

Questions about Shyness

Written by Bob Stone

Question: You have asked me to reflect a little bit about shyness and how you might help a coworker who is extremely shy. I am asked about this subject frequently, as people know there was a time in my life when I was very shy. Since that time, I have discovered shyness is not a negative thing. One can be born with a certain genetic predisposition to shyness, and there are environmental factors and modeling by parents and peers that can also affect a person's self-esteem and shyness. Beyond those factors, however, there is something surprising about shyness that most people do not understand.

The Surprising Gift Of Shyness

Shyness can be a gift that is sometimes misdirected. When it is mature and empowered by the Lord, however, it can become sensitivity, empathy, perception, and even intuition. What happens most often is that we direct our shyness at ourselves; we consider how other people are reacting to us. I used to assume when I walked into a room where people were laughing, that they were laughing at me. I would often check to see if my zipper was down, or if I had something in my teeth. After doing that a couple hundred times, I realized that I was overly sensitive.

While reading a book by Ethel Barrett, *Sometimes I Feel Like a Blob*, I decided the best thing for me was to dedicate my shyness to God, because it was driving me crazy. This dedication was inspired by a story Barrett tells in her book about the life of a man named Steven Paxton. After dedicating his life to Christ, Paxton felt God was calling him into the ministry, but he had a real challenge to deal with--he stuttered. Even though He couldn't seem to do anything about his stuttering, he didn't want it to keep him from fulfilling his calling. So he dedicated his stuttering to the Lord and proceeded to minister even with his limitations. Steven went to the Mississippi Valley to establish Sunday Schools; the children didn't seem to mind that he took a long time to tell his stories.

One day he discovered he could overcome his stuttering by breathing a certain way. It caused startling changes in his life and ministry. Eventually he became a very effective speaker. In fact, newspapers recorded that he could hold an audience spellbound as he spoke.

Dedicating Shyness To God

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Well, that example gave me the encouragement to dedicate my shyness to God. Over a period of time, the Lord has shown me that if I will take the same "sensitivity" I have been applying to myself and start focusing on others, it will really be a gift. If you are shy, I'm sure you've had the experience of being able to sit in a room with people and begin to pick up on how everyone in the room is doing, e.g., those who are hurting, depressed, faking it, etc.

So I encourage shy believers to take their shyness and dedicate it to the Lord. It really is a wonderful and beautiful gift. I love shy people, and I believe the Lord does too.

Another good way to overcome self-focused shyness is to begin memorizing a series of questions you can ask that will encourage people to open up and talk about themselves. I used such a list for years. Being "others-centered" in conversation takes the attention off you and allows the gift of sensitivity to be used on others.

If you are shy and have dedicated this gift to God, watch out, because you are going to find empathy, mercy, and caring begin to well up in your heart. It's all part of the maturing of shyness.