

How To Handle Your Emotions

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I shall never forget him. He was about 40 years old. As he sat before me he was deeply troubled. He had made a shipwreck of one marriage, and now another was on the rocks. I counseled with him and we prayed together.

Before we parted he said, "Pastor, we sure let our emotions get us into a lot of trouble."

I never forgot that. It is one of the biggest understatements I have ever heard.

Really, aren't emotions the reason for most of the trouble in the world and in the church? So often people do what they feel like doing instead of what they know they ought to do. "If it feels good, do it" is a prescription for disaster.

Emotions are wonderful servants if handled properly. But if we let them control us, they get us into no end of trouble.

How then do we handle emotions? How do we keep them healthy, beneficial servants?

First, we must understand something about how emotions operate. Some believe man is only physical. They think of emotions in terms of nerves, chemical compounds, and electrical impulses. But to get the whole picture we must consult our "operational manual," the Bible.

The Scriptures teach that man is spirit, soul, and body (1 Thessalonians 5:23). These three act together. What happens to one affects the other two.

The human body is so complex and well-designed it could not possibly have developed by itself. This is especially true of the brain and nervous system. We have learned much about this machine. But it is possible to know everything about it and its operation without seeing who is operating it.

Paul spoke of the body as a house (2 Corinthians 5:1). Our house can affect our attitude. A cold, dreary, run-down house can be depressing. On the other hand, a warm, neat house is a cheerful place. Also notice how a new car changes a person's driving habits.

So it is with the body. It has a direct effect upon the soul and spirit. When one's body is tired, it takes extra effort to be kind and considerate.

The soul and spirit are like a pilot and co-pilot. The nervous system is a communications network. Through it the soul and spirit affect the body, and vice versa. When the body is abused, the soul and spirit feel the impact. The "pilot" and "co-pilot" cannot avoid becoming dizzy if the "plane" is thrown into a tailspin.

So in learning to handle our emotions, proper care must be taken of the body. We are to glorify God in our bodies, because they are the temples of the Holy Spirit. Nutrition, rest, and exercise are important. Narcotics do not belong in a Christian. The unnecessary use of sedatives and stimulants should be avoided.

Our world is full of physical and mental pressures. Physical stresses come from disease, pollution, chemicals, radiation, and other sources. We are also the targets of social, personal, and spiritual pressures. All of these stimulate our emotions. Some of these stimuli reach us through the body. Others reach us through the soul and spirit.

The Bible indicates that the spirit of man is more flexible and responsive than the soul. It can be hasty (Proverbs 14:29), easily provoked (Psalm 106:33), and subject to unwholesome stimulation (James 4:5). We are told to rule our spirit (Proverbs 25:28). God is pleased with a contrite spirit (Psalm 51:17). Clearly, good emotional health requires a proper discipline of the human spirit.

Advertising specialists have made the stimulation of the human spirit a profitable business. They do all they can to make us discontented without the products and services they advertise. Your emotional contentment is their worst enemy! Emotional agitation means money in their pockets. Often it also means personal frustration, financial trouble, and family strife. No wonder the apostle declared, "Godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Timothy 6:6).

Because it is very important that we discipline our thought life, let us take a moment to consider how we function as human beings.

God made us with the ability to choose, act, think, and feel. Choosing is basic. That determines moral character. The Bible often refers to it as the heart.

Our actions are directly controlled by our will. So are our thoughts. Although at times we let our mind wander, we can direct its attention.

But our emotions are a different matter. Our feelings are not directly under the control of our will. But they are under the control of our intellect. That is, how we feel generally depends on how we think; and how we think is subject to our will.

Many people live in their own little self-centered world. Their mind is on themselves--their problems, fears, hostilities, frustration, ambitions, pleasures, vanities.

That is not the radiant Christian life! The Holy Spirit is working diligently to get our minds off ourselves and on Christ. He seeks to broaden our vision, to get us to look beyond our little world and see clearly the great values and issues that concern the heart of God. As we do so, Christ becomes more real to us. We walk closer to Him, and as we do this we see and feel more as He sees and feels. Our own problems become much smaller as our capacity to experience and express His love is enlarged.

We are tempted to have many emotional perversions. Fear is one. First John 4:18 says that perfect love casts out fear. Fear is excessive self-concern. Love remedies this abnormal self-mindedness and directs our thoughts and energies toward others.

There are also jealousy, hatred, anger, evil-speaking, and a host of others. Believers have put away these things (Ephesians 4:17-32).

The Holy Spirit is working to make us like Jesus. This involves the mellowing and sanctifying of our emotions. The Christian life is a disciplined life. This is not the repressive discipline of one who yearns to indulge his passions but refuses to do so for selfish reasons. Rather, it is the discipline of love, the repudiation of our former obedience to our emotions, the experience of joy, peace, and complete fulfillment in loving obedience to Christ.

Indulging our emotions does not "release" them; it only strengthens them. Neither does repressing them conquer them; it only internalizes them. Only by surrendering our whole being to Christ and walking daily in the Spirit do we experience victory.

This inner discipline of the Holy Spirit involves our conscious cooperation. He leads; we follow. He influences; we yield. He gives us light; we walk in it. Let us remember this when we are tempted to become angry, to pout, to feel sorry for ourselves; when fearful; when restlessly craving today what patience and diligence will bring tomorrow.

Of all people, Christians should be the most psychologically balanced and emotionally healthy. We have the Holy Spirit and His word to keep our values in order. Our hearts, minds, and hands are filled with the work of God. For us, life is not a stagnant pool of self-pity. Rather, it is an outflowing river of love.

Let's stay alert and ready for ministry. Every Christian has a mission field. Let us keep "prayed up," eagerly meeting each new day as another opportunity to experience God's presence in us and His love through us.

Much can be said also about the soul. But here the invitation of the Savior is sufficient: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28, 29 NIV).

Find complete joy and contentment in Christ. He satisfies. He said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you" (John 14:27). It is part of the believer's inheritance. Don't let things, people, and circumstances disrupt it. Let it guard your heart and mind.

"Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee, because he trusteth in thee" (Isaiah 26:3).