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ARE YOU A SHAMEFUL OR SHAMELESS SINNER?

Today's Text: Zephaniah Chaps 1-3

Extracts:

Woe to her who is rebellious and polluted; to the oppressing city! She has not obeyed His voice; she has not received correction; she has not trusted in the Lord; she has not drawn near to her God. Her princes in her midst are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves that leave not a bone till morning. Her prophets are insolent, treacherous people; her priests have polluted the sanctuary; they have done violence to the law. *The Lord is righteous in her midst; He will do no unrighteousness. Every morning He brings His justice to light; He never fails; but the unjust knows no shame* [Zeph. 3: 1-5]

*Gloucester High School, with a student population of 1,200, is located in a small fishing town of 30,000 people in Massachusetts, USA.¹ Recently, it was discovered that 17 girls, all less than 16 years of age were pregnant and that was more than four times the pregnancy rate last year. Several explanations have been offered for the strange development. For example, some people have claimed that the teenagers were imitating movies, such as **Juno** (2007) and **Knocked Up** (2007) that glamourized unwed mothers. Some others have alleged that it was due to the aversion to the use of contraceptives among teenagers in a predominantly Catholic town. However, the school principal has alleged that almost half of the affected girls had confessed to him that they had made a pact to get pregnant and raise their babies together!*

The politicians and some parents have tried to play down the principal's version, all for the purpose of damage control. However a graduate of that High School, aged 18, herself a mother, has said of the pregnant teens, "They're so excited to finally have someone to love them unconditionally." In other words, the girls are far from ashamed of their act, arising from the sin of fornication. Does that ring familiar to you? The word of God is clear that we are all sinners in need of God's grace [Rom. 3: 23], but what is our attitude to sin? Are we ashamed of it by confessing and reforming, or shameless by enjoying it and remaining in it?

Those and more are the issues that we shall examine in this week's study.

¹ Based on Kathleen Kingsbury, "Pregnancy Boom at Gloucester High," www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1815845,00.html ; Wednesday, Jun. 18, 2008

1. Background: A forceful prophet in a reformist era

The prophet Zephaniah was the great-great-grand son of King Hezekiah of Judah [**Zeph. 1: 1**]. That makes him about the only prophet from the royal palace, and that puts him in a vintage position to examine the conduct of princes and princes, priests and prophets [**Zeph. 3: 3-4**]. His prophetic ministry was during the reign of Josiah who became king at the age of eight and ruled for thirty-one years [**2 Kgs 22: 1**]. He was credited with religious reforms that restored true worship to Judah [**2 Kgs Chap. 23; 2 Chron. 35: 23**]. Therefore, it can be claimed that Zephaniah's forceful message influenced *in part* the dawn and tone of Josiah's reforms.

What was the prophet's message? It can be summarized as follows:

- The great Day of the Lord was imminent and He was going to “utterly consume everything from the face of the land,” both man and beast [**Zeph. 1: 2**]. With special reference to man, God would not spare idol worshippers, those who worshipped what they had made or hosts of heaven [**vv. 4, 5**], backsliders [**v. 6**], and the wicked, “All those who ... (filled) their masters' houses with violence and deceit” [**v.9**]. Neither the deceitful business people [**v.11**] nor the complacent would be spared [**v. 12**];
- There was need for the people's repentance before God's anger came upon them [**Zeph. 2: 1-3**]. The call for repentance was not only for Judah. It extended to arrogant Moab [**vv. 8-11**] and proud Ethiopia [**v. 12**] and Assyria [**vv. 13-14**];
- Jerusalem and Judah needed to pay the most attention to the call for repentance because these people, who should know better than their pagan neighbours, were equally rebellious, polluted and incorrigible [**Zeph. 3: 1-2**]. Their princes and judges were ravaging wolves. Their treacherous prophets and priests had polluted the sanctuary and done violence to the law [**vv. 3-4**]
- In spite of God's faithfulness to His word and promises, some sinners still did not fear Him but instead “rose early and corrupted *all their deeds*” because “the *unjust knows no shame*” [**vv. 5-7**]. Consequently, God's mercy would only go to the faithful remnant [**vv. 8-13**] that would have the joy of the Lord on that Day [**vv. 14-20**].

Josiah's commendable reforms were not sustained by his son, Jehoahaz, who ruled for only three months [**2 Kgs 23: 31-32**], suggesting that Josiah's reforms did not transform the people's minds and hearts. They were not *shameful* for their sins. Instead, they behaved like *shameless* sinners. A few years later, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon attacked and destroyed Jerusalem and carried most of the people into captivity in Babylon [**2 Kgs 24: 10- 16; 24: 1-7**]. Shameless sinners invite God's wrath.

2. This shame is not in the eye of the beholder!

Shame can be seen as *a feeling of guilt* for doing something that is considered below our expectation. However, how we react to shame depends on who is feeling it! The shame that I feel about a particular conduct may not be the same shame that my wife or children or others may feel about that my particular conduct. Let us illustrate it with some biblical examples.

You may recall when David desired to bring the Ark of the Lord from the home of Obed-Edom to the City of David [2 Kgs 6: 11-13]. A previous attempt had led to the death of one of those who had tried to steady the cart on which it had been carried [vv. 2-10]. This second attempt was working because the Ark had been carried in accordance with the word of God. So, David, the newly installed king of all Israel, was so excited that he threw off his outer garment and began to dance. As far as David was concerned, there was nothing to be ashamed of for exposing his flesh in public. But his wife, Michal, the daughter of the former king Saul, who was looking into the street through a window felt ashamed. So, as soon as her husband returned home, she chided him, saying, “How glorious was the king of Israel today, uncovering himself today in the eyes of the maids of his servants, *as one of the base fellows shamelessly uncovers himself.*” Her husband responded that he had danced before the Lord that had made him king over her father. Therefore, he was going to be “even more undignified than this, and (would) be humble in (his) own sight” [vv. 20-22].

Compare that with the reactions of Adam and Eve to their nakedness in the Garden of Eden. When God created them, they had no clothes on. We are told, “They were both naked, the man and his wife, *and were not ashamed*” [Gen. 2: 25]. But after they had eaten the forbidden fruit, their eyes were opened. They realized that they were naked and they “sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings” [Gen. 3: 7]. God asked them, “Who told you that you were naked?” [v. 11]. In this case, it was not the beholder (God) that felt the shame. It was the actors (Adam and Eve) themselves that did. The sinner’s shame is similar to this example.

No one is righteous before God [Ps. 14: 3]. Therefore, every sinner is accountable to God and the soul that sins shall die [Ezek. 18: 4]. But without the feeling of guilt how can one confess one’s sins and change? For example, on Pentecost Sunday, after Peter had preached about the risen Christ to multitudes of Jews and Gentiles from all over the then known world, “they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles ... ‘What shall we do?’” [Acts 2: 37]. They became ashamed of their sins and were ready to change. That day, about three thousand of them gave their lives to Christ and were baptized [v. 41]. There were also many others who had heard the same message but remained unmoved and unchanged. Would you call such people shameful or shameless sinners? To be able to adequately answer that question, let us illustrate with two case studies from Scripture- the Prodigal Son and king Jeroboam.

Case A: The Prodigal Son

The prodigal son was the younger of two sons to a rich man. While his elder brother was always obedient and ever hard working on their father's farm [**Lk 15: 25-29**], the younger man simply wanted to enjoy life. So, he asked his father to give him his share of the inheritance. When you realize that a will is not executed until the testator dies, you can appreciate the young man's request. It was like saying to his father, "I don't care whether you die now or later. All I care about right now is that you give me my share of your estate. Period!" His father was not offended by the request. He gave his son what he had asked for. Like a dog that has been given a fat bone, he grabbed his 'booty' and left home, thinking that he was rich and would never be hungry again!

He travelled to a far country where he "wasted his possessions with prodigal living" [**v. 13**]. He was enjoying life, so he thought. You can be sure that he rented a luxurious apartment and hosted endless parties and orgies. Was he shameful of his actions? I doubt. Was he shameless? I guess. Soon enough, however, he ran out of money at a time that "a severe famine" had arisen in that country [**v. 14**]. He got a job which required him to go into the fields to feed swine. The pay was pittance and sometimes, he would gladly have eaten what he fed to the pigs but no one would even give him anything [**vv. 15-16**]!

It was at that stage that he "came to himself," that is, he felt shame for what he was doing to himself and those around him. He realized what he had missed by leaving home and what repercussions he had received by way of hunger and famine. Then, he acted on his shame. He said to himself, "I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.'" He in deed arose and went back home [**vv. 17-20**]. His shame drove him to repentance and restoration. That is the shameful sinner.

Case B: Jeroboam, 1st king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel

Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, of the tribe of Ephraim, was King Solomon's servant. He was a mighty man of valour. When Solomon saw that he was industrious, he made him the human resource manager over the labour force of the house of Jacob [**1 Kgs 11: 26, 28**]. One day, on his way to Jerusalem, a prophet, Ahijah, told him that, as a result of Solomon's worship of idols (through his pagan marriages), God had torn off ten tribes from Solomon and given them to Jeroboam, with the promise, "If you heed all that I command you, walk in My ways, and do what is right in My sight, ... then I will be with you and build for you an enduring house, as I built for David, and will give Israel to you" [**vv. 29-38**]. As Solomon sought to kill him, Jeroboam fled to

Egypt until Solomon's death [v. 40]. In due course, Jeroboam became king of the larger northern kingdom of Israel while Solomon's son, Rehoboam became king of the southern kingdom of Judah

As soon as he ascended the throne, Jeroboam said to himself, "Now, the kingdom may return to the house of David. If these people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn back to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me" [1 Kgs 12: 26-27]. To prevent that, Jeroboam made two golden calves and presented them to the people, saying, "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!" [v. 28]. He created priests out of every class of people, who were not of the tribe of Levi [v. 31]. He instituted feasts to replicate those usually celebrated in Jerusalem. He brought the priests that he had made to Bethel where he built an altar on which he offered incense [vv. 32-33].

God sent a young prophet from Judah to Jeroboam in Bethel where the king stood to burn incense. He cried against the altar which he said would be split apart and the ashes on it poured out, as a sign that the word of God would come to pass, namely, "Behold, a child, Josiah by name, shall be born to the house of David; and on (that altar) he shall sacrifice the priests of the high places who burn ashes on (it)" [1 Kgs 13: 1-3].

Was the king shameful for what he had done? Did he repent? Never! Instead, he ordered the arrest of the visiting prophet. However, the hand that he had stretched toward the prophet "withered, so that he could not pull it back to himself." The altar also broke apart. Then he entreated the prophet to pray to his God "that my hand may be restored to me." The prophet prayed and his hand was restored [vv. 4-6]. Then, Jeroboam invited the prophet to come with him to the palace for material reward, and he flatly rejected the offer [vv. 7-8].

Can you see his concerns? He was ashamed of his deformed hand and damaged reputation, not his sin! He was shameless about that. So, God sent the same prophet Ahijah that had told him while his master Solomon was still alive of his coming elevation that he had not followed God with all his heart but had instead "done more evil than all who were before (him)." As a result, disaster would befall his house, and God would raise up for Himself another king who would cut off the house of Jeroboam [1 Kgs 14: 1-14]. The prophecy was fulfilled during the reign of Nadab the son of Jeroboam. Baasha of the tribe of Issachar conspired against and killed him and became king in his place. Then he completely wiped out the whole lineage of Jeroboam [1 Kgs 15: 25-30]. It is instructive that the young king of Judah prophesied about during the reign of Jeroboam was Josiah, the king of Judah during the prophetic ministry of Zephaniah!

From the two cases, we can summarize the characteristics of shameful and shameless sinners as follows:

A shameless sinner:

- Remains in or returns to sin [**Zeph. 1: 6; Rom. 1: 18-32; 2 Pet. 2: 18-32**];
- Refuses correction [**Zeph. 2: 2; Heb. 12: 7-8**]; and
- Glamourizes a sinful way of life [**Ps. 73: 1-12; Zeph. 1: 12**]

A shameful sinner:

- Acknowledges and confesses his/her sins [**Ps. 51; 1 Jn 1: 7-9**];
- Turns a new leaf [**1 Tim. 1: 13**]; and
- Preaches and lives by Christ [**Acts 9: 20-22; 2 Tim. 3: 12**]

God's judgment falls on the shameless sinner [**Zeph. 1: 1-6**], but His mercy and love belong to the shameful sinner [**Zeph. 3: 17**]

3. Conclusion: Be shameless for Christ!

When you choose to be shameful about your sins, the choice you make (to repent and live a godly life) may not be popular with your family or professional or social group, especially in a world that is increasingly hostile to the mention of the name of Jesus. To apologize or accept your errors is a higher-order mark in humility and integrity. To deal honestly with others in a world with shifting standards of acceptable morality is priceless. But, for Christ's sake, you can afford to do these things and be shameless about them. Like Paul, you can say with authority "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes" [**Rom. 1: 16**].

Be a shameful sinner. Be shameless for Christ.