

The Many Paradoxes of God, part 3

Healing our shame and living from our Imago Dei requires embracing the furious opposites about ourselves, God, and others.

Catherine Skurja ~ Excerpted from *Paradox Found: Full of Crap and Glory*
Illustrations by Mary Welch

Christianity got over the difficulty of combining furious opposites, by keeping them both, and keeping them both furious. ~ G.K. Chesterton

Hierarchy of Gods

As soon as we split a paradox, we step away from orthodox Christianity and into a Greek god system where there is a hierarchy of gods, lesser gods, demigods, and mere mortals. In such a system, one is more “divine” and one has to be the “human” – the scapegoat for our shame. Arianism makes Father the divine and Jesus the human. In human relationships, we equate those who are bent more lion-like as greater gods and those bent toward the lamb side as more human. It is a setup for abuse.

The “mere mortals” are the ones who get sacrificed to appease the gods. Abraham would have fully understood this system, thus did not question when God asked him to sacrifice his only son. In giving Abraham a ram in place of his son, God was moving his people away from the sacrificial system. It can take a long time to undo old habits. It took fourteen generations¹ for the people to begin to get a glimpse that God didn’t need or want dead animals.

*Sacrifice and offering you do not desire,
but you have given me an open ear.[a]
Burnt offering and sin offering
you have not required.²*

David, a man after God’s heart, was able to grasp that God wanted relationship, not sacrifice.³ Yet, the sacrificial system continued for another thousand years, still in place when Jesus was born. It is no wonder Jesus turned over the tables in the temple. He, more than anyone, understood that sacrificial systems are based on a hierarchy that takes advantage of those lower in the ranks. *If only you had known the meaning of 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent.⁴*

As fully human and fully divine, Jesus came to show us how to reclaim the Imago Dei. In coming into our world as the lowliest of humans, as well as supreme ruler of heaven and earth,⁵ God collapsed the system of hierarchy. Jesus showed us what it

means to be fully human by living the paradox of Lion and Lamb, Free and Slave, Greek and Jew.

A Greek god-type system is based on splitting the human and divine nature of people and is inherently abusive. At a macro societal-level, the used and abused within a culture are the ones deemed mere mortals. Once a people group is seen as "less than" within a culture, it is easier to justify marginalizing, enslaving, and even eradicating them.

At a micro level, within the individual, the hierarchical Greek god system becomes the breeding ground for all manner of addictions. Whatever aspect of self we deem least desirable within ourselves becomes the sacrificed part: what we hide, deny, and send into exile. The problem with exiled parts is they have a tendency to mutate when they are hidden away in the depths of our soul. Like a monster in the closet, the longer we wait to confront it, the greater the power it has to control us.

A Monster Inside

"Something horrible has happened. It is really bad, Katie."

Andrew sounded desperate. He wanted to come in to talk as soon as possible. It had been a couple years since I had heard from him and I could only imagine what kind of disaster had befallen him.

As he sat down in the office, the shame was palpable in the room. His face was grief-stricken and showed signs that he had been crying. It took several minutes for him to even begin to unravel the story. As it unfolded, Andrew told of a secret he had carried since he was a young boy. He had never told anyone. Until last night. Now he wasn't sure if he would survive the storm that was to come.

Between moments of silence as he tried to compose himself, Andrew shared how his older brother and some friends had locked him in a closet as a young boy. Inside were pornographic images all over the walls and ceiling. There was no escaping them. "Something happened to me, Katie. Something changed inside me that I couldn't understand." He remembers struggling with lust, fantasy, and later pornography ever since that time. Raised in a Christian home, Andrew both believed he was bad for the thoughts and feelings that he had and believed that if he would pray enough, they would go away.

When the struggle would not go away, he would develop elaborate plans of how to deal with it. It was like a monster inside him that needed to be fed. "If I just buy one magazine, then it will stop." And it would stop...for a while. Until the next time. And the next. The space in between "feeding times" became closer. The monster grew hungrier and hungrier, demanding to be fed. As the internet made pornography more accessible, it was increasingly difficult to keep the monster quiet. Struggling in silence, Andrew tried many ways to make the monster go away. Terrified of

exposing this battle to anyone, he continued to feed it quietly while praying God would make it go away.

Andrew got married, had kids, and developed a thriving business. He was part of a church and a home group, and had experienced healing from many areas of shame. He felt blessed on so many fronts, but inwardly was tormented. He had hoped his love for his wife and children would drive away the monster, but it continued to lurk in the shadows. Eventually, he stopped in at a strip club one day. Though he realized how illogical it sounded as he was telling me, he continued to believe there must be some way to feed it and make it shut up once and for all. *"This one time will do the trick. I won't even stay long. I will just walk in, walk around, and walk out."* That one time led to many more and longer stays.

"But that is not even the worst part, Katie. I started looking on the internet for women. I actually contacted one and met her. I couldn't believe it. I was so freaked out that I threw up. I couldn't go through with it, but I met her. I let her touch me. That is when I knew I had to tell my wife. I couldn't make the monster stop. I told her last night and I am afraid I am going to lose everything."

I offered him another tissue and grabbed one for myself. My heart went out to him. What Andrew did not know at that time was that I have heard similar stories many times before. I have seen the pain and confusion caused by various sexual addictions as well as many other types of addictions. I also understand the incredible power of shame that drives addictions and its ability to keep us from coming into the light where we can find healing.

Andrew suffered from the effects of Gnosticism: a split between spirit and natural, which plays out as a split between mind and body. Part of Andrew believed that God loved him unconditionally, and part of him believed that God would be disgusted with him for his struggles. Bound by the shame of the addiction, he was afraid that bringing his secret before God would kill him.

Like countless other people, Andrew was caught in a tragic lie. He believed that God could not handle his "unholiness," so he tried to keep it hidden until he could clean it up.

Original Shame

In order to understand the deeper sense of shame represented in Andrew's story above, we have to return to the beginning of the story - in Genesis. It is a bigger story in which we are all participants. Whether you read the story literally or metaphorically, it has something to tell us about our relationship with God and with each other.

The Original Shame of "not enough" causes us to believe it is not ok to be human, which leads us to participate in the Original Sin of desiring to be like God. As soon as

we pick up the scepter and put on the crown, thinking we can judge good and evil, we split apart paradoxical aspects of God and rank them in order of “most divine” to “most human.” This, in turn, causes us to live in our own little kingdoms with our own little realities, instead of centered in Christ with the Reality of being fully human created in the image of God and having access to the fruit of the Spirit.

Andrew’s participation in judging what is “spiritual” and “natural” caused him to judge the body as bad and led him to believe that he could think his way into controlling the urges of his body. Like so many others, he didn’t understand that true self-control comes from living in the paradox of Christ. As one of the fruits of the Spirit, it is a by-product of living from the Imago Dei.

About a year prior to coming in to see me, Andrew had a vision of himself stuck in a pit that was full of crap. The foul-smelling substance was up to his armpits and he was holding up two burlap sacks, trying to keep them out of the crap. Inside the bags were the many gifts the Lord had given him. He felt that if he couldn’t keep them out of the crap, he would lose them forever.

Already feeling like a failure and a disappointment, he was desperate not to lose what God had done in his life. As I often do with people stuck in shame, I asked Andrew what story he was telling himself about the vision. The phrases Andrew was telling himself over and over again were: *I am disgusting. I am a disappointment. I am a failure. I don’t deserve forgiveness. I am going to lose everything.*

Because shame is such a powerful force, you cannot talk someone out of what they believe when in shame. The deepest fears behind the shame need to be met head on in order to bring it into the light. Modeled after Job’s prayer of acceptance when he feared destruction (*Though you slay me, yet I will trust you*) and other scriptures like it, I use a simple prayer called the Paradox Prayer to reduce the power of shame beliefs. I led Andrew through some Paradox Prayers using his own words:⁶

Even though I am disgusting, I am loved and accepted by God.

Even though I am disgusting, I love and accept myself.

Even though I am stuck in a pit of shit, I am loved and accepted by God.

Even though I am stuck in a pit of shit, I love and accept myself.

The Pit of Shame

Paradox Prayers have the effect of calming the limbic brain, quieting the battlefield of the mind - a necessary step for listening prayer. After tearfully choking through some of the prayers about his worst fears, Andrew was calmer and ready to take the next step of listening to what the Lord had to say about his shame. I invited him to get a “bird’s eye view” of himself in his shame.

“Get up above the situation, stand on a balcony and see yourself in the pit you are stuck in,” I said. He was noticeably calmer at this point as is typical when we create some distance from the suffocating power of shame. I asked if he was willing to let the Lord come near, standing with him on the balcony. Almost immediately after he said yes, he broke into deep sobs. Trusting the Lord was up to something, I quietly waited until he could collect himself enough to let me know what was happening.

“He jumped into the pit of shit with me,” he said through wracking sobs. I gasped and reached for another tissue myself. I had no words.

As is often the case in healing prayer, I am mostly a by-stander, honored to witness what the Lord does with the most painful of situations. When the tears abated, I asked Andrew what was going on. “He took me out of the pit and is washing me off.” We sat in silence while the Lord worked on Andrew’s shame. After a bit, I asked, “Lord, Andrew is afraid that he has destroyed all the gifts you have given him,” referring to the burlap sacks he was trying to hold up out of the crap. Once again, he broke into deep sobs.

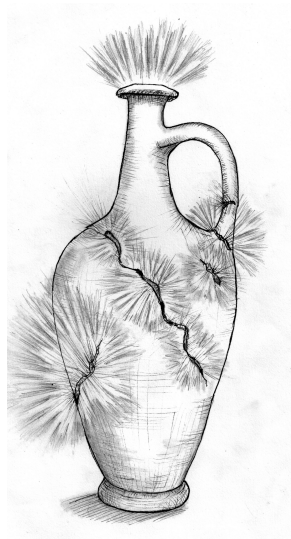
When he gathered himself enough to share with me, he said the Lord told him, “You are the gift. These things are inside you. They cannot be destroyed. You are my son.”

Created in the Image of God: Full of Crap and Glory

To accept that we are created in the image of God is to accept furious opposites about ourselves. We are: weak and powerful, capable of horrendous evil and incredible good, lion and lamb, human and divine. Like Paul, our members will war against us at times,⁷ causing us to live divided and mutated versions of who God created us to be. But also like Paul, we can find the freedom that comes from abiding in the Imago Dei: It is no longer I, but Christ.⁸ We are full of crap and full of glory.⁹ Ironically and paradoxically, it is when we can embrace our humanity that we can live more fully in the center of “Christ in me, the hope of glory.”¹⁰

Accepting the Reality of being created in the image of God sounds something like this:

I am a human being created in the image of God. God says it is very good. I am created of dust and to dust I will return. Because I am human and not God, I make mistakes. I am wrong about more things than I even realize. I have more questions than answers. I am not ashamed of these things because God is not ashamed of them. I acknowledge that God’s foolishness is wiser than my wisdom and God’s weaknesses are stronger than my strengths.¹¹ I am a jar of clay with a great treasure inside. I am imperfect – my jar of clay has its own cracks, but we are all a bunch of cracked pots with a light inside.



The prophet Micah was one of many voices calling us to paradox long ago: What does the Lord ask of you... do justice and love mercy.¹² God desires face-to-face relationship, inviting us to live from the internal Garden of Eden

In the epigraph of this article, I share a favorite quote by G.K. Chesterton: “Christianity got over the difficulty of combining furious opposites, by keeping them both, and keeping them both furious.” While I love this quote, I have come to believe that it is not quite true. The collective Christian Church, by and large, has actually done a lousy job over the centuries of keeping furious opposites. We keep pulling them apart and falling back into the major heresies. Christ, on the other hand, does a beautiful job of keeping furious opposites.

In his book, *The Ascent of Truth*, Thomas Merton beautifully captures the paradox of justice and mercy:

All perfections of God are unlimited and they are therefore all one identical reality. It is impossible for us to understand the notions of justice and mercy unless they are somehow divided from one another and opposed. In God, justice is mercy, mercy is justice, and both are wisdom and power and being, for all His attributes merge in one infinite Reality that elevates them beyond definition and comprehension.¹³

The material in this three-part essay is drawn from the writings of Paradox Found and from a presentation at the Open Table Conference in June of 2016. Audio recordings available at:

<http://opentableconference.com>

For more information on Imago Dei Ministries, visit us at: <http://www.idmin.org>

For more information on Trinitarian theology, see: Baxter Kruger’s work at <http://perichoresis.org> ; Paul Young’s work at <http://wmpaulyoung.com> and Brad Jersak’s work at <http://www.bradjersak.com>

¹ Matthew 1:17

² Psalm 40:6

³ Acts 13:22

⁴ Matthew 12:17. See also 1 Samuel 15:22

⁵ Matthew 28:18; Colossians 1:15-23

⁶ For more examples of Paradox Prayers in scripture, see: Psalm 23:4, Psalm 41:10, Habakkuk 3:17-18. For more info on Paradox Prayers, visit us at: *idmin.org*

⁷ Romans 7:23

⁸ Galatians 2:25

⁹ I am indebted to my friend, Paula Gamble-Grant, who coined this term.

¹⁰ Colossians 1:27

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 1:25

¹² Micah 6:8

¹³ Merton, T, *The Ascent of Truth*. Harcourt: New York, 1981. pp. 91-92