

# The Gospel and Emotional Health

## Look Below the Surface

Luke 6.41-45; Matt 6.1-5, 16; 1<sup>st</sup> Cor 13.3; Psalm 42.5, 11

*(Luke 6) "And why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? <sup>42</sup> "Or how can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye. <sup>43</sup> "For there is no good tree which produces bad fruit; nor, on the other hand, a bad tree which produces good fruit. <sup>44</sup> "For each tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they pick grapes from a briar bush. <sup>45</sup> "The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart.*

*(Matthew 6) "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. <sup>2</sup> "When therefore **you give alms**, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full... <sup>5</sup> "And when **you pray**, you are not to be as the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners, in order to be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full... <sup>16</sup> "And whenever **you fast**, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.*

*(First Corinthians 13.3) And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.*

*(Ps 42.5,11) Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, The help of my countenance, and my God.*

**We're looking at the Gospel and emotional health.** We prepared a reading list for this series (Kiosk or Office) get it. The last two sermons were introductory but today we begin looking at sectors of our lives where emotional immaturity may be lurking. e.g., I may think I'm spiritually mature because I've been a member of solid churches for 15 years BUT... maybe recently I've begun to question how I relate to certain people, and I THINK... maybe...slight possibility that my own emotional immaturity has damaged relationships.

The remaining sermons follow topics suggested by Peter Scazzero's book *The Emotionally Healthy Church*. I differ with Pete on a few particulars, but I do really like his general approach... and I'm glad to see the subsequent books and materials spawned by the original.

Today, one of the skills necessary for the exercise of emotional health is the ability to look below the surface. We have to be able to see that, *"what you see isn't always what you get."* People may do the right things but be motivationally disconnected, going through the visible motions but without the right emotions. Something else is going on below the surface. Let's look at:

- 1) **Our Preoccupation with Surface Appearance**
- 2) **Getting to the Heart of the Matter**

The first passages are Jesus Christ confronting how we “do” or practice spirituality, religion and morality. He directs these words to spiritual and religious people – He SEEMS to have more trouble with this type of people.

Jesus points to a universal inclination in all morally serious people: a keen insight INTO and a fixation ON small but visible faults in other people AND a simultaneous ignorance or blindness to big faults in ourselves. I can see your petty infractions even from far away but I’m blind to my own glaring sins. “*Why do you look at the speck that’s in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?*”

This is, of course, hyperbole. We’d all notice a log in our own eye. We’d probably die. Jesus uses exaggeration to help us laugh at ourselves – it’s comical – an enormous flaw so big that it obstructs our own moral field of vision.

It’s an image of what we allow MORALLY that we’d NEVER accept PHYSICALLY. Jesus is basically saying, “You have an amazing capacity for self-ignorance of your own failings. You really don’t know yourselves... and you DON’T even KNOW THAT you don’t know – blind to your blindness.

You THINK you have insight into moral things – you can spot a minor flaw in another person even when that flaw is very small AND you’re absurdly oblivious to even the most obvious evils in yourself. There are sins in your life you couldn’t POSSIBLY ignore – but you DO ignore! You don’t know yourself like you think you do.

In John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the whole work (some 2,000 pages in length) begins with these words: “*Without the knowledge of self, there is no knowledge of God. Nearly all wisdom we possess... consists of two parts: knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while connected in many ways, which one comes first and enables the other is NOT easy to discern.*” (end)

And I’m ready to give many examples of people I’ve known who apparently knew God but were appallingly blind to themselves... BUT if I use these examples, I’m falling into the very sin against which Jesus warned. If I’ve seen it in others... you can bet I’ve been blind to it in myself!

Then Jesus Christ says, “AND you spiritual types THINK you can repair your self-ignorance by making a few little alterations – shake off the few bad fruits and it’ll be fixed” But the problem is much deeper – look below the surface – it’s NOT the behavior that’s the problem, it’s the heart, the source of the behavior, the real you, the root of your self and the spring of all thoughts, words and deeds: the heart.”

The second paragraph looks at the three basic orientations or directions of spiritual practice: outward toward people (when you give alms); upward toward God (when you pray) and inward toward yourself (when you fast – i.e., self-control).

And Jesus Christ is saying that because of your shallow and surface-focused outlook on the human person you’ve convinced yourselves that doing these spiritual practices guarantees that you ARE spiritual, righteous people. Just DO IT and you’re good with God and safe.

But everyone who takes refuge in their doing these practices (the outward, upward, inward means of grace) will find that because of your inward condition, motives and emotions – you are able to turn good practices into opportunities for evil, ways to get applause, recognition.

And the Apostle Paul would later take Jesus Christ's view on the slippery human heart when it comes to spiritual practice – St Paul takes it to the extreme when he writes, *“And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing”*. (First Corinthians 13.3)

Paul, why would anyone EVER give all his/her possessions to the poor and then surrender his body to be burned if NOT for love? That would have to be the one exception to the rule...right? You can do almost anything – give to a charity in order to impress people (virtue signaling) or pray (in order to look spiritual) or fasting to show how serious/disciplined you are... BUT NOT DEATH! To be martyred can only come from the motive of love! Right?

And Paul says, “NO!” – even to sacrifice one's life and all of one's earthly goods may be done for some ulterior motive concealed from others and even concealed from one's self. (Think of the 9-11 terrorists...martyrs for love?)

My friend, Stu, told me he stopped using the image of an iceberg to illustrate how our motives/emotions are often 90% submerged/hidden... He went to a shark. That beautiful triangular fin above water – a killing machine – motives that can be utterly deadly – hid from our sight.

And it happens so quickly – “I'm so sorry to hear your dad was diagnosed with lung cancer... (pause) was he a smoker?”

“No, he worked his whole life making flame-retardant suits for fire-fighters... but uh... thanks for trying to blame him.”

And as he walks away with his wife, he says, “Sheesh! Why'd she get so testy – I was just showing concern!”

Jesus Christ would go on and say lots of things about this universal tendency to fixate on what we can see above the water. He would call the clergymen, “Whitewashed tombs full of dead men's bones...” i.e., “You do what you're expected to do but your heart, motives, emotions, inner life is a wreck – no love, mercy, loyalty, justice, empathy.”

You are play actors... hypocrites. That's the word people use to explain why they don't hang out with Christians – “I don't go to church – the church is full of hypocrites.” And Jesus Christ, the friend of sinners agrees.

And you may be thinking – “Ya know... I came to church on Mothers' Day and now I'm so bummed – it's like this sermon is an encouragement to STOP going to church, stop trying to be nice to people... stop trying to be moral – is THAT what Jesus Christ wants of me? Is it better to be authentically rotten than to do right with wrong motives?

Well, Thomas Watson famously wrote, *“Better the sin that humbles me than the virtue that makes me proud.”*

And leaving church won't help because in whatever group or community you find yourself, you'll still gravitate to the surface and shallow – it's a part of our fallenness. You could be a gangster or a prostitute or an elder in a Presbyterian Church and you will always be tempted to feel good about yourself by measuring your appearance and outward behavior against that of others.

It's true – people who are intent on doing right will always find ways to trumpet our good deeds and submerge our failings. And that's one reason why more notorious sinners don't care to be among us AND, we should note: notorious sinners do it too. Moving from sharks to whales Herman Melville wrote, "and Heaven have mercy on us all - Presbyterians and Pagans alike - for we are all somehow dreadfully cracked about the head, and sadly need mending."

So, what to do? Well, to get to the source, the heart of the matter requires you to listen to yourself AND then to talk to yourself.

Once you become aware of this submerged and often malicious world within, that behaviors are NOT the whole story and may in fact be opposite of what they appear, then you can begin to engage that hidden world within.

Listen to the words that DO and DON'T come out of your mouth because they originate in your emotions and motives – the heart. What you communicate or fail to communicate (this includes NON-verbal messages too) if you can listen to your emotions as they come out of your mouth, you'll be getting glimpses under the water. Emotions expressed verbally or in body language or by silence – emotions help you get at the real motives behind and underneath the behaviors: "for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart." (Luke 6.45)

The emotions are NOT, on the one hand, the innocent voice of our inner child AND on the other hand they are NOT to be disregarded and suppressed (that's definitely NOT what you find in the *Psalms*!). Emotions are indicators of what's going on in your soul, under the behavior.

Fear, anger, shame, contempt/hatred, desire, despair, sorrow, regret – these are the emotional equivalent to physical pain. They help you see that something more is happening than meets the eye.

The question's put THREE times in Psalm 42 and 43: (42.5,11) "*Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me?*"

The poet is interacting with his emotions – in this case grief and despair. He then preaches to his heart in light of his emotions. It's as if he says, "Look! The whole world is against you right now... and You, my God, also seem far away from me... Everything I see tells me that You've forgotten me ("*Why have You forgotten me?*"- 42.9)

He'll acknowledge that God is appealing to me, NOT in the shallow visible level of behavior but down in my soul: "*Deep calls to deep at the sound of Your waterfalls; all Your breakers and Your waves have rolled over me.*" (42.7)

The human spirit is in touch with the Divine Spirit – (Rom 8.26-27) – groanings too deep for words. And after preaching to his own heart, the Psalmist realizes, "I know Lord, you have NOT forgotten me. "*The LORD will*

*command His lovingkindness in the daytime; and His song will be with me in the night, a prayer to the God of my life. (42.8) and then the bottom line: "Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, The help of my countenance, and my God."*

My emotions are telling me that I am somehow NOT trusting in God and His lovingkindness – His covenant, His good news and victory and intentions on my behalf. My depths are crying out and I need to know that God loves me, is committed to me – that He is the reason I can stand up in this present difficulty. He is the help of my situation!

Like the Psalmist, Jesus Christ was emotionally expressive and emotionally healthy. He was NO STOIC. Walk with Him through the Gospels and you'll find a human-being very different from Mr. Spock. He is moved. He feels. He is sometimes furious, sometimes sad, sometimes happy and astonished, longing, weeping – very aware of this deeper world of motives and emotions. He was fully human.

He experienced what this poet did in the extreme, the deepest despair ever endured on planet Earth. When He faced the justice I deserved on the Cross, He FELT and was moved emotionally under a sense of cosmic rejection.

Hell came down on Him and he was crushed under the weight of MY guilt. The One with whom He's been in perfect harmony from eternity – Jesus Christ felt rejected. He knows our emotions and He is NOT afraid of them.

And if and AS we trust Him and TO THE DEGREE you know Him and BY FAITH see Him taking your despair, being cut off so YOU could be grafted IN – so we could be received and assured of God's pleasure and God's infinite love (hesed) – to THAT degree you can face the emotions you may try to hide.

You can read your emotions before God with openness and honesty. You can learn about your deeper motives as you read your motives. You can preach to yourself as the Psalmist did. The Spirit of God, who knows the depths of God and your depths too – He can help you become emotionally expressive and healthy because He calls you OUT of hiding, out of emotional darkness and into His marvelous light. (1 Pet. 2.9)

You can even be open to know, "This bit of service I offered... with this low-grade anger and disgust that people are apparently NOT as committed as I am – this self-righteousness and being fixated on the faults of others – I can laugh at myself (Remember, Jesus Christ is using humor here about logs in eyes and blowing trumpets, so others notice your generosity).

I think of God questioning the emotions of His wayward, defiant prophet, Jonah, when God asks about Jonah's emotions: "*The LORD said, "Do you have good reason to be angry?"*" (4.4) Beneath Jonah's external obedience was a deep self-pity and a frozen anger. God wants him to read it. There was a shark under Jonah's external obedience and there's often a shark under mine – right behavior, wrong motives – my emotions are telling the story.

We can pray, "Lord Jesus Christ, I'm often a big mess. I need YOU to get to the depths. Sort me out. Deal with my self-pity. I can be honest with You because in the final analysis YOU have saved me and I'm NOT dependent

on impressing people. God the Father has accepted me because I'm clothed in Your record – so I can put down the unnecessary fig-leaves (Gen 3.7, 21). I'm clothed with the fleece of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.”

“Lord, deal with my defensiveness and abrasiveness and insecurities. Bring it to the surface and I'll keep on bringing it to You – the One who tasted my despair – and drank the cup to the dregs.”

This is how the good news of Jesus enables me to look below the surface to make me open, honest and a person of true emotional health and integrity.

#### QUOTES:

**We must, therefore, not be surprised if we find among the Christians some people who are still nasty.** There is even, when you come to think it over, a reason why nasty people might be expected to turn to Christ in greater numbers than nice ones. That was what people objected to about Christ during His life on earth: He seemed to attract “such awful people.” That is what people still object to, and always will. Do you not see why? Christ said “Blessed are the poor” and “How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom,” and no doubt He primarily meant the economically rich and economically poor. But do not His words also apply to another kind of riches and poverty?...

If you have sound nerves and intelligence and health and popularity and a good upbringing, you are likely to be quite satisfied with your character as it is. “Why drag God into it?” you may ask. A certain level of good conduct comes fairly easily to you. You are not one of those wretched creatures who are always being tripped up by sex, or dipsomania (alcoholism), or nervousness, or bad temper. Everyone says you are a nice chap and (between ourselves) you agree with them. You are quite likely to believe all this niceness is your own doing and you may easily not feel the need for any better kind of goodness. Often people who have all these natural kinds of goodness cannot be brought to recognize their need for Christ at all until, one day, the natural goodness lets them down and their self-satisfaction is shattered. In other words, it is hard for those who are “rich” in this sense to enter the Kingdom.

– C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Book 4, CH 10: “Nice People or New Men”; 1943; emphasis added)

Knowing that I stand before God as his beloved, because of Christ, has freed me to explore some of the disturbing and dark aspects of who I am. I can face the truth that I have a problem with control, for example. I can reflect about it honestly, pray about it, and talk to others about it freely. I know that my control issues and all my other sin patterns don't surprise God or threaten my standing with him. He calls me his beloved because of Christ's flawlessness, not mine. Because Christ righteousness is the foundation of my self-concept, I no longer have to “keep up appearances” with myself, God, or anyone else.

A revelation of God's free grace gives us the courage to face the painful truth about ourselves. As we step out onto the tight rope of discovering the unpleasant things about ourselves, we have a safety net below – the gospel of Jesus Christ.

– Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Church* (2003, p. 83)