



Why do you think guilt and shame exist? What causes people to experience them?

Who would be the one person you would trust with your biggest secret? Why?

What do you think is the cause of all the wrong and evil in the world?

Do you think most people are more ashamed than proud or more proud than ashamed? Why?

❖ “Always winter but never Christmas.” Famous author C.S. Lewis used this phrase to describe the destitute land of Narnia underneath the curse and reign of the White Witch. Looking at the world around us, we can see how this is often true of life as we know it. Brokenness and disharmony pervade our experiences and understandings. Hurt, pain, suffering, loneliness, dissatisfaction, and a thousand other negative words describe our plagued existence. Run through your memories for just a second. Think through what has most impacted you through your life. Are they tied to positive or negative experiences? Of course, there are glimmers and remnants of the good life that was intended to be. But something has happened. Whether watching the news reports or hearing the news of a lost loved one, from without and within, we know this is not the way life is supposed to be.

We can't talk about making the world better until we have a clear understanding of what's wrong with it. We need to have an accurate understanding of the depth of the brokenness, as well as the source of the suffering, if we are going to make things better in and around us. We need to know how bad the problem is, and where it is coming from if we are going to have a proper approach to fixing it. Diagnosis comes before prescription, and as we look at our second set of encounters, we will see that is exactly what Jesus gives when he responds to the major life question of “What's wrong with the world?” with some surprising answers.

The Bible has a word for what is wrong: sin. Like the sound of the words “brussels sprouts” at dinner, that word *sin* probably leaves a lingering distaste in your mouth. Don't worry, it's worse than you think. Dr. Keller describes sin as “...much more radical and far-reaching...” than we generally understand. To rightly grasp the Bible's description and approach to sin is of utmost importance, and what we see from the encounters of Jesus in John 3 and 4 is that it is the great equalizer. How? Simply put, God made *all things* good. Sin entered the world and corrupted *all things*. What does this mean? There is no room for arrogance, pride, or boasting. We were all made with inherent value and worth and beauty, described as made in the image of God. But when sin entered and twisted what was good, bent it towards evil, and corrupted the beauty, we were all affected. And what we see in these encounters with Jesus is that sin's corruption can play itself out in two distinct, but equally rebellious, ways. Let's briefly look at these encounters in reverse order to better understand what's wrong with us and the world.

In John 4, the woman at the well gives us a picture of how sin reveals itself in secret lives of immorality that blow up and ruin us. Here is a woman who is a social outcast as a result of her messy history of relationships. She is left alone, ashamed, and secretly getting water to avoid any social interaction. Can you relate with that kind of brokenness and misery? In John 3, Nicodemus sought the teaching of Jesus in the middle of the night. Here was a prominent, successful young man who, for the shame tied to appearing as one who wasn't quite put together, had to seek help in secret. Maybe this is you. Outside your life looks great, it's all put together and glittering before others, but deep down you long for more. In both stories, we see Jesus giving surprising answers to the individuals. Instead of pointing to circumstances outside the individuals, Jesus diagnoses the fault coming from them. He points out their flaws and their need for him to deeply satisfy them and make them new. Does Jesus' answer to the world's problems, to your problems, surprise you? Scratching the surface of this issue of what's wrong with world, we must realize that not only are we all victims of sin's influence, but we are also all guilty of committing and participating in sin. We are both affected by the wrong, and causing the wrong.

In Nicodemus and the woman at the well, we see two individuals encountering Jesus in secret shame. However, He reveals the shame of their secrets. The woman at the well lived a life of promiscuity, and Nicodemus, though outwardly put together, inwardly was deeply longing for more. If you happened across Jesus of Nazareth in secret, what would He reveal to you about your secrets? Would he call them sin?

You might be asking a very appropriate question at this point: Who does Jesus think He is? Think about the last time someone found you out, learned your secret shame, or judged your decisions and actions. In those situations, we flare up in defense to justify our faults, to escape our shame. “Who do they think they are? Do they think they are any better? Do they have any right to judge me?” We should ask the same of Jesus. And we will in our next encounter with Jesus.

Snapshot from the Book of John

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' (John 3:1-7 ESV)

A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true." The woman said to him, perceive that you are a prophet..." (John 4:7-19 ESV)

- Why do you think these two encounters with Jesus happen in secret?
- Why do you think Jesus told Nicodemus he had to be born again? Why was this hard for Nicodemus to understand?
- Why do you think Jesus tells the woman to go call her husband? How did he know about her shameful life circumstances?"
- Do you relate more with Nicodemus (put together outwardly, but inwardly longing for more) or the woman at the well (deeply ashamed of past or current sins)? Why?

Dr. Tim Keller's Commentary on the Passages Above

Nicodemus is a civic leader, a member of the Sanhedrin, the assembly of Hebrew high court judges. He is prosperous. He's a devout and upstanding Pharisee; you couldn't have any more religious bona fides than that. He's not an emotional or broken type of person at all. And when Nicodemus calls Jesus—a young man who no formal training—"rabbi," this shows that he is more humble and open-minded than most of his peers. So here in Nicodemus you have an altogether admirable person—pulled together, successful, disciplined, moral, religious, yet open-minded.

And what does Jesus say? He uses a different metaphor with [him] than the one he used with [the woman at the well]. Rather than pressing him on his lack of satisfaction ("I can give you living water"), he's pressing him on his smug self-satisfaction ("You must be born again"). What did you have to do, Jesus is asking, with being born? Did you work hard to earn the privilege of being born? Did it happen due to your skillful planning? Not at all. You don't earn or contribute anything to begin born. It is a free gift of life. And so it is with the new birth. Salvation is by grace—there are no moral efforts that can earn or merit it. You must be born again.

This is an astonishing thing to say to a man like Nicodemus. Jesus is saying that the pimps and the prostitutes outside on the street are in the same position, spiritually, as he is. There is Nicodemus, flush with his moral and spiritual accomplishments, and there is someone out on the street who is homeless and addicted, and as far as God is concerned they are equally lost. They both have to start from scratch. They both have to be born again. They both need eternal spiritual life or something will eat them alive. And that life is going to have to be a free gift.

How dare Jesus say that?

Jesus can say it because he is working on a deeper understanding of sin than most people have. Let me bring the word back now with all its cultural baggage. Look at the woman at the well. Most people probably understand why Jesus would regard her as a sinner in need of salvation. But most people can't understand why Jesus treats [Nicodemus] the way he does. Why would he be regarded as a sinner in need of salvation? Why would Jesus tell this good man that he has done essentially nothing to earn a place in heaven?

Here is the surprising answer: Sin is looking to something else besides God for your salvation. It is putting yourself in the place of God, becoming your own savior and lord, as it were. That's the biblical definition of sin, the first of the Ten Commandments. One way to do this is to break all the moral rules in your pursuit of pleasure and happiness, like the woman in the well. This makes sex or money or power into a kind of salvation. But then there is the religious way to be your own savior and lord. That is to act as if your good life and moral achievement will essentially require God to bless you and answer your prayers the way you want. In this case you are looking to your moral goodness and efforts to give you the significance and security that nonreligious people look to sex, money, and power to give them. What is insidious about this is that religious people constantly talk about trusting in God—but if you think your goodness is even contributing to your salvation, then you are actually being your own savior. You are trusting in yourself. And while you may in this case not be committing adultery or literally robbing people, your heart will increasingly be filled with such pride, self-righteousness, insecurity, envy, and spite that you make the world a miserable place to live for those around you.

So you see, Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman are equal sinners in need of grace. And so are we all. In every case, you are trying to be your own savior and lord, trying to put God in your debt, or at least trying to tilt the odds of the universe in your favor. Either way, Jesus calls it sin. He says that you need living water and that you need to be born again to get it...