

The Gospel and Emotional Health

The Sanctification Gap: Preliminary Matters

2 Tim 3.10-17; 2 Cor 11.1-4; 2 Peter 1.1-4; Eph 2.1-10; Heb 11.1-3; Psa 115.1-3

^{2 Tim. 3.1-17} *But evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. ¹⁴ You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them, ¹⁵ and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.*

^{2 Cor 11.3-4} *But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. ⁴ For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully.*

^{Eph 2.1-7} *And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, ² in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. ³ Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. ⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), ⁶ and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*

^{Heb 11.1-3} *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² For by it the men of old gained approval. ³ By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.*

^{Psalms 115.1-3} *Not to us, O LORD, not to us, But to Your name give glory Because of Your lovingkindness, because of Your truth. ² Why should the nations say, "Where, now, is their God?" ³ But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases. ⁴ Their idols are silver and gold, The work of man's hands.*

The title of the new series (that begins TODAY) is *The Gospel and Emotional Health*. We all know there's a problem in our modern society – an epidemic of emotional unease, disease, anxiety, depression, phobias, rage, violence, generalized annoyance, isolation/loneliness, suicide, all “mixed together in a vinaigrette of confusion and conflict” (Lemony Snicket) ... AND in the church we also appear to be struggling (see the example...LATER). And maybe, in the Church, we're giving ourselves freedom to at

least explore a topic about which Christians have NOT always agreed or even acknowledged, i.e., the emotional component of the human complex/person.

I'm NOT a psychiatrist (though I am a member of several twelve-step programs) but I know enough to say that as we look at this public-health-crisis we all know that it's complicated.

Why ARE people in our society experiencing emotional weakness, emotional immaturity, emotional breakdown in such record numbers? What might future generations discover about THIS period in which we now live? What might later experts one day discover about toxins or hormones in our highly processed diets? What are the long-term emotional/mental effects of screen-time, social-media and a host of other technology-related practices?

What are the unforeseen consequences of the vast changes in our culture's views on organized and institutional religion, the rise of the "nones" (religious affiliation = none)? The sociologist, Christian Smith determined after VERY extensive research (a study ending in 2009 and published in the book, *Souls in Transition* [Oxford Press])* that the dominant religious/spiritual outlook among American teens is what Christian Smith called, "*Moralistic Therapeutic Deism*" – that God is watching from a distance (not directly intervening and not directly known) there are rewards those who are "good" (however that's defined) and that the main need is not salvation from sin/guilt but healing. That is our national religion.

Other issues and changes to our society have left modern South Floridians more virtually connected but much less actually, physically and personally connected. How much has the breakdown in community documented in books like *Bowling Alone* [Robert Putnam]; or in the phrase coined by Berkley sociologist, Robert Bellah, "*expressive individualism*" - how much has the gradual move away from community and toward individual, private activities been a factor in the declining mental and emotional health of the West? What about divorce? What about mobility (people moving far away from where they were born)? What about the radical emphasis on defining ourselves?

And then there was that little contagion that was going around... that uh...what was it called? COVID-19 and all the death and disarray and uncertainty that went along with that. How did the global pandemic effect public emotional health?

Even the rapid-fire, ubiquitous and endlessly assaulting presence of the news. Jeremy Renner was crushed by a snowplow. Should we even know that? Is the constant barrage of information and facts taking a toll on our mental/emotional health? I think we would mostly agree that the newsfeed on our phones and television and podcasts and Twitter and TikTok and Instagram and SnapChat and all the other sources of news and information: it just doesn't seem like we were made to process that much information... We could discuss our own domestic/political concerns. Or we could mention our angst over Ukraine and the possibility of nuclear weapons being deployed... of China, Russia and Iran uniting in a slide toward WWIII. A lot to think about!

Is there anxiety in that? Of course. Information-overload is one component in what's called "*generalized anxiety*" (*The Cleveland Clinic* defines it: *Generalized Anxiety Disorder [GAD] is a mental health condition that causes fear, a constant feeling of being overwhelmed and excessive worry about everyday things. It can affect children and adults and is manageable with talk therapy and/or medications.*) But IS it...manageable?

So, that gives us SOME background to this complicated crisis that faces us in the West. But what about the preacher's motivation in addressing this topic in church? Am I jumping on a bandwagon, or succumbing to the "*therapeutic age*"? Am I validating a society of whiney babies and milquetoast Millennials and surrendering to this semi-Christian, pseudo-Christian, therapeutic parody of true Christianity? Couldn't we say and SHOULDN'T we say together that people's problem today is NOT their emotions – it's their sin? We don't need therapy – we need repentance. We don't need doctors – we need doctrine! Not PSYchology but THEology?

Well, I wonder whether we, as believers in the Good News of Jesus Christ and as people who trust in the Scriptures as actually coming from God – I wonder if we're aware of what the Gospel says about emotions and about emotional health and healing. I wonder if we have a truncated, *simplistic misunderstanding*, a sort of hyper-spiritual outlook on the whole human complex and how our visible, physical bodies relate to our unseen, immaterial souls.

I wonder too if the phrase coined by Peter Scazzero, a minister and writer from Queens New York, is something we should take more seriously: "*It's impossible to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature*" **

Maybe that early heresies of *Stoicism* and *Gnosticism* have slipped undiscovered into our American Christianity leaving us unable to trace out and apply the Gospel to these areas of embodied life... I fear that some may turn away from the Bible and the Gospel and try to find answers outside of God's truth and grace... because let's face it: the Bible doesn't even contain the word "*emotion*." I even had a Christian friend suggest to me that emotions were an invention of an enemy of Christianity named Sigmund Freud.

What I want to do today is to assure you that our methodology remains the same. We will find what we need in basic but not truncated Christianity. In what God has revealed, in the Scriptures, in Christ, in God's grace, in trust and repentance and all pointing to God as the Source of all we need – we will find answers to emotional health, what Francis Schaeffer called, "*Substantial Healing of Psychological Problems*".

One clarification on our methodology (for this series) and that is to say: just because a word isn't used in the Bible doesn't mean the Bible doesn't address what that word represents. The most obvious example is the word, "Trinity". More than a few orthodox Christian theologians insist that the Trinity is the most important teaching in Christian theology, but the word never appears in the Bible.

Other words like “*Theocracy*” don’t show up, but Israel was obviously just that – a government based on the Law of God – a theocracy. Or this example: if you were going to teach a person how to repent, the most obvious place to turn would be the *51st Psalm* – King David’s prayer of confession: “*Create in me a clean heart, O God...*” but you won’t get to that perfect and beautiful prayer and example of true repentance – you won’t find the *51st Psalm* by looking up “repent” or “repentance” in a Bible-software program or in a concordance. Repent and repentance are words not found in the *51st Psalm* but that Psalm is ALL about repentance!

In a similar way, you can’t read the *Psalms* or the *Prophets* or *Job* and not hit again and again, words like anger, joy, fear, shame, contempt, laughter, delight, sadness. These are emotional words... the motions or movements of the inner life. What’s more, IF the Psalms are examples of normal, sanctified emotions, my guess is – we’re ALL probably less emotionally healthy than we think we are. In comparison with the Psalms, we’re emotionally inhibited at best... almost emotionally dead at worst. The Psalms are a boiling caldron of emotions as the sacred writers pour out their hearts before God AND YET, the word emotion will not be found in almost any of the popular English versions of the Bible (NLT uses it twice).

Two things to show in the remaining minutes of this, slightly different kind of sermon: **1) The Resources Available to Us** and **2) Finding Emotional Health in some of our Favorite Passages.**

The resources available to us are first, Scripture. The older pastor, Paul, says to the younger pastor, Timothy, “*that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.*”

The Scriptures are from God – inspired by God. They’re not the opinion of Moses or Solomon or Jeremiah. They’re God’s voice in human language and personality. As such, the Scriptures stand as judge over all truth-claims. We have to understand and correctly interpret and apply these ancient words – and FOR that, we need Church History and Spirit-enabled study BUT where Scripture clearly speaks – we contradict to our own peril.

Timothy, taught the Scriptures by his mother and grandmother (2 Tim 1.5), met God – came to salvation in Jesus Christ. He found relief from the guilt of a bad record AND he was, as a “man of God” (i.e., a minister in the Church), Timothy was equipped for every good work.

As we think of emotional health, we have to beware of whatever advice the world may offer that contradicts Scripture... AND what may comport with Scripture.

Second, the Church has Jesus Christ. As we sing, “*In Christ alone, my hope is found*”; He is the True Joshua who, by His Spirit, is claiming ground in the dark continent of our souls. He knocks at the door of our hearts (Rev 3.20), desiring to come in and eat with us. He wants access to our inner life, what moves

us, our emotions... Maybe you've never thought about inviting Him into those rooms deep in your soul. Well, here's your opportunity.

Third, the resource of God's grace. We fully believe that in ourselves we are spiritually dead – and it don't get any worse than D-E-A-D, and yet, St Paul told the Ephesians (3rd reading) "Uh...we were all actually *worse* than dead. We're like zombie lemmings lost in a stampede... blindly following the way of the world, secretly dominated by the prince of the power of the air, careening to destruction.

Fourth, we have faith. Hebrews CH 11 is there to show us that God's people always and only triumphed by faith. It was the way of connecting to God before the Cross of Christ and ever since. We're going to insist on that all through the series. Emotional health is not divorced from a life of daily dependency (i.e., trust/faith) in God.

Last, (Psa. 115) we live for God's glory. We're learning day by day that gaining accolades for ourselves, getting people to applaud us or be impressed by us – glorifying ourselves is hollow. We're learning the beautiful paradox that using our lives and our callings to point to God IS the path to true and lasting satisfaction: *"Not to us, O Lord but to Your name give glory"*

These resources – only Scripture, only Christ, only grace, only faith and only for God's glory (and not our own) these resources will be our platform as we move ahead. AND as we look at these passages we should also note the emotional context into which they were spoken.

For example: Timothy is told by Paul that, as a minister in the church, he'll be well equipped and adequate to help people by relying on what God has written. AND Timothy apparently had some emotional problems. He was evidently timid. Paul tells him: *"For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline"* (2 Tim. 1.7). Fear, timidity was an emotional issue for Timothy, and he would have to mature emotionally AS he matured spiritually. Timothy's rivals were both deceiving and deceived i.e., they too had serious, in fact fatal, emotional shortcomings.

Paul tells the Corinthians (second reading) that HE was trying to give them Christ (the Liberator) and the Spirit (the Helper) and the good news of grace. They also had visiting, con-men preachers who were like spiritual kidnappers, who were using and abusing the Corinthians for personal gain. And Paul says, *"I'm trying to give you truth, liberation, simplicity, power, and good news... but you would rather have deception, captivity, debt and bad news and when they TAKE from you, you bear it beautifully."*

NOW, THAT IS EMOTIONALLY COMPLEX STUFF! Today, we call it *"Stockholm Syndrome"* (when a victim gets emotionally and psychologically traumatized and twisted and then falls in love with his/her abuser) – it's sick...and it's right here in one of our favorite passages – emotional immaturity/sickness and sin (because our emotions are affected by sin.)

The Faith passage (Hebrews 11 – final reading) holds out Abraham as a model of faith, but Abraham was emotionally anxious... He lied about the identity of Sarah (his wife) because he was anxious and afraid.

Over the next few weeks, we'll look into the Scriptures to see why they aren't working on us. Why are there areas of our lives where we seem to be way behind some people who aren't believers in Jesus Christ but who frankly seem to be more emotionally mature than many Christians.

I hope you'll be praying about what's to come. It's ok to pray for yourself... and then pray for others to be able to look at this component of our humanity, our being made in the image of God and made with inner movings and motions... To seek God, in whose image we're all made and ask Him to lead us to spiritual and emotional health.

*with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: the Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford University Press; 1st edition; September 14, 2009)

** Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (2014)

QUOTES:

People aren't either wicked or noble. They're like chef's salads, with good things and bad things chopped and mixed together in a vinaigrette of confusion and conflict.

– Lemony Snicket (Daniel Handler), *A Series of Unfortunate Events #11: The Grim Grotto* (2004)

How about an **example**? John uses God to validate his strong opinions on issues ranging from the appropriate length of women's skirts in church to political candidates to gender roles to his inability to negotiate issues with fellow non-Christian managers at work. He does not listen to or check out the innumerable assumptions he makes about others. He quickly jumps to conclusions. His friends, family, and coworkers find him unsafe and condescending.

John then goes on to convince himself he is doing God's work by misapplying selected verses of scripture. "Of course that person hates me," he says to himself. "All those who desire to be godly will suffer persecution." Ultimately, however, he is using God to run from God.

– Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (2014; pp.23-24)