have been?*

*Scripture: John 4:5-26.* So Jesus came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup>Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. <sup>7</sup>When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" <sup>8</sup>(His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) <sup>9</sup>The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans. <sup>10</sup>Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

<sup>11</sup>"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? <sup>12</sup>Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?" <sup>13</sup>Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup>but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." <sup>15</sup>The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water." <sup>16</sup>He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back." <sup>17</sup>"I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. <sup>18</sup>The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true." <sup>19</sup>"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. <sup>20</sup>Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." <sup>21</sup>Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. <sup>22</sup>You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup>Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. <sup>24</sup>God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." <sup>25</sup>The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." <sup>26</sup>Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he."

In the story of the woman at the well, Jesus shows us that when we are honest about who we are; when we tell the truth about ourselves, we can cut through those walls of shame and separation. Like the Samaritan woman, when and if we ask Jesus for the living water that quenches our thirst and washes our wounds, life can be different.

#### Discussion Questions

1. What might God be saying to you through this story about the Samaritan woman?
2. Can you be honest with yourself and tell Jesus the truth about who you are?
3. How might God's word for you from this meditation help you look at situations you are facing in your life today?

## **4th Talk – The Shame of Denial**

### **10 -15 Minutes**

*Topic: When we deny Jesus, does he still love us?*

*Scripture: John 18:15-18* <sup>15</sup>Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard, <sup>16</sup>but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the girl on duty there and brought Peter in.

<sup>17</sup>"You are not one of his disciples, are you?" the girl at the door asked Peter. He replied, "I am not."

Peter stands in the crowd and three times denies that he is one of the disciples of Jesus. Surely Peter felt the sting of being a disappointment to Jesus and of being unworthy to stand in the presence of the Christ. Perhaps Peter felt in his innermost being that he was inadequate. In denying Jesus, was Peter afraid that he could not live up to the expectations of the Christ who had called him by name and had given him a message to proclaim? Could fear and shame have caused Peter to deny his gifts and graces?

Today we struggle with feelings of shame and inadequacy, afraid that others will discover who we really are. We are especially fearful that we will be disappointments to those whom we love the most—our families, our children, and our friends. Does our shame make us hide in the dark and deny that we are children of God? Our fear of being discovered for who we really are can keep us from recognizing the presence of Christ in others, in the world, and in ourselves. Shame can keep us from wholly using our gifts and graces in proclaiming the Good News.

Could Jesus love Peter for who he was? Can we be loved for who we really are? The good news of the gospel is that Jesus did know Peter completely, offering him the gift of forgiveness. It takes courage to recognize our human faults and to also embrace the gifts God has given us.

*Share a time in your life when you denied or disappointed Jesus or when you wanted to deny something in your life because you were afraid of disappointing those you loved most.*

### Discussion Questions

1. When have you denied or disappointed Jesus?
2. What were your thoughts and feelings afterwards?
3. Can you think of one concrete action you could take that would be an affirmation, rather than a denial, of Jesus?

## **5th Talk – Healing Grace**

### **10 -15 Minutes**

*Topic: God's grace heals us because we feel loved and accepted.*

*Scripture: Romans 5:1-5* <sup>1</sup>Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup>through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. <sup>3</sup>Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; <sup>4</sup>perseverance, character; and character, hope. <sup>5</sup>And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Our struggle with shame leaves us with this question: Do we still think we need to feel like we are good before we can feel accepted? Is there an alternative to the shame producing feelings of not being accepted—accepted by our parents, our children, our friends, our God?

There is.

It is called grace. Grace is the beginning of our healing because it offers the one thing we need most: to be accepted without regard to whether we are acceptable. Grace stands for gift; it is the gift of being accepted before we become acceptable.

*Share a time in your life when you received healing through experiencing God's love and grace.*

Grace overcomes shame, by accepting us, the whole of us, with no limitations. We are accepted all the way. Accepted with no possibility of being rejected. Accepted once and forever. We are given what we have always longed for in our relationships— unconditional love.

We are ready for grace when we are bone tired of our struggle to be worthy and acceptable. After we have tried for so long to earn the approval of everyone important to us, we are ready for grace. When we are tired of trying to be the person somebody at some point in our lives convinced us we had to be, we are ready for grace. When we have given up all hope of ever being an acceptable human being, we can hear in our hearts the ultimate assurance. We are accepted, accepted by grace.

### Discussion Questions

1. When have you felt God's approval in your life?
2. Have you experienced God's love and grace? If so, when?

**6TH Talk – Creating a safe place.  
10 -15 Minutes**

*Topic: The importance of having a “safe place” where I can share my life, my pain, my needs and have someone pray for me.*

*Scripture: Psalm 25:1-7*

To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul; <sup>2</sup> in you I trust, O my God. Do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me.

<sup>3</sup> No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame, but they will be put to shame who are treacherous without excuse.

<sup>4</sup> Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; <sup>5</sup> guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.

<sup>6</sup> Remember, O LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. <sup>7</sup> Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you are good, O LORD.

*Share an experience when through a prayer and share group you created a safe place for someone else to talk about their life or your group created a safe place for you. Why is this important to you and how did it help you in your spiritual journey?*

Question:

1. What makes a group “safe” so that you can share what is going on in your life? (What characteristics?)
2. When have you created a safe place for someone else to share their life experiences?
3. When has someone else created a safe place for you?
4. How does this help you in your spiritual journey?

## 7<sup>th</sup> Talk – Meditation

*Topic: Telling God Where It Hurts*

*Scripture: Mark 5:25-34.* A large crowd followed and pressed around him. <sup>25</sup>And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. <sup>26</sup>She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. <sup>27</sup>When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, <sup>28</sup>because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." <sup>29</sup>Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering. <sup>30</sup>At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?" <sup>31</sup>"You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'" <sup>32</sup>But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. <sup>33</sup>Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. <sup>34</sup>He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

Something about Jesus captivates this woman and prompts her to appear in public, even though she has suffered from a lengthy and intensely personal disease. She recognizes his love and power and trusts him enough to touch him, even though she is ritually "unclean." Do you feel safe enough with God to trust him with everything, even the most embarrassing things? Even the things that make you feel shame? Could it help contribute to the healing process to tell God about your intensely personal problems, even though he is already aware of them?

*Ask that they recall the things where there is shame, uncleanness, embarrassment in their lives. By naming our places of shame, by telling God where it hurts, we can ask for and receive healing.*

Lamentations 3:21-24. The Lord is all I have, and so in him I put my hope.

Will you now allow God to set you free from those burdens?

**Set up some prayer stations in the room where they can go and get prayer. Ask folks ahead of time to get up and 'man' these places. Allow everyone to spend some time in silence ...and don't allow the lack of noise to make folks uncomfortable.**

**Alternately, you could pass out rice paper and ask the participants to write the things they feel shame about in their lives...and have a dissolving ceremony.**

**Talk One Questions:**

How have experiences in your life made you feel distant and alienated from God?  
How did your feelings of shame affect your relationship with God and others in your life?  
Is there some shame in your life today that you would like to get rid of?

**Talk Two Questions:**

In what ways has shame shaped who you are?  
Which of those memories still holds power over you?

**Talk Three Questions:**

What might God be saying to you through this story about the Samaritan woman?  
Can you be honest with yourself and tell Jesus the truth about who you are?  
How might God's word for you from this meditation help you look at situations you are facing in your life today?

**Talk Four Questions:**

When have you denied or disappointed Jesus?  
What were your thoughts and feelings?  
Can you think of one concrete action you could take that would be an affirmation, rather than a denial, of Jesus?

**Talk Five Questions:**

When have you felt God's approval in your life?  
Have you experienced God's love and grace? If so, when?

**Talk Six Questions:**

What makes a group "safe" so that you can share what is going on in your life? (What characteristics?)  
When have you created a safe place for someone else to share their life experiences?  
When has someone else created a safe place for you?  
How does this help you in your spiritual journey?