

FREEDOM IN CHRIST

HANDLING EMOTIONS WELL

I've wrestled with this part of Freedom in Christ this week. I've wrestled because I'm not sure I'm qualified to speak on this subject. I've wrestled because I'm not sure how honest I should be. It's probably enough to say that "I get this" though. I know how powerful emotions can be – mine especially. I know that if not handled well they can be destructive – in my life; for those close to me; in work; in church. I know, and understand more and more, how some of the things that drive our emotions are things that are buried deep within us. I understand how buried emotions that are not addressed and dealt with will affect our thinking and our behaviour and we won't even know its happening, and we certainly won't understand why.

I understand that my emotions play a major role in the process of renewing my mind. I understand that my emotions are in a general sense a product of my thought life. I understand that wrong thinking can show up in my emotional life, and I understand that all this can greatly affect my spiritual life, so I find all this very challenging – and I'm wrestling with it.

So far in Freedom in Christ we've said we should believe what God says is true, even if we don't feel it is true. But we must not deny our feelings. Actually, our emotions are a God-given barometer of what is really going on inside us, and unacknowledged emotion can set us up for spiritual defeat.

Our bodies are complex! We have an outer person – our body, and an inner person – our soul or spirit! There are some parts of our body over which we have direct control, for example – to speak, or to move, for most of us is a choice. But some things happen in our body over which we have no direct control. Our heart beat for example! It is regulated by systems in our body over which we have no

direct control. And so it is with our emotions – we have no direct control over our emotions.

Here's a little test – just go with me on this for a moment! Think of someone you really find you dislike! Now tell yourself you like them! Doesn't work does it? The good news is – God doesn't expect us to change our feelings like that. He doesn't ask us to like people. The challenge though, is he commands us to love them – which is different altogether. And we can choose to do what is right concerning another person, regardless of how we feel about them. The truth is feelings and emotions will follow and change when we choose to love. You can't will it to happen, it happens when we choose to change what we can control – what you believe and how you behave.

Here's a challenging thought: "your emotions are to your soul, what your ability to feel pain is to your body." Given the choice most of us would avoid pain – right? But to take away the sensation of pain would actually be dangerous wouldn't it? For years people thought leprosy caused flesh to rot away, but that is untrue. The bodies of those suffering from leprosy become deformed because leprosy takes away the sensation of pain and people with leprosy damage their bodies without ever realising it. The ability to feel pain is a gift that acts for our own protection. Our emotions too are a gift – a gift that tells us what is going on inside us. Now, although we cannot control our emotions directly, what we feel is in a general sense the result of what we believe or choose to think! I find that extremely challenging.

Now the problem is that if what you believe does not reflect truth, then what you feel will not reflect reality. Jeremiah had exactly this problem. In Lamentations 3 he is in utter despair because he believes, quite wrongly, that God is the cause of all his physical problems:

"I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of his wrath. He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light; indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long. He has made my skin and my flesh grow old and has broken my bones. He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship. He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead.

He has walled me in so that I cannot escape; he has weighed me down with chains. Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer. He has barred my way with blocks of stone; he has made my paths crooked. Like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding, he dragged me from the path and mangled me and left me without help.” Lamentations 3 v 1-11.

Jeremiah believes God is to blame – and loses hope! You ever been there? Are you there now? Jeremiah believed things about God that simply were not true. How about you?

“I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope. Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, ‘The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.’” Lamentations 3 v 19 – 24.

Now things have changed! Jeremiah says, “I call this to mind, I have hope. Great is your faithfulness.” What had changed in his circumstances? Absolutely nothing! Did God change? No, he did not! What changed was what was going on in Jeremiah’s mind. Life’s events do not determine who you are or what you feel, it’s your perception of them that does. The more we commit ourselves to the truth and choose to believe what God says is true – the more we see things from God’s perspective and the less our feelings will run away with us.

So the big question is: if we are overwhelmed by difficult circumstances from the past or in the present, which cause us to be plagued with negative emotions, what can we do about it? Here’s the truth: you are not affected so much by your environment and circumstances as by how you see your environment and circumstance. Think of the story of David and Goliath. The Israelite army thinks there is no way out of defeat at the hands of Goliath – no-one will fight him. Along comes David with a different perspective: “how dare you challenge the army of the living God!” And he pulls out his five stones and sling and defeats Goliath. The Israelites saw the giant in relation to themselves, David saw the giant in relation to God. Faith can make a difference because it is based on the

truth. Many of us struggle because we interpret our circumstances through our past experiences or failures and we think we can't do anything about it! It's not true – healing comes by renewing of the mind and by understanding what is really true about God, rather than what experience has caused you to believe, and by committing yourself to believe what God says is true - even if it doesn't feel true.

So, the biblical truth is this: believe the truth and live the truth by faith. Your emotions will respond accordingly. Acting according to feelings rather than truth can give the devil a foothold in our lives, so as we mature we choose to believe the truth and act accordingly. Satan is actively prowling around looking to take advantage of our emotions to get a foothold in our lives – a place from which he can influence us. So we need to learn to handle our emotions well. Emotions are like the warning lights in your car, when the light comes on – there's a problem. And you can respond in one of three ways: You can ignore it; you can smash the light and fix the immediate issue, or you can look under the bonnet.

Suppression is when we consciously ignore our feelings or choose not to deal with them, but that is unhealthy and it is dishonest.

“Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord’ – and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found; surely when the mighty waters rise, they will not reach him.”
Psalm 32 v 1 - 6.

Denial doesn't work. Feelings don't die when you bury them, feelings are buried alive and eventually they come out in some form or another and it's always unhealthy. Suppressing our emotions leads to dishonest communication and is physically unhealthy.

Smashing the light is to thoughtlessly express everything you feel – to explode. The trouble with this is that it affects those around us. “To get it off my chest” may make us feel better but it could be devastating for those close to us.

The healthy response is acknowledgement. Listen to this for a prayer: “Appoint an evil man to oppose him; let an accuser stand at his right hand. When he is tried, let him be found guilty, and may his prayers condemn him. May his days be few; may another take his place of leadership. May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow. May his children be wandering beggars; may they be driven from their ruined homes. May a creditor seize all he has; may strangers plunder the fruits of his labour. May no-one extend kindness to him or take pity on his fatherless children. May his descendants be cut off, their names blotted out from the next generation. May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the Lord; may the sin of his mother never be blotted out. May their sins always remain before the Lord that he cut off the memory of them from the earth.”

Psalm 109 v 6 - 15

That’s a bit of a shock coming from David! Point is – it’s David being honest about his feelings in prayer! By the end of the psalm he sees things from God’s perspective not his – that he needs God’s help. Truth is – God is big enough to take all that you can throw at him. I began this sermon by saying I wasn’t sure I was qualified to speak on this subject. Actually I am. All of us have had traumatic experiences that have scarred us emotionally and left us with emotional baggage. These experiences are often buried deep in our memories but surface when triggered by some event in the present. That’s very true for me. We can try to avoid our negative experiences if we want – but slowly they will destroy us. These kinds of experiences cause us to believe things about ourselves and God that are not true. These things can become mental strongholds and if we do not deal with them we will live in bondage to the past. I know, I am still a work in progress – but I am honestly trying to face the truth.

Children of God are not primarily a product of their past, but of Christ’s work on the cross. Nobody can fix your past – or mine, but we can be free from it. I’m on that journey, question is – are you?

“Once I held in my tightly clenched fist ashes, ashes from a burn that flickered upon my ten-year-old body, ashes I didn’t ask for. The scar was forced on me and for seventeen years the fire smouldered. I kept my fist closed in secret, hating those ashes, yet unwilling to release them, not sure if I should, not convinced that it was worth it, marring the things that I touched and leaving black marks everywhere or so it seemed. I tried to undo it all but the ashes were always there to remind me that I couldn’t. I really could not, but God could. His sweet Holy Spirit spoke to my heart one night in tearful desperation. He whispered, “I want to give you beauty for your ashes, oil of joy for your mourning, a garment of praise for your spirit of heaviness.” I had never heard of such a deal as this – beauty for ashes, my sadly stained memory for the healing in his Word, my soot-like dreams for his songs in the night, my helpless and hurting emotions for his ever-constant peace. How could I be so stubborn as to refuse an offer such as this? So willingly yet in slow motion and yes, sobbing. I opened my bent fingers and let the ashes drop to the ground. In silence, I heard the wind blow them away, away from me for ever. I am now able to place my open hands gently round the fist of another hurting soul and say with confidence, “Let them go.” There really is beauty beyond your comprehension.”¹

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church on Sunday 7th December 2008 by Rev. Ian Phillips

1. Quoted from: The Freedom in Christ Leader’s Guide page 144