

## ***Nailed to the Cross***

*Colossians 2: 13-15*

**First Presbyterian Church  
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In his book, *The Soul of Shame*, Christian psychiatrist Kurt Thompson goes straight to the heart of our sense of shame when he describes the voice we hear that says, “You are not enough.” You are not enough in yourself. In your work. In your relationships. Before God. You’re not enough and if you are discovered in being not enough, you will be humiliated and you will die.

It may be an inner voice, the sense that we are just never measuring up. It may be an outer voice, from someone who regularly shames us. Or it may be the combination of someone who shamed us long ago, but whose voice still echoes in our thoughts. You are not enough. Not enough to be loved by others. Not enough to stand before the presence of a holy God. For those of us who hear that voice, we may come to realize that our lives are made of a mad scramble to silence that voice by showing that we *are* enough. And a mad scramble to keep from being “outed” in front of others in all our not-enough-shame.

The natural thing to do is hide from shame, or try to create enough worth that the voice stops. That only feeds shame. The Christian answer is a better strategy. It has two parts. The first is to agree with the voice. “You’re right. I am not enough. I deserve to be discovered as inadequate, unholy, despicable, prone to wander and to failure. It’s all true and then some. My defense is not through any way that I can work out of this hole. My defense is that someone else has stood by me in my shame, taken it, and more, taken a greater shame and defeat, exposure and punishment than I ever could.

Remarkably, a mainstream movie from a few years ago illustrates this beautifully. Towards the end of the film *About a Boy*, 14-year-old Marcus is determined to take the stage in the school talent show. Marcus has a bad haircut, unstylish clothes, and a sweetness that has gotten him bullied in his rough, inner city school. But Marcus’ mother loves to hear him sing. He hopes that if he performs at the talent show, she will feel better and stop being so depressed. Her favorite song is “Killing me Softly,” the painfully sentimental soft rock song from the 70’s made famous by Roberta Flack. Marcus’ few friends have all bailed out on him. He’ll have to commit social suicide by singing acapella alone on a stage before thugs. Bravely, he begins in a tiny voice, and the jeers start to come.

But then suddenly Hugh Grant steps onto the stage. His character has been a reluctant big brother to Marcus. Hugh realizes the only way to save Marcus is to come alongside him. To show that he is not ashamed of Marcus. Hugh steps onto the stage with a guitar and totally owns the wretched song. Marcus begins to beam and to sing louder. He's going to survive. At the end of the chorus, Marcus is ready to stop, receive a bit of applause and escape. But then Hugh takes over. He strikes up the next verse with loud, horrifying sincerity. He's so extravagantly awful that even Marcus can laugh at him. All eyes are off Marcus, as Hugh takes the boos and even an apple in the head. He out-shamed Marcus and set the boy free. He took Marcus' place on the stage to receive the public humiliation as his own.

It's helpful to me to see how a person can stand in for another person, taking their shame as his own. Indeed, in our text, we know that Jesus endured shame for us. Crucifixion was not only torturous physically. It carried the humiliation of being naked and exposed before public eyes as not worthy of life. And that shame carried on in your family for generations. He did not forsake either his Father or the humanity he came to save as he endured the cross. Hebrews tells us he "despised the shame," but took it in the hope of the joy set before him (Heb. 12: 2) the joy of bringing many sons to glory (Heb. 2: 10-11), of reconciling the world to God (2 Cor. 5: 19, Col. 1: 20).

I love thinking about Jesus as a shame-bearer. But so far, we've really just considered shame as something put onto us by others. What about the reality that I actually think, feel and do shameful things? Real damage. Real violations of God's will. Real sin.

Paul describes this as "the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands" (Col. 2: 14). The picture is of a certificate of debt. Written down on the paper is what you owe. It may be a promissory note. It is written in one's own handwriting so there can be no doubt. This is what I owe. This is what I bought and signed for. It's the written record of our transgressions against God's law. In that way it becomes the tally of how far we have fallen from what we should be. It is the list of what we owe God and could not pay. This is the list that condemns.

There are lots of ways we receive this notice. There are many kinds of writing that strike us with shame we have earned. The way when swimming in a warm ocean, you suddenly feel a cold stripe of water pass underneath you. Even on a hot day it chills you. It's a stripe of fear. It's the red ink all over a math exam. It's the note on my first paper in my first upper level English class, "Mr. Dawson, your style, or lack of one....." It's being served divorce papers. It's the eviction notice

because you couldn't pay your rent. It's the transcript of a conversation you shouldn't have had. It's the charges made against you in a legal document that make you seem like the scum of the earth. It's reading Scripture and realizing how every thought and deed is exposed and measured against the standards of God's holiness.

Paul nearly understates it when he says that this record of debt "stands against us." I'd say it does. It shames us. It blocks our hope of the future in this life and the next. It weighs on us all the time. And there is no working our way out of this kind of debt, of throwing off this kind of shame.

But the miracle of the cross is that God has cancelled our debt. Paul writes, "This he set aside, nailing it to the cross" (Col. 2: 14). By his own choice, Christ took over payment on our note. He stepped on the stage of the world to take our shame. Paul tells us here that God expunges our record. He blots it out. He writes over the debt so the amount no longer shows. The certificate of debt is entirely laid aside. It's nailed to the cross. God takes the record of our debts, the source of our shame, and, writes, "Paid in full," across it, then tacks it onto the cross. When someone goes looking for my debt, they find it nailed to the cross with Jesus. He has picked up the cost and absorbed all my obligation in his dying for me.

For centuries, people have drawn further thoughts about God's forgiveness from this passage. Some have noted the parallel with the inscription that Pilate nailed to the cross, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." Pilate gave him his title. It was also his crime. Jesus was crucified as a rival of Rome, a pretender to be king when only Caesar could be king. The Son of God came to us, and we humans crucified him for being who he was. We made it a crime for Jesus to be the king for whom we had been longing. The Son of God, of course, had another plan. He took the punishment not only for the crime we accused him of, but also for the crimes we ourselves actually committed. God nailed our certificate of debt to the cross with Christ.

Take it just a bit further and recall what Jesus said as he died, "It is finished" (Jn. 19: 30). In Greek, *tetelestai*. The work was accomplished. "It is finished" contains many layers of meaning. It includes, at least, the sense of saying Paid in Full. The debt has been cancelled because it has been paid completely. Our list of sins has been removed by Christ. He took it as his own. Our certificate of debt has been paid in his blood. Our signature at the bottom of the page, our names agreeing to obey and serve God, sealed in blood, all turned hostile against us. But Christ has taken them as his own and cancelled the obligation. We are free. The debtor's

prison of hell no longer has a cell for those who are in Christ. The death warrant signed against us has been commuted. The list, the wretched list, of our failings, has been blotted out, taken away and purchased by Christ. He bought our mortgage and left us with the house. He gives us the house of his eternal home.

In other words, he went on stage right before we committed social suicide singing “Killing Me Softly” in front of a bunch of thugs. We are the goobers who deserved the ridicule. He came out and sang the terrible song and put his whole heart into it so that he took our jeers. He took the scorn so we could be free.

Our passage concludes with news of the great switcheroo. The authorities heaped shame on Jesus by crucifying him. But it backfired. He took the shame, let it kill him, and then in his rising, he brought them all to shame. Jesus shamed the earthly powers that rejected him by proving himself victor. He also shamed the spiritual powers that assaulted him. His shame became his glory. For he took away our sins. He destroyed death. Jesus shamed the accuser of our souls. Because Satan has nothing on us now. All is known and all is forgiven. We can now admit everything because Jesus paid for everything. No one can take away his blood-bought forgiveness of us. No one can separate us from him. He disarmed the forces hostile to us. They can kill our bodies, but they cannot bring us to final shame or condemnation. For Christ has granted us a share in his everlasting life.

Years ago, at a midweek communion service, I preached a very brief sermon on this passage. I simply discussed the certificate of debt as a business obligation that got marked “It is finished,” or “Paid in full” by Christ. Honestly, it was no masterpiece.

But a man’s life changed. Nearly 15 years earlier, this man had cheated on his wife. The months long affair ended. He returned to his wife. He asked forgiveness. She received him back and the marriage stayed intact. But things had not been the same for all these years. He still felt horribly guilty. She still suffered from depression. And though they lived together and were companions, they did not have a deep closeness.

All that changed when the Spirit spoke the words of the gospel to him through this text. This image made sense. He told me, “I have had a list of my sin dangling before me for years. It witnessed against me day and night. I did it. I broke my marriage vows. I’m sorry. I repented. But it wasn’t enough. For myself, it was unforgivable. I couldn’t get rid of the debt. But now I see. Christ took that particular debt, my specific sin, as his own. He marked it *Paid*. I don’t have to pay

for it any more. He took my sin. He made it his own and marked my ledger, Paid in Full. I am free.”

Their marriage underwent a renaissance. They grew closer than they ever had been before. Life had its ups and downs, many downs, after that. But the deeper sense of freedom and forgiveness remained. He became one of the finest elders I’ve ever worked with.

The gospel works. I can’t explain why. I can’t lead you logically step by step from your certificate of debt to the freedom of forgiveness. But I can tell you with confidence: Jesus can. Hold up that hostile list of what you owe, there with your own signature on it, and ask him to take it. Give it to him in repentance and ask forgiveness. He will take it. He has taken it. Your personal certificate of debt, even if it’s as big as the encyclopedia, has been marked, Paid in full! It is finished.

Christ Jesus atoned for sin. His atonement is sufficient for all the sins of the world. You cannot out-sin his Cross. He has paid for more than you can owe. You do not have the privilege of thinking you out-sinned God. You didn’t and you can’t. You may not have the position of arrogance, masquerading as humility, which says, “He may forgive others, but he can’t forgive me. I’m too bad.” Look, as we’ve said often before, you’re not just bad. You are way worse than you’ll ever know. The ocean of your sinfulness cannot be measured by human measures. But that ocean of debt is just a drop in the bucket compared to the universe of God’s love. He loves you more than you can imagine.

Your sins have been nailed to the cross. This grace is free. You can’t earn it, buy it or manipulate it. But it ain’t cheap. It demands that you offer your certificate of debt up to him. Cry out, “Lord Jesus, I am in debt and I cannot pay. I need a savior. Lord Jesus, I am a sinner and I need your salvation. I release control of my life to you. I want you to be Lord of my life. I want to live for you. But I cannot keep even that obligation on my own. Come and help me. Live in me. Take this guilt and show me your forgiveness.”

If you pray such a prayer, I promise you, because God’s Word promises you, Jesus will cleanse you of your sin. He will come and be your savior. He will be Lord of your life and live within you, changing you from the inside out.