

Families of Grace

Principle 8: *Words of grace transform our environment (see Proverbs 25:11).*

A family system in which members are given constant messages about themselves that something is wrong with them is a family of shame. In that family, love is conditional, based on performance; acceptance as a person is not free, it is earned by performing certain behaviors and avoiding others. Even under the best circumstances, then, people are not loved and accepted; behavior is all-important. It is not surprising that a grace-full family looks entirely different than a shame-based family. As a matter of fact, it is the opposite. The characteristics of a shame-based family serve as a springboard from which to step into a discussion on the characteristics of a grace-full family. Shame-based relationships have:

1. Out-loud shaming. The message communicated is: "Something is wrong with you;" "You are defective;" "You don't measure up;" "Why can't you be like . . ."
2. Performance-orientation. The focus is on doing certain good behaviors and avoiding others as a means of earning love, gaining acceptance, acquiring approval, or proving value.
3. Unspoken rules. Behavior is governed by rules or standards that are seldom, if ever, spoken out loud. In fact, sometimes the only way they are discovered is when they are broken. There is a "can't-talk-about-it" rule in effect, which means no one is supposed to notice or mention problems, and if you speak out about a problem, you are the problem. This forces people to keep quiet. There is also a "can't-win" rule in effect. For instance, children are taught never to lie; they are also told to never tell Grandma her meatloaf tastes bad. No matter how hard you try to keep these contradictory rules, you always fail to perform. And failure to perform results in shame. These rules tend to govern future relationships as well.
4. Communicating through "coding." Talking about feelings or needs leaves you feeling ashamed for being so "selfish." Talking about problems breaks the "can't-talk-about-it" rule and gets you shamed for being the problem. Therefore, family members learn to say things in code, or they send messages to each other indirectly through other people.
5. Idolatry. Family members are taught to turn to things and people other than God's acceptance as the measure of their value and identity. The measuring stick becomes: how things look; what people think; religious behavior; acquiring possessions.
6. Putting kids through a hard time. Kids are involved in the messy and imperfect process of finding out about life. But the family cares most about how things look and what people think. Therefore, just being a kid becomes a shaming thing. Children must learn to act like miniature adults in order to avoid shame.
7. Preoccupation with fault and blame. Since there is such a focus on performance in this family, lack of performance must be tracked down and eradicated. Fault and blame are the order of the day. The purpose of the question, "Who is responsible?" is to find out who is to blame. That way the culprit can be shamed, humiliated, and made to feel bad.
8. Strong on "head skills." Family members become experts at defending themselves. Blaming, rationalizing, minimizing, and denial are just some of the ways people push away shame.
9. Weak on "heart skills." "Can't-feel" is another rule governing this system. Feelings are wrong, selfish, or unnecessary. People in shame-based families don't know they feel.
10. Needy people. Because love and acceptance are earned on the basis of behavior, but never received apart from performance. Shame-based families are empty on the inside.

FAMILIES OF GRACE

1. Out-loud affirming (vs. out-loud shaming). Hearing is one of the senses through which people receive information about themselves, others, and life. Ears are not equipped with tiny filters that only let in wholesome messages of support. Every message gets in. As adults we can learn to consciously push away certain messages that shame us and tear us down. But the fact that we have to do so much work to reject those messages means we have heard them loud and clear in the first place.

2. People-oriented (vs. performance-oriented). David Seamands says, "We all need an environment where we feel our needs are met because of who we are and not because of what we do." In grace-full families, love and acceptance does not fluctuate depending on how people act. People are affirmed for being who they are. In shame-based families, behavior is the most important thing.

3. Out-loud rules and expectations (vs. unspoken rules). In a grace-full family, rules are there to serve people; people are not there to serve the rules. In order for rules to serve the family most effectively, everyone needs to know what the rules are. If a rule favors certain people (the adults, an older child, the baby of the family), or is too rigid or silly to say out loud, you should not have that rule. And it is not okay to hold people accountable for rules they did not verbally know were in operation.

4. Communication is clear and straight (versus coding). If you want someone to take out the garbage, ask them to do so. Don't say, "Sure would be nice if someone would take out the garbage," and then complain when people ignore or miss your coded message. If you'd rather have hamburgers than hot dogs, say so. Don't say, "I don't care, we can have whatever you want," and then pout when you end up with hot dogs. If you need help, ask for it. Don't say, "No, it's no big deal. I'll be fine," and really mind.

5. God is the Source (vs. idolatry). As Christians, God is our Source. He is our need-meeter, our vindicator, our defender, the one who has the last word on our value and acceptance. We are not valuable and acceptable because of how much money we make, the clothes we wear, our church attendance, or because we have been faithful in our giving. Other people can think whatever they want and they will. What they say might feel hurtful sometimes, but they do not decide the truth about us.

6. Children are enjoyed (vs. giving the kids a hard time). In shame-based families, children must act like little adults in order to keep from being shamed. In grace-full families it's okay for them to act like kids.

7. Responsibility and accountability (vs. fault and blame). Fault and blame are used in shame-based families to punish children for their lack of performance. They become tools in the process of trying to control the behavior of others. But people are responsible for their choices, and accountability is good.

8. "Head skills" are used for learning (vs. "head skills" used for defending). In grace-full families, thinking is used for the purpose of learning. In shame-based families it is used to defend, to blame, to make excuses, and to get out of being responsible. This mental-dodging is to keep from being shamed.

9. Feelings are valid and useful (vs. weak on "heart skills"). Feelings are not right or wrong, they simply exist. They are emotional and physiological signals that tell us that something is going on between us and the world around us. The choices we make in response to our feelings determine good or bad.

10. It's OK for outsides to match insides (vs. empty people learning to act full). In grace-full families, what is real is more important than how things look. We learn to create our homes as a safe place.