

Honor and Shame in the Sermon on the Mount

By Mark Moore

1. Shame/Honor was the core social value of the Mediterranean basin of Jesus' day. It was the currency, so to speak. While Americans will give up honor to gain money, Palestinians would give up money to gain honor.
 - a. The subtle understanding was that there was only so much honor to go around. Therefore, there was a constant push and pull for who gets this limited resource.
 - b. Nearly every social interaction dealt with honor. This honor was not merely for the individual but the family or group he represented. Thus social groups tended to vie for power and support their spokesman.
2. The honor game is played by the following rules:
 - a. *Claims* -- this is boasting that asserts your position.
 - b. *Challenge* -- through physical, verbal or sexual aggressiveness, an individual either accosts another man, his property or his position. (E.g. sleeping with his wife, publically rebuking him, claiming his seat at a banquet, etc.)
 - c. *Riposte* -- responding to the challenge either through revenge or some other kind of satisfaction. All challenges demanded some kind of riposte.
 - d. *Acknowledgment* -- honor is granted when groups recognize the claims or challenges as valid.
3. Jesus overturns the honor game in the sermon on the mount:

The beatitudes are a radical reversal of the kinds of *claims* that would be made. Through the six illustrations of 5:21-48, Jesus forbids the kinds of *challenges* and *ripostes* that would be essential for defending one's honor or claiming another's.

In the three illustrations of public piety, Jesus forbids the *claims* and *acknowledgment* that go along with playing the honor game.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is not merely giving an alternative morality. He is accosting the Middle Eastern ethos of shame/honor. Two observations must be made here. First, Jesus is not merely a radical, he is counter-cultural. He attacks the very fibre of social mores. This is, to a large extent, why he was hated, attacked and executed. We no longer need to wonder why such a "mild-mannered, good moralist" was so despised. For Jesus, God alone was the source of honor or shame. All things must be submitted to his word and filtered through his philosophy.

Second, if Jesus superseded his own culture with a theocentric ideology, is it not fair to assume that he would do the same with ours? The question then becomes, "What social values of ours would Jesus attack?" While somewhat speculative, let me suggest the following. As shame and honor was the dominant social currency of Jesus' day, so individualistic democratic capitalism is of ours. Jesus would, no doubt, attack with a vengeance our ideas of individualism above group identity given in God's family. Likewise, he would surely have much to say about our egalitarian democracy -- everyone deserves a fair shake and deserves to be treated equally. His theocentric ideas of the sovereignty of God would override our cultural ideologies here. Finally, Jesus would lambast our foundational philosophy of economic security as the basis for personal happiness and hedonistic pleasure. Rather he would argue that obedience to God is the only true source of security and satisfaction.

The Sermon on the Mount was not merely an alternate morality. It was the Magna Carta for a social revolution which replaced human sources of security and satisfaction with God's provisions alone. This is the Kingdom of God.