

Specks and Planks

by David Cluff

Matthew 7:3-5 (NKJV)

And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

Blame has very obvious machinations. If someone rear-ends you in a motor vehicle accident, invariably the law will lay fault with the other driver. Much of the legal system is structured to determine the perpetrator and victim¹ and duly compensate the victim and punish the perpetrator. As a means to determine the justice of external events, the process of placating blame seems altogether rational. But what for blame that arises from internal emotive reactions such as frustration and anger in relational settings?

It's only when external silence befalls on me I get to notice the nature of my self-talk. Invariably the tone of internal conversation mirrors my external relationships. I'm either defending myself in anticipation of a conflict, attempting to prove myself with clever words or looking for possible traps so I can avoid them. Unchecked, my internal chatter can leave me charged with energy as if what I fantasised had actually taken place. When I do enter a real relational setting, it's likely I'll successfully seek and find the pain I feared. With such negative charge being held in my body, and little practice in owning how I feel and self-soothing, I look for someone or something external to discharge onto. I believe blame, in this context, can best be defined as a resistance to hold myself responsible for how I feel. Blame energy is discharged through many subtleties. Do any of the following sound familiar?



Have you seen my keys! Will you be quiet! Will you let me know what you're doing so I don't have to worry! Everything is so easy for you! Why didn't you do your best! Will someone please clean up! How dare you speak to me in that tone! Why did he get the promotion! If only I'd win lotto! Bloody government! I can't stand that person! I'd be better off without them! I need a new job! You could lose a few kilograms! Would it be asking too much for a thank you! Women are so much better at this kind of stuff! Go Australia!!

¹ Karpman, S. (2007). *The New Drama Triangles*.

I know them all too well. The orientation for blame is always outward. Notice the commonality of “you”. Ironically, blame energy starts with triggers of the blamer’s anxiety, anger and/or discomfort. Because of humanities’ central tendency which Girard names the “scapegoat mechanism”², we immediately and almost instinctively hold the other person, people, object or event responsible for how we feel. I remember at points throughout my personal counselling when I protested “why is it always me that has to change!” I reflectively chuckle at my unwitting defense of scapegoating.

It’s clear to me that Jesus understood this aspect of the human condition. He went as far as calling his audience “hypocrites” which means “actors or mask wearers”³. His message was simple. If you’re looking outwards when personal discomfort awakens, you’re missing the invitation that the unwelcomed speck is offering. The specks are merely the triggers to an emotional state that pre-existed that moment and relationship. At the heart of the blaming self is conditional love. We idealise pain-free living and consequently attempt to manipulate others, even God to change their behaviour or our personal circumstances. I’m convinced that the majority of my prayer life was purposed to steer God to engineer my life’s agenda and keep the specks away from my course less the devil have his day. If I couldn’t find a worthy scapegoat then God must be the one at fault. While casting my mind over my prayer life, I notice a dependency for external changes specific to job interviews, happy times with people, events at church, relational struggles, positive impact on others, educational assessment results, child raising and competitive outcomes to name a few.

Demanding external change avoids an inward journey. As it was for me, I had to face and endure a crisis that disorientated the identity I found outside of myself. In the Garden of Eden, Eve was deceived, believing she could obtain godliness or wholeness through something external to her current union while Adam crafted the template for blaming in his complaint, “this woman you gave me” (Gen 3:12). If the target of blame, the scapegoat, cannot meet the change condition then my inner drama can uphold its default as victim. If you don’t repent then I’ll exclude you, gather support against you or hold a sustaining judgment against you when we are together. I might even pretend to love and welcome you while an emotional wall demands you change your ways.

Clearly, the larger and most significant metaphoric object Christ mentioned was the “plank”. The plank is an aspect of self that we cannot consciously see. Jesus recognized this blindness. He engaged his audiences with parables. He artfully showed the religious that they judged and marginalized from their own poverty, which was masked as righteousness. I don’t believe having Christ as the head of our church removes this trap. Christ addressed the religious systems of his day because it was how we humans do religion throughout the ages, Christian or not. On the Cross, as the collective targeted the specks in Christ that activated their

² Girard, R. (1986). *The Scapegoat*. USA: John Hopkins University Press.

³ Sanford, J.A. (1970). *The Kingdom Within: The Inner Meaning of Jesus’ sayings*. New York: Paulist Press.

own poverty he said, “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.*” (Lk 23:34). With the plank unconscious, we have little chance of it coming to consciousness in isolation of the specks. The specks then provide the breadcrumbs that lead us to ‘see clearly’. They are inviting us to ‘consider the plank in our own eye’. When the reaction is triggered, a part of ourselves is being awakened. The only way to recognise an awakening is by countering the tendency to blame and own the discomfort, no matter how repulsive and regardless of the feeling’s accompanying story. Holding onto the blame energy in my experience can feel like injustice, even death.

The importance of community comes to the foreground. The specks are purposed to bring our blind spots to awareness. If I retreat from community or surround myself with only like-minded and advocating people, there is no challenge to my judgements. Self-awareness begins the moment I see that I am disowning and blaming. Holding onto the blame energy then helps me incrementally start to recognise what form my plank(s) takes. This is the process of the unconscious becoming conscious. Confronting my own judgement leads to understanding why others invoke offense and more importantly, how to reconcile, even love my own offensiveness. The shift in my relationship to my own offensiveness will be mirrored when faced with previous offenders. If unconditional love is the benchmark of Christianity and indeed human relationships, then any uprising within me that requires change in another is a strong indication that God is working through me for my wholeness and salvation. If only we reside to “turning inwards”⁴ for transformation. Blame stands at the gates of the inward journey determined to convince us that our interior instabilities can only be remedied through the external world.

⁴ Metzner, R. (1998, 2nd Ed.). *The Unfolding Self: Varieties of Transformative Experience*. Novato, CA: Oregon.