

# **What Does the Bible Teach About Our Emotions?**

## **Learning the ABCs of Emotional Intelligence**

**By**

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## Part 1

### Emotions: Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

When it comes to emotions, we seem prone to *extremes*, even in the Christian world. Some of us act as if emotions are a result of the Fall, so we *stuff them or ignore them*. For others of us, we act as if emotions are *king* and we *allow them to rule us*.

But what does the *Bible* teach? What models of *Christlike emotionality* do we find in God's Word?

If we are to live godly lives—Christlike lives—then we need God's perspective on emotions. We need a biblical, practical theology of emotionality.

In this introductory series, we look at a Creation, Fall, Redemption model of our emotions. We examine:

- How God originally designed us as emotional beings—Creation
- How our fall into sin marred our emotionality—Fall
- How our new life in Christ restores us to and toward emotional maturity—Redemption

#### Creation: Emotions—God's Idea

In many Christian circles, emotions are viewed as the "*black sheep*" of the image bearing family. We accept that God created us with a soul to *relate*, with a mind to *think*, and with a will to *choose*.

But somehow we act as if emotions were *not* God's idea. We often see emotions more as a cursing than a blessing. "More harm than good." "Suppress them." "Ignore them." "Don't have them." If emotions are so distressing, then why did God create us with feelings?

#### God's Original Emotional Design for Us: Emotions—In the Image of God

Somewhere along the lines we've forgotten that when God paused to ponder His image bearers, He pointed out that they, *emotions included*, were "very good." Feelings were God's idea.

Not only did God give emotions to us; He experiences them Himself! God is an emotional being. Hear that again. Let's not dodge it. *God is an emotional being*. God the Father experiences anger. God the Son weeps. God the Spirit grieves.

God created us in His image, including His emotional image. As John Piper notes:

*“God’s emotional life is infinitely complex beyond our ability to fully comprehend.”*

Our emotionality is designed *by* God *and* like God—our emotions were created *very good*.

### **God’s Original Emotional Design for Us: Emotions—Fearfully and Wonderfully Made**

Emotions are God-given. They are not satanic. Adam had them before the Fall. Christ has them. In and of themselves, emotions are not sinful. Emotions are beneficial, and yes, even beautiful.

The Psalmist understood this. In the classic passage describing God’s utmost care in creating us—Psalm 139—emotionality is *the one aspect of our inner personality* specifically referenced.

“For you created my *inmost being*; you knit me together in my mother’s womb” (Psalm 139:13).

“Inmost being” is kidneys or reins in the KJV. In Psalm 73:21, the same word is used to mean grieved and embittered. And in Proverbs 23:16, the kidneys are the place of rejoicing and gladness.

Theologian and Hebrew language expert, Hans Wolff, notes that the Semitic languages used terms for kidneys, reins, stomach, bowels, and womb *to describe the feeling states*. As we literally experience and feel an emotion in our physical being, so we feel an emotion in our inner being. That’s why we say things like, *“I have butterflies in my stomach.”*

God created your inmost being, your kidneys, your emotions. Your emotions are fearfully and wonderfully made—by God. In fact, your emotions are *the one* element that God highlights as having been fearfully and wonderfully made!

### **The Rest of the Story**

Contrary to public opinion, emotions are God’s idea, they are created in His image, and they are fearfully and wonderfully made. Having summarized God’s “Big Picture” about the original beauty of our emotions, next we’ll ask and answer the question, *Why Do We Feel What We Feel?*

### **For Reflection and Application**

Why do you think that we as Christians sometime fear feelings?

How does it change your thoughts about your feelings when you realize that emotions were God’s idea and that God specifically declares that your emotions are fearfully and wonderfully made?

We tend to think so negatively about our emotions. So, let's ask some different questions. What are some of the beautiful aspects of your emotions? Of your moods? Or your emotional life?

How are your feelings and emotions beneficial to you? To others?

## Part 2

### Emotions: Why Do We Feel What We Feel?

Why did our heavenly Father create us with emotions? For what purpose and function did God design our emotions?

#### Defining Emotions

The root of the word *emotion* is *motere*, from the Latin verb “to move,” plus the prefix “e” meaning “to move away.” This suggests that a tendency to act is implicit in every emotion.

All emotions are, in essence, inclinations to act and react. This means that:

*God designed our emotions to put us in motion.*

Emotions represent an inner response that motivates outward action—emotions signal the mind to go into high gear. To understand this biblically, let’s consider 1 Peter 5:7-8.

“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:7-8).

We often fail to relate these two verses even though they are back-to-back in Scripture. Anxiety, like all emotions, is an emotion that *motivates us to act*. Our emotions and our mind sense something that we perceive to be dangerous—a *threat*. We can respond to that anxiety-provoking situation with fear of man or self-protection—that would be a *fallen* emotional response.

Or, we can respond to that anxiety-provoking situation by casting our anxiety on Him *and by* being alert and vigilant. We could describe the creation side of anxiety as *vigilance*—the ability to pick up on cues in our world and to respond in a God-dependent, other-protecting way.

Thus, we don’t have to see emotions, including anxiety, only as a sinful. We could take what Paul said in Ephesians 4 about anger and paraphrase it from 1 Peter 5:7 with anxiety:

“Be anxious, but do not sin. Instead, when your emotional sensors pick up a threat, especially a spiritual threat, then cast your anxiety upon the Lord. As you do, use your anxiety to warn yourself to keep alert and vigilant. Don’t be like Adam in the garden who went off sentry duty when the serpent tempted him and Eve. Instead, be like Christ who was always on sentry duty to protect His disciples against the subtle attacks of the Evil One.”

Instead of seeing emotions as only evil or fallen, we need to understand that God designed emotions to play a crucial role that forces us to do a double-check, to look *outward and inward*. Emotions are our “inner sentinel” that connect us to our inner and outer world.

So, we can provide a working definition of emotions:

- Emotions are our *God-given* capacity to *connect* our inner and outer world by *experiencing* our world and responding to those experiences.
- Our emotional capacity includes the ability to internally experience and respond to a full-range of both *positive* (pleasant) and *negative* (painful) inner feelings.

### **A Biblical Model for Understanding Our Emotional Responses**

To more fully understand our emotions, we need an introduction to how God designed our inner person. We’ve said that God designed us as emotional beings. However, that does not mean that we are *only* or *primarily* emotional beings. Nor does it mean that our emotions are meant to control us. Instead, God designed us so that our emotions submit to and respond to our beliefs and convictions.

1. What we believe (Romans 12:1-2) (Rational Direction)
2. About God and life (Psalm 42:1-2) (Relational Affection)
3. Provides the direction we choose to pursue (Joshua 24:15) (Volitional Motivation), and
4. Directs our experiential response (Ephesians 4:17-19) (Emotional Reaction) to our world.
  - What we believe → about God and life → provides the direction we choose to pursue → and directs our experiential/emotional response to our world.

Let’s think again about how this plays itself out in 1 Peter 5:7-8. The context of 1 Peter is a Christian response to suffering and persecution. Notice the key to how we respond to suffering—it’s in the phrase “because He cares for you.”

Our belief about God (that He cares for us) is what motivates our godly response (casting our cares on God and vigilantly resisting the devil) to feelings of anxiety.

Godly beliefs (rational direction) lead to godly affections (spiritual affections) which in turn lead to godly motivation and actions (volitional motivation), and ultimately result in Christlike handling of our emotions (emotional reactions).

## God Designed Our Emotions to Interact with Our Inner and Outer World

Now let's take this introductory theology of our inner life and consider a practical biblical model for understanding emotions:

- *Our External Situation plus our Internal Perception/Belief leads to our Emotional Response.*

Picture our emotions like this:

- Negative Situation + Biblical Belief = Legitimate Painful Emotion (Sorrow, Sadness, etc.)
- Negative Situation + Unbiblical Belief = Illegitimate Painful Emotion (Hatred, Despair, etc.)
- Positive Situation + Biblical Belief = Legitimate Positive Emotion (Joy, Peace)
- Positive Situation + Unbiblical Belief = Illegitimate Positive Emotion (Pride, Self-Sufficiency, etc.)

Your boss says to you, "You blew it." Your emotions react to this external situation *and to* your internal beliefs. What if you had a biblical belief: "I enjoy my boss's approval, but I don't *need* it, and I know that in Christ I am accepted by God"? Then you will respond with legitimate painful emotions such as sorrow, disappointment, or remorse (if you were truly in the wrong).

On the other hand, what if "fear of man" is a besetting sin in your heart? What if you believe that, "I must have my boss's approval"? Then you would likely respond with illegitimate negative emotions such as uncontrolled anger, depression to the point of despair, hopelessness, or hatred.

Now let's say your boss says to you, "You always do A+ work!" You could respond to that positive external situation with a biblical belief like, "I live for an audience of One—Christ, and I am glad that my Christlike work ethic glorifies my heavenly Father." You would then experience positive legitimate emotions like peace, joy, and contentment.

On the other hand, if your boss says, "You always do A+ work," and you live for the praise of man, then you might experience illegitimate positive emotions like pride and arrogance.

The key to our *emotional reaction is our belief or perception about the meaning behind the event.*

Thus, events determine whether our emotions are *pleasant or painful*, while longings, beliefs, and goals determine whether our emotional reaction is *holy or sinful*.

## **The Rest of the Story**

If only life and emotions were as easy as some bullet points on a page. What makes emotions so hard to handle? We'll explore that question in our next topic: *Emotions Gone Bad and Mad*.

## **For Reflection and Application**

Ponder a current situation you're facing. Use our model to assess the situation and your emotional response: *Your External Situation plus Your Internal Perception leads to Your Emotional Response*.

What is the external situation that you're responding to?

What are your beliefs about this situation? Are those beliefs biblically accurate or inaccurate? Wise or foolish?

What are your beliefs about God in this situation? Are those beliefs biblically true or untrue? Wise or foolish?

How are your beliefs about the situation, others, and God influencing your emotional response?



## Part 3

### Emotions: Gone Bad and Mad

So far we've focused on how God designed us as emotional beings. However, we'd be quite naïve to imagine that our emotions and moods are always well-ordered. Because of our fall into sin, we're not the way we're supposed to be—we are depraved and disordered.

#### Our Fall into Sin and Our Emotions

In Ephesians 4:19, Paul chooses a very rare Greek word, *apēlgēkotes*, to describe mood disorder—our fallen emotionality. The NIV translates it as “having lost all sensitivity.” The word literally means “past feeling, becoming emotionally callous.”

God intended that our emotions send us signals that connect us to Him, to our outer world, and to our inner world. Instead, we now shut ourselves down to the messages that God intended our emotions to signal. That's why, in the fallen heart, emotions by themselves are *not* a good guide.

Notice how Ephesians 4:17-19 connects how our fallen emotional reactions to our fallen beliefs and fallen wills.

“You must no longer live as the Gentiles do in the futility of their thinking (fallen rational direction). They are darkened in their understanding (foolish rational direction) and separated from the life of God (fallen relational affections/false worship) because of the ignorance that is in them (fallen rational direction) due to the hardening of their hearts (fallen volitional motivation). Having lost all sensitivity (fallen emotional reaction), they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more” (Ephesians 4:17-19).

Designed to be responsive to the world, others, and God, we now follow our fallen mindsets which separate us from the life of God, which leads to hard hearts, which leads to emotional excess and self-indulgence on the one hand and emotional callousness on the other hand.

In our refusal to depend upon God, we pinball between two self-centered, self-sufficient emotional moods.

- Out-of-Control Emotional Expression
- Over-Controlled Emotional Suppression

Both styles share the refusal to listen well to our emotions, the refusal to use our emotionality to evaluate where we are spiritually. We refuse to face our feelings because we refuse to face God or need God.

## Using Our Feelings as Spears: Out-of-Control Emotional Expression

We read where Paul described sinful emotions in Ephesians 4:19 as “giving themselves over to sensuality.” We’re ungoverned. Out of control. We’ve taken the brakes off our emotions. We decide that we want nothing to do with managed moods. If we feel it; we express it. If it hurts others; so be it. We want what we want and we want it now!

Consider King Saul. He massaged his jealousy toward David. When the women of Israel met Saul and David with dancing and song, they sang, “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands” (1 Samuel 18:7). Saul was enraged. This refrain galled him. “And from that time on Saul kept a jealous eye on David” (1 Samuel 18:9). *Caressed anger leads to expressed anger.*

“Saul had a spear in his hand and he hurled it, saying to himself, ‘I’ll pin David to the wall’” (1 Samuel 18:10b-11a). Saul perfectly pictures imperfect, sinful emotions—we use our feelings as spears to hurt others.

Like all unmanaged moods, Saul’s resulted from a foolish internal evaluation of a difficult external situation. No doubt, it would be emotionally distressing for most leaders to hear subordinates praised to the extent people praised David.

Experiencing this, Saul kept *thinking to himself*, rather than *talking to God*. “They have credited David with tens of thousands,” *he thought*, “but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?” (1 Samuel 18:8b).

Imagining God to be a puny god with limited resources, imagining God to be a hoarder, Saul could not imagine that there was enough respect and responsibility to go around for both David and himself. *This town was not big enough for the both of them because God was not big enough for Saul.*

People like Saul wear their emotions on their sleeves and hurl their feelings like a spear. They will *not* be controlled. They refuse to be inhibited.

Their feelings become their god.

Yet, their feelings never direct them to God.

They may feel their feelings, indulge their feelings, but they never *engage* their feelings. They never use their mood states to detect their spiritual state.

## The Rest of the Story

The impact of sin runs deep. So, in our next section, we’ll explore another sinful way of handling our emotions: *Stuffing Our Feelings*.

**For Reflection and Application**

I know. We're all thinking about people—*other* people. People who have treated *us* like this—by using their emotions as spears. But what about *us*?

Am I, are you, are we ever guilty of indulging our feelings?

Do we ever use our feelings as spears to harm others? Maybe in subtle ways? Maybe in not-so-subtle ways? Have we ever been "Saul-like"?

If so, how could understanding the connection between our foolish beliefs, false worship, self-centered motivations, and our emotions help us to repent of emotional sin and use our emotions to honor God and minister to others?

## Part 4

### Emotions: Biblical and Unbiblical Ways to Handle Our Feelings

For most people, especially us as Christians, “spearing of emotions” seems like the worst possible scenario. Additionally, many Christians seem to assume that the opposite extreme is actually a healthy emotional response: “stuffing our feelings”—over-controlled suppression of our feelings. That’s *not* the biblical approach to healthy, Christlike feelings.

#### Stuffing Our Feelings: Over-Controlled Emotional Suppression

The psalmists model how to handle our feelings maturely. The psalmists faced their feelings face-to-face with God, candidly and boldly shared their feelings with God. They felt their feelings and soothed their soul in their Savior God.

Instead of being like the psalmists, many times as Christians we think we are supposed to be like Mr. Spock of *Star Trek* fame. He tried to repress his emotions, deny them, if he could, eradicate them. And we try to live without pathos, without passion and feeling, thinking somehow that this is the Christlike way to manage our moods.

So, let’s explore several biblical contrasts between suppressing our moods and psalm-like facing of our feelings face-to-face with our God.

#### 1. Option One: Acknowledging Our Emotions or Trying to Eradicate Our Emotions

We should not try to eradicate our feelings. Paul tells us to be angry but sin not; he does not tell us never to be angry (Ephesians 4:26). The psalmists acknowledge their moods to themselves (candor) and to God (lament).

Psalm 73 is a classic expression of a believer’s struggle to comprehend and control his envy, jealousy, and hatred. Asaph is dismayed that a good God could allow bad things to happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. He faces his envy *coram Deo* (face-to-face with God) telling God all about it. He takes himself, all that he is, including his envy, to God. Once in God’s presence, he is able to see and confess the folly of his envy.

Those who try to suppress their feelings, on the other hand, try to eradicate their hatred. “If I don’t think about it, it’s not there. If I repress it, it will go away.” They choose denial and self-deception over biblical candor and lament.

#### 2. Option Two: Seeing Our Emotions with Spiritual Eyes (Wisdom) or with Eyeballs Only (Folly)

To handle our emotions like the psalmists, God wants us to explore our moods with spiritual eyes. Asaph enters the presence of God to gain God’s perspective on Asaph’s perspective.

“When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny” (Psalm 73:16-17).

God calls us to view our external situation and our internal moods from His eternal perspective.

Those who suppress their moods try the opposite approach. When a mood doesn’t vanish, they mull it over and over and over again with eyeballs only—from a worldly perspective. Asaph was once trapped there, seeing only the prosperity of the wicked. We’re doomed to defeat whenever we look at our situations and our feelings only from a temporal perspective.

### **3. Option Three: Confessing Our Sinful Emotions or Playing the Pharisee with Our Sinful Emotions**

Third, when we handle our emotions in a psalm-like manner, we confess our sinful emotions to our Father. Asaph says:

“When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you” (Psalm 73:21-22).

On the other hand, if we suppress our awareness of our emotions, then obviously we can’t confess our sinful moods to God. Often one of the inner heart motivations behind emotional suppression is *our sinful belief that we can’t come to God unless we perfectly, serenely suppress all our feelings*. We play the emotional Pharisee—trying to deal with our emotions through the flesh, through works, through emotional perfection, and through emotional self-sufficiency.

### **4. Option Four: Facing Our Emotions with Grace or with Works**

Fourth, when we practice psalm-like emotional maturity, we receive grace, as Asaph did. Having faced the sinful folly of his envy, he still perceived the amazing grace of God:

“Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand” (Psalm 73:23).

Not so the emotional suppressor. In self-righteousness, they do not receive grace because they do not face their feelings face-to-face with God. They arrogantly believe they can manage their moods without God.

### **5. Option Five: Choosing God-Sufficiency or Self-Sufficiency**

Fifth, psalm-like emotional maturity involves recognizing that only God is enough.

“Whom have I in heaven but you, and earth has nothing I desire besides you” (Psalm 73:25).

When we face our emotions, we are forced to face the truth that we are not self-sufficient. Being honest about our emotions and how frail and vulnerable they make us feel motivates us to yield to the reality that we must live every second in God-sufficiency.

Emotional suppressors choose self-sufficiency by denying and attempting to repress their feelings. Why? *Facing moods forces us to face our insufficiency.* Nothing makes us feel punier than being overwhelmed by feelings. No one wants to hear the derogatory comment, “He’s so moody.” “She’s so emotional!”

When feelings overpower us we feel powerless, impotent. In our flesh, we would rather stuff our moods, would rather survive self-sufficiently, than admit that we need help managing our moods.

That’s why stuffing our feelings is sinful—it exposes a work’s orientation. It displays a self-sufficient denial of our need for God. Though more subtle than out-of-control expression (spearing) of our feelings, suppression is equally sinful.

### **The Rest of the Story**

We’ve looked at God’s original design for us as emotional beings—Creation. We’ve explored how sin mars our emotions—the Fall. Next we’ll examine how our salvation in Christ restores us to emotional maturity—Redemption.

### **For Reflection and Application**

How surprised are you that suppressing/stuffing our feelings is just as harmful and sinful as using our feelings as spears?

Do you agree or disagree?

While we can all sin emotionally in either direction (spearing or suppressing), many of us tend toward one extreme or another. How about you? Are you typically more inclined toward emotional expression and spearing others with your feelings? Or are you more prone toward emotional suppression and denial?

How would following the 5 psalm-like ways of facing our feelings face-to-face with God help you in your emotional life?

## Part 5

### 4 Principles for Handling Our Emotions Maturely

We've looked at God's original design for us as emotional beings—Creation. We've explored how sin mars our emotions—the Fall. Now we'll examine how our salvation in Christ restores us to emotional maturity—Redemption.

#### **Emotions: With Christ in the School of Emotional Maturity**

We'll start by exploring how our emotions are of value to us. Emotions serve as God-given “warning lights.” That flashing red light on our dash that says, “Hey, you'd better pop the hood 'cause something is haywire underneath.”

Emotions are our warning lights that say, “There's something important going on inside, pop the hood of your heart and check it out.” Our emotions point to our goals, which in turn point to our beliefs. Emotions are a God-given means for discerning inner motivation and thinking.

Often we're afraid of our emotions because we do not understand what is natural. Mark 3:5 helps us because it describes the *emotional life of Christ*.

“He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored” (Mark 3:5).

In this passage, we learn that *Jesus experienced strong emotions*. He experienced anger. This particular word for anger has the sense of “strong indignation and wrath.” He also experienced compassion which is “deep distress and grief.” Shouldn't image bearers expect to experience strong emotions since Christ did? Don't deny them. Don't stuff them. Experience them.

We also learn that *Jesus experienced a full range of both “pleasant” and “painful” emotions*. He felt anger and compassion *simultaneously*.

“While being grieved he felt intense anger” (Mark 3:5, author's paraphrase).

We, too, should expect to go through a full range of both pleasant and painful emotions. *The lack of intense emotions has nothing to do with emotional maturity.*

In light of Jesus' model, we can ask the question:

➤ **When an Emotion Comes, What Do I Do with It?**

### **1. *Admit and Identify What You Feel***

First, admit it and identify it. Acknowledge to yourself what you are feeling. Label it accurately. “I’m hurt, angry, content, nervous, etc.”

I do a lot of counseling with pastors with struggling marriages. Sometimes they are so out of practice with tuning into their feelings that I have to express what I think they may be feeling before they can ever put words to their emotions. Jesus, on the other hand, was *not* tone deaf to His feelings in Mark 3. He knew what He felt and used those feelings for God’s glory.

### **2. *Courageously Face and Feel Whatever You Feel***

Second, courageously face and feel that emotion. This is not an academic exercise. It is deeply feeling what is going on inside. Jesus experienced His strong feelings of anger and deep distress.

Not only do I counsel a lot of pastors, I train a lot of pastors to counsel. There are times that a counselee/parishioner has just shared a deep hurt—maybe never before shared. It might be about having been raped, or having witnessed the murder of a relative. The counselee is in tears, sobbing. And the pastor is preaching away, oblivious to how his parishioner feels and oblivious to how he feels. So, after the counseling training session is over, we’ll interact about it. Many times I’ve had pastors admit that they are so out of practice in tuning into their feelings that they can’t even tune into other people’s feelings.

### **3. *Candidly Share Your Feelings with God***

Third, always share with God what you are feeling. The Bible tells us why we should and can do this in Hebrews 4:15-16.

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:15-16).

When you’re feeling an “illegitimate emotion” (hatred, etc.) confess it deeply, including confessing the goals and beliefs behind the feeling (1 John 1:8-2:2). When you’re feeling a “legitimate emotion” (joy, sorrow, etc.) share it fully (Hebrews 2:18).

Recently I preached through selective Psalms. I pointed out to our congregation that there are numerically more Psalms of lament and complaint than there are Psalms of thanksgiving and praise. I challenged our people to be Bereans and check me out on that. Several did. To their amazement, they came back to say, “I’m shocked. You were right. There are more Psalms of lament than Psalms of praise!” God’s people know how to share their hearts with their heavenly Father and with their sympathetic High Priest.



#### **4. Use Your Emotions to Probe and Examine Your *Heart***

Fourth, we can use our emotions to probe and to examine our goals and beliefs. An acknowledged sinful emotion functions as a clue to a spiritual malfunction just as an acknowledged physical symptom (i.e., a cancer warning sign) serves as a clue to a deeper physical problem.

When do we probe? Even a good thing can be misused or overused. Should we constantly probe and become compulsively introspective? No. No one (no one in their right mind at least) checks under the hood of their car before every trip down to the local grocery store. No, you check periodically, before long trips, and when the light comes on.

The same is true with emotions. When the light of intense emotion flashes, then check your goals and beliefs. For most Christians, the problem is checking far too infrequently. We tend to be afraid of our emotions. Check periodically, and always check during times of extremely strong emotions.

#### **The Rest of the Story**

We just examined what to do with emotions in our own soul. Next, we'll explore 5 biblical principles for when to share our emotions with others.

#### **For Reflection and Application**

Which of the four principles of what we can do with our emotions seem most important to you in your emotional life? How could you apply that principle?

Think back on a recent situation where you did not respond very maturely emotionally. How could you have applied these four principles of emotional maturity? What would that have looked like in your soul? In the situation? In your relationship?

## Part 6

### 5 Christlike Criteria for When We Express Our Feelings to Others

Jesus modeled a cardinal principle of emotional maturity when He purposely expressed His feelings to others in order to minister to them. The original language of Mark 3:5 is clear.

“He chose to look around with angry glances, stopping at each one of them” (author’s paraphrase).

#### **How and When We Can Use Our Emotions to Minister to Others**

Jesus made a volitional choice to express His emotional reaction with the goal of ministry.

On what basis did Christ do so? On what basis should we do the same? We should express our feelings to others when we can meet the following criteria:

#### ➤ **Five Christlike Criteria for When We Express Our Feelings to Others:**

1. When we can answer the question: “How will expressing my feelings increase the potential for the other person’s growth in Christ?”
2. When we have previously established a strong relationship with the other person.
3. When we believe the person has the emotional maturity to handle and benefit from our sharing.
4. When we believe that sharing our feelings has the potential for healing the relationship.
5. When we are under control enough to think through the previous criteria. Or stated another way; when we can govern/manage the expression of our emotions.

#### **How and Why We Connect Our Emotions to Deeper Issues of the Heart**

Part of being a new creation in Christ means that we have a renewed capacity to honestly experience life in all its grief and hope. We are not ashamed of our emotionality. We don’t consider emotions the “black sheep of the image bearing family.” We don’t hide from our feelings.

We are alive to life in all its external ups and downs and internal joys and sorrows. What a reversal from our fallen emotionality where we feared feeling anything deeply, honestly, and ended up living for shallow emotional highs and avoiding personal pain at all costs.

The Bible teaches that mature emotionality connects our emotions to deeper issues of the heart. Emotional maturity should permeate every aspect of our new person in Christ.

### **1. We Can Connect Our Emotions to Our *Spiritual* Core: Sooth Our Soul in Our Savior**

We can learn to courageously express our feelings to our heavenly Father and to soothe our soul in our Savior. “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7). According to Peter, we will only be this open and candid about our emotions with our heavenly Father **if we believe that He cares for us**. Like David, we identify our mood states, but then we also take our emotions to God:

“Why are you downcast within me, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God” (Psalm 42:5).

### **2. We Can Connect Our Emotions to Our *Relational* Core: Empathize with Others**

Socially and relationally we can empathize with others, helping them find God’s sustaining comfort and healing hope. We live out Romans 12:15 where we weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. We live out 1 Corinthians 12:26 where if one part of the Body of Christ suffers, we all suffer with it and if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. We live out 2 Corinthians 1 where we comfort others with the comfort we have received from the Comforter.

The person who suppresses their own emotions, inevitably has a difficult time expressing empathy with other people’s emotions. The person who is unable to tune into their own feelings, typically has a very difficult time tuning into another person’s feelings. When we’re tone deaf to and in denial about our own moods, we rarely are tuned into and compassionate toward other people’s moods.

### **3. We Can Connect Our Emotions to Our *Rational* Core: Bring Gospel Rationality to Our Emotionality**

Rationally, we can bring gospel truth to our emotionality by understanding with wisdom the causes and nature of our feelings, and by envisioning with spiritual eyes Christlike ways to interpret and handle our moods. “In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold” (Ephesians 4:26-27). Emotional maturity includes experiencing life deeply *and* acting on our feelings wisely.

Again, this is what David does in Psalm 42:5. Aware of his feelings, he does not allow his feelings to dominate and control him. When David’s feelings “talk to him,” *David talks back to his feelings!* Our minds and emotions are constantly speaking to us. Like David, having listened to our feelings, we force our feelings to listen to God’s perspective from God’s Word. “Soul, feelings, you’re down. You’re sad. You’re upset. You’re disturbed. You’re anxious. Well, soul, listen to God. Hope in God. Cast your cares on God because He cares for you.”

Martyn Lloyd-Jones powerfully describes this *biblical self-counsel*:

Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that *you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself*? Take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them, but they are talking to you, they bring back the problems of yesterday. Somebody is talking. Who is talking to you? Your self is talking to you. Now, David's treatment in Psalm 42 was this: instead of allowing this self to talk to him, *he starts talking to himself*. "Why art thou cast down, O my soul?" he asks. His soul has been depressing him, crushing him. So he stands up and says: "Self, listen for a moment, I will speak to you."<sup>1</sup>

John Piper further develops this idea of gospel-self talk, or preaching the gospel to ourselves in the midst of emotional distress and hopelessness.

On this side of the cross, we know the greatest ground for our hope: Jesus Christ crucified for our sins and triumphant over death. So the main thing we must learn is to preach this gospel to ourselves. "Listen, self: If God is for you, who can be against you? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for you, how will he not also with him graciously give you all things?"<sup>2</sup>

#### **4. We Can Connect Our Emotions to Our *Volitional* Core: Courageously Choose to Use Our Emotions for the Purpose of Ministry**

Volitionally, we can consciously and courageously choose to creatively respond to our emotional mood states. We choose to use our emotions for the purpose of ministry.

This is exactly what we saw Jesus do in Mark 3. He was acutely aware of what He felt, and He chose wisely to express His feelings for the purpose of ministering to others.

What incredible maturity this takes! Yet, what beautiful ministry it can create.

In counseling, I typically seek to tune into the feelings I find my counselee prompting in me or "pulling out of me." If a husband's harsh treatment of his wife "pulls" righteous anger out of me, rather than ignoring those feelings, I seek to express those feelings in love—exposing how damaging he is being to his wife. If a wife's distant, disrespectful, non-responsive way of relating to her husband "pulls" out of me sadness for her husband, rather than stuffing those feelings, I seek to express what I'm feeling in love—revealing how damaging she is being to her husband.

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<sup>1</sup>Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 20-21.

<sup>2</sup>John Piper, *Shaped by God* (Minneapolis: Desiring God, 2017), p. 23.

## For Reflection and Application

We said that *“Jesus made a volitional choice to express His emotional reaction with the goal of ministry.”* How could this principle guide you as to when or when not to express your feelings to another person?

How could the 5 Christlike criteria for when to express your feelings to others guide you in deciding when and how to share your feelings?

Which of the following principles of emotional maturity would you most want to work on? How would you go about that?

- Sooth Our Soul in Our Savior
- Empathize with Others
- Bring Rationality to Our Emotionality
- Courageously Choose to Use Our Emotions for the Purpose of Ministry

Like David in Psalm 42:5, how can you speak gospel truth to your emotions?

In light of this 6-part biblical study of Christlike emotions, what will you do differently with your emotions?

How could you grow in greater Christlike emotional maturity based upon these biblical principles?