



ROMANS

A Theology Guide of Paul's Epistle for HonorShame Contexts

MAIN POINT

Paul combats ethnic exclusivism among Christians in Rome by replacing all claims to honor with God's honor, which is now available by faith in Christ through grace. The Romans must resist cultural imperialism and unify together for Paul's mission to Spain to succeed.

KEY VERSES

- For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." 10:13.
- We are children of God...and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. 8:17
- Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you. 15:7

SOCIAL CONTEXT

The church in Rome was ethnically divided, with both Jews and Gentiles boasting (=making a false claim to honor) based on cultural superiority. Jews claimed observance Torah (i.e., Sabbath, food laws, and circumcision) was how a person was faithful to God, justifying the exclusion of impure Gentiles. The Gentiles of Rome took pride in their own imperial dominance, looking down on uncivilized barbarians.

Meanwhile, Paul desires to plant churches in Spain. The peoples of Spain had no Jewish communities (so Paul needed contacts to host him), spoke no Greek (so Paul needed translation help), and despised Rome's imperialism (meaning the cultural arrogance of the Christians in Rome would fly well). Into this context, Paul writes his magisterial letter of God's honor for all nations – Jews, Romans, and barbarians – to unite and mobilize the church in Rome.

THEOLOGY

Romans has been interpreted through individualistic lenses in Western theology since Augustine and Luther. But, Paul mentioned shame (6x) and honor/glory (20x) far more than guilt (0x) or forgiveness (1x). Paul's theological treatise answers "Who (what group) is saved?" more than "How am I saved?"

Paul message of good news of salvation for all peoples is *God's* plan. So, even though Paul identifies with the shamefully crucified Jesus and fellowships with 'foolish and impure barbarians', he is not ashamed (1:14-16). Romans focuses more about corporate inclusion than individual forgiveness. Paul defines the boundary markers God's people (i.e., Abraham's children, Israel). Faith in the Messiah indicates legitimate members of God's covenantal community – "we are justified by faith." This message undercuts all false claims to status –whether cultural or religious.

God: The Honorable Creator and Covenanter

The God spoken about in Romans is worthy of honor, glory, and praise (1:25; 15:8-12); he is the honorable Creator to be exalted (Rom. 11:36; 16:27). All the events of salvation-history magnify God's name and extol his honor. God is the ultimate honorable Being because of his life-giving power (1:3, 4:21ff, ch. 8) and great faithfulness. God is not a liar reneging on promises to Israel, but persistently committed to the salvation of

Israel and the world (chs. 2-3). Jesus – the honored agent of God’s benefaction – established and mediated God’s honor. Romans 1:3-4, a theological foreshadow, establishes Jesus’ honorable and exalted status as Son of God, Son of David, Messiah, and Lord, even despite his shameful death.

Sin: Dishonor and Shame

Paul associates sin with the concepts of dishonor and shame. Humanity’s problem is not its failure to keep ethical ideals and rules; our problem is its fundamental unacceptability due to a lack of honor and its ensuing futile efforts to restore such honor via untruthful perversions of socio-cultural systems (Jewett 1997:268).

Firstly, sin is the failure to honor God (1:18-32). Our disloyalty towards God also leaves the self mired in shame and defilement. Sin is unfaithfulness (3:3-5, 9) and disobedience (1:30; 5:19; 10:21; 11:30-32). Sin is a relational, not just legal, problem. The climatic summary of 3:23: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” means all peoples have fallen short of properly honoring God, and so lack the honorable name and prestigious position that Adam and Even one enjoyed (not, a complete failure to conform to the moral law of God, as legally interpreted).

According to Romans, humanity’s (with no group as an exception) main problem is its shame and dishonor resulting from its idolatrous and ethnocentric unfaithfulness, and from its weakness as slaves to sin and death. In essence, we are the very opposite of the Creator who is honorable due to his faithfulness and strength. And our perverse abuse of cultural systems to restore Adamic honor only further disqualifies us from our share in divine glory, and jeopardizes God’s mission.

Salvation: Honor and Glory in Christ

Although shame and disgrace cover all humans, God has bestowed honor through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the epistle to the Romans, salvation is not simply forgiveness of sins, the imputation of alien righteousness, or eternity in heaven, but honor and glory, the removal of shame, and group inclusion.

The first mention of salvation, after the introduction, in Romans is 2:6-10: “He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life... (there will be) glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek.” Regardless of how one understands the means of salvation, the nature of salvation is “glory and honor.” This glory and honor is sought after by humans (2:7) and granted only by God, not other creatures (2:10, 29; cf. John 5:44). Because of this hope in “the glory of God,” Christians can rejoice in the present, despite shameful suffering (5:2-3). The original, honorable status granted by God at creation (Gen. 1:26-30; Ps. 8:4-6) is restored in the new creation.

The most dynamic explanation of salvation as honor comes in Romans 8:17b-18 – “We (will) be glorified with him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” Similar to a child who receives his father’s name and honor as a part of the family, our glory is derived from our unity with Christ, not from ourselves. Although Christians might live temporarily without honor, the honor revealed before the entire world in the eschaton super-abounds the shame we currently endure—to such a degree that it is “not worth comparing.”

The radical transference from shame to honor for those in Christ is further communicated through multiple rhetorical expressions: blessed, heirs, strength, life, sanctified, glorified, the Spirit, and adoption. For example, Romans 4:6-9 speaks of the honorable blessing granted through faith. According to recent socio-linguistic investigation, Paul is speaking of the blessed worth of being part of the acceptable group (cf. Gal. 3:7ff), not sentimental encouragement (Hanson 1996). Also, believers are considered rightful co-heirs



with Christ of God's promises (8:17); the inheritance being nothing short of the world itself (4:13). Inheritance symbolizes honor by affirming the boundaries of worthy descendants. Even the theological terms "sanctification" and "glorification" describe our transition from shame to honor. Sanctification is the process of being made pure and cleansed from the defilement of sin (6:19; 15:16). Glorification is the future point at which the covenant members' true honor as God's children is revealed (8:30). Once orphans without a name or family-identity, we have been adopted into God's family and granted an honorable status as children of God because of the gift of the Spirit (Rom. 8:14-17a). In honor-shame cultures, family determines one's social status. For this reason, our adoption through the Spirit leads to a new, honorable status and a prestigious future of glory (Rom. 8:17b-21).

Along with the bestowal of honor, the removal of shame is another key element in the believer's salvation. "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame" (Rom. 10:11). This citation of Isaiah 28:16 teaches, regardless of one's shame before God or community, God declares that Christ has objectively and completely removed that shame. Paul, for example, rightly lives free of shame before God and people. Because the gospel works powerfully for salvation in the lives of even Gentiles, he rejects the defilement or shame he once felt when associating with impure Gentiles or foolish barbarians (1:14-16) in favor of Christological honor; and neither does the stigma of the cross mar his status (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18-31).

In addition to being the granting of honor and removal of shame, salvation in Romans is consistently presented as inclusion into the group of God's honored people. As a matter of fact, "Who are God's people?" undergirds and animates Romans more than "How can I be saved?". By welcoming and including people into his new community, God bestows an honorable status upon humans, which would have been otherwise inaccessible due to our shameful sin. Such honor derived from adoption into a prestigious family (in this case, God's) is cherished by people of honor-shame cultures. Regardless of what false social mechanisms of shame and exclusion they fall victim to (even within the church), those in Christ are eternally honored and accepted as members in the people of God, with full rights, privileges, and status. This new group status expounded in Romans 3, 4, and 9-11 is salvation itself.

The language of "justification" and "righteousness" (Rom. 3:21-31) is one way of articulating entrance into God's people. Paul's formulation of "being set right by faith" countered the mistaken Jewish notion that covenantal membership was maintained by adherence to the ethnic badges outlined in Torah. So when expostulating who are the real people in and through whom God realizes his salvific purposes, justification is a shorthand way of declaring whom God now considers true covenant members with restored honor and glory.

The question of who the descendants of Abraham are is significant because of God's promises that Abraham's descendants would become an honored people (great nation, blessed, great name, divine protection, benefactor of blessing, cf. Gen. 12:1-3). Romans 4 exegetes Genesis 15:6 ("Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness") to redefine descent from Abraham – the father of all who believe. Through Abraham-like faith in the Creator and not through being ethnic Israel (9:7ff.), we obtain the honorable heritage of Abraham, which is to become the people of God's promise and possessors of a great inheritance.

The greatest explanation of God's redefined, new-covenant people is Romans 9-11. In 9:22, Paul explains that God's actions before Christ were pre-planned for the purpose of bringing the "riches of his honor" to the Gentiles, which is one's new identity as God's beloved people who were predestined "for glory" (Rom. 9:22-26). Also, believers in Christ are "grafted into the olive tree" planted long ago by God (11:17-24). As evidenced by the repeated and sustained arguments throughout Romans, God is working in history to create his own family of honored members from the entire world, and salvific inclusion into this shame-free community is through faith, not participation in ethnic Israel as demarcated by Torah.



This new, honorable status is mediated through grace – God's acceptance of the shamed – thus trivializing all false claims to honor, whether based on Jewish Torah observance, Roman imperial power, or Greek wisdom. Only in being honored by God through Christ's shameful death on behalf of the shameful can humans be integrated into God's community and bear eternal honor.

APPLICATION - Christian Ethics as Honoring Others According to God's Code of Honor

Having received an honored status from God, the church is called to a new ethic in which honor plays a key role. "Behavior among Christians should reflect God's free granting of honour" (Moxnes 1988:75). The Spirit-led life is not conformity to an abstract legal standard, but the appropriate navigation of social relations in community. Christian ethics is rejecting cultural methods of group engineering, and extending honor according to God's righteous code of honor: "Pay honor to whom honor is owed" (13:7). For example, the church is to honor governmental authorities because God himself has vested them with authority. As recipients of divine honor, Christians reflect the honor that God himself graciously extends. Christians are to "outdo one another in showing honor" (12:10). Furthermore, the church is called to break the cultural cycles of exclusion by enduring shame and graciously extending honor even to those who do evil and persecute (12:14-21). This is possible because we no longer depend on culture for honor (2:29), but have already been credited infinite, divine honor.

Romans 14:1-15:13, the functional climax of the epistle, reformulates cultural honor systems to explicate the new terms by which Christians are to accept ("welcome," or "honor") others. Whereas Jewish Christians had used dietary regulations to relegate Gentile Christians, Paul speaks of how all things are now clean and pure (14:14b; 14:20b); the logical conclusion being that God's welcoming (15:9-12) overcomes social barriers of shame and endues all with intrinsic honor. Romans 15:7 is a cornerstone of Christian ethics for honor-shame cultures –since the Christ has honorably accepted us, we are to welcome one another in the church for the sake of God's honor. The 21 admonitions to "greet" particular members in Rome in 16:3-16 reflect Paul's insistence that both sides of the Roman church honorably accept rather than shamefully exclude one another – the ultimate purpose of this Pauline letter designed to unify chauvinistic groups so they would not thwart the upcoming mission to the culturally-unique Spanish peoples with their sinful cultural imperialism. In summary, Paul's ethical teaching "disregards the rules of the game, breaks through the respected social boundaries and offers a new honor code for the Christian community" (Corrigan 1986:25).

FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS:

Jayson Georges, "From Shame to Honor: A Theological Reading" *Missiology* (2010) 38: 295

Robert Jewett, "Honor and Shame in the Argument of Romans," in *Putting Body and Soul Together*, pp. 257-72.

