



## THE GOSPEL OF JOHN:

### A Theological Guide For Ministry in HonorShame Contexts

***“The glory you have given me, I have given to them” – John 17:22***

The contrasting metaphors of light/darkness, truth/lie, life/death, believe/judge, and love/hate make John’s thought immediately accessible to all readers, yet invite nuanced theological reflection to grasp their full and intended meaning. What is John saying about humanity and salvation? How can we summarize his ideas in the language of honor and shame?

Using John’s own key concepts, I propose this theological chain:

LIGHT -> BELIEVE -> LIFE -> LOVE

When we are in the light, then we believe in(to) Jesus. To all who believe in his name, God gives (eternal) life and they love others.

The antithesis is this tragic cycle:

DARKNESS -> REJECT -> DEATH -> HATE

When we are in darkness, we reject Jesus. As a result, experience death and possess hate towards others.

Of course, real life is not so neat and linear; but that is John’s main idea throughout. To grasp the full import of these concepts, I will try to explain each segment in the language of honor and shame. This not only allows us better explain John’s gospel to honor-shame peoples, but also help us get closer to John’s original meaning.

#### **LIGHT as “TRUE HONOR CODE”**

Being in the light means being able to rightly perceive spiritual realities. Imagine you are sitting in the dark, holding what you think are a diamond, necklace, and cashmere sweater. But then the light comes on, and in horror you realize you were instead adoring a cockroach, snake, and fuzzy tarantula...”AHHHH!!!” Light allows us to see objects’ true identity and worth. Such vision affords the granting of honor to objects of legitimate worth and value. In this vein, “truth” is not abstract propositions known by smart people, but the correct identification and evaluation of everything in God’s world. Jesus, as *the* “light” and “truth”, reveals to humanity the accurate honor code of who and what is truly honorable. John’s language about sight is another image about correctly perceiving identity and worth. In John 9, the blind man believes and worships upon receiving sight.

Darkness in contrast is a false code of honor. To be in darkness is to esteem all the wrong things. For example, “you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God (5:44)”, or “they love the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God (12:43).” The Jews in darkness (a.k.a. hardness of heart) were unable to perceive the glory manifested in Jesus signs, unlike Isaiah who saw the glory (12:37-41).

When our spiritual eyesight allows us to see Jesus as glorious, praiseworthy, and honorable, we ideally (though not always) respond with praise, worship, and glory. We believe, and honor Jesus.

### **BELIEF as “HONORING JESUS”**

To believe in(to) Jesus means to actually accept who he claims to be. He *really is* God’s special agent with the unique task of manifesting God’s glory for salvation. Such belief is not a cognitive ascent, but genuine submission. To believe him is to grant him the appropriate respect and admiration due his name. John’s favorite verbs ‘abide’, ‘receive,’ ‘accept’, and ‘believe’ carry the connotation of ‘honor’ and ‘respect.’ John Piper speaks of faith as “treasuring” Jesus – a modern term that nicely captures the idea. In some ways, the gospel of John is a parade of witnesses testifying to the true identity and worth of Jesus (1:29, 41, 49; 4:25, 6:14-15, 69; 11:27; 20:28).

Unbelief deems Jesus as shameful, unworthy of respect and honor. Unbelief rejects his true identity and mislabel with scandalous terms - “you are a Samaritan and a have a demon (8:48),” or “He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him (10:20)?” Jesus calls out their shaming tactics – “I don’t have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me (8:49).” The frequent verb ‘to judge’ (what non-believers do to Jesus in John’s gospel) means to evaluate negatively, in the sense of ‘to condemn’ or ‘to shame.’ The shaming of Jesus climaxes with the trial and crucifixion (chs. 18-19), where he is judged and subsequently rejected as a disgraceful figure. Unbelief is dishonoring.

### **LIFE as “GOD’S HONOR”**

“The glory that you have given me I have given to them (17:22).” When one believes in Jesus, they receive ‘life’; when you honor Jesus, God honors you. The same principle is in 1 Samuel 2:30b - “For those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed.” “If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him (12:26).” One component of this ‘eternal life’ is the physical resurrection from the shameful and dirty state of death on the last day (6:40; 11:25-26). Moreover, life from God in the OT refers to the unhindered reception of covenantal blessings and promises, which were fundamentally a state of honor (cf. Gen 12:1-3, Lev 26:3-13, 2 Sam 7:8-16). The life promised to the Noble Shepherd’s sheep (10:1-18) and True Vine’s branches (15:1-17) is fundamentally their identity as the true Israel - the true covenantal people of God. All life must include a new birth (3:1-8) into God’s family (1:12-13); such a divine origin like Jesus’ amounts to an incomparably honorable status.

The opposite of life is death and judgment. Those who judge Jesus receive judgment and perish; even more ironically, their judgment of Jesus *is* their own judgment (3:18). “The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father (5:23).” Judgment is the future moment when one’s true identity worth is exposed, and God’s evaluation becomes finalized (cf. Is 66:24; Dan 12:2).

### **LOVE as “HONORING OTHERS”**

Jesus’ ethic of love was modeled by washing the disciples’ feet. The shame of foot washing was generally equated with humiliation, since it was a task performed for non-Jewish slaves (hence Peter’s objection in 13:8, 14). Foot washing was a suitable expression and example of love because it demonstrates genuine humility. Only a person with sufficient honor could be secure enough to willfully humble oneself to another’s foot. Such mutual acceptance and unity among Christians is possible because of the glory Jesus has given us (17:5). For John, love means voluntary abasement and sacrifice to esteem others. To love is to



value others above ourselves (cf., Phil 2:3-8). This corresponds with other NT books' ethic of honoring others (particularly Romans, 1 Peter, and 1 Timothy).

But the consequence of death and judgment is characterized by hate and exclusion. John narrates constant attempts to shame others for the purpose of honoring one self. The lower we make others, the higher we appear!! Jesus threatened the Jewish leaders' grasp for the false honor of power in many ways, so they resorted to the shaming tactics of hate and exclusion. When the blind man's testimony of Jesus perplexes the leaders, "they cast him out" from the community, which they falsely assumed was synonymous with God's people (9:35). Their spiritual rejection of Jesus' actions and words culminates with the arrest and humiliated crucifixion of Jesus – the ultimate power move of shaming and exclusion. Jesus predicts the world's hatred would continue towards the disciples through intentional shaming – "They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God (16:20)."

### SUMMARY CHART

<u>Perceptions and values -&gt;</u>	<u>Response to Jesus -&gt;</u>	<u>God's evaluation -&gt;</u>	<u>Relations with others</u>
(+) TRUE HONOR CODE -> (light/see)	HONORING JESUS -> (believe/accept)	HONORED -> (life/child of God)	HONORING OTHERS (love/serve)
(-) FALSE HONOR CODE -> (darkness/blindness)	SHAMING JESUS -> (reject/judge)	SHAMED -> (death/judgment)	SHAMING OTHERS (hate/exclude)

If you see what is truly honorable, then you will rightly honor Jesus. Then you will be honored with God's life, and be able to lovingly honor others. For John, that is the Christian life.

### FURTHER

- Davd deSilva, *The Hope of Glory: Honor Discourse and New Testament Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999). Pp 70-90.
- Jerome Neyrey, "Despising the Shame of the Cross: Honor and Shame in the Johannine Passion Narrative." *Semina* 68 (1994): 113-27.
- Jerome Neyrey, "The 'Noble Shepherd' in John 10: Cultural and Rhetorical Background." *JBL* 120, no. 2. (2001) 267-291.

