

24.17

## Honor and Shame in Hebrews

The author of Hebrews has the difficult task of addressing people who have committed themselves to a way of life that lacks social approval, and of doing so in a culture that puts a very high premium on the acquisition of public honor and the avoidance of public disgrace or shame. He does not challenge the importance of honor and shame as such but, rather, suggests a reappraisal of what will ultimately count as “honorable” and “shameful”: conventional wisdom has this wrong, defining the values in ways that do not concur with the judgment of God.

First, the letter encourages its readers to consider any loss of status or social reputation that they have experienced because of their faith as an ironic badge of honor. Since God disciplines those whom God favors (12:5–6), such trials may be viewed as an indication of divine approval.

Second, the letter reminds readers that they are in good company. The heroes of the Bible also were people who suffered loss of wealth and prestige in this life in exchange for greater, lasting honor in the world to come (11:8–10, 13–16, 24–26). Even those who seemed to be the lowest of the low—people who were imprisoned or chained, who suffered horrible torments and disgraceful deaths, who wandered homeless in the wilderness and lived in caves, who

wrapped their bodies in animal skins because they had no clothes, who were utterly destitute and miserable—ultimately would be recognized as ones “of whom the world was not worthy” (11:36–38). In short, those whom the world despised turned out to be the ones who were ultimately accorded the greatest honor. Indeed, they ended up being regarded as people who put the world to shame. Finally, the book of Hebrews draws on the image of an athletic contest or a race (12:1; cf. 10:35–36; 12:12–13): the Christian pilgrimage may be viewed as a competition for honorable victory. Yielding to society’s pressures and “giving up” would constitute ignoble defeat.

See David A. deSilva, *Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, SBLDS 152 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).