**Those Pesky Emotions!**

Emotions at times can be a trick for all of us!  Sometimes we wear them on our sleeves, while other times we stuff and deny troublesome emotions, pretending they aren't bothering us and hoping they will go quickly away so we feel better. Yet they do bother us as well as those around us! And they keep counselors in business!

Our Triune God expresses emotions appropriately, so emotions do have a good purpose. They alert us that something needs to change, either in us or through us! We are created in His image and therefore must learn to align our emotions to His sinless emotions, even though we live in a fallen world with sin affecting our emotions as well as our thoughts and behaviors.

Learning to express emotions in ways that honor God requires growing in self-control. Self-control is a Fruit of the Spirit, matured by bringing “self” under the control of the Holy Spirit, allowing His work of teaching, convicting, correcting and training us to conform us to the image of Christ that we might engage in the work of Christ.

The sinful responses we tend to blame on our emotions must be replaced by Biblical thinking that reflects the mind of Christ about circumstances that trigger negative emotional responses. Righteous thinking then results in righteous behaviors that reflect the character of Christ.  In our culture, many believe we have no control over our emotions but are rather held captive to them.  Scripture lays a clear foundation for how to control our emotions by consistently controlling our thoughts (Php 4:8) and behaviors (Pro 4:23), bringing them into the obedience of Christ (2Cor10:5). We can choose to have positive emotions, to live out the Fruit of the Spirit in everyday life.

***We feel what we feel because we think what we think and do what we do!***

We respond to our life experiences through emotions. Just bang your thumb with a hammer and see if the physical pain you feel doesn’t also produce an emotional response! When you have a deadline to meet, the pressure produces an internal stress that you very much feel in your body and your emotions. Arguing with a beloved relative may lead to hurt feelings that send you onto an emotional rollercoaster. As we grow in understanding that our everyday experiences contribute to the emotions we feel, we must also be quick to understand that circumstances do not CAUSE the emotions!

Anger, fear, depression, shame, confusion, and loneliness are some of the negative emotions we are quick to feel and express. These emotions are not caused by the circumstance of our experience, but by the way we interpret those circumstances. When we put God into the interpretation of our circumstances, our beliefs about that circum-stance begin to change and we act on those beliefs in ways that honors God. Then our emotions begin to reflect the Fruit of the Spirit, combining beliefs, actions, and emotions: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. We experience true happiness, joy, peace, gratitude, and contentment. Positive emotions prevail even in the midst of difficult circumstances.

Take David for example. The Israelite army was quaking in fear of Goliath, and their action was to run away from the dangerous circumstance. Their belief system interpreted that Goliath was too big and too dangerous; they were victims of disaster. David faced exactly the same dangerous circumstance; Goliath was much bigger and stronger than he, equipped to battle in ways of which David knew nothing. However, David’s belief system interpreted his God as bigger than Goliath; his God had always been faithful, helping him kill the lion and bear to protect his sheep; his God would help him kill the giant that was defying the true and living God and mocking His people. David’s actions then reflected his beliefs, and he defended God’s honor by killing Goliath. What emotions David must have experienced as the victor who won the battle! I do believe they were positive emotions of jubilation that came out of his God-honoring beliefs and lifestyle choices.

Let’s take another example. An idiot on the road cuts you off and nearly causes an accident. You spew and sputter for 20 minutes about those idiot drivers, speeding up to cut him off and show him how it feels. You may even curse and give him a nasty look. What belief system rules you at that moment? You have a right and he violated your right to that spot on the road. You deserve better treatment. You are angry and therefore believe you are justified in your actions that reflect your belief system. Are your emotions at that point positive or negative? Is your anger righteous (reflecting God and His glory) or is it unrighteous (reflecting your selfish desires)?

However, another day, another idiot may cut you off again. Same circumstance, but let’s say this time you are worshipping God as you drive along and your car reflects the sanctuary of your heart that wants to honor God. Your belief system has changed from selfishness to honoring God and others, so you slow down to allow him to safely enter, you pray for him to get home safely without killing himself or anyone else, and you go right back to your praise and worship, thanking God for His tender mercies of safety toward you and others. Now what emotions are you experiencing and expressing? The emotions, then, are really a by-product of what you think about your circumstances and your God, and how you act out on those beliefs.

***Communicating feelings accurately***

God gave us emotions to assist us in identifying our circumstances and motivating needed changes. In Psalm 38, David identifies his symptoms of depression and its triggers, and then he was able to identify where to turn in the midst of his troubles. In Psalm 51 we see his emotion of guilt and shame motivating him to repent and change his behaviors. Then in Psalm 73, Asaph’s emotion of jealousy assisted him to compare two lifestyles (his and the wicked), to evaluate the eternal destination of each, and to reinforce his godly lifestyle. Psalm 133 is an example of emotions assisting to enhance our lives as David expressed joy over unity with his brothers of like-mind.

Our culture has programed us to believe that feelings are the most important part of our existence. We are taught to communicate our thoughts, beliefs, attitudes and personal desires by expressing how we feel about something. Therapists often talk more about how a particular circumstance makes a person feel than about what the person can change in their own thoughts and actions to help change the negative feelings about that circumstance. Emotions are typically the entry point into counseling, so we as Biblical counselors must understand how to lead a person from those bothersome feelings to what they can do about those feelings through sanctification.

When we as counselors or parents downgrade another’s feelings or invalidate them, we may rob that person of an opportunity to grow by identifying what he really believes about his circumstance, about himself and about his god. We must listen to emotions for what they reveal about a person’s belief system, rather than denying or minimizing what he is feeling. Use the person’s emotions to help her gain insight into what actually needs to change.

Emotions are not the standard for quality of life. When emotions are exalted as supreme, a person may determine what is true and right for himself based on feelings rather than on God’s Word. How he feels about something does not make it accurate nor God-honoring, but it can give insight into his heart. Feeling good about sinful behavior does not make it right, it just indicates a heart misaligned from God’s heart. Our goal is to first help a person re-align his heart with God’s Word and then his desires, thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors will set the stage for balanced and godly emotions.

***Triggers for Imbalance***

I can hear some protesting that chemical imbalances must be addressed. I don’t deny that body chemistry can play a part in some people’s depression or anxiety, but the jury is still out as to which comes first, the trigger or the imbalance. That is not the topic of our discussion here, since we all understand that our body as well as our heart has been affected by the Fall.

But I will end this discussion on emotions by looking at Luke 2:52, the only record we have of Jesus’ development and maturity. Four spheres of life are mentioned. Jesus grew in wisdom (mind, intellect), in stature (physical), in favor with God (spiritual) and man (social). The absence of the emotional sphere does not mean Jesus had no emotions! He certainly displayed emotions regularly as he ministered here on earth, and He was emotionally balanced!

I believe His development focused on the four spheres we are responsible to balance in our maturing process. If a person becomes out of balance in any one of the four spheres, the emotions will be affected in a negative way. Rebalancing these spheres typically rebalances the emotions.

A person who is physically imbalanced, either because of disease, poor nutrition, lack of exercise, or lack of rest will experience emotional imbalance. A medical doctor may need to help correct physical problems. Diet, exercise, and rest must certainly be bought into a healthy lifestyle.

Think about the person who is mentally distraught, perhaps because of vocational or educational goals unmet or because of communication or thinking skills not developed in healthy ways. That person often struggles with emotions of fear, anger, jealousy, or depression triggered by an immature belief system. Perhaps reevaluating educational or vocational goals, or learning skills that allow them to grow in wisdom in healthy ways will make a big difference in mental balance.

Social imbalance from relationships out of sync with someone who should be close results in emotional imbalance. Couples who are fighting will come to counseling more about how they feel than how they need to learn to relate to one another in God-honoring ways. Yet learning to get along and love one another is foundational to how they will feel about one another!

Spiritual imbalance from guilt over sin, from misunderstanding and misapplying God’s Word, from lack of a personal relationship and connection with the Lord…these will also leads to an emotional imbalance. Confession, repentance, and then growth in sanctification are all necessary to help the person regain a healthy view of himself before God.

So how do we help someone rebalance emotions? By helping that person understand and correct the other spheres of their life that are out of balance. Emotions, then, are a by-product of what we believe and what we do in each of these spheres of life. When any one or more of these spheres are not in balance, negative emotions result. When all four are functioning in healthy and God-honoring ways, there is an emotional balance and stability that will get us through any of the trials of life we may face. That doesn’t mean we never feel a negative emotion…we do and we will. But the negative emotions won’t dominate, because the Fruit of the Spirit will prevail in our lives. Even if difficult circumstances never change, our attitude about the circumstance will be the mind of Christ resulting in the character of Christ lived out in us and in our counselees for His glory.

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