

Emotions, Emotional Distress and Addictions

Sunday School Class
Trinity Baptist Church

Part One: Emotion in the Life of the Christian

Introduction

- Ps. 139: 13-16 – we’re fearfully and wonderfully made
- God has made us with the ability to experience emotions
 - Pleasure centre (nucleus accumbens)
 - Fear and sadness (limbic system—hypothalamus, amygdala, hippocampus)
 - Religious/spiritual feelings (neurotheology—neuroimaging studies)
- Why?—for our good and His glory
 - Our good: emotions serve to bring us pleasure—they engender attraction, desire, motivation, energize, facilitate connection with others, enliven worship—and serve to warn us of danger, disengage us from losing ventures, promote acceptance of loss, etc.
 - His glory: our emotions can motivate us to glorify God
 - E.g., David’s psalms (42 sadness; 21 joy)
 - Mary’s Magnificat (Lk. 1:46ff)
- Today we’re going to discuss emotions more broadly—with specific reference to what the Bible teaches about the role of emotion in the life of a Christian
- In the next two sessions, we’ll consider how the fall has impacted on this aspect of human functioning
 - Next session we’ll consider what happens when painful emotions such as anxiety, anger and sadness become a problem
 - The following session, we’ll consider what happens when pleasure becomes a problem—i.e., addictions and compulsive behaviour

What is emotion?

- Emotion is an internal regulatory or feedback system activated in response to external events which serves to motivate behaviour (e.g., guitar tuner, thermostat, electrical breaker, etc.)
- Emotions can be painful (e.g., anger, sadness, anxiety, jealousy, guilt, shame, boredom, despair, etc.) or they can be pleasurable (e.g., joy, love, gratitude, happiness, peace, pride, excitement, anticipation, hope, etc.)

What is the function of emotion?—i.e., why do we experience emotion?

- Emotions serve to motivate or energize our actions
- Painful emotions typically motivate us to do something which serves to reduce or eliminate the source of that emotion (“avoidance”)

- E.g., the emotion of anxiety arises in situations of perceived danger/threat and motivates efforts to avoid or escape that threat
- E.g., the emotion of guilt arises in situations where a person perceives himself as having violated a moral precept—and motivates efforts to make amends and to bring his behaviour more into line with that precept
- E.g., sadness or depressed feelings arise in situations of loss or failure and motivate disengagement
- E.g., anger arises in situations where we perceive some injustice or violation of an important moral precept on the part of another—specifically when it impinges personally on ourselves
- Pleasurable emotions typically motivate us to maintain or enhance the feeling by taking positive action (“approach”)
 - E.g., hope arises from the perception that desired outcomes are possible—and motivates persistence in the face of difficulty
 - E.g., loving feelings motivate efforts to connect with others and to unselfishly seek their good
 - E.g., joy is an emotion we experience in response to the perception that all is well—particularly after having come through difficulty or hardship—and motivates worship, gratitude, etc.

Emotion and behaviour

- As noted, our emotions influence what we do
- However, our emotions must not rule or control us—we are enjoined to be people of self-control (2 Pet. 1:6; Gal. 5:22-23) and spirit-control (Eph. 5:18)
- We must also be careful not to over-rely on feelings or emotions with respect to guidance—the Word must be our guide, not our feelings (quote Luther)

Emotion and Truth

- Note that emotions are not a response to external circumstances per se, but are a response to our perception of, or how we think about external circumstances
 - This means that our faith can and must have an enormous impact on the types of emotions that Christians experience
 - How? See Rom. 5: 1-5 for an incredible example (also 2 Cor. 6:10)
- Principle: For the Christian, good theology is the foundation of godly affections—and the degree to which we are emotionally impacted by the truth of the gospel is a good index of the degree to which we really believe it

Is it sinful to experience certain types of emotion (e.g., anger, jealousy, anxiety, etc.)?

- The Bible warns against certain emotions
 - Ps. 37:8 (refrain from anger, forsake wrath, don't fret)
 - Phil. 4:6 (be anxious about nothing)

- Gal 5:26 (don't envy each other)
- 1 Thess 4:13 (don't grieve like the world grieves)
- On the other hand, the Bible indicates that it's possible to experience even very painful or intense emotions without sinning
 - Eph. 4:26 (quoting Ps. 4:4—be angry and do not sin)
- We may not always be able to help having a particular emotion such as anger, anxiety, jealousy, etc.—however, we do have the capacity to choose how we will respond
- What might be a godly and a sinful way of responding to anger?
- What about pleasure—is pleasure sinful?
 - Not when experienced within the proper context and with moderation—God made us capable of experiencing pleasure and wants us to enjoy his creation!
 - When the pursuit of pleasure becomes an end in itself apart from the Giver of pleasure, we are in danger of idolatry or addiction

Are there specifically sanctioned Christian emotions (e.g., joy, gratitude, sorrow for sin, fear of God, etc.)?

- We are commanded to rejoice (Phil. 4:4)
- We are commanded to be thankful (Col. 3:15)
- We are commanded to fear God (Ps. 34:9)
- We are commanded to glory in God (1 Cor. 1:31)

How do we summon up these emotions? First and foremost, we obey these commands as we meditate on the truth and act on the truth! (see Matzat)