

Quick Guide to Honor/Shame Dynamics in the Bible

1. **Love of Honor:** The foremost social value in an honor/shame world is gaining honor, thereby avoiding shame. A person in an honor/shame culture sees herself as she imagines others see her.

Exodus 33:17-20; Psalm 57:8; Mark 9:33-34; 10:35-45; John 5:44; 12:42-43; Romans 2:6-8

2. **Two Sources of Honor:** Worth and value are either ascribed (based on relationships with others, e.g., family, village, or social group) or achieved (based on accomplishments).

Jesus has both ascribed honor (*Matthew 1:1-17; 3:17; Hebrews 1*) and achieved honor (*Philippians 2:6-11; Hebrews 1*).

3. **Belief in Limited Good:** Everything desired in life (e.g., food, water, wealth, respect, status, power, influence, honor) exists in limited quantity. More for you means less for me.

1 Samuel 18:6-9 shows a belief in limited good and win-lose thinking. *Philippians 1:18-24* reveals the antithesis of a belief in limited good—win-win thinking.

4. **Honor Competition:** Also called Challenge and Riposte. When people perceive honor as their most valuable possession, a resource that's in limited supply, they compete for it. Thus, life becomes a series of contests. There are four steps to honor competition:

- a. Claim of worth or value
- b. Challenge to that claim or refusal to acknowledge it
- c. Defense of the claim
- d. Public verdict of success awarded to claimant or challenger

Many of the exchanges between Jesus and the Pharisees were characterized by honor competition: *Matthew 12:8-16, 23* and *Luke 13:10-17*. *Philippians 2:6-11* may also be seen as a cosmic example of honor competition.

5. **Importance of Face:** “Face” expresses what you are; it represents your honor, your public worth, your social reputation. The concept of face in Scripture has two parts. First, humanity’s shame before God is the result of sin and is expressed by our turning away and hiding from the face of God. Second, humanity’s redemption and healing from shame comes when people turn to and are given peace before the face of God.

Genesis 3:8; 4:4-16; Isaiah 59:2; Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 34:5; 67:1 2 Corinthians 3:18; 4:6; Revelation 22:34-5

6. **Body Language:** In the social world of the Bible, the most honorable parts of the body were the head, face, and hands. One of the most shameful body parts was the feet.

Psalms 8:6; 110:1; Matthew 22:43-44; 26:64; Mark 12:36; 16:19; Luke 20:41-44; Acts 2:33-35; 1 Corinthians 15:24-27; Romans 8:34; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3, 13

7. **System of Patronage:** A distinctive relationship in ancient Roman society existed between a “patron” and his “client.” The relationship was hierarchical but carried mutual obligations. The

patron was the protector, sponsor, and benefactor of the client. The client repaid this with loyalty and honor.

Patrons/benefactors were specifically referenced in *Luke 7:25* and *22:5*. Phoebe was a patron to Paul — *Romans 16:1-2*.

8. **Name/Kinship/Blood:** In an honor/shame culture, people are not just taken on their merits (achieved honor). Honor begins with the merits (or debits) of their lineage, the reputation of their ancestral house (ascribed honor).

Genesis 12:2; Psalms 79:9; 96:8; 102:15; Isaiah 42:8; 43:7; Malachi 1:16; John 5:43; 12:27-28; 1 John 2:12

9. **Emphasis on Purity:** People, places, and things can be clean or unclean. While cleanliness represents spiritual purity/honor, uncleanness refers to more than hygiene; it denotes a condition of shame. The biblical purity codes explain how the Israelites could survive with a holy God in their midst.

All of *Leviticus*, especially chapters *11–18*. Also, *Ezekiel 46:20; 44:19; Matthew 9:18-26; Luke 5:12-14; Mark 5:1-20; 1 John 1:8-9; Hebrews 9:13-14*

10. **Motif of Honor-Status Reversal:** From *Genesis* to *Revelation*, we find examples of honor-status reversal. When a person, family, or people have whatever degree of esteem, respect, privilege, power, or authority before a community turned the other way around, they have experienced a reversal in their honor status.

The prime example is Jesus: pre-incarnate glory → incarnation → death on the cross → resurrection and ascension → exalted honor— *Philippians 2:5-11*. Also, Adam and Eve, Joseph, Job, David, Daniel, Esther, Paul, Peter, and numerous passages in the Prophets and the Gospels.

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