

Jesus' Ministry in Light of Honor and Shame

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(Reference "Life in the Big City" at <http://faculty.occ.edu/markmoore/sociology.htm>)

The most valuable commodity in the ancient Near East was not money or time, but honor. Virtually every interaction one had -- every business deal, conversation, marriage proposal, party -- was about gaining honor or saving face. For the Jews, Greeks, and Romans, honor was the supreme social commodity (Aristotle *Nic. Eth.* 3.1.1; Isocrates *Ad Dem.* 17, 43; Quintilian *Institutes* 3.8.1; Proverbs 6:32-33; 19:26; 21:21). This permeates nearly every page of the gospels and Acts and must be understood to appreciate the characters we meet there.

So what is honor? Simply put, it is group approval and valuation whether the group is one's family, synagogue, city, province, or empire. How does one get honor? There are three ways. First, honor is **ascribed** by parentage (*Ben Sira* 3:11, "A person's honor comes from his father.") A person's race can be the subject of shame (e.g. Samaritans among the Jews). Honor can also be granted by adoption or through honors given by a social superior. Second, honor can be **achieved** through noble deeds (especially in war) or through generosity (hosting a banquet, building a public building, or providing food during famine). Finally, honor can be won or lost through the "game" of **challenge/riposte**. This is seen time and again with Jesus and the Pharisees (Lk 4:16-30; 5:17-26, 29-32; 6:1-5, 6-11; 10:25-37; 11:14-26, 37-41; 13:10-17; 14:1-6; 15:1-32; 19:1-10, 38-40; 20:1-9, 20-26, 27-40). How do you know when the game is being played? Well, anytime a person is challenged, confronted, or questioned publicly the game is on!¹ It can be a positive challenge: "Heal me please!" or a negative one, "Show us a sign." The rules are quite simple. First: I challenge you by a question, a name I call you, an invitation, or even a gift given. Note: generally we only challenge (negatively) social equals, which makes it extraordinary that this Galilean carpenter was challenged so often by the highest religious leaders of his day! However, you don't want to take an equal to court because that would suggest you need help dealing with this problem, virtually admitting social defeat.² Second, you respond (that's called the "riposte") with a clever answer, another name, a greater gift, etc. By the way, silence implies defeat. Therefore you *will* play the game, or I will gloat in my victory. Third, the watching crowd then arbitrates through signs of approval for the "winner." For example, on a number of occasions the gospels say the crowds were delighted with Jesus' words in reply to the Pharisees (cf. Lk 13:17). They were, in essence, declaring him the winner.

This may sound like child's play, but the stakes really were quite high for a couple of reasons. First, these folks believe that honor is a limited resource -- there's only so much to go around. Thus, if Jesus gains honor, the Pharisees naturally lose some of theirs. Hence, the game of challenge/riposte can get pretty dirty. Second, we may believe that name-calling is harmless,

¹ Bruce Malina & Jerome Neyrey, "Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World" in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, ed. Jermoney Neyrey (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991) 29: "In the first-century Mediterranean world, every social interaction that takes place outside one's family or outside one's circle of friends is perceived as a challenge to honor, a mutual attempt to acquire honor from one's social equal. Thus gift-giving, invitations to dinner, debates over issues of law, buying and selling, planning marriages, or arranging what we might call cooperative ventures for farming, business, fishing, mutual help -- all these sorts of interactions take place according to the patterns of honor called challenge riposte."

² Malina 43.

but in the Mediterranean your name *is your credit* in the social system of Patron/client. Thus, if you lose face, you also lose privilege, bartering power, social status, and benefits. The cost is not merely in self-esteem, but hard, cold credit.³

The church in Acts is challenged constantly (Acts 4:1-3; 5:17-18, 40-41; 7:54-8:3; 12:1-4; 1 Thess 2:14; 1 Pet 2:12; 3:16; 4:12-16) and therefore has to find mechanisms for explaining how being dishonored through public ridicule and persecution is actually a thing of honor. They do this by (1) predicting it, (2) turning its perpetrators into ignorant and shameless individuals, and (3) by showing that one is merely emulating ancient prophets, namely, Moses and Jesus (cf. Acts 5:41; Lk 6:22-23; John 15:18-21; 1 Thess 3:2-4; Heb 12:1-4).⁴ Thus shame is turned into a badge of honor. The expansion of the church testifies to the success of this mechanism.

An Example from the Gospel: Matthew 21-26

1. **The Triumphal Entry** was an overt, albeit symbolic, claim to kingship. Riding on a colt across the Mt. of Olives into the Temple was a serious play for power. Furthermore, the crowds, in effect, acclaimed him by shouting “Hosanna, Son of David, Blessed” and the like. (Notice Luke 19:39-40).
2. **The Cleansing of the Temple** was another *offensive* act since Jesus over-stepped his bounds of authority, particularly if one pays attention to the context of Isa 56:7 and Jer 7:11 which he quoted. (Notice Mt 21:14-16).
3. **Jesus’ Authority is Questioned**, typically with questions (Mt 21:23). Jesus’ answer, through a question, was subversive. He said he would not answer their question but did, in fact, through a series of three parables. The Parable of the Tenants (21:33-46) is the only one told in all three synoptics and it caused a serious rift between Jesus and the leaders.
4. **Three Questions to Trap Jesus**. Each question is asked by one of the three major political parties of the day and Jesus’ genius answers don’t engender much affection.
5. **Seven Woes (Mt 23)**— With these Jesus throws all caution to the wind and makes a frontal assault on the religious hierarchy.
6. **Jesus was honored by Mary** when she anointed his feet. But notice, this story’s deliberate misplacement (Mt 26:6-13) shows the disciples ignorance and Judas’ treachery.

While there are many more details that could be pointed out, these are enough to show how this social system worked. Now, what can we learn from it? First, Jesus refused to play the honor game, yet won at every turn. Partially this was due to his sheer genius and his absolute moral integrity. But it was also largely due to his methodology. Jesus preached an upside down kingdom (perhaps most clearly seen in the Beatitudes). For him, up was down and in was out. Thus his shame became his honor. Second, we learn that Jesus didn’t merely clear the way for us, he modeled the path we are to follow. He calls us to a life of self-abnegation as a way to honor and victory. His cross, which was his greatest shame, became the very key to his glory. Yet the cross is not merely a favor he does for us; it is a way of life he calls us to. Thus throughout the book of Acts we see the church slandered yet rejoicing, beaten yet praising God, persecuted yet growing. As contemporary followers of Jesus, we must recapture this way of life, this perspective that the least is the greatest, that we live by dying, conquer through self-abnegation. The odd thing is that it really does work!

³ This is seen in the fact that “humility” shows up in the lists of Christian virtues, but not in pagan ones.

⁴ David deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000) 66.